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‘I say! Neither a Whore nor a Saint’: Transgender memory, Spanish popular television, and media histories in ‘Veneno’

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Abstract
In March 2020, the series *Veneno* was released on the streaming platform Atresplayer Premium, immediately becoming one of the biggest media sensations in Spain. The series centres on the life of the television star Cristina ‘La Veneno’ Ortiz Rodríguez, who shot to fame during the 1990s. Herself a transgender woman, *Veneno* was frequently an object of both public fascination and mockery, with her life as a sex-worker and gender-identity often relayed in the media through sensationalistic and dehumanising terms. By focusing on a figure who was an object of public fascination, but whose experiences of discrimination were often trivialised, the series *Veneno* not only humanises its central protagonist, but also acts as a commentary on the broader history of transgender representation in Spanish media and as a re-evaluation of la Veneno’s own legacy as a prominent media representative of the trans community. In turn, this focus on both mediated and hidden histories of transgender experience reflects a broader turn in the Spanish televisual and cinematic landscape, which has shown a marked focus on excavating and recreating local LGBTQI histories, as is evident from recent television series such as Bob Pop’s *Maricón perdido* (TNT, 2021), Miguel de Arco’s *Las noches de Tefía* (Atresplayer Premium, 2023) and Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo’s *Vestidas de azul* (Atresplayer Premium, 2023), as well as in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Madres paralelas* (2021). In the case of *Veneno*, the recreation of transgender history also intervenes into current political discourses on transgender rights, with even Spain’s then-vice president Pablo Iglesias recommending the series to his followers on Twitter during a period of intense public debate surrounding the so-called ‘Ley Trans’ or ‘Trans Law’, which came into force in 2023. Drawing on this, this article will examine the ways in which the series intervenes into contemporary discourses surrounding trans rights, as well as how it comments on broader questions of transgender memory and the history of transgender media visibility within the Spanish context.

Keywords
transgender, Spain, television, memory, history

Introduction

In April 1996, the journalist Faela Sainz entered Madrid's Parque del Oeste (Western Park) with the intention of making a report on the covert world of sex work taking place nightly in the park. The report was to be aired on the talk show *Esta noche cruzamos el Mississippi* (*Tonight We Cross the Mississippi*, Telecinco, 1995-1997), which enjoyed such popularity at the time that it has been credited as single-handedly changing Spanish sleeping habits due to being broadcast after 11:30 pm.[1] In many ways, Sainz's ambition to film a place usually inaccessible to television exemplified one of the reasons the public found the talk show so appealing – an emphasis on shocking and sometimes lurid material, which would soon earn it and similar shows the nickname 'telebasura' or teletrash.[2]

While she filmed a number of interviews that night, her interview with Cristina Ortiz Rodríguez, a transgender woman who called herself 'la Veneno' ('Poison' in Spanish), would go on to make an indelible impression on the Spanish public upon being aired, near-instantly making her a national superstar. Startlingly beautiful, scantily clad, and surprisingly humorous in both her approach to her own gender identity and to sex work, la Veneno would swiftly go on to become a regular contributor to *Esta noche*, and would stay a media personality in Spain on and off until her untimely death in 2016. During this time, she would be presented both as an object of fascination and of mockery; as a person deserving of sympathy, and as an object simply meant to be ogled.

Recently, this legacy has been re-examined in the immensely popular series *Veneno*, which first aired in Spain in 2020 on Atresplayer Premium, becoming a media sensation of such magnitude that even Spain's then-vice President Pablo Iglesias took to Twitter to encourage people to watch the show.[3] The series was created by Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo, known in the country as 'los Javis' due to both their creative and romantic partnership, and featured no less than three trans actresses (Jedet, Daniela Santiago and Isabel Torres) embodying Veneno at different points of her life. On the level of local distribution, *Veneno* served as one of the key successes of the online streaming platform Atresplayer Premium, which was introduced by Atresmedia as a paid alternative to their channel Antena 3 to counter the entry of streaming services such as Netflix into the Spanish media landscape. The show's debut was the most successful in the platform's history, with the series being viewed ten more times than any other of its shows, and subscriptions to the platform rising by 42%.[4] While unquestionably the platform's most successful release, its streaming-only distribution also emblematises Atresmedia's current approach to the production of original, LGBTQI-focused content as a draw for viewers to subscribe to the platform, as seen with the release of other shows such as *#Luimelia* (2020-2021), *Las noches de Tefía*, and *Vestidas de azul*. The series was also released in North and South America via HBO Max, garnering rave reviews from the American press, with many lauding it as an exemplary example of trans representation.[5]

