***The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017) and *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018)**

**Film backgrounds/summaries:** The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson is a 2017 documentary, directed by David France, who is a white gay cisgender male filmmaker and journalist. It is France's second documentary; he also directed *How To Survive a Plague* (2012), which focuses on HIV/AIDS and the ACT UP movement in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s. *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* chronicles the story of Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans woman who was a prominent figure in the Stonewall rebellion, co-founded the group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries in the 1970s with Sylvia Rivera, and was an LGBTQ advocate until her death in 1992. The film follows Victoria Cruz, an anti-violence advocate, as she investigates the circumstances of Johnson's death.

*Happy Birthday, Marsha* is a 2018 short film created by Black trans artist Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel. It features Mya Taylor as Marsha P. Johnson and Eve Lindley as Sylvia Rivera, and imagines the day and evening before the Stonewall riots began from Marsha P. Johnson's perspective.

**Content warning:** *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* contains brief nudity and discussions of violence, murder, sex work, and suicide. *Happy Birthday, Marsha* contains police brutality.

**Running time:** *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* is 1 hour and 45 minutes. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* is 15 minutes.

**Notes:**

* This week, we will be watching these two films together to address the ethics of storytelling and the different approaches of these two films to portraying Marsha P. Johnson. Students should watch *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* prior to Day 1's class, and *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* prior to day 2's class along with the assigned reading for that day. For more on the controversy in the making of these two films, you may want to read (and perhaps assign) this essay by Tourmaline in [Teen Vogue](file:///Users/Sarah%20Schrag/Documents/GitHub/queer-cinema/modules/unit%203:%20documentary/Teen%20Vogue) or this article in [Slate](https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/10/marsha-p-johnson-netflix-doc-raises-questions-over-what-trans-led-storytelling-would-look-like.html).
* Because there are two films this week, I have reserved 15 minutes in Day 3’s class for a student-led scene analysis of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (in addition to the typical time reserved on Day 1). You could alternatively use this time for more teacher-led scene analysis or to examine the Slate or Teen Vogue articles mentioned above.

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 2: Caldafell, Maria Bernadette. "Narrative Authority, Theory in the Flesh, and the Fight over *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson." QED: A Journal in GLBTQ* Worldmaking Vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 26-39
  + Day 3: Tang, Jeannine. "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* edited by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, pp. 363-393. (Excerpt provided: 378-383).

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson***

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis on *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*.
3. (5 min) Start teacher-led scene analysis with screening clip. (Second scene: 2:27-7:15)
4. (6 min) Discussion prep.
5. What does this film present as its project through this scene? How do the formal elements of this scene support that project?

* *This scene focuses on Victoria Cruz’s quest to uncover the cause of Johnson’s death, Cruz’s current work with AVP and the ongoing violence against trans people in New York City, and it shows the first clip within the film of Johnson when she was alive, suggesting it also hopes to capture who she was.*
* *Score: The score is primarily a loud, tense, violin piece. It suggests a mood of investigation, secrecy, and threat.*
* *Voiceover: As Cruz puts up notes on her bulletin board, a clip of her voice plays asking, “If we can’t bring justice for Marsha, how can we bring justice for all these other unsolved cases?” This suggests that the film’s project is to investigate Johnson’s death partly because she represents a broader cause of getting justice for trans women of color who are victims of violence.*
* *Mise-en-scene: The first part of this scene includes members of the AVP discussing a recent assault on a trans woman. It contains shot-reaction shots that show the AVP members looking fairly neutral when describing acts of horrible violence, suggesting the frequency of these attacks. They also mention the Nettles case, which is used throughout the film as a contemporary analogue for the anti-trans violence Johnson encountered throughout her life.*
* *Editing: The film cuts between clips of Cruz cutting open boxes, looking at files, carrying boxes through the streets of New York, etc. with archival footage from the 1990s of people describing the condition of Johnson’s body when she was pulled from the river. The editing raises the audience’s suspicion because shots of police reports list Johnson’s death as caused by suicide, while archival footage shows people describing her body in ways that do not suggest suicide, and claiming that Johnson would never commit suicide. It also shows Cruz watching the archival footage herself, suggesting that this film is primarily an investigation of Johnson’s death, told from Cruz’s perspective. One expects, from this opening scene, that by the end of the film (as in a CSI episode), the audience may find out what really happened to Johnson.*
* *Editing: The first clip of Johnson shown alive features her on the piers, being introduced by a white gay man who says he loves her and thinks she’s brave because she expresses her gender in varied ways, which he explains he would not be comfortable doing. This is an interesting clip because one could argue that this “introducer” is a stand-in for France himself. In this clip, this man also refers to her as “Queen of the Village,” suggesting her importance to the community.*

