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# VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY

## *Translatina world-making in The Salt Mines and Wildness*

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Midway through the documentary film *Wildness* (US, Wu Tsang, 2012), we see a montage of glowing night-time Los Angeles streets and a laughing and posing translatina woman. Over a pulsing beat, the husky, feminine voice of the Silver Platter, a half-century-old Latinx gay bar, testifies (in Spanish):

My ladies are strong ... But we all have our limits. Not only do they live in fear of being deported, they also have to deal with abuse from their families, their boyfriends, and strangers. Going to the police is not an option when you are afraid they will hurt you or deport you. If you are in the streets you risk being a target.

This scene condenses the key themes of this chapter: the structural forces that produce trans women of colour as vulnerable, how some trans activists have organised a political movement that centres the experiences and leadership of the most vulnerable, and how filmmaking can contribute to this project. What happens when we bring together a trans social justice politics attuned to the unequal distribution of vulnerability with a consideration of the ambivalences of transgender representation? How can documentary filmmakers encounter marginalised people ethically and help share strategies for survival, kinship, and world-making in the face of vulnerability? I will explore these questions using two documentaries about translatina world-making: *The Salt Mines* (US, Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio, 1990) and *Wildness* (US, Wu Tsang, 2012).

*The Salt Mines*, made on low-resolution video by cisgender Spanish-American documentary filmmakers Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio,

portrays a group of homeless Latinx immigrants in New York City, many of whom present as transfeminine, who live in abandoned garbage trucks beside the building where the New York City Sanitation Department stores road salt, which they call the 'Salt Mines.' *Wildness*, a richly saturated and dreamy digital film created twenty-two years later by trans Chinese-American multimedia artist Wu Tsang, tells the story of Tsang's relationship with the Silver Platter, a Latinx bar in Los Angeles, and the many translatina women who go there. The films show how translatina women are building new forms of relation within conditions of vulnerability and imaginatively invite viewers into these worlds.

### TRANSGENDER VULNERABILITY

As trans legal scholar and activist Dean Spade has written, the United States 'has always had laws that arrange people through categories of indigeneity, race, gender, ability, and national origin to produce populations with different levels of vulnerability to economic exploitation, violence, and poverty' (2015: 2). The police and legal system, together with racial capitalism, make trans and gender-nonconforming people who are of colour, poor, immigrants, and/or sex workers particularly vulnerable to violence, murder, incarceration, and deportation. Alongside black and indigenous trans women, translatina women are particularly vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> A 2011 report conducted by the National Center for Trans Equality indicated that 'Latino/a Trans people often live in extreme poverty with 25% reporting a household income of less than \$10,000/year', which is 'nearly double the rate for Trans people of all races', 'five times the general Latino/a community rate', and 'seven times the general U.S. community rate' (as cited in The TransLatin@ Coalition et al., 2013: 3). In a 2013 national survey of translatina immigrants, 61 per cent reported being victims of sexual abuse, 78 per cent had experienced 'verbal insults and/or physical aggression for being a Trans Latina Immigrant', and 69 per cent had 'met another Trans Latina who was murdered because of her gender identity' (The TransLatin@ Coalition et al., 2013: 29). In these conditions of extreme precarity, surviving becomes a crucial political act. Translatina women cultivate survival through strategies of collective care, kinship, and world-making.

Following the insights of the Combahee River Collective, which argued that, 'If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression' (1986), trans activists have argued that the most vulnerable trans people should be at the heart of trans politics and activism (Spade, 2015: 19). This political attention to vulnerability (e.g. to the structures that produce it, the people who are most impacted by it, what it feels like, and how people survive in the face of it) builds on a queer and

transnational women of colour feminist tradition of interrogating ‘vulnerability as a lived experience and diagnostic tool to point to asymmetrical distributions of power and violence,’ articulated by Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, and others (Oliviero, 2016: 6).

Indeed, since the 2000s, trans people of colour who are poor, immigrants, sex workers, and/or formerly incarcerated have founded and led many grassroots trans organisations, campaigns, and actions, such as the TransLatin@ Coalition in Los Angeles, El/La Para TransLatinas and the TGI Justice Project in San Francisco, the Translatina Network and FIERCE in New York, Butterflies Trans Foundation in Puerto Rico, and the national Trans Women of Color Collective. The concept of vulnerability has become central to trans activism, in terms of both the political work of trans survival in the face of structurally enforced vulnerability and political organising that centres the experiences and leadership of the most vulnerable people.

### THE VICISSITUDES OF TRANS VISIBILITY

One key tool of trans imagination, kinship, and world-making is audio-visual media. But where trans media ‘visibility’ is often hailed as an unalloyed good, it can also contribute to the vulnerability of trans women of colour. Trans filmmaker Sam Feder and the editors of a recent anthology on trans cultural production point out that the so-called ‘transgender tipping point’ (coined by a *Time* magazine cover story featuring black trans actor Laverne Cox [Steinmetz, 2014]) coincided with a marked increase in violence against and murders of trans women of colour (Feder and Juhasz, 2016; Gossett et al., 2017). Black trans activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy argues that trans sex workers bear the brunt of this backlash because they are accessible and the legal and political system has already deemed them disposable. She observes that:

People all around the world were amazed by Laverne’s cover story. However, for the girls who have to live on the streets and off their wits, this was not something that was beneficial to their existence. What I have noticed, since that happened, is that there are more girls being murdered or beaten up because the people who want to do these harmful things can’t get to Laverne Cox. (Griffin-Gracy et al., 2017: 26)

Increased visibility has also sparked political backlashes in the form of bathroom bills, religious freedom laws, and religious proclamations (Allen, 2018; Tang, 2017: 364–5; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017).