In narrating la Veneno's life, the series also presents a re-examination of a pivotal era in the development of Spanish media: one in which transgender women like Veneno gained increased visibility but were often presented through a spectacularising and objectifying approach. In turn, this focus on both mediated and hidden histories of transgender experience reflects a broader turn in the Spanish televisual and cinematic landscape, which has shown a marked focus on excavating and recreating local LGBTQI histories, as is evident from recent television series such as Bob Pop's *Maricón perdido* (*Queer as You Are*, TNT, 2021), Miguel de Arco's *Las noches de Tefía* (*The Nights of Tefia*, 2023), and what has been termed the 'second season' of *Veneno* – the series *Vestidas de azul* (*Dressed in Blue*, 2023), also produced by the Javis. While cinematic precedent for this turn towards queer memory can be found in films such as Pedro Almodóvar's *La mala educación* (*Bad Education*, 2004), which takes a trans perspective towards crimes of paedophilia committed by the church under Franco's rule, as well as the much earlier *Un hombre llamado Flor de Otoño* (*A Man Called Autumn Flower*, Pedro Olea, 1978), which reimagines its gender-nonconforming protagonist going against the dictator Primo de Rivera in the pre-Franco period, there is a notable increase in the number of such works being produced today. These include the docuseries *Nosotrxs somos* (RTVE, 2018) and *La memoria homosexual* (RTVE, 2022), which track the development of Spain's LGBTQI movement; Almodóvar's film *Madres paralelas* (*Parallel Mothers*, 2021), which again takes a queer look at crimes committed under Franco; as well as *Te estoy amando locamente* (*Love and Revolution*, 2023), which depicts the development of the queer rights movement in Spain during the 1970s. Taken together, all of these works attest to the specific concern not only with memory within the Spanish context, which has sought to fight against the so-called 'Pact of Forgetting' (el pacto del olvido) which has marked the post-dictatorship context, but with queer memory specifically. This concern with queer memory matches what I have argued is a transnational emphasis on remembering in queer cinema, adding to global cinema and television through examining the Spanish history of the LGBTQI struggle.[6]

Of all of these works, *Veneno* stands apart not only through its immense popularity and cultural influence, but also through the ways it addresses transgender memory specifically. By focusing on a figure who was an object of public fascination, but whose experiences were often trivialised, the series thus not only humanises its central protagonist but also acts as a commentary on the broader history of transgender representation in Spanish media and as a re-evaluation of la Veneno's own legacy as a prominent media representative of the trans community. The series' recreation of transgender history also intervenes into current political discourses on transgender rights, as can be seen by Iglesias explicitly invoking the series during a time of intense debate surrounding the so-called 'Ley Trans' or 'Trans Law', which came into force in 2023.[7] First proposed in 2018, the law makes significant changes to multiple areas related to transgender equality, allowing for legal gender self-recognition by anyone aged sixteen and over without medical supervision, as well as for children aged

fourteen provided they have the support of their parents and, if twelve years of age, judicial support.[8] Consequently, *Veneno* needs to be regarded as a series which both comments on the history of trans rights but also intervenes into present political debates surrounding questions of gender identity and access to single-gender spaces. Drawing on this, this article will examine how the series comments on contemporary discourses surrounding trans rights, as well as broader questions of transgender memory and the history of transgender media visibility within the Spanish context.

Setting the stage: La Veneno and transgender visibility

The narrative of *Veneno* draws on Ortiz Rodríguez's own recounting of her life story in her autobiography *¡Digo! Ni puta ni santa. Las memorias de la Veneno* (*I say! Neither a whore, nor a saint: The Memories of la Veneno*), co-written with Valeria Vegas.[9] Beyond simply adapting the memories recounted in the book, the series utilises the character of its other author as an anchor through which we as an audience learn la Veneno's story. Embodied by trans actress Lola Rodríguez, Vegas is seen in the beginning of the show before her own transition, as a young fan of Veneno who spends the first episode attempting to track the star down upon learning she now lives in Valencia. As the narrative evolves, Valeria is empowered to undergo her own transition, and becomes part of a community largely composed of transgender sex workers, fronted by la Veneno and her closest friend Paca la Piraña, a media personality who plays herself.

Through bringing together a large ensemble cast composed of trans women, *Veneno* acts as one of the rare televisual works – both in Spanish media and beyond – which centre transgender communities instead of simply lone and sometimes lonely trans individuals (in the Anglophone context, Ryan Murphy's *Pose* [FX, 2018-2021] and Joey Solloway's *Transparent* [Amazon Prime, 2014-2019] have received much international attention for featuring a number of trans performers both in front of and behind the camera). The casting of numerous trans actors in trans roles remains highly relevant both in terms of the employment of marginalised actors, but also because the long history of casting cisgender actors in these roles still persists in contemporary media, with, for example, the immensely popular *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*, Netflix, 2017-2021) recently receiving criticism for casting the cisgender Belén Cuesta as a trans protagonist in its fourth and fifth season.[10] Moreover, the show's emphasis on the chosen families created by trans women also narratively subverts what researchers like Jamie C. Capuzza and Leland G. Spencer have noted in the US media context as a tendency of depicting transgender protagonists in relation to cisgender, and not transgender characters.[11] Conversely, *Veneno* centres the trans perspective towards the events depicted on screen, instead providing a subversive depiction of family which counteracts hetero- and cisnormative assumptions. This is particularly evident in scenes such as the beginning of its second episode, in which the instrumental

accompaniment of Georges Bizet's 'Votre Toast', popularly known as the 'Toreador Song', plays in the background while the camera focuses on the large paella Paca is making for a group of her friends. While starting with a paella, the scene then shows Veneno joyfully recounting to Valeria her experience as sex worker in Madrid, therein encouraging the juxtaposition between the traditional – paella, music, and familial gatherings – and this same depiction of familial warmth being associated with a group of transgender women who engage in sex work.