1. (20 min) Whole-class discussion.
2. What does this film present as its project through this scene? How do the formal elements of this scene support that project?
3. **Additional questions, if needed:** Consider the film’s score in this scene. What does it suggest about this film’s mood?
4. Consider the mise-en-scene in the AVP meeting. What do you notice about the shots, framing, editing, and dialogue? What does this suggest about anti-trans violence? What does it suggest about this film’s focus?
5. Consider the voiceover of Cruz speaking about Johnson’s death. How does she speak about Johnson’s death? What questions does she ask? What does this voiceover suggest about how this film is framing Johnson’s death?
6. Consider the editing throughout this scene, and the cutting together of clips of Cruz with archival footage from 1992. How does the editing establish this film’s narrative? What does it suggest this film will try to do? What expectations does it set up for the remainder of the film?
7. Consider the first clip we see of Johnson alive. Why do you think France chose to use this clip to introduce the audience to Johnson? What’s interesting or significant about this clip?

**Lesson 2: Examining *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* Alongside *Happy Birthday, Marsha!***

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one question to respond to:
2. What did you know, prior to watching these films, about Stonewall, Marsha P. Johnson, or Sylvia Rivera?
3. What did you not know? What surprised you?
4. What would you like to know more about?
5. (5 min) Discuss.
6. (3 min) Screen today’s clips. (*Death and Life* opening clip – 0:00-2:27; *Happy Birthday Marsha* opening clip 0:00-1:25)
7. (15 min) Study groups.
8. What is Calafell’s argument? What key lines are most important?

* *France’s documentary erases how Johnson’s life was affected by anti-Blackness: She argues that the film “engages in colorblind strategies that erase Johnson’s experience as a black trans\* activist, instead framing her as a queer victim” (28). Calafell argues that the film “frames Johnson as a queer victim by ignoring how her race intersected with her gender in terms of her social activism and the anti-trans\* violence she experienced” (30). Calafell highlights that “we aren’t presented with the particular challenges Johnson faced as a black transwoman and activist” (35). She suggests that the scene depicting the 1973 Christopher Street Day Rally presents Rivera and Johnson’s story through colorblindness without examining their particular struggles as transwomen of color. Calafell suggests that France’s colorblind approach is linked to other examples of the whitewashing of queer and trans history, such as the 2015* Stonewall *film that centered on a fictional white, cisgender gay protagonist (30).*
* *France’s film centers on death and avoids the joy that filled Johnson’s life (perhaps most evidently in the title, which places “Death” before “Life”): “The documentary and France’s ensuing statements about the controversy flatten the resistive and joyful possibilities of Johnson’s story for trans\* and queers of color” (28). As Tourmaline explained in her Teen Vogue essay, she “dreamt of a day that black trans women and the people who love us would come away from watching my film feeling more connected to…our sense of power and joy and feel more free” (29). As Calafell explores, trans power and joy is not necessarily at the heart of France’s film: “Shifting the framing of Johnson as a victim erases not just her activism, but the joy she experienced as a black transwoman. Although it is imperative that we recognize and act against the violence against transwomen of color, it is also necessary to honor the joy they experience as a way to push back against images of the tragic queer” (36).*
* *The significance of France’s treatment of Tourmaline and the connection to violence against Johnson: Calafell quotes Tourmaline, who noted that France’s work was “the kind of extraction/excavation of black life, disabled life, poor life, trans life [that] is so old and so deeply connected to the violence that Marsha had to deal with throughout her life” (29).*
* *The queer Afrofuturist vision at the heart of Tourmaline’s work is quite different from France’s goals: Calafell quotes Tourmaline and Wortzel who write that their work “addresses the systematic erasure of rich legacies of trans and queer activism and art by creating artworks that revisit and re-imagine these stories…we look back in order to dream a way forward” (29).*
* *Calafell argues that Tourmaline’s comments about her alignment with Marsha P. Johnson is emblematic of Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga’s “theory in the flesh” (30), which involves “theorizing through lived experience” (31) and prioritizing the emotional over the intellectual.*
* *Calafell argues that France’s comments about solidarity with Tourmaline’s project are an example of what Sara Ahmed calls “the nonperformative,” which are “statements of commitment that can be ‘understood as opaque: it is not clear what they are doing if they are not doing what they are saying” (32). Calafell asks, “Although France may include a link to Tourmaline’s project, the question remains, what is he doing to use his privilege to shift resources and change the landscape for black trans\* filmmakers?” (32). Calafell links France’s choice to center his narrative on Victoria Cruz and her search for justice as evidence of a “nonperformative strategy of superficial diversity” (33), since it is “an acknowledgement that identity matters, but not enough to let transwomen of color tell their stories from behind the scenes (33).*
* *Calafell argues a “trans\* analytic” that “allows for a new way to think about coalition building based in heterogeneity rather than homogeneity” (36).*