Well-intended representations can also exploit their subjects, as critics of ethnographic documentaries and other representations of marginalised

people have long pointed out (Rony, 1996; Spivak, 1988; Winston, 1988). Trans studies scholar Aren Aizura has criticised the spectacularisation and instrumentalisation of trans of colour suffering by LGBT non-profits in activist videos like *Transgression* (2011), created by Immigration Equality. Aizura cautions that LGBT non-profits place a 'symbolic burden' on trans women of colour 'to represent consistently as victims' (2016: 133). Aizura writes: 'Vulnerability becomes a method to extract value [from trans women of color] in the form of spectatorial sympathy' (2016: 124). The films put these women's suffering on display but refuse to consider them as historical agents or experts in anything beyond their own personal experience. These audio-visual media strategies are part of the broader 'extraction of value from trans of color lives through biopolitical and necropolitics technologies' that trans scholars C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn have described (2013: 71).

The unequal distribution of economic resources and social capital have long put creative control of trans stories in the hands of white, middle-class, cisgender creators, which often results in 'aesthetically gentrified' representations directed at cisgender audiences (Keegan, 2016; Namaste, 2005). Black trans filmmaker Reina Gossett recently revealed that David Francis, an established white gay filmmaker, had stolen material and opportunities from her when they were both working on documentaries about black trans activist Marsha P. Johnson (Gossett, 2017).

But trans media need not be solely about 'visibility' as such (that is, about simply asserting trans people's existence and humanity); it can also be a form of collective world-making and radical imagination. Queer of colour scholar José Esteban Muñoz has described art as a crucial mode of queer world-making (2009). He writes:

Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. (Muñoz, 2009: 1)

Similarly, queer black artist Kai Lumumba Barrow states, 'In imaginative space we have the freedom to create new worlds, counter-narratives, and new mythologies where daily realities are transformed, appropriated, subverted, destroyed, and refashioned' (Barrow et al., 2017: 335). The potential of audio-visual media to create new worlds is most clearly present when trans people themselves become media makers. However, I also want to hold out the possibility that films made through genuine collaboration between cis and trans people can contribute to this process. In this chapter, I argue that documentary films can be an essential way to present the survival and world-making strategies of marginalised trans people and

to invite viewers into these worlds and networks of care. Documentary films that engage ethically with marginalised trans subjects can help us imagine, as Muñoz urges, ‘new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds’ (2009: 1).

Despite the ambivalence of trans representation in general, *The Salt Mines* (1990) and *Wildness* (2012) demonstrate the potential for documentary films to stage largely respectful encounters with marginalised trans subjects and the worlds they have created, and to extend these words to new times and places. They are part of a small wave of translatina documentaries released over the past three decades. Several realist, talking-head style documentaries focus on translatina women’s political organising across the Americas, including *Translatina* (Peru, Felipe Degregori, 2010), *TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story* (US, Dante Alencastre, 2013), and *Mala Mala* (Puerto Rico/US, Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014). *Mala Mala* also explores the world of trans and queer performance, as do *Paris is Burning* (US, Jennie Livingston, 1990), *How Do I Look?* (US, Wolfgang Busch, 2006), *I am the Queen* (US, Henrique Cirre-Lima and Josue Pellot, 2010), and *Kiki* (US/Sweden, Sara Jordenö, 2016). In contrast to films about political organisers and performers, *The Transformation* (US, Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio, 1995), a follow-up to *The Salt Mines*, follows the efforts of Christian missionaries to convert translatina sex workers, and revisits the protagonists of the previous film. A recent short documentary, *Becoming Joanna* (US, Jonathan Skirnik, 2016), shows the struggles of a translatina high schooler who is able to take advantage of trans and queer support networks in Los Angeles to get back on the path to graduation. In different ways, all these films present resilient communities of Latinx and black trans and gender-nonconforming people and their varied strategies of survival, organising, kinship, and creative world-making.

*Paris is Burning*, which has received the widest distribution and most critical attention, put some of the black and Latinx participants in New York’s ballroom scene at the centre of scholarly conversations about gender performativity, racialised queer subcultures, and new queer cinema in the 1990s. However, some complained that the film sensationalised the performances as a modern-day freak show or minstrel show, and criticised the realist ethnographic style that absented the film’s director, Jennie Livingston, a white lesbian filmmaker, from the diegesis (e.g. hooks, 1996; Reid-Pharr, 1990). In contrast, queer film scholar Lucas Hilderbrand argues that critics of *Paris is Burning* ‘have repeatedly failed to imagine identification, appreciation or coalition in their claims of exoticization, exploitation, and “othering”’ (Hilderbrand, 2013: 134). Black queer scholar Marlon Bailey asserts that the film has been important for contemporary house/ball participants (2011: 368). *Paris is Burning* invites spectators into the dynamic

world-making practices of marginalised trans and queer people even as it raises ethical questions about the appropriate relationships between the film team, the film's subjects, and its varied audiences. Wu Tsang, the director of *Wildness*, has stated that she specifically wanted to avoid the ethical missteps of this earlier film (Oishi, 2015: 253, 263).

