

What's wrong with woke ads? An analysis of trans resistance movements and corporate co-optation

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Defense Date: 1 April 2020

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank this list of people for helping me through the whole process of writing and researching this project. I don't think I would've finished it without all of you, especially what with the pandemic and all that.

- Dr Kate Fischer
- My mom, Dr Joanne McLain
- Dr Laura DeLuca and Dr Robert Wyrod
- My friends Landon Yáñez and Jasmine Suryawan

Thank you very much!

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Abstract:

In this paper, I analyze the potential impact of woke ads on marginalized communities, specifically focusing on how ads that feature transgender people or use trans symbology affect the trans community. I will be using this analysis to think about the role of neoliberalism on the lived experiences of trans people, and ultimately to discuss how these ads make trans people legible to the state and how this legibility intersects with anti-discrimination laws and “trans rights.” Part of this analysis relies on the idea that corporations, especially multinational corporations, work with the state to produce a more entangled entity that benefits primarily corporate interests. I will also critique corporate social responsibility and discuss the hypocrisy that is inherent to many of these woke ad campaigns. The research questions I use to guide my thesis are: Does the rise of transgender inclusion in woke ads represent a positive change towards

more acceptance of trans people or are they only superficial attempts to align a brand with a popular social justice movement in order to profit the company? And: Do these ad campaigns actually benefit the trans community, do they do nothing, or could these woke ads actually cause more harm to trans people due to strengthening a status quo that harms marginalized groups through assimilating only a portion of “normative” LGBTQ people?

How I'm using certain words, keeping in mind a lot of them change frequently and may be understood differently depending on the context in which they're used:

- **Woke:** Slang originating from the African American community (like much popular slang in the US); refers to being aware of historical and ongoing socioeconomic and racial justice issues.
- **Woke Ads:** Advertisements that use a contemporary social justice issue to sell a product, in order to elicit reactions and remain relevant to consumers.
- **Trans/transgender:** A person who was assigned a sex (and therefore a gender) at birth that they do not identify with.
- **Nonbinary:** A person whose gender identity does not conform to the traditional Western binary (two firmly separate and oppositional categories of male/man versus female/woman). A nonbinary person can identify as transgender but may choose not to.
- **Queer:** A broad term encompassing anything or anyone that resists the norm. (I am considering the norm, in terms of identity, to be white, affluent, and cisgender; the status quo in the US assumes these identities as the most important when making decisions, creating policy, reporting on the news, etc, and so US laws and systems of governance reflect this priority).
- **Legibility:** How people and their identities become understood and then controlled by the state (and other powers). Legal documentation (like driver's licenses, passports, social security cards, etc.) is a good example of this, because without them the US legal system and government has no way to categorize and track its citizens. Being illegible to the state (for example, having no officially recognized documentation) is considered threatening to it.

- **Neoliberalism:** A set of ideologies that took hold in the US around the 1980's and since have become mainstream. They include an emphasis on privatization, expanding markets, individualism, free trade, and cutting funding for public services like healthcare and education. In this ideology, the role of the government is limited to aiding neoliberal goals, but otherwise only serves to limit the effectiveness of the market.
- **LGBTQ Community:** This term comes from a Western point of view and may not comfortably fit many people who are outside of a North American and European experience¹. I'm using this as another broad term to connect all people who don't identify as both heterosexual and cisgender and I'm situating it from a US perspective, since that's where I come from and the context with which I'm framing my analysis. I think of LGBTQ as a bit different from "queer" because I think of queer as placing emphasis on resisting and subverting normativity, whereas LGBTQ doesn't necessarily do that. LGBTQ has "queer" embedded in it, but it's also a catch-all term that is used by corporations and institutions to categorize a very wide range of diverse identities, often to the point where the category is functionally useless, since it holds so many identities. LGBTQ can be a useful umbrella term for uniting a very large community, but it can also homogenize us and render more marginalized members invisible, especially to people outside the community. I'm also using the term "community" because it's a widely accepted word to describe this group, and I like the solidarity the word implies, even though I think it can also be misleading as many of us do not get along as a community,

¹ This isn't to say that non-Western people cannot identify with the term LGBTQ, and many people from around the world do consider themselves as under this umbrella. Also, it's not to say that everyone from a Western perspective also identifies with LGBTQ and no other term to label non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities and experiences.

and in fact may actively work against each other's interests. I think the term “LGBTQ Community” is still a useful shorthand, even though it’s usage should also be carefully thought about and examined.

- **AFAB:** An acronym standing for “Assigned Female at Birth,” used to highlight the life-long influence these legal binary categories have over particularly trans people, but also over all people who have been marked with a specific sex that is meant to align with a specific gender identity in a binary fashion.
- **AMAB:** The same concept as AFAB but this one stands for “Assigned Male at Birth.”
- **Cishet:** a shortened version of “cisgender and heterosexual,” the only gender and sexual identities that are not considered to fall under the LGBTQ umbrella.

Introduction

The last few years have seen a surge of what many are calling “woke advertising,” or campaigns and advertisements that are meant to bring to light various social justice issues with the apparent goal of giving a platform to these issues. They have generated controversy, partially because they generally take one side of a polarizing argument, and so those who are against whatever side the brand picks tend to express anger and, ironically, can generate even more sales and recognition for that brand, while those who agree with the ad come out in full force to buy their product. These ads have also been criticized for “woke washing,” exploiting social justice movements in order to make a profit without actually making anything better, which is seen by many as immoral and even dangerous for some movements. Many of these woke ads were produced in the past three years alone, including Gillette’s “We Believe: The Best a Man Can Be” campaign, which aimed to tackle misogyny, Pepsi’s generic pro-cop protest ad featuring Kendall Jenner (“Live for Now” or “Live for Now Moments Anthem”), Google’s Google Home

ad featuring a gay nuclear family (“Carpool: Google Home now supports multiple users”), Heineken’s “Worlds Apart” video which showed people overcoming their political differences in order to build a bar and share a beer to discuss their disagreements, and Nike’s “Just Do It” ad narrated by Colin Kaepernick, which highlighted the company’s decision to back Kaepernick in his protests against police brutality, to name a few. Along with woke ads in general, there has been an increase in woke trans ads, which operate similarly (to align the brand with a social cause) but highlight transgender people in some way. Examples of these include Gillette’s “First Shave, the story of Samson” which features Samson, a black trans man learning to shave with his dad, and Pantene’s “#SeeBeautyNotGender” ad that aired in Thailand in 2018 and featured multiple Thai transgender celebrities. A really interesting one is Bud Light’s pro-transgender ad, featuring cisgender actors Amy Schumer and Seth Rogan, who pretend to be politicians for the “Bud Light Party” running on the platform of giving beers labels, not people (“Labels”). This ad is both an illustration and a parody of the involvement of corporations in politics and the use of transgender identity as a progressive talking point. The ad even directly states that Bud Light doesn’t care about your gender identity, they only care about selling you a beer, placing its priorities directly on profit.

The rise of woke trans ads, especially those that portray nonbinary or gender nonconforming people, are also linked to an increase in people identifying with these labels, or at least knowing someone who does. “Fifty six percent of 13-to-20-year-olds told the J. Walter Thompson Innovation Group that they knew someone who used ‘they’ as their pronoun” (“Gen Z goes beyond binaries in new Innovation Group data”), and Mattel’s new Creatable World doll illustrates the shifting trends of younger consumers desiring “no labels” and more freedom of expression for their gender presentation and the toys they play with (Horowitz, “Most Americans

see value in steering children toward toys, activities associated with opposite gender”). There is an increasing awareness of nonbinary genders, and an accompanying loosening of the traditional Western gender binary, at least in some ways².

These ads have had varying degrees of success, in terms of sales and how they have generally been received by the public, but they show a rising trend of brands attempting to link themselves to social justice movements in order to capitalize on polarization and controversy. They also show a trend of increasing emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), illustrating the general shift in consumer interest in ethical brands as well as an increasing awareness of the powerful influence companies have over mainstream cultural ideas and assumptions and how they can impact policy changes and livelihoods. The main question this all raises is whether this co-optation of social justice movements is ultimately helpful or harmful, and for whom. Does a corporation making the appearance of signing on to help fight oppression or offering representation for marginalized groups increase the effectiveness of the movement, possibly by widening its scope and introducing it to more people? Or does it risk reproducing harm due to making people hyper-visible³, or by assimilating a movement into the mainstream and therefore reducing its edgy authenticity? Is there ever a truly ethical brand? These ads most likely create a combination of benefits and problems, but I ultimately believe that it is important to be wary of this corporate co-optation, if only because it’s impossible to be sure whether corporations really do value people over profits, and what that might mean. When executed correctly, the gambles these companies made in dipping into such controversial topics yielded higher profit margins and kept their brand name in the news for sometimes weeks after the ad

² The limits of this awareness will be expanded on later in this paper.