1. What makes these opening scenes different, and how do they suggest the filmmakers’ different goals? What formal elements of these scenes are most significant?

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|  | *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* | *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* |
| *Score* | *Opens with a somber piece of music to accompany the clips of the march for justice for Johnson’s death* | *Opens with an upbeat, diegetic piece of music being played on a jukebox at the Stonewall; this suggests a party or a dance.* |
| *Title cards/Film title* | *The film’s presented in front of an establishing shot of Manhattan seen from the river. The city looks gray, dark and stormy. This shot may have been chosen because it features the river that Johnson’s body was pulled from, and so the image suggests a mournful mood tied to her death. and because it connects her story to a broader narrative of New York, through Stonewall, the work of the Anti-Violence Project in general, and the death of Islan Nettles, whose story is also featured. Also, by choosing to title the film “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson, France prioritizes the story of her death over the story of her activism, her community, or her personality.* | *The title card for* Happy Birthday Marsha! *is presented in neon purple letters, suggesting something vibrant. It is also featured against a slightly grainy background, suggesting a VHS tape. This might speak to Tourmaline’s project of recovering archival materials in order to create beauty and joy. Similarly, titling this film “Happy Birthday, Marsha!” sets the expectation that this film is a celebration of Johnson’s life, even long after her death. It suggests commemoration and preservation.* |
| Voiceovers | *The opening voiceover features a newscaster from 1992 remarking on Johnson’s death. While the newscaster uses the pronoun “she,” he refers to her “real name” as Malcolm, which was perhaps typical of news clips at this time (and sometimes still), but this clip pulls the focus towards a mainstream perspective on Johnson rather than a perspective of those closest to her. It also suggests that this film is primarily about her death, rather than her life.* | *The film opens with a clip of Johnson smiling and looking at the camera, and then a recording of her voice plays over the openings shots of Taylor portraying her and cuts back to footage of her being interviewed. She speaks about her early days in New York and the origin story of the name “Marsha.” By constructing the opening clip and voiceover this way, Tourmaline centers her voice as the frame for this film.* |
| Mise-en-scene | *Most of the opening shots in this film feature a large crowd of supporters walking through the Village shortly after Johnson’s death. Randy Wicker and Sylvia Rivera stand at the front of the march, but Rivera is sometimes out of frame and is not identified during the clip.* | *The opening shots include clips of Johnson herself as well as shots of Taylor entering the Stonewall and sitting by the bar.A long shot of her sitting alone slowly zooms in towards her as she smiles into the distance, with soft lighting behind her. The film then cuts to an extreme close up of her eyes as her face breaks into a smile (while the voiceover describes how much she liked the name “Marsha”). This suggests that her subjectivity and joy is the focus of this film. The final shot before the title card is of the cops entering the Stonewall while she stands on stage in the background, suggesting the significance of her role in this event.* |

1. How do the differences in the scenes we just re-watched relate to Calafell’s argument?

* *When considered holistically, the formal elements of the opening scene of France’s film suggests that this is a film told from outside Johnson’s perspective, has a mournful tone, and is centered on her death. In contrast, the opening scene of Tourmaline’s film centers Johnson’s experience and life and has a celebratory mood.*

1. (25 min) Whole-class discussion.
2. What is Calafell’s argument? What key lines are most important?
3. Review p. 28 and 30. What is Calafell arguing about race in France’s film and in Johnson’s life?
4. Review p. 28, 29, and 36. All three of these pages mention “joy.” What is Calafell arguing about joy in France’s film? What is Tourmaline quoted as saying in terms of joy in her film? What else does Tourmaline say in the quote on p. 29 that seems significant for understanding her intent?
5. Review p. 30-31. What is “theory in the flesh?” How does Calafell apply this term?
6. Review p. 29. What is the “nonperformative?” How does Calafell critique France’s work using this term?
7. What makes these opening scenes different, and how do they suggest the filmmakers’ different goals? What formal elements of these scenes are most significant?
   1. Compare and contrast the following elements: the film’s titles, the shot of the title cards, the voiceovers, the score, and the mise-en-scene. What’s different about these elements in the two opening scenes?
8. How do the differences in the scenes we just re-watched relate to Calafell’s argument?
9. **Extension question:** Consider Calafells’s references to Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “nonperformative in diversity work” (32). Can you think of other examples of the “nonperformative” you have seen?
10. **Extension question:** Do you agree with Calafell’s critique of *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson?* Why or why not?

