

# The Marketing of a Voguing Icon: How Leiomy Maldonado Became the Face of Black Opal’s 2021 Campaign

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In the words of Katelyn Burns, trans people “entered the 2010s quietly and are leaving it as magazine cover stars and TV shows protagonists” (Burns). The embodiment of commercial brands by trans people in the media contributed to heightened visibility as corporations reached out to a more diverse clientele. Following in the footsteps of the fashion industry, the cosmetics industry pioneered this practice of trans inclusion in 2015. That one year, Lea T became the new face of Chromatics, the hair coloring line of American hair care brand Redken (Sharkey; Ferrier) owned by the L’Oréal Group, Andreja Pejic modeled for the Louis Vuitton-owned Sephora franchise Make Up For Ever brand (Gregory; Del Russo), and teenager Jazz Jennings was featured in the Johnson & Johnson owned Clean & Clear #SeeTheRealMe campaign (Nichols; Alcindor). By showcasing trans women as ambassadors of lead products, giants of the cosmetics industry gave – via sheer presence – a platform for the recognition of trans lives and the defense of trans rights.

During the 2010s, Barack Obama’s two presidential mandates saw several landmark trans victories. Starting in 2010, the State Department began to loosen Federal laws that required gender-affirming surgery to apply for a legal gender change (Eilperin). This not only simplified the lives of trans people but also started a slow movement towards the abolition of binary gender categories on official identification documents (Blinken). The passing of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in 2010 included article 1557, which bans any state-funded health care provider from discriminating

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*Popular Culture Studies Journal*

Volume 12, Issue 1

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on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or *sex*. In 2016, the Obama administration added a series of regulations to include gender identity (Eilperin). The PPACA was then extended to cover gender-affirming surgery and other medical care connected to gender transition, which made it available to people who could not afford it prior to this law.

It is tempting to argue that the rise in representation is directly linked to the advent of trans rights, and it would be hard to argue there is no connection, yet although the two struggles may meet, they are not moving along the same planes. With the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 and his inauguration in 2017, reactionary forces with access to the highest strata of political power pushed binary paradigms of equating sex and gender in ways that jeopardized newly acquired trans rights and endangered trans bodies (Simmons-Duffin). New regulations of discrimination based on sex now explicitly excluded trans people, and PPACA benefits were revoked. In 2021, Joe Biden's administration changed PPACA regulations back to its 2016 scope (Biden), and how long it is upheld will likely depend on the next administration.

Since 2010, the legal status of non-binary individuals has depended on the political will of Democrats and the well-organized backlash of Republicans. Representations in the media partly follow the political pendulum, yet the production and reception of mainstream media do obey their own logic. Trans visibility has not been affected by any significant backlash since 2010 and new promotional campaigns are launched every day (Dua). Yet the hateful reactions and very real economic backlash following the promotion in April 2023 of Bud Light beer by trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney is disheartening (Holpuch). While high fashion, luxury brands and cosmetics continue to open up to gender diversity as a marketing strategy, it is clearly much more difficult to have trans women successfully promote a general market symbol of working-class American culture such as cheap beer.

The Bud Light marketing fiasco reveals how strong the traditional gender binary still is on a symbolic and capitalistic level. Transgender women may be associated with products that promote physical, transformative beauty and care for one's body, and which are stereotypically feminine, when targeting women and even gay men. Because of strong stereotypes, mannishness is in fact left out and the product's binary characteristics remain intact. But when a trans woman promotes goods perceived as belonging to the realm of male virility, marketing strategies spin out of control.

Trans representation in advertising is just as diverse as in any other media. A liberal president's access to power and will to do away with binary policing

and extend civil rights to the gender non-conforming cannot protect trans people from attack. The symbolic plane of representation's impact on the way trans people are perceived still functions within a binary gender matrix that remains very powerful. Skin color also comes into play and, in spite of the election of a Black president open to LGBTQ+ rights, opportunities for the visibility of Black trans people remained scarce. While the world of cosmetics opened up to trans models in the mid-2010s, the case study that follows shows how extending the same opportunity to Black trans women was another stepping stone.