I use *The Salt Mines* and *Wildness* as my case studies because they both stage encounters with marginalised translatina subjects who come together in precarious urban spaces to create new forms of recognition, relation, and community through provisional collectivities, yet they are separated in time by twenty-two years and use very different formal strategies. They are also both excellent films that should be screened and taught more often. These two films can help us better see the possibilities and dangers of the documentary representation of vulnerable trans lives.

### ENCOUNTERING PRECARIOUS TRANSLATINA WORLDS IN *THE SALT MINES*

José Esteban Muñoz has called *The Salt Mines* and *The Transformation* 'antidotes of sorts to the overexposed *Paris is Burning*' (1999: 162). He writes that the films 'have offered a narration of transgender communities of color in New York City that has resisted the impulse to glamorize the experience in the way that *Paris is Burning* does. Poverty and disease, for instance, have not been sacrificed in these videos for the sake of spectacle and style'. Released in 1990, the same year as *Paris is Burning*, *The Salt Mines* screened on US national public television via the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). It also made the rounds of gay and lesbian film festivals, Latino film festivals, and, in 1997, played at one of the world's first transgender film festivals, Tranny Fest, in San Francisco. Lately, *The Salt Mines* and *The Transformation* have been rediscovered by today's trans activists.

In the film's first scene, Little Man, an energetic homeless Latino man, shows the filmmakers around the Salt Mines and names the people who live there the Salt People. Gigi, Giovanna, and Sara and their friends Little Man, JR, Bobby, Edwin, and Ruby<sup>2</sup> talk to the filmmakers about their lives and hopes for the future, and make an assessment of the United States. Gigi, with dyed red hair and a leather jacket, is a cynical fast-talker from Puerto Rico, Giovanna a determined Afro-Latina from the Dominican Republic (see figure 6.1), and Sara a charismatic blond from Cuba with a Farrah Fawcett look.

Sara describes immigrating to the United States in the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the experience of being incarcerated in Cuba and the United



Figure 6.1 Giovanna in *The Salt Mines*.

States. The filmmakers observe Gigi, Giovanna, and Sara as they chat, cook food, show off new outfits, and argue. All three candidly discuss using crack and doing sex work, and Sara allows the team to film her picking up a trick.

Clearly, Gigi, Giovanna, and Sara are at the intersections of multiple forms of socio-politically generated vulnerability – they are immigrants, poor and homeless, drug users and sex workers, and at least one has been incarcerated. In the *Salt Mines*, they must work to fulfil their basic needs – food, warmth, the ability to bathe. And yet, the point of the film is not the spectacularisation of their suffering, evocations of pity, or incitement of donations in the vein of the film *Aizura* critiques; rather, the film presents the world these women have created for themselves. Though their lives are hard, they have autonomy and are recognised and valued as their feminine selves. They have friends and lovers and seem to have a good time together. They don't seem troubled by their identities. They are not ashamed or guilty. The film does not romanticise their hard-scrabble lives, but it does attend to the value of what they have created together. Even though *The Salt Mines* was created by filmmakers who are outside the community they represent, it presents subjects who are living in relation to multiple forms of vulnerability without instrumentalising them.

*The Salt Mines* adopts a realist ethnographic documentary style. The filmmakers are outsiders to the community and they do not appear onscreen

(although we do sometimes hear the filmmakers and subjects talking to each other). The film has a rough, lo-fi image and sound quality associated with a handheld video camera and footage shot on the fly. It primarily consists of long takes in which the subjects explain their lives and perspectives to the camera, as well as observational shots of the Salt People hanging out together. There is no voiceover narration and very little non-diegetic sound.

While critics of *Paris is Burning* have denounced the realist ethnographic documentary style as objectifying and a misguided attempt to obscure the constructed nature of all representation, *The Salt Mines* demonstrates the power of this form to centre the perspectives of marginalised subjects. It accomplishes this by giving these subjects centre stage in a series of long takes, and minimising music that might cue a simplistic emotional reaction by the audience. Alex Juhasz (1999) has described realist documentaries as an essential feminist tool for sharing the experiences and insights of marginalised subjects.

How does the film manage to represent translatina subjects living with vulnerability without re-victimising them? One key strategy is that the film stays close to its subjects. The long-take interviews give the subjects time and space to express themselves, rather than having their words cut up into soundbites. Aparicio asks the women neutral questions about where they're from, when they arrived at the Salt Mines, and where they sleep, and avoids probing questions about their identity, drug use, or sex work – anything prurient or moralising. With the exception of Aparicio's off-screen inquiries, the only voices we hear are of the Salt People themselves. No outside 'experts' are brought in to explain things. The only experts are the women themselves. There is no attempt to create an objective frame outside the women's testimonies, the type of frame criticised by documentary scholar Dijana Jelača (2016) as a 'humanitarian gaze' that fails to scrutinise its own partiality, positionality, and implication in inequality. Instead, we get a decidedly partial view and are well aware that we only see and hear what the women decide to show and tell us.