³ For more information on this issue, the article “Trans visibility is greater than ever-- but that’s a double-edged sword” by Shon Faye sums it up well.

debuted, a tenacity that is very difficult to achieve in the constant barrage of change, news, and new products, coupled with the ongoing decrease in brand loyalty and recognition. It remains to be seen whether these companies continue to promote progressive issues when they can no longer capitalize off their controversy.

I am focusing on trans ads to understand wider issues of neoliberalism and the codification and practice of human rights, specifically anti-discrimination laws and trans rights. Neoliberalism depends on selling commodities and expanding markets and needs constant supply of workers and consumers. This ideology defines people's worth based on their contribution to this system, which connects to human rights, since the reasoning for granting rights is based on how productive a population is viewed to be.

Ads are a product of this system and perpetuate it. In order to sell products, companies need to advertise them-- ads are a helpful way of understanding the priorities and interests of brands, and are also a sort of reflection of mainstream society since the ads are marketed to us and have our psychology in mind.

Woke ads co-opt resistance movements by capitalizing off of controversy and shifting consumer preferences. Trans liberation and critiques of the gender binary are still very controversial issues and it can be too risky for most brands to get into why. However, these ones that I am focusing on have decided to do just that, whether explicitly or implicitly. Analyzing these trans ads can be a good way to try to grasp this whole massive complex and also to understand our own society through the reflection of these advertisements.

I have seen many other articles about woke-washing⁴ (and especially about the commodification of feminism⁵) but in my research, I haven't found work produced about woke trans ads specifically. I also haven't seen comprehensive analysis of the connections of co-optation to corporate power in other ways, in terms of control over justice systems and governments, and also how this relates to personhood and rights in general-- I think these should all be in conversation with each other. In addition to this, it's important to discuss how certain populations are valued and what constitutes them as people in the eyes of states and corporations; I argue that it essentially boils down to how productive a person (or group) is in terms of consuming products and also creating them, both of which hinge on a person's capability of generating profit for elites. I believe it's important to think about all this holistically in order to understand far-reaching consequences. So this work is an attempt to fill in the gaps in the literature in this complex mess of issues.

A note on how this paper is written:

My goal is to make this thesis as accessible as possible, because I want anyone who is interested in the topic to be able to easily read it. I decided to steer away from an academic voice and write with a slightly more colloquial one, to try to best represent my own voice and to hopefully make it more approachable to readers. In my opinion it's especially important to write accessibly in queer theory, since this field is attempting to dismantle systems of inequality. Unfortunately, a lot of the scholarship in queer theory is very difficult to read, not necessarily because the ideas are complicated, but because they are written in a sometimes intentionally dense and overly academic way. One of the failures of

⁴ For more information on this the article "Woke-washing: how brands are cashing in on culture wars" by Owen Jones for *The Guardian* is a good source.

⁵ Additional information about this can be found in "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism," by Ellen Riordan.

academia is how inaccessible it is to so many people, and within queer theory, trans studies, women and gender studies, and related fields, it's important to allow as many people to engage with this work as possible. It's not enough to simply critique systems and produce papers about them, but we also have to work with our communities and outside of them to produce any real, sustainable, progressive change.

Methods

My research site for this project is three trans ads (H&M's "Stay True, Stay You," Coke's "The Wonder of Us," and Mattel's "Creatable World"). I also draw from my own experience as a white, middle class, able-bodied, queer nonbinary trans person from the United States. These identities are the lens through which I experience the world and they influence how I interpret it. My analysis of these ads is an analysis of how my own community is represented in mainstream media, and my concerns about these representations and their effects are concerns about how my community experiences discrimination and repression in the society I live in.

I define trans ads as an advertisement that associates itself with the trans community in some way, whether explicitly or implicitly, through featuring transgender celebrities (H&M) or using LGBT terminology and symbols (Coke and Mattel), in order to connect the brand to the LGBT community and keep themselves relevant and appealing to their target audiences.

I picked these ads and not others for multiple reasons. One is that all of these corporations are multinational corporations (MNCs), which work to perpetuate neoliberal designs. These include privatizing everything, expanding factories and sweatshops into every area without strict labor laws in order to exploit unprotected classes and spend less on manufacturing, and eradicating traditional communal structures and replacing them with

“modernized” workplaces that base their value on productivity above all else. I’m also interested in how each of these ads, at least on the surface, represents the trans community in a positive light and may be celebrated even by trans people for apparently furthering trans rights. However, I want to debate that idea and provide a more nuanced analysis of the potential problems these ads perpetuate.

I expand on the other reasons I chose them that are specific to each ad below:

Descriptions of each case study:

The first case study is H&M’s “Stay True, Stay You” ad which aired in June 2019.

Description: This ad starts with Laverne Cox, a transgender celebrity and actress, looking glamorous in a bowling alley and wearing a crop top sweater with the word “Love” on it and rainbow print underneath. Her voice then says, “Now I understand that being too much is just enough for me.” The camera then cuts to a black masculine-presenting person wearing a different shirt that says “Love” on it dancing around in a convenience store. A voice (presumably of the person shown on screen) says “I am loud, I am extra, and I love being me.” It then cuts to a gay white couple holding hands and buying ice cream from a truck, and a different voice says “I think Pride isn’t just limited to one month for us, it’s every single day” as the couple then kisses. Then a white feminine-presenting person in a laundromat wearing a shirt with a rainbow on it says “I’m proud that I’m always myself even though sometimes that’s hard to do” as they play with soap bubbles in a washing machine. Then it cuts back to Laverne Cox who flips her hair and says “Your power is in owning every part of who you are.” Then all the actors are shown outside together throwing confetti, and a person says “I will

never turn down for anybody,” followed by Cox saying “Own it, feel it, live it, love it” and then she throws her head back and laughs. The ad ends with all the actors⁶ walking together in the street overlaid by the H&M logo and the text “available now.” This isn’t mentioned in the actual ad, but part of the campaign is that 10% of the sales price of this collection will support the work of the UN Free & Equal campaign.

I thought this ad did a good job of illustrating the disconnect between what H&M is presenting in the ad and what their practices do in reality. Central to the ad is Laverne Cox, a black trans woman who has been featured in many mainstream pro-LGBTQ things⁷, making her recognizable as a stand-in for the trans community to the average viewer. There is an interesting connection with how Cox plays the role of an inmate in “Orange is the New Black,” a series that shows a lot of the issues affecting women in prison in the US, including the widespread use of prison labor, and how H&M is notorious for profiting off of prison labor (Shane). H&M claims to support marginalized communities but also contributes massively to the fast fashion trend⁸, which ultimately harms marginalized groups by generating huge amounts of waste, relying on sweatshop labor, and overall contributing to unsustainable consumer practices.

This ad is a good example of how only certain people can be assimilated into normativity. There is a lack of disability representation in the lineup of actors, and the only clearly gay couple appears to be white. There is also no indication of non-monogamy or anything else potentially more controversial-- overall the ad is just very much playing it safe and only superficially strays

⁶ I was unable to find out the identities of any of the actors other than Laverne Cox

⁷ The most widely cited example of this is when Cox was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* for the June 2014 issue “The Transgender Tipping Point.”

⁸ Information about this can be found in “The environment and economy are paying the price for fast fashion-- but there’s hope,” by Jasmin Malik Chua for Vox.

into controversial territory by making an LGBT ad, but the controversy is somewhat debatable since they made this for Pride Month and only hint at trans inclusion by using the image of Laverne Cox. It's also clear that this ad is meant to be mainly legible to cis het audiences-- the use of rainbow clothing and associated symbols is very obviously meant to signal queerness, but in a very normative way. Only LGBTQ people who are out and identifiably LGBTQ to non-queer audiences are represented here. Also, the focus on consuming products to generate joy and inclusivity is very telling-- the stated message is about accepting everyone, but it's really only for those who can consume and produce at a rate acceptable to MNCs like H&M. I think this highlights the point about MNCs only caring about trans people (and other LGBTQ people) to the extent we can make them a profit, as they can use trans bodies to align the brand to the movement without actually committing to changing the status quo.