In the spring of 2021, many North American news sites targeting women and LGBTQ+ demographics celebrated Black Opal's choice to hire a transgender model to promote its products (Nguyen; Maril; Broverman). Already famous model Leiomy Maldonado became the first openly queer incarnation of this widely distributed beauty brand presently carried by nation-wide department stores such as Walmart or CVS. Most articles underlined what this meant in terms of diversity and visibility for transgender people. Stressing the importance of these issues, Leiomy Maldonado was quoted saying,

to be their first trans model, it's groundbreaking, and not only for the trans community but for the whole LGBTQ+ community [...] For them to have asked me, I felt like this was another door opening for our community and it's another way for the world to see how accepted we should be and how our beauty matters as well. (Maril)

To fully understand what is at stake, it is important to consider the brand's target demographics. Black Opal was created in 1994 to offer exclusive dark skin products. Maldonado specifically addresses the identity politics attached to this brand.

I've known about Black Opal since I was younger. Black Opal has created products that have been specifically made for women of color for over 25 years, and today it's also black- and female-owned, which to me is something amazing. (Maril)

The photographs of Leiomy Maldonado, one of the world's most famous vogueers, alongside these phrases, promote the image the brand wants to build as being inclusive of non-binary people. Although serving commercial purposes, Leiomy Maldonado's appearance in a Black Opal ad campaign uniquely contributes to the recent evolution of Black representations in the United States. The various declarations quoted here also participate in this reading.

The identification of the model plays an important role, as Leiomy Maldonado epitomizes the ballroom universe and more specifically, the practice of voguing which she illustrates. Voguing is a dance that grew within Afro-Latinx homosexual and transgender communities. Leiomy Maldonado has become a major icon since the turn of the 2010s, a period of important growth in the visibility of voguing, which she largely contributed to. If we assume that the Black Opal commercials are not only aimed at people familiar with ballroom culture, the campaign is an unmistakable sign that visibility is on the rise. With this increased presence outside the ballroom community via mass media and pop culture, voguing is becoming mainstream and voguers may increasingly make a living from it, following the example of Maldonado. This commodification, most prominent in the United States, raises questions of appropriation of a culture born and bred within a racialized, queer community facing multiple marginalization (Bailey 4; Higgins). Yet, the recent increase in non-binary Black and Latinx visibility may well erase the subversive aspect of voguing in the face of heteronormative domination.

Voguing has been in the media spotlight before, and Leiomy Maldonado seems aware that her career happens to coincide with a period of mediatic amplification that should not erase the history of voguing if it is to avoid the pitfalls of the past. I will therefore try to observe how this moment differs in terms of identity politics. First, I will look back on the 1990s when voguing first left the ballroom community and faced the risk of being cut off entirely from its roots. Voguers who embodied this phenomenon were largely re-marketed for the dominant heterosexual matrix. Secondly, I will look at how the legacy of the 1990s informed the renewal of the 2010s, with Leiomy Maldonado as a major figure. This time, voguing espoused the social issues of the communities it sprang from. I will finally suggest that the recognition of transgender identities is a major new step in the struggle for black civil rights in the United States.

### Mass Media Reframing of Vogue at the Turn of the 1990s

In a previous study, I looked at how the increased visibility of voguing happened in two phases, first at the turn of the 1990s, then in the 2010s and beyond (Herbin). The first is well known and often attributed to the release of Madonna's 1990 "Vogue" video at roughly the same time as Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* in the festival circuit. The previous year, while Marlon Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on PBS to a restricted audience (Bequer and Gatti; Halter), Malcolm McLaren's

“Deep in Vogue” video reached a wider audience with the successful entry of the track on the Billboard dance chart (Moore). Livingston’s film was then theatrical released in 1991 and largely available on VHS soon after. Such are the major contours of the first phase and its three channels of amplification via mass media and popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

*Paris is Burning*, “Vogue” and “Deep in Vogue” are all created by outsiders of the ballroom community looking in. The houses and the balls are spaces of refuge against the exclusions both from predominantly White homosexual and transgender spaces and from heteronormative circles. Just as the word “voguing” refers to Vogue magazine, the term “house” refers to the fashion houses and the world of fashion that greatly inspires ballroom culture. “Houses” also directly refer to the notion of home: each house acts as a substitute family structure, in place of the biological families that so many homosexual and transgender people are rejected from.