Fig 1: A new version of family: Paca, Veneno, and Valeria make paella

This focus on transgender community and family occupies a particular part in the larger history of Spanish transgender representation, wherein la Veneno was by no means the sole representative of the community.[12] After all, Spanish cinema had for decades been engaging with the question of gender normativity and had been depicting transgender people. In *Cambio de sexo* (*Change of Sex*, originally refused release by state censors in 1972 but finally released in 1977), director Vicente Aranda cast Victoria Abril in the role of a young pre-transition woman whose family is attempting to quell her gender expression, and featured a cabaret striptease by none other than Bibiana Fernández, then known as Bibi Andersen, one of Spain's first transgender superstars. In the same year, José Jara's film *El transexual* also tracked the trials faced by transgender performer Lorna (played by the cisgender Ágata Lys), which also featured an appearance by the Brazilian Yeda Brown, one of the first well-known transgender women in the country. In the following year *Un hombre llamado Flor de Otoño* was released, which has already been mentioned in the introduction to this article as being a highly political depiction of gender nonconformity in positioning its protagonist as fighting against dictatorship. Transgender characters also played prominent roles in numerous films of La Movida Madrileña's most-famous enfant terrible Pedro Almodóvar, with films such as *Tacones lejanos* (*High Heels*, 1981), *La ley del deseo* (*Law of Desire*, 1987), *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999), and *La mala educación* all featuring transgender protagonists. While Almodóvar is by no means the first director to

feature transgender characters, it is relevant to note that his films remain much more accessible and well-known today than many of the other works mentioned here, which are not easily accessible even in Spain. Almodóvar's work also presents an interesting case study in casting, both due to the fact that he frequently cast both cigender women in trans roles (Carmen Maura in *La ley del deseo* and Antonia San Juan in *Todo sobre mi madre*) and cisgender men in trans roles (Gael García Bernal in *La mala educación* and Toni Cantó in *Todo sobre mi madre*), while also casting trans performer Bibiana Fernández in cisgender roles (Fernández appears as Maura's ex-partner in *La ley del deseo*), therein subverting expectations. On the small screen, the widely popular series *Farmacia de Guardia* (Antena 3, 1991-1996) is usually credited as the first series to feature a transgender protagonist, with its first season featuring the character Clara (played by Fernando Telletxea).[13]

What is visible from this short history is not only a cinematic interest in transgender stories but also the tendency of directors to cast nontrans actors in trans roles while simultaneously featuring and further popularising the image of real trans women such as Bibiana Fernández or Yeda Brown. Of the two, Bibiana Fernández achieved particularly dizzying heights of fame in Spanish society, going from being a cabaret performer to appearing in films by Almodóvar and working as a television panellist and presenter from the 1990s onwards. Far from simply appearing on television, Fernández was the object of public fascination, as evidenced by a well-known nude photo shoot in the magazine *Interview*.[14] As Patrick Paul Garlinger writes, she was often 'presented as [embodying] the last step in a political movement from fascism to democracy, [with] Bibi's technologically altered and spectacularised body [bearing] the burden, at least for some writers, of embodying the political and social changes that have occurred since the demise of the Franco regime'.[15] This was a sentiment shared by Fernández herself, who commented that 'people who write tend to theorise a lot about me, treating me like a phenomenon that needs to be explained, to be pondered and on which to project their own obsession'.[16] Both of these quotes point towards the inherent tension between recognising trans subjectivity on the one hand and a kind of spectacularised approach towards the bodies of trans women on the other; an approach that treats trans women both as the object of desire and as metaphor (whether for the transition to democracy, postmodernity, or the decay of traditional values), while simultaneously failing to dismantle the social and legal hurdles faced by transgender people in everyday life.[17]

Like Fernández herself, la Veneno became a sex symbol, though it is worth stressing here that Ortiz, while keen to remain in the public eye afterwards, did not control the nature of her first appearance on *Esta noche* but was unexpectedly interviewed by Sainz. As noted earlier, the overwhelming national popularity of the series was based on the fact that it and similar programmes such as *Crónicas marcianas* (*Martian Chronicles*, Telecinco, 1997-2005), on which la Veneno would also go on to appear, brought a mixture of content that was

reminiscent in format and appearance to American variety shows like *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-), but also had no equivalent. This was due in part precisely to how both shows brought panellists from marginalised communities to the forefront, often referred to extra-diegetically as 'los frikis' or 'freaks'.[18] These segments sometimes inspired increased controversy, such as a 2002 interview on *Crónicas marcianas* which was later condemned by Spain's Constitutional Court due to mocking a physically and mentally disabled interviewee.[19] However, while a scopophilic and dehumanising approach was often taken to contributors including la Veneno herself, the fact that she and other members of the LGBTQI community were given regular media space to discuss their experiences – which in Veneno's case included her speaking of her experiences of transphobic assault – carries particular relevance. At the same time, it is especially evident from her later media appearances that television shows frequently thrived off of her periods of financial and mental instability, as explored in the series through episodes dramatising moments such as la Veneno taking a public polygraph test on the show *En antena* (Antena 3, 2006-2007) following her release from prison, where it is deemed she is lying about her life and she is called 'a broken toy' by host Jaime Cantizano.

