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# SASSMM'S POP CULTURE TAKE

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## POSE, SEASON 2, EPISODE 1: THE EXPLOITATION AND FETISHIZATION OF TRANS WOMEN

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Set in New York City's drag scene in the 80's and 90's, Hulu's *Pose* focuses on the lives of transgender women and LGBTQ+ folks living together in "Houses", which are families formed in the drag community under a House Mother. The show's main characters include Blanca, Mother of the House of Evangelista, and her House Children, Angel, Papi, and Damon, who regularly participate in drag at a club called Ballroom. It hosts weekly shows where rival Houses compete in different drag categories to express their beauty and talent, hoping to bring home a grand prize. Along with being LGBTQ+, the main characters are Black and Latinx people in the 80's and 90's, making it strenuous for them to exist in major society.

A large theme of the show is their struggle with exploitation and discrimination from dominant culture, from cultivating relationships to making money to finding steady housing. Despite these hardships, the characters support and hold space for each other, revealing another major theme: loyalty to family. Together, they find ways to both survive and thrive together. These themes are both demonstrated in this episode, particularly in Angel's experience trying to become a model while someone else seeks to capitalize off her identity as a trans woman.

Blanca, the House Mother, has AIDS and expects that she will someday die of it. In addition to the stress of fearing for her life, she worries for her House children, for whom she is the sole provider. Hoping to help them create financial stability for themselves, Blanca encourages Angel to try out in an upcoming modeling competition. It's a big deal, because professional models are almost all cisgender, white women, especially given the time period. Angel makes it through the first round, (unrecognized as a trans woman), but is told by a judge that she needs professional photos if she's going to have a chance at making it through the semi-finals.

Optimistic after the initial success, she books a photographer so she can get a few good photos – just enough to make it through the next round of the competition. However, when Angel arrives at the shoot, the photographer (a white man) tells her, "It doesn't work like that"; a whole team is booked for the day so she can shoot many different styles and outfits. She says she doesn't have enough money for a full session. The photographer then compliments her "unique" beauty and says he recognizes her from down at the pier, where Angel and a lot of other trans sex workers garner business. Wary now, she asks, "What do you want in return for the shoot?" He tells her he wants photos for his "special collection." The photographer doesn't clarify what that means – only that it "won't cost her a dime." She has little choice but to agree if she wants a shot at making it through the semi-finals.

**Consent can only be given when both parties are clear on all parts of what they're agreeing to. Agreement without equal understanding is not consent.**

They go on to do a full day of shooting, and then, when the rest of the clothing and makeup team has gone, the photographer tells Angel to undress. She does so, looking extremely sad and scared. He tells her to take off her underwear as well. "No", she tells him. "Yeah", he counters certainly, and takes photos of her. Angel goes to Ballroom later that night, obviously dissociated\* and simply going through the motions.

After she performs, Angel dully walks out of the main room and into one of the hallways out back, suddenly bursting into tears. Blanca and Papi follow her, asking her what's wrong. Crying, she tells them what happened and that she's scared of being exploited by the photographer. If he reveals her photos by selling them to pornographic magazines, it would be both dangerous for her if she's recognized, and near impossible to get a more traditional modeling job. Blanca, Papi, and Angel track down the photographer and beat him up to get the photos back, and Angel goes on to get through the semi-finals with her professional shots.

What's obviously messed up about this is the photographer's exploitation and fetishization of Angel as a transgender woman. Though we as viewers don't find out what he planned to do with the photos, the fact is that he intended to capitalize off of her being "different" from the status quo. He continued to take photos of her even though she was clearly hesitant, her face showing her discomfort. He knew she was in a vulnerable position where she needed the professional shots, and used that to get what he wanted from her. He could have said, "If you don't have enough money, I won't do your photoshoot"; he could have worked with her limited budget. Instead, he made the choice to capitalize on Angel's body to "add to his collection", demeaning her for his own status and satisfaction.

The photographer knew there was something to be gained in the sexualization of Angel, whose intersecting-minority identity makes her "different". This creates more subject for fetishization, which is the making of someone into an object of sexual desire based on some aspect of their identity. It is dehumanizing to watch him continue to snap photos of her as her eyes well up in tears, unconcerned for her pain or agitation. This speaks to dominant culture's tendency to both 'other' minorities by objectifying them (in this case, taking exposing photos) while also serving its own interests (making money off the photos, having power over something considered "taboo").



The fetishization of people in BIPOC, Latinx, and Asian communities, as well as LGBTQ+ communities, is a form of objectification and oppression. These kinds of fetishes are based off of stereotypes, which reinforce specific biases. It leads to further discrimination and poor treatment of others influenced by false ideals. Basically, it's just another way in which dominant culture asserts and justifies its inequitable behavior towards minorities.

Let it be clearly stated that it is not a survivor's responsibility to learn to accept or deal with systems of oppression and the resulting trauma – it is the responsibility of the oppressor to unlearn their harmful mindsets and behaviors. Still, some survivors choose to find ways to empower each other and themselves. Angel finds some healing and justice by disclosing her trauma to her family and receiving their support, and then retrieving the photos. Healing is a unique journey for each individual -- it won't look the same for any two people. Still, finding one's own personal version of this journey can contribute so much to a survivor's wellbeing, allowing them to rebuild peace in themselves, their relationships and their communities once more.

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\*Dissociation is a normal reaction to trauma, in which the mind tends to disconnect from reality or bodily senses to protect itself from an overwhelming experience. People who dissociate may lose their sense of time, space, identity, or are not able to recall things that happened in their lives, perhaps for hours, days, or even years at a time.