Houses compete in balls where they try to excel in the various performance categories. As ethnographer Marlon M. Bailey has shown, these competitions are intrinsically linked to the “gender system” established by the community. With its six genders and sexualities—Butch Queens, Butches, Femme Queens, Butch Queens up in Drag, Men, and Women—the ballroom scene regulates how each person may compete according to their self-identified gender variance. If the accepted notions of sex, gender and sexuality are not eradicated *per se*, the participative research that Marlon M. Bailey carried out within the ballroom community of Detroit in the early 2000s leads him to observe that “most things are open, negotiable, alterable” (Bailey 34). According to him, the “gender system” and its six categories transcend dominant heteronormative categories:

The gender system is queer insofar as it allows for, and in many cases celebrates, sex, gender, and sexual fluidity and diversity. Members of the Ballroom community enact and experience sex, gender, and sexual identification as a performative process rather than as an immutable biological fact. (Bailey 30-31)

Voguing has thus developed as a performative, individual and collective form of activism. Performed within the ball’s categories, voguing as a dance is a specific expression of ballroom culture. The increase in visibility – to a wider

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the seminal texts in the field of queer studies were elaborated and published during this same period: Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990; Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*, U California P, 1990; *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, n°2, « Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities », 1991.

and therefore less familiar audience – creates both the possibility of recognition and a potential for severance from its community roots and from expressing the disenfranchisement it originally echoed. From this point of view, and in spite of their differences, the 1990s productions were unable to render the complexity of shifting identities taking place within the ballroom community. All three tended to separate voguing from its roots, going so far as to practically erase the original context in Madonna's "Vogue" video.

Jennie Livingston's documentary<sup>2</sup> probably best manages to connect voguing to the ballroom community, even though it was very much criticized at the time (hooks; "Gender is Burning"). The documentary is akin to a sociological investigation shot over several years, during the second half of the 1980s. It is cut up in chapters, one of which is entitled "Voguing" (00:36:01-00:42:01). This sequence revolves mostly around dancer Willi Ninja, and greatly contributed to making voguing a central element of the affirmation of ballroom culture. Willi Ninja's virtuosity didactically illustrates the meanings of voguing's main choreographic elements.

Ninja's centrality to voguing in *Paris is Burning* is no coincidence.<sup>3</sup> He was already renowned in the voguing community and the ballroom scene as a dance master<sup>4</sup> with successful forays outside the reserved spaces of the community. For example, it is Willi Ninja's silhouette that is seen against the white background of Malcolm McLaren's 1989 video "Deep in Vogue." This cut out technique underlines the signature moves of voguing, making it the central visual element. The aesthetic innovation of voguing is undoubtedly what is most striking, beyond the fact that McLaren conceived his piece as a tribute to ballroom culture with the names of the houses of La Beija, Xtravaganza, Saint Laurent, or Dupree quoted in the lyrics. The black silhouettes against a white background also tend to highlight androgyny with the long hair, shiny gloves, short jackets and tight-fitting stockings and leggings, yet it falls short of the range of identities hosted at any ball. Another exceptional detail is that Willi Ninja and Adrian Alicea are dressed in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston, Miramax films, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> His presence is equally central in the voguing scenes in Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*.