Consequently, the central paradox between media visibility both engendering empathy and also fostering a dehumanising and objectifying approach is at the heart of the series' exploration of Veneno's fame. While particular to the 'telebasura' talk shows characteristic of the Spanish media landscape, the question of media visibility acting as a kind of double-edged sword for trans people invokes larger debates on the paradoxical nature of media exposure. For example, a recent collection by Eric Stanley, Tourmaline and Johanna Burton, titled *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, discusses the ways in which increased visibility can lead to an increase in empathy towards trans people while at the same time being followed both by actual physical violence in terms of hate crimes, but also the political violence enacted by conservative groups and transexclusionary feminists.[20] Such questions are of the utmost relevance both to the history of la Veneno's own media appearances and to the space occupied by *Veneno* as an adaptation of her life, which will be discussed later in more detail with respect to political developments in Spain.

From its outset, *Veneno* questions the role which Ortiz herself and media depictions of her have played in Spanish society. The show's opening scene takes place in a house in Valencia in the year 1996, as a young child wakes up in the middle of the night and covertly watches Veneno being interviewed in *Esta noche*. This child is soon revealed to be the young Valeria Vegas, whose encounter with the televised appearance of la Veneno is implied to have been her first encounter with a transgender woman, which she herself will grow up to be. As Paul Julian Smith's analysis of the episode notes, it is significant that Valeria is shot within this sequence through a set of railing bars, mimicking a sense of imprisonment or entrapment,

and therein positioning Veneno herself as a potential vehicle for Valeria to escape such feelings of oppression.[21] As such, the series immediately positions its own narrative as focusing on the intergenerational exchange between Valeria and Veneno, and the potential of media visibility, however imperfect, to inspire self-recognition in younger trans people.

The series utilises the relationship between Valeria and Veneno – here first positioned as that of accidental viewer and celebrity – in order to explore how memory can be passed down from one generation of trans women to the next. This intergenerational exchange of memory is then positioned as the narrative entry point into not only details about Veneno's own life, but also into the broader history of women like Veneno. Parts of this sequence bracket both the beginning and the end of the episode, emphasising the relevance of the young Valeria noting her father commenting that Veneno was both beautiful and entertaining, therein signalling the potential of approval for an aspect of her identity Valeria is yet to discover.

However, it is worth pausing here to note that the depiction of the intergenerational friendship between Veneno and Valeria was not, as Smith notes in his recent monograph, lauded by all Spanish television critics.[22] In particular, Smith cites a review by Elizabeth Duval, who argues that Veneno is effectively canonised in the series, transformed into a saintly figure whose suffering is thus dehistoricised.[23] In this reading of the series, the link tying la Veneno and Valeria together is one of equivalence, with all discrimination against trans women being decreed equal and depicted through a decontextualised lens. Such a reading of the series, I would argue, negates precisely the ways in which the series utilises the character of Valeria to bring a historical perspective to the violence la Veneno experiences, and to critique the institutional structures which enable such violence.

Figs 2, 3: A young Valeria watching la Veneno on television.

In the same episode, the series further stresses the question of media representation through its depiction of Valeria's experience studying journalism in a university. As yet unwilling to accept herself, Vegas presents as male in the episode, and is tasked by her sociology lecturer to write a paper on the question of 'the roles mass media play in society'. Following her meeting with Veneno herself, which inspires Valeria to accept herself, her consideration of this question is shaped by an interrogation of Veneno's own public image. The series goes as far as to explicitly state its raison d'etre through an excerpt from Valeria's own essay, the narration of which is superimposed onto scenes tracking Cristina's decision to appear on television, as well as Valeria's own history of seeing her there. The monologue is worth relaying here in full, as it clearly outlines the focus on exploring the significance of media visibility, and its effect both on audience members and on the subject of media attention. Valeria tells the viewers that

> Whether fortunately or unfortunately, I didn't know Cristina in the mid-90s. I mean, I knew her like everyone else in my generation, whose parents sent them to bed at midnight when it was time to *Cross the Mississippi*. And we were dying to see that impressive woman, who was something from another planet. Nocturnal and treacherous, she entered our homes to give voice and body to a subject that up until then had been taboo. A reality that society had decided to look away from. It was clear that Cristina wasn't perfect, but then, who is? Is television perfect? Did those shows take advantage of her vulnerability just so they could turn her drama into higher ratings? Or did they save her by giving her the opportunity of a lifetime? Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argues in *The Spiral of Silence* that the responsibility lies with the media, because they draw the line between what's socially accepted and what's not. Because they can transform prejudice into empathy, darkness into light, and make visible what is invisible. Nobody's perfect, but if Cristina hadn't appeared on TV, many others might have remained in the shadows. What you don't talk about, doesn't exist. And what doesn't exist, is marginalised. There's no doubt she saved me. Because she made me see I wasn't alone.

Through thematising visibility and its societal effects, the series explicitly states its intention to complicate all the negative associations which Ortiz's image had accrued throughout her years as a media presence, whether those were of Veneno as fame-hungry, as overly-sexualised, as a liar or – and this aspect is key here – as someone whose image had not benefitted or positively represented the trans community. Through immediately positioning itself in its first episode as both problematising the potentially exploitative role of the media

and through complicating the respectability politics which led some to denounce her, *Veneno* serves as a re-narration of media history, re-centring the often-marginalised perspective of the trans community and, more specifically, of transgender sex workers, who are repeatedly shown watching Ortiz's media appearances as a group, therein emphasising the need for both individual and community representation.