Viewers of the film never have the sense that we have transparent access to the Salt People's whole lives or innermost selves, or that we can see more than they do. While the women sometimes get emotional when speaking, they never break down or hold up a hand to shield their face from the camera (which have become almost stock shots in today's emotion-obsessed documentary culture). In other words, we generally stay at a friendly but polite distance from the subjects.

Although we never see Aikin or Aparicio onscreen, we are nonetheless aware of them through Aparicio's occasional questions and the Salt People's gazes towards Aparicio, who is holding the camera. Furthermore, as the filmmakers follow Little Man in the film's opening sequence, he glances back



towards the camera and observes: 'He looks like a reporter. You look like a cop! I hate cops!' Through this remark, the filmmakers are written into the film as outsiders who are potentially on the side (at least socio-economically) of the authority figures who exploit and police the Salt People. And yet, as the films continue, it becomes clear that the filmmakers, despite their socio-economic position, do not approach the Salt People as police or traditional news reporters.

While there is a tendency to see documentaries as being more honest about their constructed nature and the relations between filmmakers and subjects when we can see the filmmakers on screen, that approach sometimes centers the voice of the filmmaker rather than that of their subjects. Perhaps seeing Aikin and Aparicio would reveal some of the disjunctures between them and their subjects, but we can still get some idea of the feelings of the subjects towards the filmmakers and vice versa. Based on Gigi, Giovanna, and Sara's body language, gestures, and speech, we get the sense that the women view the filmmakers as interested friends with whom they can be relatively candid.<sup>3</sup>

The film's sound also demonstrates respect for its subjects. For one, there is very little music. We mostly hear the subjects' voices and some ambient industrial sound. Music often cues particular emotional responses – sadness, pity, hope, etc. – and is a key tool for inciting emotional responses to spectacularised suffering. This film's lack of music de-spectacularises the women's experiences and forces audiences to read the subjects' body language and tone of voice to cue their own emotional responses.

In the short sequences where there is music, usually during shots of the urban landscape, we hear a saxophone and sometimes bongo drums playing Charlie Parker-style melancholy bebop, and occasionally a dissonant Ornette Coleman-inspired screaming sax solo, all composed by New York musician Elliot Sharpe. This jazz music is associated with black metropolitan music culture. It connotes urbanity and world-weariness, and sometimes desperation, but also coolness, resilience, sophistication, and countercultural belonging. While one could critique the score as being a kneejerk convention of representing urban social outsiders, appropriating black cultural production to evoke a universalising sense of outsidership, one could also read the music as making an argument for connecting the translatina women's experiences with the long American history of black oppression and resistance.

The subjects of *The Salt Mines* do not become political actors in the way the subjects of many later trans documentaries do. They do not form an organisation, protest, or raise money; in fact, they don't seem to think of themselves as part of a 'class' of people. One of the most interesting things about the film is that its subjects do not seem to have a coherent sense of

'transgender' identity, let alone a sense that this identity is associated with a political movement. One of the film's great strengths is that it portrays this diversity of terms and concepts without trying to homogenise them under a single label or political project. Gigi, Giovanna, and Sara mostly use female pronouns and engage in some forms of body modification – in one scene, they inject black-market hormones, and in another Giovanna points out her breast implants. Yet they use many different words to describe themselves. At one point, Giovanna says 'I consider myself a transvestite' (*Yo me considero un transvestista*), using a part-English, part-Spanish version of the word 'transvestite' with a male pronoun (*un* instead of *una*).<sup>4</sup> However, elsewhere she refers to herself using feminine nouns (e.g. *cuando era pequeñita*), and notes that most gay men 'do not like women like me' (*la mujer como yo*). She points out that even in the gay world (*el mundo gay*), 'We are the minority, the drag queens and transvestites' (*las drag queens, las travestistes*), using the English term 'drag queens' and a part-English, part-Spanish word for 'transvestite'.

Gigi, on the other hand, never calls herself a transvestite. She tells us that when she was young, a doctor told her parents that she was 'a woman trapped in the body of a man' (*una mujer encerrada en el cuerpo de un hombre*). She seems to agree with this assessment, though she never uses a specific term and later describes her relationship with Edwin as a relationship between 'two people of the same sex' (*dos personas del mismo sex*). When describing the dangers of street sex work, she implicitly calls herself 'a queen' (*un queen*), using the English word with a masculine pronoun. She refers to other people as homosexual, but never herself. Sara, on the other hand, calls herself *un homosexual* and later describes herself as *una transformista*, a word with varying meanings throughout Latin America, from female impersonators to people who transform their bodies through make-up, hormones, and surgery. When they want to be insulting, they call each other *maricón* (faggot).