The second ad I analyze is Coke's "The Wonder of Us" which aired during Pride Month of 2018.

Description: This ad starts with the image of an empty Coke bottle spinning for a game of Spin the Bottle overlaid with the audio: "There's a Coke for he... and she... and her... and me... and them" while panning over a series of diverse people to represent each pronoun. For the "them" representation, the person shown is white, thin, traditionally androgynous⁹, and is wearing a rainbow collared jacket. Then the video turns to shots of hands opening cans of Coke with the voice-over continuing, "There's a different Coke for *all* of us," followed by

⁹ What I mean by "traditionally androgynous" is the body presentation that has become synonymous with androgyny in popular media; this look is characterized by being white, able-bodied, skinny, AFAB, and masculine of center to fit into the narrow confines of what mainstream ideology decides is "in between" masculine and feminine, but in a non-threatening way. This concept is expanded on in the section on legibility.

people cracking open bottles of Coke at a party. It continues with a shot of someone riding a bike surrounded by a mass of balloons with another voice saying, “And especially for him.” A different voice then chimes in with “No feet have wandered where you’ve walked,” followed by another saying “No eyes have seen what you’ve seen” with shots of kids playing on a swing set. Then some people do gymnastics while a voice says, “No one’s lived the life you’ve lived.” Then there’s a shot of someone contact juggling while a voice says “No head has held your dreams,” followed by some people riding bumper cars and doing sick flips in a wheelchair while a different voice says “To act the same would be mundane.” Then a pair of white people look over a mountainous landscape while a voice says, “What a boring thing to do.” The camera then zooms in close to one of the people’s eyes and a voice reflects “That’s why there’s just one me.” It zooms back out to show a big beach scene with a ton of people spread out on the sand while a voice says “In a billion unique yous,” with the camera then zooming in to focus on a couple cuddling on a towel. Then someone drinks a Coke while a voice says “We all have different looks” followed by “And different loves” as the person looks over to a different person driving the car, “likes” as a person spreads their arms to the ocean, “and dislikes too” with some scenes of parties. “But there’s a Coke for we... and us” as a person jumps off of a yurt-like structure into some body of water. Finally, the ad ends with “And there’s a Coke... for you” as the screen flashes with the phrase “ENJOY YOURS™” and then the Coca-Cola label.

Although I don’t spend as much time analyzing this ad as the other two, this one still offers another example of how these ads can strengthen the status quo that oppresses trans people even while offering a positive representation of genders outside of the cisgender binary. This ad

mostly stuck out to me because of the nonbinary representation in it. Nonbinary representation in any form is still very rare and is not often shown in advertising. This ad uses singular they pronouns but otherwise makes no mention of nonbinary identity, making it quick and somewhat subtle but still groundbreaking for mainstream advertisements.

I also chose this ad because the company that created it, Coca-Cola, is a very complicated MNC with a lot of different facets. They have a great Public Relations (PR) department that makes them out to be environmentally friendly and a supporter of many nonprofit groups working to promote social equality. However, at the same time this corporation has been criticized multiple times for its unsustainable use of plastic and its numerous human rights violations¹⁰. Coke offers a good example of the many contradictions of social entrepreneurship and the difficulties of holding a powerful MNC accountable.

The third ad I'm analyzing is Mattel's "Creatable World" which debuted their new line of gender neutral dolls in September 2019.

Description: This ad begins with two children in boxes on screen with a child's voice saying "Introducing Creatable World" as the screen shifts to a picture of the box the doll comes in and shows off the various clothing and accessories that you can buy with it. A chorus then sings "Creatable World!" followed by the child saying, "Create characters that are awesomely you!" This is accompanied by flashes of the various possible dolls, all shown with a split screen of their long and short hair styles. Then a kid does a cartwheel on one side of the screen while a doppelganger doll also does a cartwheel, as the voice says "Mix and match for hundreds of

¹⁰ This will be expanded on in the Neoliberalism and the Corporate State section, under CSR.

looks,” and then two children reach through the barrier separating them and trade dolls. “What will you create?” overlays a lineup of one doll wearing many different hairstyles and clothing ensembles. Then a series of racially and gender diverse children are shown playing with their dolls in a bunch of tiny boxes for each of them, as the logo of “Creatable World™” and “all welcome” flashes on screen. The voice says, “Creatable World dolls, each sold separately!” and then the ad ends.

This Mattel ad marks the beginning of a difference in mainstream understanding and acceptance of non-traditional gender identities and presentations. This product is aimed at the up-and-coming generation (currently labeled “Generation Alpha”) who apparently reported to the toy company that they would rather not be labeled by anything and would prefer to dress and act how they want, unencumbered by binary gender expectations. Mattel may be tapping into a new market in gender inclusive products, since there are numerous reports of more and more people identifying outside the gender binary or knowing others who do (Laughlin).

This doll could be considered progressive since it allows the user to easily change the gender presentation of the doll, and makes no discrimination between the gender of their target audience-- there are no obvious gender markers meant to appeal to either boys or girls in the advertisements or the product labeling. However, this doll only features one specific body type, which, due to the lack of gender neutral dolls on the market, unfortunately perpetuates toxic assumptions of what a person has to look like in order to be nonbinary¹¹. It’s also worth noting that Mattel has never explicitly aligned this product with queerness, and makes no reference to

¹¹ This is expanded on in the section on Legibility.

trans identities in any of its ads, except for one Instagram post that defined singular they pronouns (creatableworld, “They, Them, He, She, Him, Her, We. ❤️ #AllWelcome”). However, this doll is still considered by consumers to be gender neutral and situated in transness, to the point where there is some opposition to it-- One Million Moms, a conservative Christian and anti-gay group, is working on a petition to discontinue this line¹². Despite their attempts to minimize this doll’s relation to queerness, Mattel is still considered to be advancing gender inclusion and expanding nonbinary representation.

Mattel as a corporation is also interesting because, unlike many other MNCs, they don’t have any immediately apparent controversies, other than the long-standing ones about Barbie’s unrealistic body proportions¹³ and the difference in the pay gap between the average line worker and the CEO (Ynon Kreiz makes 3,408 times more than his line workers (Anderson)). Mattel is signed on to the Mekong Agreement to end modern-day slavery and is committed to sustainable sourcing to create its products (“Mattel Citizenship”). In comparison to the allegations lobbied against Coke and H&M, Mattel seems to be fighting a lot less negative public attention. This complicates the narrative of corporate power since Mattel has not blatantly committed human rights abuses and undermined its CSR reputation in the same way certain other MNCs have done. Because of this, I will be focusing much more on the implications of the Creatable World product and advertisement as opposed to spending time critiquing the corporation that created it.

¹² The petition is called “Urge Mattel to Discontinue Its Gender Inclusive Doll Line”; these moms are worried about “a toy that glorifies gender inclusivity and ignores one’s biological sex” and say that “Mattel should avoid aiming to please a small percentage of customers while pushing away conservative customers who hold to the age-old truth that a boy is a boy and a girl is a girl” (One Million Moms).

¹³ More information about this can be found in “Does Barbie make girls want to be thin? The effect of experimental exposure to images of the dolls on the body image of 5- to 8-year-old girls,” by Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive.

Questions:

It's important to analyze these trans ads to understand how trans identity is being used to sell a product and what the consequences of this model could be for the lived experience of trans people. It's important to consider what the intent of these ads are, and whether they achieve what they intended. Does positive representation actually result in material benefit to trans people, or does it just give a brand the reputation of being woke in order to protect it from controversies and make it more profit as consumers buy their products in order to show their allyship with the trans community? Or does it maybe do both? Also, when these corporations effectively co-opt a social movement, what does this do for the movement? Does it give grassroots organizations and mobilizers more credibility and spread the word about an issue, or does it steer attention away from the movement and instead focus it on the brand? Or, again, does it do both? There is also the worry that if trends shift and it no longer becomes profitable to say a company stands with a movement, then these businesses may change their tune and refuse to aid in social justice work, proving their solidarity to be shallow and worth little. Overall, do these ads change the status quo of transphobia at all? Do they have the potential to actually strengthen it due to perpetuating normative ideas about what a trans person should look and act like? If this is the case, then what happens to trans people who do not fit this normative model? Are they then further marginalized and barred from accessing even more resources and institutions?