Through her deliberately stylised ultra-femininity, which featured a number of wigs and was marked by outfits that emphasised and frequently revealed her breasts, Veneno immediately became emblematic of the kind of exaggerated, highly sexualised femininity which marked the 1990s, and which the series itself references in its depiction of the time. As host Pepe Navarro delivers his monologues to the audience of *Esta noche*, a careful viewer will notice references to Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995) and to Pamela Anderson's film *Barb Wire* (1996), both of which are eponymous of an international media era which emphasised the oversexualisation of both cisgender and transgender women. The insertion of these references in *Veneno* thus enters into dialogue with criticisms frequently thrown against trans women, in which they are lambasted for an adherence to a sexualised and normative femininity which, as trans writer and actress Jen Richards has argued, both eschews the ways these same expectations are levelled at cis women and the ways in which gender non-normativity adds to the already dismal level of safety experienced by trans women in day to day life.[24] Thus, through emphasising how Hollywood cinematic releases of the time also depicted exaggerated visions of femininity, these references point towards a larger concern which the show has with mediated forms of both transgender and cisgender womanhood.

This is further underscored in the third episode, in which a newly-famous Veneno is introduced to the legendary Spanish actress Sara Montiel, one of Spain's most revered film actresses, who was famous during the Francoist period in part because she subverted and transgressed across the sexual and professional norms normally associated with womanhood during the dictatorship.[25] Far from being a cursory reference to the history of Spanish cinema, the meeting with Montiel is depicted as central to the episode's narrative, as the episode begins with a memory of Veneno's usually restrained mother attempting to get Montiel's autograph as she visits their small town of Arda. The episode thus juxtaposes the adulation of the older women for Montiel with Veneno's own triumphant return to her hometown, where she is rejected by her mother but is nonetheless flocked by a crowd of fans and news reporters as she is filmed entering the sea in a fishnet dress that exposes her breasts. The contrast between these two types of femininity thus highlights the show's emphasis on the evolution of the female celebrity in Spain, tracing a lineage between the two. It is interesting here to note that while Montiel may perhaps be considered as symbolic of a decidedly cisgender media heritage, Inmaculada Matía Polo's analysis of the music used in the series actually points towards the ways in which Montiel's image was itself repurposed

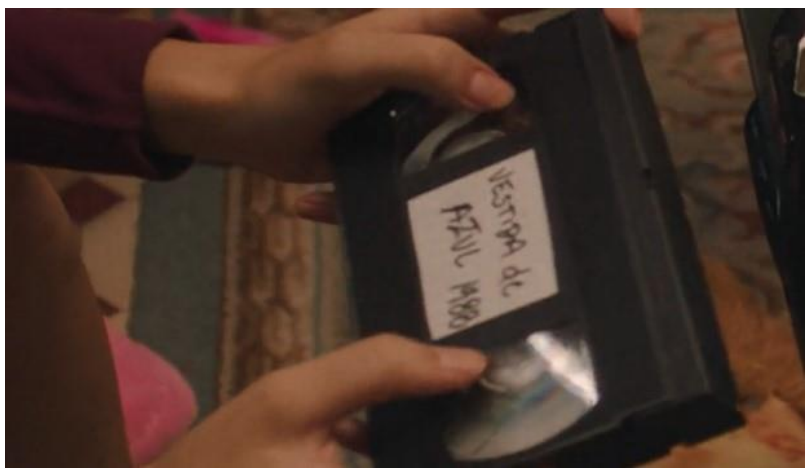
and expounded upon by the queer cabarets at the time. Polo notes how 'both folkloric performers and the stars of the silver screen were used as inspiration for numbers that played with provocation and transvestism', emphasising how 'artists such as Paco España, Madame Artur, Bibi Andersen, Powlowsky, Christine, and Pierrot paraded in successive shows that took their aesthetic cues from Sara Montiel, Lola Flores, and Marujita Díaz'.[26] From this, it is possible to see here the ways in which queer Spaniards have historically repurposed heteronormative media, utilising what José Muñoz terms disidentification in order to engage with these star personae through subversive performance.[27]

The episode also features a scene in which the two meet and Montiel expresses her admiration for Cristina. The way in which this scene is filmed is especially interesting, as Montiel is filmed through a deliberate soft focus which both references how she mandated she be shot in her own films, with a stocking fitted over camera lenses to achieve a blurred smoothing of her facial features, but also to underline the deliberately fantastical quality between Montiel's star persona and her significance in terms of how womanhood and femininity have been mediated in Spanish cinema. This may not seem like a very poignant connection, but the narrative strategy of linking la Veneno with Montiel has much to do with the question not only of which of these women had a particularly important star persona at a particular point in time, but with broader questions of which of them should be afforded monikers such as 'national treasure' and should be linked with a media history worthy of pride. Considering la Veneno herself was a prominent representative of not only trans women but also of sex work at the time, this connection is especially relevant.

In many ways, it is precisely the show's interlinking between transgender and heteronormative media heritages which represents one of the most poignant aspects of its commentary on Spanish media history. In turn, this concern with Spanish media history is not a new aspect of Ambrossi and Calvo's work, with their immensely successful comedy series *Paquita Salas* (Flooxer, Netflix, 2016-2019) presenting numerous references and cameos from both the past and the present of the country's media landscape. Nonetheless, *Veneno* performs what I would argue is a particular rhetorical shift through bringing together both heteronormative and transgender media lineages. The show's engagement with the question of how Spanish cinema and television history is remembered does not stop at its juxtaposition of Montiel and Ortiz, but is also mobilised in the show's more campy, comedic moments, which here echo the comedic sensibility of *Paquita Salas* through bringing in a cameo by one of Spain's most instantly recognisable middle-aged heartthrobs, actor José Coronado.