The most likely reason for this proliferation of terms is that *The Salt Mines* was released right before activists began arguing for a coalition of gender-nonconforming people to organise under the banner of 'transgender' in the early 1990s (Stryker, 2017: 153–5; Valentine, 2007). The film thus provides a snapshot of the variety of terms and concepts used before this sea change. Its attentiveness to this linguistic variety also individualises the film's subjects, rather than labelling and classifying them. The film presents the kinship and care cultivated by translatinas for each other in the years before explicitly political organising around trans rights.

While the film does not portray its subjects coming into consciousness or intervening in the political order, they are still political actors. One of their key political acts is to survive in the face of multiple forms of oppression. In the opening sequence, Little Man tells the filmmakers: 'We survived! And

that is the name of the shit!' His assertion echoes black lesbian poet Audre Lorde's famous reflection that for black women like her, 'self-preservation' is 'an act of political warfare' (2017: 130). Likewise, by keeping each other alive in the face of a system that has thrown them away, the Salt People's survival is a form of political resistance.

Key to their survival is the creation of community – one that is precarious and temporary, but nonetheless crucial. The trans and straight members of the Salt Mines alike have woven networks of care between each other. They recognise each other as they are, without trying to change each other, and offering what they have to each other. These genuine forms of relation are in a stark contrast to Christian missionaries who appear later in the film. The missionaries are quick to offer the Salt People kind greetings, warm clothing, and a hot meal, but only in exchange for the opportunity to convince the women to give up their feminine identity and accept Jesus as their saviour.

Another way the women become political actors is through critiques of American inequality and Christianity. In Spanish, Giovanna says:

This group of Christians, I think, is seeking recognition in their Church. Just imagine, good Samaritans who found a bunch of nomads ... that's us in this Salt Mine, sleeping in trucks in the worst possible conditions and they are going to make us straight and get us into religion ... Shit! What more could they do? That's worth a Nobel Prize each!

Like Aizura, Giovanna points out how this organisation tries to instrumentalise trans of colour suffering to benefit themselves. Giovanna and Sara are also sceptical of the promises of the United States. Sara says (in Spanish): 'I used to think the USA was the most beautiful place in the world where you could have anything you wanted ... But now I'm sorry I came. Because here without money you are nothing!' She is ambivalent about whether her combination of freedom and poverty in the United States is actually better than being imprisoned in Cuba.

The one part of the film that comes across as prurient is a three-minute sequence representing the women's sex work. It is shot from inside a car, thus from the point of view of a potential customer, curious tourist, or vice officer. Grainy and mostly in slow motion, this scene is the film's most stylised. First, we look out of a car window as dark, decaying urban streets go by in slow motion. We hear rhythmic, dissonant, jazz electronica. Then we spot a sex worker in a short dress walking by in grainy slow motion, then more sex workers standing around, then a cut to a woman leaning into a car (Aikin says that this is Sara, although we can't tell by looking). The saxophone goes crazy with a burbling, screaming cry as the camera zooms in on the grainy scene. We stare clandestinely at these fuzzy figures as Sara gets in the car, the car's lights brighten, and the shot freezes then slowly fades to

black. This sequence is the film's most problematic, with its explicitly voyeuristic structure, identification with a customer's point of view, and sense that it is capturing a secretive and shameful thing. It is very different in tone from the candid daylight chats and observations of the rest of the film.

Perhaps because the film's only spoken words come from its subjects, *The Salt Mines* never openly considers the effect its production might have on its subjects. However, Aikin later published a book about the film's production in which she thinks through this question. She admits that the increased visibility that came with the film did contribute to its subjects' vulnerability. She recalls: 'There was no doubt in my mind that the closing of the Salt Mines had, if nothing else, been accelerated by our filmmaking' (Aikin, 2013: 137). She also learned that the parents of one of the film's subjects (Ruby) had discovered her HIV positive status from watching the film on television. Aikin berates herself, writing:

I had pushed relentlessly to film every detail of *The Salt Mines* and interviewed to probe deep into its people's hearts and minds. In my craze, I had been convinced that the world needed to have a close look at this reality to better understand the predicament of its inhabitants. But now I was wondering how all this information was going to benefit anyone at all. (Aikin, 2013: 137–8)

However, after seeing the film's effect on a conservative audience at a Long Island library screening, Aikin concludes that the film did make a positive impact, 'shaking up the comfortable patterns we live in' and 'questioning our prejudices', albeit on audiences assumed to be cisgendered.

The film has evidently impacted translatina activists as well. Recently, New York trans Latinx activist Bianey Garcia wrote that *The Salt Mines* and *The Transformation* are two of her favourite films. In a promotion for a screening, she wrote: 'When I saw these documentaries, it broke my heart to see how my trans sisters lived during that time. Nowadays, there are people like me who fight for a better life for our future generations!!' ('The Salt Mines & The Transformation', 2017). The film has become part of today's trans movement through repeated screenings. It shows both how much the trans community has mobilised since 1990 but also how vulnerabilities are still disproportionately distributed to trans women of colour. While the film may have made its subjects more vulnerable in some ways, by bringing their lives to the notice of family members and the authorities, it also shared the survival and world-making strategies of these translatina women with audiences, including fellow translatina women like Garcia. Through a realist ethnographic approach, it keeps these women at its centre and allows the messiness of their language as well as their lives and community to show through.