It's impossible to fully answer these questions, since there is not a massive amount of research currently circulating around this topic and the ads I'm analyzing were created very recently. The answers also depend on the point of view of the person asking them, their own interests, and whether they favor social entrepreneurship and believe in neoliberal ideology. However, in this piece I argue that these representations are harmful, and that they do exclude

more marginalized trans people, painting a false picture of full acceptance and equality that can be misleading and can hinder social justice movements.

The goal of this paper is to open the discussion about woke ads in general, and to focus on the impact on marginalized groups, specifically transgender people. I'm not advocating for completely discontinuing the production of woke ads, but I want the general public and the target audiences of these ads to critically think about each one of them and consider who may be harmed even by good intentions. I also want readers to consider the role of corporations in social movements, and to think about the limitations of advocating for change solely through the private sector.

Neoliberalism and the Corporate State:

This section will focus on how neoliberalism functions to shape the way we think about identity, value, and work, and how the corporate state enables this ideology to be enforced. To illustrate these concepts I'll be using the H&M ad "Stay True, Stay You" as an example, and also the Coke ad "The Wonder of Us."

Neoliberalism

I understand neoliberalism as an ideology that emphasizes individualism, privatization, expanding markets, limited state control, and free trade¹⁴. This ideology acts as an effective structure to channel a capitalist economic system, since it places value on mechanisms that allow capitalist systems to flow unimpeded. Neoliberalism places all its faith in corporate power and

¹⁴ I base the majority of my understanding of neoliberalism on David Harvey's analysis of it in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

the private sector and considers governmental structures to be valuable only as a means to increase corporate power and contribute to capitalist processes. Neoliberal ideology is widespread in the US, even though most of us don't actually refer to these principles as such, and it has become pervasive enough that many of these principles are often not criticized, or even thought about. Neoliberalism is an effective power structure because it has become hegemonic for the US, which also influences the rest of the world to an extent that this ideology is well known across the world. It's important to consider the role of neoliberal ideology when discussing advertising and social movements, because this ideology is steeped into every social and economic system we interact with, and many feel that neoliberal principles are an unchangeable fact of life, like a set of natural physical laws.

Neoliberalism forces the onus of creating change onto individuals within the society, as opposed to analyzing unequal power dynamics created and perpetuated by the upper classes, due to its extreme emphasis on individual agency. This then leads to the rise of woke ads, and CSR, as brands attempt to stay relevant to consumers and feed into this rhetoric of the private sector being the most effective and fastest method to promoting progressive change. In this way, neoliberalism acts as an effective philosophy through which to maximize capitalist gains for those in power and push the responsibility of making change onto consumers, at the same time convincing us that our only real option is to work within this corporate model. Because of this, if a progressive movement is seen to threaten corporate interests, brands likely will not back it, potentially causing the movement to lose traction as more of its supporters are diverted into campaigns that ultimately work to preserve the status quo.

Understanding the overall general framework of neoliberalism is essential for understanding the connection of states to corporations. Neoliberalism demands privatization,

including of traditionally state-controlled institutions, such as healthcare and education. This ideology, coupled with the power of corporate lobbying groups and other ties between state bodies and businesses, has resulted in a sort of combined system of government and corporations, where the corporations may in some ways exceed the powers of the state (Babic, Drutman, and Harvey).

This is especially true of multinational corporations (MNCs), since they can reach beyond even the political parameters of their host country and impact multiple nations around the world. This impact is shared among disproportionately few MNCs-- "States versus Corporations" by Milan Babic gives the statistic that "nearly 40 percent of the control over the economic value of MNCs in the world is held, via a complicated web of ownership relations, by a group of only 147 MNCs." This article goes on to say that "MNCs and states are, in this sense, foci of social forces competing for power and enforcement of their interests within global capitalism. They are embedded in relations represented as networks of power that combine different features, that is, they can be ownership, elite and/or other networks." Although corporations have not fully extended beyond the power of the state and still require certain state functions in order to run, the state actively works to promote business interests in many ways and corporations support aspects of the state that benefit business. Because of this entanglement, it's important to think about this system (which I will call the corporate state) as a combined one, instead of thinking of state and corporate power as separate.

Due to corporate influence, certain things are prioritized over others, which produces legislation that can be biased towards promoting corporate interests instead of benefiting the citizens within a country. Sometimes these interests line up in a way that benefits both the corporation and the people living under its rule. Sometimes these interests are at odds. In an

article published by the Atlantic in 2015, Lee Drutman says “Corporations now spend about \$2.6 billion a year on reported lobbying expenditures—more than the \$2 billion we spend to fund the House (\$1.18 billion) and Senate (\$860 million)... Today, the biggest companies have upwards of 100 lobbyists representing them, allowing them to be everywhere, all the time. For every dollar spent on lobbying by labor unions and public-interest groups together, large corporations and their associations now spend \$34. Of the 100 organizations that spend the most on lobbying, 95 consistently represent business.” These figures show how deep the involvement of businesses within government is and raises concerns about whether legislation that may threaten corporate interests may ever be effective. This also causes more people to believe in the power of the private sector more than traditional state structures since these corporations are able to use their wealth to out-maneuver opposing legislation. Drutman goes on to say “When I surveyed corporate lobbyists on the reasons why their companies maintained a Washington office, the top reason was ‘to protect the company against changes in government policy,’” showing that corporate entanglement in government does less radical reform that may advance the interests of their consumers and instead are much more focused on maintaining a status quo that benefits companies. Presumably corporations are not actively out to make people’s lives worse on purpose, but based on all this, if it came down to a decision between promoting the interests of the public or promoting the interests of a business, it seems likely that corporations would choose to support themselves.

Voting with your wallet

Woke trans advertising reflects neoliberal attitudes of what constitutes the value of certain groups, because these campaigns are based on extracting a profit from populations that are thought to have significant buying power. As of 2018, the LGBT buying power is estimated

at \$3.6 trillion globally and \$1 trillion in the US alone (LGBT Capital). Many corporations have taken note of this and have subsequently jumped into advertising campaigns that appear to align the brand with the LGBTQ community, hoping to secure some of this capital for themselves. Representation of LGBTQ people in advertising is more often a case of corporations trying to appeal to the community (as well as to its allies) to make a profit, showing that interest in positive portrayals of a large percentage of the population¹⁵ stems from interest in using that population to increase profits. In order to pave the way for corporations, organizations like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and GLAAD actively promote this kind of advertising, and even provide firms various guides¹⁶ to effectively appeal to an LGBTQ audience. These guides have good suggestions, such as “Be sensitive to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender stereotypes and avoid positioning LGBTQ people as a perceived threat for humor” and “Always use a transgender person’s chosen name” (LGBTQ Marketing and Advertising: Best Practices) which can help ensure these ads do not promote negative stereotypes of LGBTQ people. However, they never challenge the assumption that these corporations should be profiting off of queer identities, and often do not discuss potential methods for these corporations to engage in LGBTQ liberation beyond creating a thirty second feel-good video that ultimately just serves to promote corporate interests, and not LGBTQ ones.

The HRC also supplies different resources to evaluate a company’s dedication to supporting LGBTQ people, including the Corporate Equality Index and the Buying for Workplace Equality guide. Deena Fidas, Director of HRC Foundation’s Workplace Equality

¹⁵ In 2019, a Gallup poll estimated the LGBT population in the US at 4.5% (“In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%,” Frank Newport, *Gallup*)

¹⁶ These include “LGBTQ Marketing and Advertising: Best Practices,” the HRC, and “media reference guide,” 8th ed., GLAAD, as well as tips from the Commercial Closet Association.