The actor's image is explicitly mobilised in an episode that ponders how Cristina will be remembered, titled 'Veneno's three funerals'. In the episode, Cristina is symbolically laid to

rest three times: once in a funeral organised by her family, where she is buried under her deadname and her transgender chosen family is refused access to her; and after this through two wakes organised in Parque del Oeste, where she tells Valeria she wishes for her ashes to be scattered, because she had been happy there alongside other sex workers. While the final funeral represents reality, the second wake is imagined by Valeria, who tells the deceased Veneno of all the many people who came to see her off. In a highly comedic sequence, Paca is shown taking a taxi to attend the funeral and is stunned upon entering when she realises it is being driven by Coronado himself. Once they arrive in Madrid, Coronado runs after Paca, unable to suppress his attraction to her, and kisses her on the lips in a scene that is deliberately stylised to echo the culminations of romantic comedies. This camp mobilisation of Coronado's image thus utilises the audience's cinematic memories of a classic leading man in a subversion of heteronormative expectation, making Paca a leading lady who is romanticised not despite but in part because she, like la Veneno herself, represents how trans sex workers have been mediated on screen.



Figs 4, 5: A focus on transgender media history: Paca introduces Valeria to *Vestida de azul*.

In the same episode, a particular emphasis is also placed on the history of transgender cinema, therein again interlinking the cinematic memories embodied by figures like Coronado with how marginalised identities have been represented. In the opening scene, Paca is shown introducing the young Valeria to the little-known 1983 documentary film *Vestida de azul* (*Dressed in Blue*, Antonio Giménez-Rico), which carries particular relevance in the history of Spanish transgender representation through centring not a sole transgender protagonist, but rather a group of trans women with different experiences. The documentary's importance is further stressed through the episode's opening credits using footage of *Vestida*, where the names of Veneno's actors and creative team are superimposed on scenes from the documentary, therein echoing the use of footage from another pivotal trans documentary, Frank Simon's *The Queen* (1968) in the opening credits of Joey Soloway's influential *Transparent*. The creative influence of the writer Valeria Vegas needs to be stressed here, as Calvo and Ambrossi are here drawing not solely on her biography of Veneno, but her subsequent authorial work in *Dressed in Blue: A Social and Cinematographic Analysis of Trans Women during Spain's Transition to Democracy* (2019), in which she tracked the development of transgender visibility in Spain through a particular emphasis on the documentary, and for which she interviewed a number of the women featured in it.[28] This work can be credited in inspiring not only this specific scene in *Veneno*, but what has been dubbed the show's 'second season' – the series *Vestidas de azul* (2023), again featuring Lola Rodríguez in the role of Vegas as she tracks down the protagonists of the 1983 documentary.

In order to promote this then-upcoming project, the additional material that followed the *Veneno* finale also further mimicked both the documentary's poster and format, focusing on a conversation between Vegas and a number of other trans women, who shared their

experiences in a style similar to that of the documentary. Taken together, it is clear that both *Veneno* and the series adaptation of *Vestida* display a marked focus not only on the broad history of transgender representation but a particular emphasis on mediating the experiences of transgender sex workers and the specific oppression and violence they continue to face. Coupled with the larger commentary presented within the series on how Spain's media history is memorialised, *Veneno* succeeds in reevaluating the relevance of its controversial central protagonist and in proposing different memory narratives which centre the trans perspective beyond an objectifying lens.

Will the revolution be televised?: 'La Ley Trans' and the place of *Veneno* within cultural dialogue

While this article has already discussed the ways in which *Veneno* focuses on mediated forms of trans identities, the series also explores aspects of the trans experience which are not frequently mediated. This includes demonstrating the informal networks of mentorship and support among trans women, as well as how employment discrimination pushed many of them, including Veneno herself, into sex work. A particularly harrowing depiction comes from episode seven, in which la Veneno is shown being sent to an all-male prison due to the fact that she had never undergone a legal gender change. The episode focuses on the years of rape and abuse she endured there, which led to her deep depression, as well as on how this abuse was enabled first through her being sent to this prison, but also by the complicity of the prison guards there. The episode thus makes painfully clear the consequences of denying trans women access to single-sex spaces, and as such positions itself in dialogue with the passing of the so-called Trans Law. While it is popularly referred to as La Ley Trans, it is relevant to note here that the law presents a broader feminist and queer intervention into the legal system and includes a ban against all types of conversion therapy, easier abortion access for people aged sixteen and above, as well as paid menstrual leave. This connection between measures meant to aid both trans people and cis women is anything but an accident and actually testifies to what researchers such as Lucas Platero and Esther Ortega-Arjonilla have documented as a broader history of cooperation between trans and cis women that marks Spanish feminism.[29]

Nonetheless, this history of cis and trans feminist cooperation does not mean that transexclusionary opposition to the law did not mark the years since its proposal, with criticism coming from right-wing and also left-wing parties. In 2020, the year in which *Veneno* was released, several ministers from PSOE (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) signed an open letter against the law, prompting opposition from other government ministers.[30] As mentioned in the introduction, vocal support for both the proposed Law and the series came from Spain's former Vice President Pablo Iglesias of the Podemos party, who wrote on Twitter that