<sup>4</sup> Willi Ninja recalls the beginnings of this fame in Rose, Tricia. "Nobody wants a Part-Time Mother: An interview with Willi Ninja." *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, edited by Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross, Routledge, 1994, pp. 163-175.

creations of French designer Thierry Mugler, who they vogueed for on the runway the same year.<sup>5</sup>

The capacity of Willi Ninja to move from the ballroom scene into high fashion and pop culture begs analysis. When Judith Butler comments on Jennie Livingston's film, she focuses on the trajectories of two of its key figures – Venus Xtravaganza and of course, Willi Ninja – with regards to the lives they manage to create for themselves outside the ballroom scene.

Consider the different fates of Venus Xtravaganza. She “passes” as a light-skinned woman, but is – by virtue of a certain failure to pass completely – clearly vulnerable to homophobic violence; ultimately, her life is taken presumably by a client who, upon the discovery of what she calls her “little secret,” mutilates her for having seduced him. On the other hand, Willi Ninja can pass as straight; his voguing becomes foregrounded in the video productions with Madonna et al., and he achieves post-legendary status on an international scale. There is passing and then there is passing, and it is – as we used to say – “no accident” that Willi Ninja ascends and Venus Xtravaganza dies. (“Gender is Burning” 129-30)

I believe this uncompromising observation underlines one important aspect of the first phase of increased visibility. In all three productions, voguing within ballroom culture is represented by Butch Queens. As Marlon M. Bailey explains, “although it is claimed almost exclusively by cisgender men [...], the Butch Queen category includes very masculine and very feminine individuals as long as they identify and live as gay men” (44). He also observes that this is the predominant identity within ballroom culture in the United States. It follows that “power and privilege are accorded to gay men and masculinity” (41) as shown, according to him, by the absence of competition categories specifically dedicated to lesbian women. Unsurprisingly, this is also true of voguing represented outside of ballrooms, where the pre-eminence of masculinity is accentuated to the point of almost erasing gender fluidity. If Judith Butler may be going a bit fast when presenting Willi Ninja as off to work with Madonna, she does correctly point out that the “Vogue” video made voguing acceptable to the heterosexual matrix.

The video, directed by David Fincher, transports Butch Queens into a black and white evocation of Hollywood's glamorous golden age. Everyone is

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<sup>5</sup> See “22. VERY RARE Thierry Mugler Fall-Winter 1989/90 (3) with Willi Ninja and Imán.” *YouTube*, uploaded by AngelPlanett, 28 April 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjI9\\_zCOOMs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjI9_zCOOMs)

sporting trousers and dinner jackets that tend to erase gender differences. However, the succession of shots contributes to a subtle partition between the bodies of the voguers and the chorus girls. On one side, men's bodies are dressed in shirts and, on the other, glimpses of cleavages eventually reveal bustiers enhancing the women's breasts. When they regroup and shed most of their clothes at the end of the video, the cross-dressing of the chorus girls' bodies becomes perfectly legible, while that of the Butch Queens is not. In a way, the erotic charge that Madonna and Fincher demand from the silenced male bodies eventually has them follow a binary code of gender division, reducing voguing to a choreography that can be appropriated and emptied of its subversive message for change.

### From the Turn of the 2010s to Now, Building a New Representation for Black Trans People with Voguing Icon Leiomy Maldonado

In light of what happened in the early 1990s, the second phase of increased visibility clearly attempted to include the ballroom community and transgender identity in the representation of voguing. Much like the discussions that accompanied the release of the video for Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)," the spectre of a wave of appropriations of dance movements from ballroom culture by pop stars resurfaced. But the following year, in 2009, MTV audiences discovered *Vogue Evolution*, a group of five voguers from New York (Leiomy Maldonado, Jorel Rios, Devon Webster, Dashaun Williams and Malechi Williams) who were proud of coming from the ballroom scene and used the press to raise awareness about the fight against HIV/AIDS (Anderson). As they competed in the fourth season of *America's Best Dance Crew*, *Vogue Evolution* tried to inscribe the issues their community faced in the very dance practice they were showcasing. The TV show's narrative constantly underlined this opportunity for greater visibility by the first openly gay and transgender group in its history, and presented them with a mission of "breaking down barriers," in the words of host Mario Lopez.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with the presentation preceding its first performance, the group introduced each of its members as being gay first and foremost, before the montage isolated one of the five voguers, Leiomy Maldonado, who revealed