Program, said “Our annual Buying for Workplace Equality guide provides quick, user-friendly help in selecting everything from groceries to cars, allowing fair-minded consumers to use their wallets to resist attacks on the LGBTQ community by supporting brands committed to fully inclusive workplaces” (Kozuch). These resources are generally very helpful, since they provide a measure to compare various workplace environments and consider the impact a company has on LGBTQ populations from a specific point of view. However, they also rely on the idea that corporate involvement in social issues is always a necessary and useful thing, and puts the onus on the average consumer to force anti-LGBTQ companies to change by encouraging patronage of certain companies and boycotts of others, by “voting with your wallet.” While this can be an effective tactic, it also excludes those who do not have the financial ability to participate in a meaningful way, and advocates for change that appeals to those with disposable income, who are disproportionately of non-marginalized groups. This kind of tactic also emphasizes the power corporations have over the rights and well-being of LGBTQ people, since its effectiveness relies on these corporations’ decision to listen to the needs of its queer consumer and worker base. Although it’s framed as using the power of the consumer to advocate for our rights, this model depends on the LGBTQ community (and its supporters) maintaining a sufficiently high buying power in order to sway corporate profits. If a campaign that threatened corporate profits became associated with the LGBTQ community, or if the community was later evaluated to have a much lower estimated buying power, then it’s unlikely that this tactic would work at all.

The LGBTQ estimated buying power lumps together a very diverse range of individuals, many of whom do not have the same financial resources as their perceived buying power would assume. If this metric eventually breaks up the LGBTQ community into separate groups (for instance, evaluating it based on a cross-section of both race and queer identities, or considering

the transgender community as separate from the rest of the LGBTQ community) then certain groups would likely be shown to have significantly less buying power. In this case, would any of these “voting with your wallet” campaigns serve the interests of groups without a lot of money? I don’t think this tactic is inherently worthless, but it’s important to remain critical of how queer interests are being framed, and how these campaigns rely on enough people having the wealth necessary to influence corporations, thereby always backgrounding the most marginalized and presuming worth based on the potential to generate a profit for people in power.

CSR

A much more concrete example of some of the issues with neoliberalism (in terms of the “voting with your wallet” idea mentioned in the previous section) is Corporate Social Responsibility. “‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ (CSR) is defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) as ‘the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life’” (Birch, 81). Because fewer US citizens have faith in traditional government institutions (except for the military) and have increased faith in businesses¹⁷, there is a prevailing belief that the most efficient and quickest way to promote societal change is through the private sector. This leads to the assumption that the only way to enact widespread societal change is through the private sector. Because of this belief, the last few years have seen an increase in consumers demanding the businesses they patronize adopt a stance on pressing issues and offer solutions to them. In order to retain their customers and

¹⁷ According to the Gallup Poll “Confidence in Institutions,” in 2019 only 11% of respondents said they had a “Great Deal/Quite A Lot” of confidence in the US Congress, compared to 23% for Big Business and a whopping 73% for the military.

attempt to profit off this trend, many corporations now discuss their commitment to CSR, and some even have entire departments dedicated to it.

CSR is a big topic that has been written about extensively, so I will focus on a few of the issues that are useful to understanding the impact of woke ads on marginalized people. A main worry of CSR is that the prioritization of capital over people might result in unsatisfactory commitment to causes. To bring this into conversation with the previous section about the combined powers of corporations and states, if it really is true that meaningful change can only be achieved through the private sector, then what happens if the private sector determines a cause threatens their bottom line? Many CSR campaigns emphasize a “triple bottom line-- financial, social and environmental performance” (Birch, 82) meaning they work for causes that both progress society and also make them a profit. The Goldman Sachs model of “doing well by doing good¹⁸” is another example of this thinking; the assumption is what’s good for society is good for business. In certain instances this is true-- in a broad sense, if too many humans are unable to work (due to not having access to basic necessities and so dying, for example), then a traditional business cannot operate (since it would not have workers). However, this model is too simplified, and does not allow room for more complexity, a hallmark of neoliberal ideology. One issue is that many CSR campaigns do not take into account the local needs of particular areas their companies may be operating from since “most CSR policies and protocols are developed in comfortable head offices of large companies in developed countries, and not their operational sites in developing ones” (Birch, 82). There’s also no analysis of what these corporations will do when faced with issues that inherently threaten their profits, such as movements that seek to greatly transform society and institutions in ways that disrupt power. I’ve never seen a company

¹⁸ From the Goldman Sachs website, under “People and Culture.”

advocate for large-scale wealth redistribution, for instance, and very few push for pay controls to ensure managers do not make significantly more than other workers, and many corporations are actively anti-union¹⁹. It could also be argued that the system that allows corporations to make money often relies on the exploitation of marginalized people, and so corporations have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, even when they made slight adjustments to appease their consumers.

An example of the contradictions that can occur between stated intentions in CSR campaigns and actual business practices is Coca-Cola. Coke is currently engaged in multiple CSR campaigns. These include the Coca-Cola Foundation, which donates 1% of the corporation's operating income every year to provide millions of dollars in scholarships and grants to students and organizations around the world, the 5by20 initiative, which is meant to empower women entrepreneurs, and the World Without Waste project, which is working to make their packaging recyclable, among others²⁰. Many have benefited from these initiatives. However, despite their commitment to CSR, some might wonder if these projects are simply an elaborate PR stunt, working to ensure Coke has plenty of contrasting examples of humanitarian services so they can distract from their many controversies and human rights abuses.

Certainly their ad "The Wonder of Us"²¹ promotes the image of Coke as community-building and inclusive, showcasing a variety of people of different races, physical abilities, and genders, going so far as to even include nonbinary genders with a quick singular "them" pronoun thrown out there. If a person's entire understanding of the Coca-Cola company came from their

¹⁹ One source that discusses this in more detail is "US Companies Are Weaponizing Employees to Keep Unions Out" from Industry Week in 2018.

²⁰ Information about each of these campaigns can be found on Coke's website, under "Sustainable Business" and "Better Shared Future."

²¹ I will return to this ad in the section on Legibility.

advertising and CSR campaigns, it would appear to be a universally loved company that only exists to ensure every person on the planet has a good time. Unfortunately, a non-exhaustive dip into Coke's various controversies reveals a more complicated picture.

On the one hand, Coke promises to empower and stand in solidarity with marginalized groups and combat environmental destruction through sustainable practices. On the other hand, Coke continues to produce more plastic waste than any other company (Nace, Chalabi) and actively steals (and poisons) already scarce groundwater in India and Mexico (MacDonald, Earth Talk, India Resource Center, and Lopez and Jacobs), selling it back to the local population in Dasani bottles (Agerholm). The corporation also has a long history of committing various labor and human rights abuses against their workers in many places, including Indonesia, Colombia, Haiti, Ireland, Turkey, and the Philippines (Business and Human Rights Resource Center and International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)). In addition to all this, when their workers attempt to organize to demand their rights, Coke has cracked down on dissent using heavily militarized tactics, going so far as to murder prominent union leaders, prompting multiple protests, boycotts, and the Stop Killer Coke Campaign (Harris and Lapan). Faced with all these contradictions to their stated commitment to CSR, I start to wonder whether Coke's various social justice campaigns are simply meant to distract from their actual practices, and whether the priority is really to bring the world together in solidarity²² or if it's just to force as much soda down each person's throat as cheaply as possible. If the bottom line is always profit (regardless of attempts to convince us that Coke is "doing well by doing good" while profiting from these human rights abuses), and a multinational corporation like Coke seems to suffer no real consequences despite their actions

²² A reference to their famous ad campaign "I'd Like To Buy The World a Coke" from 1971.

being well known and documented, then does CSR have any actual power to hold corporations accountable? Or does it exist mostly as an effective method to pretend these corporations are progressing social equality while still allowing marginalized people to be screwed the world over? Can corporate co-optation ever really solve the issues it is deeply embedded in, and in fact helped to create?

The limitations of CSR can be further criticized for in many ways perpetuating and deepening already entrenched inequalities by normalizing and distracting from the root causes of them. CSR is a mechanism for corporations to co-opt various social justice movements-- it could possibly be thought of as the campaign component to woke ads, where corporations are expected to go beyond simply voicing support for a movement and actually contribute something material to it. CSR allows the corporation to align itself with a movement, thereby disassociating itself from the underlying causes of the issues and framing the company as the solution to problems it benefits from. This kind of framing has the potential to lessen the effectiveness of the movement and can actually cause groups that should be in solidarity with each other to actively work against each other, and their own interests. What I mean by this is that corporate co-optation and CSR appear to fight for social justice while effectively molding a movement into something that folds into the mainstream and then works to protect the status quo, and in doing so protect business interests.