> I just finished watching Veneno last night. It makes you cry, laugh, remember, empathise, but most of all, it makes you understand the savage pain that has been and is being inflicted on trans people, simply for being themselves. I hope that many people watch the series. #DepathologiseTransness.[31]

While Iglesias' support for the Trans Law matches the Podemos Party's commitments to trans equality, his tweet makes clear that the series proved to be a relevant addition to the cultural dialogue surrounding trans access to single-gender spaces, bringing to the wider public the knowledge of how women like Veneno have been affected by measures which make self-identification difficult. While the Law itself passed in 2023, it has continued to generate controversy, proving a continual point of heated debate in the political arena. In this sense, while Spain can still be seen as one of the most progressively pro-LGBTQI legal contexts in the world, there is nonetheless an added importance to queer memory work done within the country, especially considering the virulent right-wing opposition which has marked recent political developments. Following the swing towards the right which marked the 2023 local elections and the snap election called by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of PSOE following these results, the televised debates between the candidates made clear the ways in which far-right candidates such as Santiago Abascal of Vox utilised fear surrounding trans access to single-gender spaces as a continual talking point. At the same time, a Madrid banner promoting Vox showed an image of a hand throwing the Pride flag, the feminist symbol, and the Catalan flag into the trash, along with the tagline 'Decide what matters', only to later be removed following complaints from PSOE.[32]

Consequently, the vital relevance of continued transgender representation, both with respect to the legal context and in public space, becomes clear. In the case of *Veneno*, the show's success led to the first billboard featuring a trans person occupying a large space in Madrid's famous Gran Vía. This and similar public examples of transgender visibility and memory contribute to what Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have termed queer worldbuilding, creating additional spaces of trans joy and celebration within public spaces that are not often dedicated to them.[33] Such a sense of public celebration is anything but guaranteed for trans communities, as can be seen from the 2023 local elections leading almost immediately to pride banners and similar signs of support towards the LGBTQI community being removed from government buildings in cities such as Madrid, as well as to the censorship of queer works of art, such as a theatre adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in Valdemorillo, Madrid.[34] Drawing from this, the fact that the same year saw the release of both *Vestidas de azul* and *Las noches de Tefía* on Atresplayer Premium, as well as *Te estoy amando locamente* in cinemas, all of which dramatise LGBTQI histories, shows the continued importance of televisual and cinematic works which are directly concerned with the histories of queer people and queer protest. At the same time, work by director Carlos Giménez has tracked regional histories in his film *València, t'estime* (2023), which subverts

a frequent overemphasis on events in cities such as Madrid and Barcelona through a focus on Valencia's own local LGBTQI history.

As I argue in *Screening Queer Memory: LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television* with respect to queer media works being produced in the British and American context, the relevance of film and television which reimagines LGBTQI histories cannot be overstated due to the specific circumstances which often prevent queer people from accessing community memories via other means. In particular, LGBTQI histories are not often the subject either of national commemorations or of history classes, therein meaning that queer people cannot easily stumble upon knowledge of their own histories. At the same time, the devastating effects of the AIDS crisis have meant that whole generations of queer cisgendered men and trans people have been lost to us, with their memories lost as well. Finally, the generational segregation that has been documented as frequently pervading LGBTQI communities also sets the queer community apart from other minority communities with which it intersects, as youths often have little contact with community elders, and therefore little opportunity to absorb narratives of queer postmemory from them. Such obstacles have of course not meant that concentrated efforts to salvage queer memory by LGBTQI organisations have not fought against this erasure; in the Valencian region, for example, the currently ongoing project of *L'Armari de la Memòria* (The Memory Closet) has focused on uncovering and documenting hidden queer histories, with leaflets given out by project members at manifestations such as the 2023 Alicante Pride for marchers to get in touch to share recollections.[35]

It is also worth noting here that not all queer memory work exists within a formalised organisational context – instead, as Dilara Çalışkan's work with Turkish transgender sex workers has demonstrated, informal networks of support which preserve local transgender histories of oppression and fighting back are more than alive in contexts which are not often known to the wider public.[36] Mirroring real trans communities, the significance of informal support networks and mentorship is continually highlighted within the series, as is the fact that these networks are the only way in which most of their participants could survive when faced with rampant employment discrimination and continual threats of violence. As such, the relevance of *Veneno* and *Vestidas de azul* as series which commemorate precisely such informal transgender memory work cannot be overstated, as they bring to a wider viewing public the awareness of, for example, the ways in which trans women have fought against attackers in order to preserve their communities (in episode four of *Veneno*, a particularly fantastical sequence shows la Veneno fighting off skinheads with a scythe in the company of other sex workers), or their work at preserving informal media archives, such as Paca sharing a VHS copy of *Vestida de azul* with Valeria and providing her with additional information about the documentary participants with whom she was personally acquainted.