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<sup>6</sup> "Dance Craze Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 1, MTV, 6 September 2009.



her singularity as a transgender woman.<sup>7</sup> From then on, the show's narrative revolved around this fact. Leiomy is first literally celebrated as the "queen" of the group by the jury,<sup>8</sup> and then portrayed as uncertain when it comes to her willingness to continue with the competition.<sup>9</sup> The narrative managed to divide the queer unity of the group to set apart one individual, sometimes presented as an inspiration, sometimes as a disruptive element. In fact, the way the group is constantly summoned to "represent" weighs much more heavily on the shoulders of Leiomy Maldonado, the only transgender member of *Vogue Evolution*.

As the season unfolded, issues of gender performativity became prominent, in the sense that, on several occasions, the evaluation of her performance as a dancer was conflated with the evaluation of the performance of her gender identity. When *Vogue Evolution* was asked to choreograph a piece based on Beyoncé's song "Déjà Vu," the jury moved away from its role of judging the dance performance and discussed instead what is traditionally the crux of ballroom culture – rapper Lil Mama praised Leiomy Maldonado for how she managed to "bring out the feminine side of Beyoncé" ("Beyoncé Challenge"). At times, *Vogue Evolution*'s performances loosened the grip of gender naturalization. Yet, identity rules were violently reinstated when Leiomy Maldonado seemed unwilling to comply with the shows' expectations. The same judge who praised her later summoned her, as a woman, to better "represent" herself, more "correctly," through gender stereotypes, by way of supposedly "representing" transgender people as political subjects:

You were born a man and you are becoming a woman. If you're going to become a woman, act like a lady. Don't be a bird, like "Oh my god, I'm not doing this!" You know what I'm saying? It gets too crazy and it gets confusing. You're doing this for America. Even though you're the face for transgenders, you're the face of America right now with this group and it's not about anybody else. It's about y'all. You know what I'm saying? So do it for the team. (Lil Mama "Bollywood Challenge.")

The LGBTQ+ community immediately reacted to this ("Lil Mama"), and the African American rapper had to offer an apology (Newman). The judge's

<sup>7</sup> "Crew's Choice Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 1, MTV, 9 August 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "Beyoncé Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 2, MTV, 16 August 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "Bollywood Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 4, MTV, 30 August 2009.

reprimand, however, contributed to establishing Leiomy Maldonano as a public figure for the ballroom scene and more specifically, the transgender community and their demand for recognition and respect. From that moment on, she became associated with all major projects connected to ballroom culture and its representation in the mass media, a bit like what happened with Willi Ninja at the turn of the 1990s. She even ended up symbolically turning the tables on her original TV performance in 2020 when she joined the jury of *Legendary*,<sup>10</sup> a competition entirely dedicated to voguing. Along with the TV series *Pose* created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals in 2018, *Legendary* marks a culminating point in the commodification of ballroom culture that arguably started with *Vogue Evolution* competing on MTV. And every single time, Leiomy Maldonado is there as a dancer, a choreographer, an actress, and an icon of the ballroom scene. She is known as the Wonder Woman of voguing and excels at ubiquitously validating any visibility effort she participates in. Her name and image are conspicuously connected to the ballroom scene, beyond community circles.

Maldonado's ubiquitous presence in the representations of voguing, and the media's attempts to make voguing palatable to mainstream audiences — naturally breeds criticism from the ballroom community (Kleinmann). But it also gives her a platform to promote the queer community and more specifically, trans people. Leiomy Maldonado introduces a new paradigm of visibility for voguing, one that reconciles artistic recognition with community activism. This is shown in the advertising campaign launched by sports equipment manufacturer Nike in 2017, which is the first for this company to feature a trans woman. Its “Be True” campaign in support of LGBTQ+ people featured the voguing legend in a video directed by up-and-coming visual artist Daisy Zhou<sup>11</sup>. Leiomy Maldonado is presented as an accomplished athlete teaching voguing in a dance studio. The clip cuts to ball competitions that place the practice in its original context. The two spaces are connected via slow motion underlining dance moves at the studio, at the ball and back, as if to make sure voguing is not separated from the ballroom culture that created it. Here, Leiomy Maldonado's success as a dancer is fundamentally linked to her recognition on the ballroom scene she belongs to and allows her to serve as a role model for racialized queer people in the ballroom community, and for all non-binary people. This was presented as the reason for the Hetrick-Martin