Productivity

Beyond valuing queer people's worth only based on our ability to consume, an important other factor to consider is how value is also attributed based on one's potential as a worker, to then produce the products that will later be consumed. Due to extreme corporate involvement in

governance and popular neoliberal ideology, productivity is emphasized as one of the most important values a citizen can have, and therefore its importance becomes codified into law in ways that can harm marginalized groups²³. Within this paper, I understand productivity as traits that work to perpetuate and enforce capitalism by enabling certain people to amass capital, so people who can fit these traits are valued more than those who cannot. People with mental and physical disabilities, for example, despite having various anti-discrimination laws and employment first programs to prevent their exploitation, are nevertheless subjected to exploitation and discrimination²⁴. Following this logic, if a person is unable to secure their basic needs due to not meeting these strict requirements, their suffering is treated as a personal failure, and an issue they should solve themselves. As David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, writes, “If conditions among the lower classes deteriorated, it was because they failed for personal and cultural reasons to enhance their own human capital through education, the acquisition of a Protestant work ethic, and submission to work discipline and flexibility. In short, problems arose because of the lack of competitive strength or because of personal, cultural, and political failings” (Harvey 34). Blaming marginalized people for their own marginalized status stems from the neoliberal prioritization of the individual, focusing so much on the ideal of each person’s own agency that it completely ignores the larger systemic issues that are outside of individual control which create inequalities in the first place. This way of thinking forces the burden of change onto the individuals who have the least resources and assumes that the best solution for societal ills is for marginalized groups to assimilate into the mainstream. It does nothing to challenge the current status quo and considers the dominant group

²³ This concept will be expanded on in the section Legibility.

²⁴ For additional information on this issue, see: “Exploitation” from Disability Justice and Maroto, Michelle and Pettinicchio, David, “Twenty-five years after the ADA: Situating Disability in America’s System of Stratification.”

to be superior to marginalized ones, since non-normative individuals cannot assimilate into normativity. One way in which marginalized people are made to assimilate is through the workplace, since an important aspect of normativity is how effectively people benefit a society in material ways, and within the corporate state, it's essential that citizens create value for corporations in order to be considered valuable themselves.

A concrete example of how value is given to marginalized groups, specifically trans people, only if they work efficiently for a company is in Emmanuel David's "Purple-Collar Labor: Transgender Workers and Queer Value at Global Call Centers in the Philippines." In this piece David coins the term "purple collar work" to describe occupations that rely on the labor of transgender people, or "the emergent patterns of trans people in occupations, from workplaces characterized by complete segregation to the dense clustering in particular jobs." David specifically looks at the rise of trans women employed in call centers in the Philippines. He notes the importance of expanding opportunities for trans people, but he remains critical of the systemic forces that demand trans people work in "legitimate" occupations in order to be seen as worthy of existing. He cites Dan Irving, who argues that "The legitimizing of the transsexual worker, however, does not offer serious challenges to heteronormativity, nor does it illuminate the conditions of hyperexploitation that structure neoliberalism. In fact, these narratives dovetail with hegemonic discourses concerning the upstanding citizen and the necessity of entrepreneurialism." David emphasizes how these industries do not challenge the power imbalances and oppressions that trans people face on a daily basis, arguing that "The privileging of 'proper' transgender subjects risks leaving others behind, particularly those without access to formal education... or those whose gender expressions are considered inappropriate for the workplace." This idea of who can be considered a "proper" trans person based on their ability to

effectively contribute to the workplace can also be seen in who is shown in woke trans ads-- only the most acceptable trans people are represented, narrowing the range of trans people who can benefit from these representations and workplaces.

In another piece titled “Capital T: Trans Visibility, Corporate Capitalism, and Commodity Culture,” David explores similar themes, but focuses on industries outside of call centers. In this piece, he mentions a company called TransTech, a US-based creative design firm which offers tech apprenticeships to trans people in order to help them build marketable skills. Angelica Ross, the entrepreneur who started this business, describes its practices as a progressive win for trans rights, since they provide trans people with more opportunities for building careers. In certain ways this is true, as this company does indeed provide jobs and skills training for an oppressed group whose members often have few options for making money. However, as David points out, this company also exploits these workers, and in certain ways makes their lives even more dangerous. “One drawback of TransTech's approach is its reliance on flexible work. While telecommuting can offer some relief from on-the-job trans discrimination, the cultivation of self-employed independent contractors could leave many in precarious work positions... While TransTech is portrayed as relief from employment discrimination, it potentially leaves some trans subjects in insecure economic positions because of their status as independent contractors and freelance workers who shoulder the weight of the global restructuring of work.” David also mentions problems with heightened surveillance in this workplace, as well as the lack of benefits provided to employees. All of these issues are products of the neoliberal ideology that assumes that what’s best for business is best for everyone, even if what makes the most money for businesses leaves employees without benefits or stable work environments.

Despite on the surface creating positive change and access to jobs for trans women, TransTech still buys into the idea that in order for trans people to be afforded any basic rights or access to securing livelihoods at all, they must prove their worth in a narrow capitalist sense by making money for a corporation. In order to make this money, this corporation has no reservations about exploiting their employees' marginalized status to eke out a larger profit margin. Dan Irving, in "Normalized Transgressions" describes this process clearly: "When employment within the legal wage labor economy is addressed, the tenor of discussion is often assimilatory. The necessity of integrating some trans people into the labor force, and of protecting the employment status of others, appear to foreclose critiques of capitalist productive relations and of the embeddedness of trans subjectivities within capitalist systems of power" (Irving 39).

Analyzing H&M's "Stay True, Stay You" 2019

The disconnect between who is supposedly benefiting from corporate projects and who actually benefits is represented in woke trans ads. Even when actual trans people are represented in these ads (which isn't always the case), the target audience is likely not trans people. Despite LGBTQ buying power being estimated at \$3.6 trillion globally, this is in reality a very broad, unfocused estimation. The LGBTQ community is very big and diverse and includes many wealthy people as well as many people chronically in economically precarious situations. Trans people (especially trans people whose identities intersect with another marginalized group, such as trans women of color, and trans people with disabilities) do not earn as high of wages on

average in comparison with cisgender counterparts²⁵. The 2015 National Center for Transgender Equality United States Transgender Survey (NCTE USTS) found that “nearly one-third (29%) of respondents were living in poverty, compared to 14% in the U.S. population,” that “the unemployment rate among transgender people of color (20%) was four times higher than the U.S. unemployment rate (5%)” and that “nearly one-quarter (24%) [of respondents who identified as transgender and disabled] were unemployed, and 45% were living in poverty.” So although these ads may be in part targeting LGBTQ groups, it’s unlikely that they expect to make money only from trans customers, or even only from LGBTQ customers. Instead, these ads are likely targeting people who consider themselves allies of trans people, as this group is larger and as a cohort has a greater buying power.

In a 2016 J. Walter Intelligence report on the effects of transgender advertising, it was noted that cisgender consumers report “high levels of acceptance and openness” but also a lack of personal connection with trans folks, as well as a lack of full understanding of what trans identities even are (“Understanding Transgender Inclusivity in Advertising”). Most of the awareness of trans issues comes from celebrity culture, such as Laverne Cox and Caitlin Jenner. With this in mind, it makes sense that the H&M ad uses Cox²⁶ as a focal point for their ad, as she is likely one of the only touchstones to trans culture that the majority of their customers have. It also highlights the fact that most of these allies do not actually know trans people in their personal lives, and only know of their struggles in an abstract sense. These ads use trans bodies

²⁵ “A study of transgender adults in the United States found that participants were nearly 4 times more likely to have a household income of less than \$10,000 per year compared to the general population” (“Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons and Socioeconomic Status”).

²⁶ It’s also worth noting that H&M probably didn’t use someone like Caitlin Jenner and instead opted for Laverne Cox because Jenner is much more associated with conservative ideals and the audience ads like these try to attract are typically more politically liberal. Standing in solidarity with trans people has not been a concern of conservative parties in the US.

and trans experiences to present their brand as “woke” and in solidarity with this oppressed group in order to situate themselves as relevant to customers demanding greater CSR and political action from companies. In this way, the brand becomes associated with a certain group or movement in order to appeal to allies who also want to be associated with that movement, so they can feel good about themselves and claim to promote progressive change. These allies may buy the advertised product simply to alert others to the fact of their wokeness and allegiance with the trans community. There tends to be little interest for both allies and companies in actually upsetting the status quo that forces trans people into marginalized positions-- instead of working to promote real change, they more often want to perform an overturning of the status quo.