In seeking out Veneno's own recollections first as fan, then as friend and biographer, Valeria acquires what Marianne Hirsch has famously termed postmemory, which designates a type of 'memory' acquired by younger generations who did not themselves experience the remembered events of the older generation, but whose affective relationship towards these memories is so powerful as to constitute a foundational part of their identities.[37] As I argue in relation to another key work of trans television, Joey Soloway's series *Transparent*, queer media works have sometimes positioned the exchange of postmemory as crucial to their own narrative, especially with respect to the exchange of information about buried trans legacies, as is depicted in both *Transparent* and in *Veneno*.[38] In a manner similar to the former, which depicts a character as literally stepping into the buried landscape of her family's trans history, *Veneno* also depicts this exchange of memory as not only affectively but also spatially occupying Valeria's surroundings, with episode six providing a particularly gruelling depiction of Valeria witnessing Veneno's experience of domestic violence as she moves around her flat, therein bringing Veneno's own memory into the landscape of Valeria's present. The same episode positions this postmemorial witnessing as key to Valeria's own personal development, depicting her as distancing herself from her cisgendered partner and his family in order to willingly and deliberately enter the traumatic memories of her own community. By the episode's end, the symbolic passing on of both community membership and memory is highlighted through Valeria physically coming between Veneno and her former partner when he returns in the present-day narrative and threatening him with the very scythe which Veneno herself had once used to fight off skinheads. Valeria is thus depicted as someone who has deliberately refused to 'pass' as cisgender and has instead consciously chosen to align herself with the pain and traumatic recollections of her predecessors. In doing so, Valeria in some ways serves as a stand-in for the series itself, which has focused on not only recontextualising the life of an often-maligned figure, but also on bringing trans histories into dialogue with the present.

Drawing on this, the series represents what can be seen as a caring media work, with the concept of care here being understood as informed specifically by the lens of trans theory.[39] This pertains both to the ways in which it centres trans actors and trans communities, but also through a sustained examination of specifically trans care practices, which decentre domestic and heterosexual perceptions of care. I draw here on authors such as Hil Malatino and Aren Aizura, who ask

> What happens if we decenter the emphasis on the domestic and the reproductive that has so long informed theorizations of care, and begin instead by investigating networks of mutual aid and emotional support developed by trans femme communities subject to transmisogyny, transmisogynoir, and multiple, interlocking forms of institutional marginalization and structural violence? Or when we investigate caretaking labor involved in forms of historical recovery that piece together trans and queer intergenerational memory and knowledge production in the face of mechanisms of elision, erasure, and absence?[40]

As this analysis of the series has made plain, the series both functions as a caring work precisely through its depiction of the informal networks of support and care which have for long formed the backbone of trans communities, but also through an emphasis on memory work as care, and the relevance of preserving the histories and experiences of trans communities, particularly when the rights of these communities are regularly under attack. Through focusing on the how trans sex workers form chosen families and create informal networks in which postmemory can be passed on, both *Veneno* and the recent *Vestidas de azul* have succeeded in bringing to television screens the specifically trans practices of care which have allowed for the survival of trans communities in the face of continuing backlash and suppression, but which are seldom afforded representation in both Spanish and international televisual and cinematic works.

Conclusion

Taken together, Ambrossi and Calvo's interrogation of Spanish media history and focus on transgender collectivities breaks new ground with respect to televisual representations of transgender experience, both in the Spanish national media context and in comparison to representational trends in international television. While there have been significant examples of transgender visibility in television drama in recent years, the depiction of trans communities found in *Veneno* is paralleled only by Ryan Murphy's *Pose*, which is unprecedented through the ways in which it centres trans communities of colour and also serves as an exemplary televisual dramatisation of the AIDS crisis. Apart from both of these works focusing on the chosen families of trans women, it is also interesting that both share a preoccupation with the trans past, which in the case of *Pose* mainly extends to looking at the 1980s and 1990s, and with depicting trans sex worker communities. While all of the characters in *Pose* stem from circumstances of familial rejection which have driven them into both poverty and, for the trans female characters in the series, to sex work, it is relevant to note that *Pose* chooses to end their stories through presenting an unlikely accumulation of material wealth in the case of most of its trans characters, and absolute financial stability for all of them. The show's central house mother Elektra amasses such wealth that she can easily fund lavish weddings for her children; the gorgeous Angel becomes a successful model even after being outed, while the modest Blanca becomes a nurse.

Such a vision of success does not match the grittier reality depicted in *Veneno*, in which sex work remains the only financial means available to many of its trans protagonists, and in which fame does not present the ultimate vehicle for Veneno herself to leave the profession, and in fact leads to her being coerced by an abusive partner into performing in porn. Consequently, unlike the rosy, fairytale ending of *Pose* in which all characters achieve a

capitalist dream of success, *Veneno* instead more realistically dramatises the experiences by many trans people, where employment discrimination and financial instability is not easily escaped and, in many cases, continues to remain a reality for many of its protagonists.

In this sense, it is precisely the centring of the hidden histories and bonds between women such as Veneno and Paca, and the generative potential of such bonds to inspire the younger generation of trans women as embodied by Valeria, which make *Veneno* an especially relevant televisual text for trans representation. The series highlights the question of transgender memory both through its depiction of community and its re-examination of past media histories, presenting a nuanced approach to how visibility can be both inspiring and destructive, as well as an argument for the inclusion of trans media histories into larger narratives of Spain's cinematic and televisual history. Considering recent political developments which have allowed the far-right significant gains on the level of regional politics, such a call to action seems especially apt.

Author

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Notes

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[9] Ortiz & Vegas 2016.

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[12] Roig Mora 2017; Hernández 2022.

[13] For a fantastic overview of the history of Spanish trans representation, see Roig Mora 2017, 'Spanish Transitions'.

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[16] Quoted in Garlinger 2005, p. 28.

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