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<sup>10</sup> Available on VOD with HBO Max since May 27, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Nike Vogue*. Directed by Daisy Zhou, Dream City, Public Record, 2017, [vimeo.com/222699290](https://vimeo.com/222699290).

Institute to honor Leiomy Maldonado, along with Nike Incorporated, at the Emery Awards Ball on November 16, 2022.

### Conclusion: From Past Black Representations to the Present, Inscribing Trans Recognition in the Legacy of the Struggles for Civil Rights

The Nike ad campaign logically brings me back to the cosmetic brand Black Opal campaign I started with. Hopefully, this analysis of images that are making voguing visible outside its original community informs the reading of the Black Opal images. Leiomy Maldonado's persona as conveyed by mass media informs what the pictures are attempting to channel by using her as a model. Unlike the way Butch Queens may have been appropriated by the heterosexual matrix and emptied of their activist, community roots, I believe that Leiomy Maldonado's images for Black Opal, while also reframed for the heterosexual matrix, are rooted in the history of the struggle for the recognition of civil rights. To show this, let us look at the two portraits produced by the photographer Quil Lemons for this campaign.



Figure 1 BLACK OPAL/QUIL LEMONS



Figure 2 BLACK OPAL/QUIL LEMONS

Both portraits feature the voguer's face on a unified background similar to the cosmetic products tone sold by the company. Only a few elements distinguish one portrait from the other, but they are significant in the way they reveal two versions of Leiomy Maldonado, possibly both required by Black Opal to embrace a panel of black femininities – one with natural hair, one with straightened hair – as if to reach out to a diversity of customers who may identify with the model. Here, Maldonado's poses are static, in stark contrast with the acrobatic spins and dips that have imposed a profoundly renewed conception of femininity inside voguing. Maldonado's signature head spin is dependent on her long straight hair that whip the air to create the Leiomy Lolly, picked up by numerous pop stars.

From my point of view, the second portrait is more surprising as it calls on historical figures to inform our understanding of the Leiomy Maldonado icon. I believe the use of a natural Afro hairstyle affirms black transgender beauty within a black militant legacy. The same year as the Black Opal campaign, Quil Lemons also used this hairstyle in a photo titled *Monument*<sup>12</sup>. This time, the Afro literally hides the model's face so that it works on a symbolic level to represent Black beauty. At the crossroads of art and fashion (Sargent), Quil's work pursues a line drawn by the 1960s Black is Beautiful movement (Ford) and updated for queer inclusivity.

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<sup>12</sup> Lemons, Quil. *Monument*. 2021, private collection, <https://www.abt.org/entry/quil-lemons/#images-0-4>.



Figure 3 Hulton Archive. Angela Davis. 1969. Getty Images, T992504\_01

Leiomy Maldonado's portrait with the Afro recalls this visual memory of the Black activism of the 1960s and 1970s. It is reminiscent of Angela Davis's famous portrait with a similar pose, hand under chin. Maldonado also refers to past Black representations when she dedicates her image on Instagram to Tracey "Africa" Norman,<sup>13</sup> the first African American transgender model whose journey was marked by the discrimination transgender people have historically suffered. The association with these two figures seems to serve a similar purpose as when Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* connected in its montage the Selma marches with the first Black prides. These evocations of past discriminations and political struggles in the United States clearly posit the recognition of non-binary people as full-class citizens. It is one more step in the on-going fight for civil rights.

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