The H&M ad panders to a cisgender audience by using blatantly obvious signaling to ensure all viewers can tell their ad is meant to showcase queer people, through their collaboration with a transgender celebrity and their excessive use of rainbows, as well as the inclusion of two white men kissing. This blatant signaling is not necessarily a bad thing, since it ensures the majority of their audience will not misinterpret the ad as something other than including gay symbology. However, it works to depoliticize trans (and other LGBTQ) experiences by painting them as one-dimensional and erasing any characteristics that might alienate a cisnet audience. This ad reads like a cisnet person’s interpretation of what it’s probably like to be queer, so that other cisnet people can watch it and understand what it’s probably like to be queer, but they don’t have to worry about the violence trans people face or think about the structural issues that perpetuate this violence. Instead of undertaking a nuanced approach to better understand the LGBTQ community, this ad performs surface-level solidarity and takes no real action, and therefore does nothing to upset the status quo, only using the appearance of doing so in order to profit from it.

H&M used this ad to unveil their Pride Month collection, products which are made using sweatshop labor and unsustainable resources²⁷. This campaign tacks on a small charitable piece, where they promise to donate 10% of the profits from this campaign to the UN Free and Equal Campaign. It is good that H&M is donating at least some of their profits in order to make the appearance of creating material benefits for the LGBTQ community, although this falls a little flat when considering how little of their profit (which they made through fast fashion²⁸ and sweatshop labor practices, in part created in countries where it is still illegal to be gay²⁹ (Bach)) actually goes to this cause. Over the course of 2019, during which this ad was aired, H&M's net sales increased by 11%, putting them at about SEK 234,000 billion in net sales. Several other companies donated 100% of the profits from their pride month collections, whereas H&M only felt the need to donate 10% from a limited time collection (Mulkerin).

Using the H&M ad as an example, it's apparent how neoliberal ideology has resulted in de-politicizing transgender people in order to profit from marginalized identities, and how this corporate state system has minimized entire groups into vehicles for profit-making without ever actually doing anything to materially benefit the people whose images are used to sell products.

²⁷ For more information on this, see "Abuse is daily reality for female garment workers for Gap and H&M, says report," by Kate Hodal, and "H&M Is Pushing Sustainability Hard, But Not Everyone Is Convinced," by Heather Farnbrough.

²⁸ For additional information on fast fashion, see "How Fast Fashion is Destroying the Planet," by Tatiana Schlossberg.

²⁹ It's worth debating whether criminalization of homosexuality actually means an entire country is more homophobic than another country, since not everyone has access to anti-discrimination laws if they exist in a nation, and not everyone is penalized at the same severity in countries that do have discriminatory laws. However, I think this point still helps illustrate the hypocrisy of Pride Month campaigns like this one.

Legibility

Woke ads and corporate co-optation normalize certain identities in a way that makes them legible to the corporate state, making them easier to market to and potentially creating divisions between disenfranchised communities. This legibility, since it's built on prior state mandated categories, works to reinforce the status quo (specifically the hegemonic idea of the Western gender binary) and attempts to eliminate non-normative identities and expressions, as they can be seen as threatening to the order the state tries to impose on society. The main concern around legibility is whether this categorization may result in further marginalizing groups that don't have connections to power and can't assimilate into the mainstream, causing further harm to oppressed groups and convincing us that we are already well on our way to full equality even when evidence shows we are not.

High-modernism

To think about this concept of legibility, I use James Scott's high-modernism. In his book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Scott defines high-modernism as

a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature) and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. It originated, of course, in the West, as a by-product of unprecedented progress in science and industry. [Scott 4]

High-modernism is an ideology that directs how states assume their regimes can best support the populations they contain and also allows them to reproduce the systems that maintain the state³⁰. It includes the idea that humanity can be shaped to perfection, that society can be intricately designed in a way to best suit the needs of everyone (mainly through technology, science, and architecture) and that nature can and should be controlled by people. It is also defined by oversimplicity: this ideology doesn't take into account the myriad of wants and needs of its population, or consider (or care about) the possibility that those in power may not fully understand the needs of the people they represent and so might not act in their interests, even if they have good intentions.

High-modernism is important for the subject of woke ads and trans rights because it helps explain why assimilation into the mainstream is desirable for institutions, since it renders certain populations legible to the corporate state, but also why not everyone is allowed to assimilate due to failure or refusal to fit into legible categories. "Large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is, with the difference being that, for capitalists, simplification must pay. A market necessarily reduces quality to quantity via the price mechanism and promotes standardization; in markets, money talks, not people. Today, global capitalism is perhaps the most powerful force for homogenization" (Scott 8). Creating and inscribing these categories of legibility allows the state to reproduce itself, through better containing and controlling the citizens within it and directing them to activities that reproduce hegemonic systems.

³⁰ This theory can also be thought about using Althusser's "On the Reproduction of Capitalism," which discusses how ideological and repressive state apparatuses are reproduced, especially "Appendix 2: Ideology and ideological State Apparatuses," where he explains how Marx's ideas about how the infrastructure supports the superstructure in capitalist systems.

I understand the state in terms of how David Harvey describes it, within a neoliberal context:

The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such [neoliberal] practices [which include strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade]. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. [Harvey, 2]

The corporate state should act in this way in neoliberal theory, which assumes that the private sector is the most effective means of running society and that government intervention should be kept to a minimum, since the state is inherently inefficient. In reality the state is still very much an actor in controlling and perpetuating society, but neoliberal ideology continues to work in opposition to this reality, causing contradictions. Harvey discusses this as well: “This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and ‘experts’ in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist” (Harvey 69). In this way the state is both a highly influential and powerful institution that affects daily life for each person living under it and also a supposed threat to free markets and individual freedoms due to its ineffectiveness. I argue that the state is very effective in rendering the populations within it legible to its methods of categorization, and this process of legibility is also highly dependent on how corporations understand the people who produce and consume for them. Instead of considering the state and corporations as fully separate, I think of them as entangled in a complex web of many active players who blur the lines between the private and public sector. High-modernism is a helpful theory with which to think about these contradictions and how they impact various groups of people.

Another theory through which to think about this is Tania Murray Li's work on governmentality, which she defines as "the conduct of conduct'... the attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means" (Li 275). Since "the concern of government is the wellbeing of populations at large," but it's impossible to fully understand and meet the needs of every single citizen, it "operates by educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs. It sets conditions, 'arranging things so that people, following only their own self-interest, will do as they ought' (Scott 1995:202). Persuasion might be applied, as authorities attempt to gain consent. But this is not the only course. When power operates at a distance, people are not necessarily aware of how their conduct is being conducted or why, so the question of consent does not arise" (Li 275). Harvey writes about this question of consent as well, and discusses how neoliberalism projects the idea of freedom but continues to control populations from a distance-- he talks about how homogenizing projects arise through creating the idea of a new "common sense," which can be "profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices" (Harvey 39). This common sense is created through a variety of different institutions, like media productions, corporate campaigns, schools, churches, and other powerful influences that legitimize certain ways of thinking about the world. This common sense can then be used to justify all sorts of actions taken by the state which citizens may not even realize are being done in their name.

To further analyze this idea, I'm using the contradictions of transgender rights (specifically anti-discrimination laws) to understand how legible categories become codified into law and how these laws often further harm marginalized groups despite claiming to support them. "Trans rights" offers a simplistic solution to complex issues, and separates the oppressions faced by trans people into one neatly packaged goal that slots into pre-existing institutions so as

not to challenge more complicated structural problems. It also homogenizes the trans community in a way that erases intersectionalities. Trans rights exemplify how high-modernist concepts are codified into law and reveal the thinking behind this legislation. High-modernism depends on categorizing people into easily-evaluated populations so each person can be more easily tracked so that, ideally, the state can then provide everyone with what they need-- or at least with what the state wants them to need, to best suit its style of governance. In our current neoliberal corporate state model, high-modernism does not solely rely on the whims of the state but must also work with other powerful institutions so that this kind of control and categorization are accepted by the public. This means using media like advertising to produce and perpetuate hegemonic orders that maintain the separation of groups and allow certain ones to be assimilated into generic categories.