**Lesson 3: Examining *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* Alongside “Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures”**

1. (5 min) Students write – compare/contrast. Choose one question to respond to. Consider our discussion yesterday and the two films you’ve seen.
2. Which film do you think you’ll remember more? Why?
3. Which film moved you more? Why?
4. Which film do you think best honored the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson? Why?
5. (7 min) Discuss.
6. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis on *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*
7. (3 min) Teacher-led analysis begins. Screen today’s clip from *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (Marsha is attacked; Marsha prepares for her party 2:50-5:01)
8. (5 min) Discussion prep.
9. What does Tang argue in her piece?

* *Limited archival of significant materials relevant to trans history: Tourmaline (referred to in this piece as Reina Gossett) has worked as a “community historian” to salvage the history of trans activists during the Stonewall Rebellion. Tourmaline has argued that “artifacts” to “reconstruct this history are often limited; she has critically observed how public and LGB-specific repositories rarely prioritize saving materials related to transgender artists” (379). These materials are sometimes “accidentally archived” (380). Tang asks, “How then, does one work with these scant traces of trans elders?” and explains that Tourmaline’s art works to “excavate trans and cultural histories, provide critical views on contemporary trans political issues, and distribute collectively sourced funds” (380).*
* *Importance of aesthetics of love, care in artwork related to trans infrastructure: “These pragmatic, infrastructural interventions have aesthetic effects, working upon our sense of what lives might be desirable, possible, cherished, and loved. They are dually aesthetic in their visual dimensions, in their attention to color, fashion, and beauty”(380)*
* *Value of embracing the aesthetics of glamour: Tang points out that surveillance and policing of trans people in US history “violently target[ed] trans people based on perceptions of sexualized flamboyance and gender nonconformity” (381); therefore it is essential that Tourmaline embraces glamour to refute the criminalization of trans aesthetics*
* *Art world’s rejection of glamour and the connection to transphobia: Tang also points out how glamour is sometimes rejected for its perceived “deceptiveness” and “deceitfulness” (381); however, these “dismissals risk reproducing a dangerous and transphobic discourse” that sees trans identity as “a signifier of deception and falsity” (381)*
* *Glamour in* Happy Birthday Marsha!: *Tang argues that the film “adopts the language of glamour” through “cinematography, soft-focus, and tinted camera filters, period typography and costuming, and score by artist Geo Wyeth” (382)*
* Happy Birthday Marsha’s *rejection of typical forms of trans representation in cinema through the aesthetics of glamour: a “luscious film as a form of aesthetic resistance to they ways in which trans bodies are so frequently mangled and murdered…their characters presented as caricatures, tropes or scenography. In opposition to such depictions, in* Happy Birthday, Marsha!, *the camera lingers on the faces of its characters, its slow pans focus lovingly on the grace of each gesture and capture the beloved objects and animals of a household” (382); Tang points out the glamour of the film resides in the “optics of loving looks between queer and trans women” (382).*
* *Affects in the film and the “infrastructure of trans feeling” (383) – the film’s focus on friendship, care and support: The affects in the film are largely focused on support and connection; Tang explains that “most of the film consists of quiet, conversational scenes between trans women in groups or pairs, who are rarely shown in art and cinema within structures of kinship and familial affection” (383); Tang highlights the phone call between Rivera and Johnson in which the “tone of the scene is amplified by the anchor setting of Johnson’s living room, decorated with party accoutrements, trinkets, and cats—artifacts of cherished femininity and festivities that are lovingly beheld by the camera” (383); additionally, the “camera’s close-ups solicit the interiority of kinship striated by fatigue, forgetfulness, disappointment, forgiveness, and immense tenderness” (383)*
* *The film’s glamour and affects of care and kinship suggest its message of healing: “The “glamour of Sylvia and Marsha is here a kind of affective mapping of what it’s like to hold onto life and stay with it: each promise kept, each phone call answered, each gesture of forgiveness and staying with is a moment of aesthetic transformation within the natal alienation that strucuturally underpins black and transgender lives under racial capitalism” (383)*

1. How does the scene we just reviewed, or other scenes in the film, relate to her argument? What formal elements of this scene are most significant?