## CONFRONTING THE FISSURES IN TRANS WORLD-MAKING PROJECTS IN *WILDNESS*

*Wildness* (2012), created twenty-two years after *The Salt Mines*, also explores the world-making of vulnerable trans subjects that coalesces around a particular place, but in a very different context and using different formal strategies. *Wildness* is a feature-length documentary written and directed by trans Chinese-American performance artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang and co-written by queer Persian film programmer Roya Rastigar. *Wildness* presents Tsang's discovery of the Silver Platter, a forty-nine-year-old Latinx gay bar near MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, and friendships with the translatina women who frequent the bar (see figure 6.2) and with the bar's co-owners and operators, Gonzalo, his sister Nina, his boyfriend Javier, and his ex-boyfriend Koky. Tsang performs a version of herself, 'Wu', which was scripted by Tsang and co-writer Rastigar.<sup>5</sup> The Silver Platter itself, voiced by Guatemalan-American trans activist Mariana Marroquin, narrates the film. Wu and friends create a popular Tuesday night party called Wildness that combines dancing and performance art. The film explores the divisions between the bar's Spanish-speaking regulars and the predominantly English-speaking Wildness attendees, as well as Wu's attempts to bridge these divisions through friendships, artistic collaborations, and the creation of a legal aid clinic.

Eventually, when the party attracts too much outside attention and Gonzalo's death prompts a messy inheritance fight, Tsang and friends shut



Figure 6.2 Wu and Erika in *Wildness*.

the Wildness parties down. *Wildness* takes up the question of vulnerability head on, explicitly thinking through the effects of the Wildness party on the bar's regulars, who are vulnerable to deportation, incarceration, and violence, as well as the precarity of the bar itself and the entire Latino neighbourhood, which is undergoing 'revitalization.' The film invites the audiences to step into the communities that interlace the Silver Platter, if only temporarily and in fantasy, thus sharing the world-making of the bar's denizens with the cinema audience.

As an artistic, formally-innovative documentary that takes an unflinching look at queer and trans life, *Wildness* was well-received by art institutions and LGBT film festivals. It premiered at the New York Museum of Modern Art's Documentary Fortnight Festival and was included in South by Southwest and the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial. It also played at Los Angeles' Outfest LGBT Film Festival, with many of the film's subjects in attendance, where it won the Grand Jury Prize for documentaries.

Many queer and trans scholars have praised the film for its self-reflexive, self-critical examination of the difficulties of creating community across differences. Dean Spade, upon viewing a rough cut, wrote: 'the portrayal of the creation of Wildness and its impact on the Silver Platter engage a complexity and self-reflectiveness that is rarely represented in film and yet is a constant companion of activists, artists, and organizers' (2011: 29), and Finn Jackson Ballard likewise appreciates Tsang's willingness to criticise her own queer utopian project (2014: 464–5). Tavia Nyong'o (2013) helpfully calls the film 'a critical reimagining of "safe space"'. He writes: 'Rather than engage in the interminable analysis of the impossibility of ever doing interpersonal justice to one another – given the ways our communities are necessarily riven by difference – the film turns its attention to the structures that enable and condition our gathering in the first place.'

Like *The Salt Mines*, *Wildness* presents a community of translatina women who experience intersecting forms of state-enforced vulnerability and yet have created a space where their feminine selves are recognised and valued. One of the translatina women interviewed early in the film, Griselda, is deported midway through. Two of the regulars, Karen and a friend, discuss their fears (in Spanish): 'We've had deaths here, too. Yes, girlfriends. We've known people, who we could be with today, but tomorrow, we don't know.' Karen's friend notes that they were, 'Murdered with guns. In the area. Because of discrimination', and 'That makes us really scared.' The film documents a press conference about the murder of trans teen Paulina Ibarra, with signs that demand 'Stop Killing US!'

One major difference between the two films, though, is that while the feminine Salt People in 1990 did not share a coherent sense of identity, the women of the Silver Platter seem to share a sense of belonging to not just one but

several nameable, politicised, collective identities – trans, Latina, and immigrant. This is one of the starkest markers of the twenty-two years that separate the films – the creation of specifically trans identities, communities, and political movements as a result of steadfast trans activism. Nevertheless, a variety of terms proliferate in the film in both Spanish and English, and the film makes space for this multiplicity. Tsang says that this strategy was intentional:

I feel like I barely even use the word ‘transgender’ in the film because that was another ideological category to me. I felt like life at the Silver Platter almost defied all categorisation in that way. It wasn’t ‘LGBT’; it was more complicated and messy than any of those categories. (King and Rivas, 2012)

Nonetheless, Nicol, the bar’s host, calls the bar a ‘living room’ for ‘the transgender community’ (*la comunidad transgénero*). Alternately, one of the regulars, Karen, declares: ‘I’m so proud that I’m a transexual’ (*transexual*). Most commonly, the women refer to themselves simply as *las chicas*, translated as either ‘the girls’ or ‘the ladies,’ and leave it at that. The community also includes men who perform as women only on stage, such as Morale, leader of the bar’s weekly ‘transvestite show’ (*show travestis*).

Despite her reservations about categorisation, Tsang and her English-speaking friends mostly refer to the crowd at the Silver Platter as ‘trans’ and ‘queer,’ words they likewise use for themselves. A flyer created by the Wildness organisers and featured in the film states: ‘THE SILVER PLATTER IS A SAFE SPACE FOR TRANSGENDERED AND QUEER LATINO PEOPLE(S). WE, THE ORGANIZERS OF WILDNESS ... AS A COLLECTIVE BODY BEING THING ARE: 1) BROWN 2) QUEER 3) TRANS 4) CREATIVE!’ While the terms ‘trans’ and ‘transgender’ seem unavoidable for the English-speaking activists, the film nonetheless demonstrates its commitment to the messiness of community building by maintaining space for all these labels at once.

While *The Salt Mines* presents a series of low-resolution long takes in the convention of 1980s activist videos, *Wildness* has an arty, stylised, and polished feel. The images are high-resolution and the sound high fidelity. There is lots of quick cutting, many different camera angles, and colourful lighting. The film’s seductive look recalls Jeannine Tang’s description of the way Reina Gossett and Sascha Wurzel’s *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (US, 2018) uses ‘glamor as an optics of loving looks between queer and trans women’ (2017: 382). Of that film, Tang argues that:

Gossett and Wurzel set out ... to make a luscious film as a form of aesthetic resistance to the ways in which trans bodies are so frequently featured on camera as mangled and murdered, their scenes often captured with lower production values, their characters presented as caricatures, tropes, or scenography. (Tang, 2017: 382)

The 'luscious' formal qualities of *Wildness* similarly function as a form of 'aesthetic resistance'.

There is also a lot of music throughout the film, ranging from sparse electronic music to Latin cumbia. As the film's music was largely created by the same DJs who did the music for the Wildness parties (NGUZUNGUZU, aka Daniel Pineda and Asma Maroof; and TOTAL FREEDOM, aka Ashland Mines), this music brings the film spectators into contact with the rhythms and melodies that likewise moved the party's attendees.

The focus of *Wildness* is not on the stories and perspectives of translatina women per se, but rather on the challenges of coalition across class and linguistic differences within queer and trans communities. The protagonists are the Silver Platter itself and 'Wu', a version of the film's writer-director, whose quest for a place to create art and community drives the narrative. In interviews, Tsang says that she endeavoured not to exploit the film's subjects. Tsang states: 'Documentary is an inherently exploitative medium, literally because you are using people's lives to make art. The narrative structure of *Wildness* grew out of this question of responsibility' (Berardini and Tsang, 2013). Though Tsang says that she first approached the documentary through 'more of an anthropological "this is what it's like to be a transgender immigrant" kind of story', she grew frustrated by the conventions of documentaries about immigrants and trans people she was watching, which she found to be 'a little bit exploitive' (King and Rivas, 2012). In response, Tsang says:

We made the bar the main character, who narrates the story. I also put myself in the film, which exposes me to vulnerabilities alongside my subjects. In a way I wanted to exploit myself, or put myself out front, because I would rather be the target than have my subjects be the target. (Berardini and Tsang, 2013)

These two strategies were intended to make Tsang's role as filmmaker 'really transparent' and call attention to the constructed and partial nature of the film. Tsang asserts: 'films simply cannot tell the whole "truth" about something – so the mythology was intended to eliminate any possibility that this film could be "about" the women of the Silver Platter, or transgender/immigrant experience in general' (Berardini and Tsang, 2013).

What is the effect of these strategies on the film? Having the bar narrate the film, through the compelling and seductive voice of Marroquin, does convey the element of fantasy and constructedness that Tsang aims at. The Silver Platter's voice also provides some of the positive functions of a narrator (e.g. it provides continuity, exposition, and context), without bringing in an external authority that might de-authorise the expertise of the trans subjects. It also quite helpfully concretises a relation of care between people and places. Having a translatina woman perform the voice of the Silver Platter puts the translatina experience of the bar at the centre of the



bar's own identity, even though the business is owned by a cis gay man and cis straight woman. The personified bar is one of the film's most unique and compelling aspects – it's the thing that I remembered best when I first saw it.

The strategy of the filmmaker writing herself into the film does make visible the gaps and misunderstandings between Wu and the bar's regulars. In this, the film does not pull any punches. It shows how Wu's attempts to engage with the Latinx regulars do not always succeed and the community created by the Wildness parties is often fissured and contested. However, another effect of this strategy is that the translatina women are decentred and deindividualised. The film becomes primarily about Wu and her experience of the Silver Platter. The translatina women remain on the sidelines. They are first introduced to the viewer en masse, in a quickly edited montage that makes it impossible to name and differentiate one from the other. The film quickly introduces eighteen different translatina women who stand in front of a gold curtain, singly and in pairs, and announce, variously, their name, age, where they're from, and their thoughts about the Silver Platter. The film cuts between different women, with voices and bodies only occasionally in sync. We only hear seven names. Later, we get to know Nicol, Betty, and Erika a little better, but overall the translatina women are introduced as a barely differentiated mass. This approach conveys a sense of community, but not of each woman as an individual. While Tsang is interested in their stories and collaborating with some of them, their thoughts and feelings are ultimately filtered through Tsang. In her analysis of Tsang's attempts to counter *Paris is Burning's* 'mistakes', Eve Oishi similarly concludes that, 'While a self-conscious foregrounding of the filmmaker and the apparatus can open up a critical space for the viewer, the proliferation of autobiographical and self-reflexive representations means that this technique does not inoculate a film or a viewer from hegemonic forms' (2015: 265, 267).