* *Close-ups, props: The flowers that Junior gives to Marsha are used as a symbol of how the aesthetics of glamour are both weaponized against transfeminine people and used as a tool of resistance by Tourmaline to convey the affects of care and kinship.. A close-up shot shows Marsha inhaling the scent of the flowers after Junior gives them to her; a few seconds later, a close-up shows them damaged and abandoned on the street after the police attack her. The police attack in this scene is an example about how transfemininity is often “violently attacked” for “perceived flamboyance” (381), but also how Tourmaline lingers on the flowers as a symbol of “kinship and familial affection” (383). Similarly, the birthday cards she crafts play a similar role. They are a symbol of her gestures of affection, creativity, and care for others, and a close-up shot of them discarded on the ground suggests the violence directed at those attempts to create kinship. While the film does not avoid the violence that Marsha and trans women of color so often face, it does not center on that violence. Close-up shots of Marsha’s bruises in the bathtub emphasize the brutality of the violence, but most of the film is devoted to gestures of care between the people of Christopher Street.*
* *Editing, dialogue and the excavation of artifacts: This scene also highlights the way that Tourmaline has “work[ed] with “the scant traces of trans elders” to “excavate trans histories” using “limited artifacts” (380). Throughout this scene and the rest of the film, clips of an interview with the real Marsha P. Johnson are intercut with Mya Taylor’s performance of her, combining the limited artifacts available with storytelling that expands on collective memory of Marsha P. Johnson’s legacy. As Calafell quoted in her piece, Tourmaline and Wortzel wrote: “We look back in order to dream a way forward” (Calafell 29). The weaving of archival resources and imagined narratives suggests this project to use the past as a guide to the future.* 
  + *Tourmaline adds to this excavation by providing connective imagery that links the interview and the narrative film, such as the baby’s breath that Marsha P. Johnson wears in her hair being linked to a vase with baby’s breath in it on Marsha’s vanity, and another on her dining table as she gets the party ready.*
  + *Similarly, as the interview clip shows Johnson holding up a compact mirror and checking her appearance, Mya Taylor sits before her vanity mirror and checks her makeup as she prepares for the party.*
  + *The interview clip also includes Marsha saying “I’m just in this world for the party!”, emphasizing the word “party” in the same tone that Taylor does throughout her performance. In this connection between the language of the real Marsha P. Johnson and the portrayal of her by Taylor, Tourmaline highlights how details can be salvaged to produce a collective memory of this history imbued with love, celebration, and affection.*
* *The next scene, which Tang discusses in depth, examines how the phone call between Sylvia and Marsha highlights Tourmaline’s project of depicting transfeminine kinship, care, forgiveness, and tenderness (383).*

1. (15 min) Whole class discussion.
2. What does Tang argue in her piece?
3. **Additional questions, if needed:** Consider p. 379-380. What does Tang suggest about Tourmaline’s work as a historian? What challenges does Tourmaline encounter, and how does she address those challenges in her art?
4. Review p. 381-382. According to Tang, what is glamour? How is it misunderstood or inappropriately critiqued? How does glamour function in *Happy Birthday, Marsha?* What formal elements illustrate Tourmaline’s focus on glamour?
5. Consider Tang’s commentary on the film’s development of an “infrastructure of trans feeling.” What feelings are most centrally depicted in the film? Why are these films so critical to Tourmaline’s project?
6. How does the scene we just reviewed, or other scenes in the film relate to her argument? What formal elements of this scene are most significant?
   1. Consider the close-up shots of the flowers that Junior gives to Marsha. What is the symbolic meaning of these flowers? How does that relate to Tang’s argument? How are the birthday cards Marsha makes serving a similar function? What key lines in Tang’s piece relate to this idea?
   2. Consider the way this scene intercuts clips of the real Marsha P. Johnson with Mya Taylor’s performance of Marsha P. Johnson. How does that editing choice relate to Tourmaline’s project? What else in the mise-en-scene links the documentary and the narrative aspects of this film? What lines in Tang’s piece relate to Tourmaline’s choice to link the historical artifact of this clip to the film she produced?