*Wildness's* major achievement is to take a frank look at creative and activist queer and trans world-making and reveal the persistent fissures within queer and trans communities. Although Wu and the women of the Silver Platter are trans, they are nonetheless from different worlds – economically, educationally, linguistically, and otherwise. They can become friends and create networks of care, but the possibility of harm remains.

Tsang is both an insider and outsider to the community of Silver Platter regulars she portrays in the film. The film's trans subjects (Wu and the women of the Silver Platter alike) exert political agency by taking care of each other and surviving, but also through dancing, performing, and making themselves glamorous and beautiful (and expanding what those categories could mean). They also engage in more straightforward political actions, attending a march protesting the state's crackdown on undocumented immigrants. Wu and the Wildness crew establish a legal aid clinic

near the bar to help trans immigrants acquire status in the United States and change their documentation to fit their gender identity.

Tsang clearly worries that increasing media attention on the Silver Platter due to the Wildness parties will put the bar's regulars at risk. At the same time, Gonzalo, the bar's co-owner, notes that when the crowds get unwieldy on Wildness nights, the police never intervene, unlike on regular nights. However, when the *Los Angeles Times* deems the bar 'LA's Best Tranny Bar', Tsang and friends ask the newspaper not to print the review, because 'there will be serious consequences for the safety of the people involved'. The newspaper prints the review anyway and some Silver Platter regulars lash out at the Tuesday night parties.

Unlike *The Salt Mines*, *Wildness* takes up the question of vulnerability and inadvertent harm as an explicit part of its politics. However, despite their many differences, the two films are alike in key ways: both share the survival and world-making strategies of precarious translatina women, both hold space for contesting and contradictory identity labels, and both invite viewers into these networks of care and community.

### WORKING THROUGH VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY

Just as Nyong'o argues that the film *Wildness* attends to 'the structures that enable and condition our gathering' (2013), these films reveal how another kind of structure – cinematic structures – 'enable and condition our gathering'. The films accomplish this task in different ways. *The Salt Mines* uses the conventions of realist ethnographic documentary to centre the perspectives of a community of homeless translatinas. While the film does not explicitly conceptualise its subjects' vulnerability as such, their resilience and the insights they have gained through survival are surely what drew the filmmakers to these individuals. *Wildness* likewise shares the survival and world-making strategies of two intersecting groups of trans people – *las chicas* of the Silver Platter and the queer and trans organisers of the Wildness parties – with film audiences. The film takes up the question of how Tsang, as party-planner (and, implicitly, as filmmaker), can engage ethically with *las chicas* of the Silver Platter in a way that contributes to the liberation of both communities. Tsang rejects a realist ethnographic style in favour of an overtly self-referential and lusciously fantastical style in order to complicate the traditional relationship of (powerful) filmmaker with (vulnerable) subject. Both films provide potent examples of how cinema can contribute to the political project of trans of colour survival and imaginative world-making, even as they demonstrate the potential dangers of documentary representation. Nevertheless, films

like *The Salt Mines* and *Wildness* can help bring new worlds into being and stretch the kinds of coalitions – however fraught – that arise and disappear in these worlds.

## NOTES

- 1 I use ‘translatina’ to identify ‘transgender, transsexual, and transvestite individuals in Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America and elsewhere’ (La Fountain-Stokes, 2014: 237; see also Rodríguez de Ruíz and Ochoa, 2016). Trans- refers to the ‘transing’ of gender and of national boundaries (e.g. ‘trans-latinoamericana’).
- 2 In the film, Ruby uses the name Ruben. A year after the broadcast, Aikin ran into ‘Ruben’ and discovered that she now goes by Ruby (Aikin, 2013: 134–7).
- 3 While Aikin’s account of the filmmaking process in a later book (2013) suggests that she is emotionally attached to the film’s subjects, many passages of the book reveal a more condescending attitude towards them than is evident in the film itself. The film is actually better than its maker in this regard.
- 4 In correspondence with me, Javier García León writes: ‘This word, as she says it, it is not recognized as part of the Spanish language by the Dictionary of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española. It seems to be an accommodation from English to Spanish. The Spanish words recognised by the Language Academy are *travesti*, *travestido* or *travestista*.’
- 5 While the film uses male pronouns for ‘Wu’, Tsang’s most recent bio in *Trap Door* uses female pronouns, so I have chosen to use female pronouns for both Tsang and ‘Wu’.

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