The LGBTQ community is complex and diverse. The topic of who should be included under the umbrella is hotly debated, as members of various disenfranchised groups make the case for not wanting to share space with their oppressors, questioning how to ensure the safety of each member of the community in more broadly inclusive spaces (which may invite in everyone regardless of prejudices or threats they may pose to other more vulnerable members), and determining how we maintain our differences so as not to become erased in favor of lumping us all together under one umbrella. There are also questions of whether all these diverse identities should even be considered as one group, since the basis of being considered LGBTQ does not mean that you experience anything close to what other people within the supposed “same” community do. The lived experience of a rich, white, cis gay man has less in common with that of a low income black trans woman than either do with certain other identity-based groups, such as ones centered around race, class, religion, or gender. Although it can be a useful organizing

tool, grouping such a wide range of identities and lived experiences under one classification risks homogenizing the whole group and ignoring differences of oppression and access, a key issue of high-modernism. This kind of categorization assumes this population has specific needs and characteristics that might not actually be important to many people who are grouped within it, allowing the corporate state to decide how to deal with the LGBTQ community without considering the lived experiences of those within it.

The corporate model for dealing with the complexity of the LGBTQ community is to basically ignore that complexity, which can be seen in woke ads. Even when a business makes a distinction between different queer identities (such as focusing solely on trans people) there is little demonstrated understanding of the different lived experiences of people who identify under the LGBTQ label. I have yet to see a campaign that critically analyzes the ongoing issue of violence against trans women of color or considers how queer people of color or queer people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poverty. Most CSR projects and ad campaigns lump all queer identities together and address complex, multi-tiered issues as simple problems that affect each queer person equally.

This type of homogenization may at times result in bringing us all closer together, if we collectively mobilize around our queer identities. However, I would argue that it tends to result in the erasure of more vulnerable groups in the community. Queer people who have multiple marginal intersections (such as also identifying as a person of color, having a disability, a specific nationality, etc.) have to navigate more institutional oppressions than queer people who only have to navigate one marginalized identity, and their needs and concerns may be different. Representations that erase our different struggles in this way can result in even more suffering, as the needs that are prioritized tend to be the needs of the most dominant population at the expense

of the more marginalized ones. As certain identities are prioritized over others, and are represented more than others, they may come to dominate the discourse around the community, leading to underrepresented populations being erased³¹. The normalization of certain groups (who are closer to dominant groups, such as having connections to whiteness, wealth, institutional access, etc) means the exclusion of groups who cannot fit into the mainstream as easily and whose existence is seen to threaten the power of the dominant group.

Trans Rights:

Trans rights are often used as a rallying cry to advance the trans community and secure more protections. On the surface, fighting for legal representation in the form of anti-discrimination laws makes sense, as it can provide important avenues for legal recourse for trans people who are discriminated against. However, this movement fails when these rights are only granted to those within the trans community who have the ability to access them. The same structures that allow only some trans people to access their rights also make certain trans people legible to the corporate state—they act as a homogenizing force that assumes all trans people have the same needs and suffer the same sorts of discriminations, and also assume that the US justice system works for all innocent trans people.

³¹ We can see this in how white cisgender gay men and lesbians are represented in mainstream media versus transgender representations-- even though LGBTQ representations in general have increased over the last decade, both positive and negative media representations of trans folks have also increased, with the negative including sensationalized portrayals, caricatures of "pathetic" or "deceptive" "transvestites," and painting trans people as criminals, as well as just a lot of false information about trans existence. There are also few representations of trans youth in mainstream media, which can be harmful to young people figuring out their identities. In contrast, although there are still many negative representations of other LGBTQ people in media, there are far more positive representations of particularly white cisgender gays and lesbians. See, for example, "Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspectives," by McInroy and Craig.

I will briefly return to the topic of LGBTQ buying power here because it helpfully illustrates this point of homogenizing legibility. The estimated buying power for the LGBTQ community is one of the main drivers for corporations to expand their products and advertising to incorporate LGBTQ themes align the brand with the community. Buying power is a straightforward example of how different identities are used by corporations to categorize us in order to better track our income levels and spending habits and to then capitalize off of perceived marketing trends. This kind of categorization does little to actually describe the community, since, as stated earlier, it glosses over the many differences within this large group and assumes all our interests and needs are virtually identical. It also assumes we each have comparable resources to the most wealthy in this group, regardless of how each of us are affected differently by varying access to institutions and discriminations, and seeks to cater to those in the community with wealth and influence (as well as allies with wealth and influence) in order to turn a profit.

Trans rights operate similarly to LGBTQ buying power because both demarcate the boundaries of queerness based on a corporate state understanding. The boundaries that determine who counts as trans and who doesn't are based on who has access to wealth and institutions (in this case, the institution of the US legal system), which does nothing to account for a person's own identity. Both exclude queer people who cannot access these institutions, which can have the effect of further marginalizing them. Trans rights then make only certain trans people legible and grant them anti-discrimination recourse while leaving more vulnerable trans people out, and at the same time create the illusion that trans rights ensures equality for all trans people, which ultimately allows current inequalities that are inherent to the US justice system to continue unchallenged.

Much of this section draws on Dean Spade's work, especially his article "What's Wrong With Trans Rights?" In it, he discusses the many limitations of anti-discrimination laws. "Looking at categories of identity that have been included in these kinds of laws over the last several decades indicates that these kinds of reforms have not eliminated bias, exclusion, or marginalization. Discrimination and violence against people of color have persisted despite law changes that declared it illegal" (Spade 3). Beyond general inefficiency, these laws are not accessible to those who need their protection the most³², as it takes a significant amount of resources (especially time and money) to take discrimination charges to court, and it is difficult to prove a situation was discriminatory in nature. On top of this, these laws are based on the assumption that anti-trans violence can be solved by the current US justice system, and therefore rely on this system being fair and effective for institutionally oppressed groups. Spade delves into the limitations of the US justice system in this article and other works³³, speaking on how hate crime legislation lends more resources and legitimacy to "a system that we know targets and endangers trans people, especially poor people and people of color" (Spade 297, "Trans Law Reform Strategies"). This also reinforces the state's need for legibility in order for it to track this narrow understanding of discrimination, so it can focus on supposedly eradicating it as opposed to pushing for other forms of change that may be more equitable, or forcing the US justice system to reflect on its own role in trans violence and making structural changes to account for this.

³² "laws might give some people recourse to address injustice, but this will often not be the people who need the most protection, since those people (and by 'people' i mean trans feminine iaopoc) often have the least access to the necessary resources to assert their rights. (ie. finding a lawyer, even having enough educational attainment to know they have applicable rights, time, energy, etc.)." (binaohan, 93)

³³ "Trans Law Reform Strategies, Co-Optation, and the Potential for Transformative Change," "Laws as Tactics," and "Their Laws Will Never Make us Safer" are a few examples.

Spade also discusses how the assumption of fairness further harms disenfranchised groups by strengthening the status quo and blaming trans people for our own discrimination:

Discrimination law's reliance on the perpetrator perspective also creates the false impression that the previously excluded or marginalized group is now equal, that fairness has been imposed, and the legitimacy of the distribution of life chances restored. This declaration of equality and fairness papers over the inequalities and disparities that constitute business as usual and allows them to continue. Narrowing political resistance strategies to seeking inclusion in anti-discrimination law makes the mistaken assumption that gaining recognition and inclusion in this way will equalize our life chances and allow us to compete in the (assumed fair) system. [Spade, 6]

Trans rights, in this narrow definition, grants certain trans people legal recourse and representation, but does so at the expense of others. As specific identities are allowed to assimilate into unfair institutions and reap their benefits, those who cannot assimilate are left behind, now with the added burden of having to prove their ongoing oppression and explain how these "gains" don't necessarily mean the community has no other inequalities with which to contend.

This type of activism also fails to critique the systems that can cause harm to the trans community, assuming their inherent fairness and that advancements for one part of the community means advancements for everyone, since the entire group is homogenized from the beginning of these projects. It puts the onus of change onto the affected marginalized groups and expects institutions that were created out of and are sustained by oppression to provide the pathway for justice.

Trans rights act as a way of making the trans community legible to the corporate state, which then allows the state to more easily categorize us and control us, potentially causing harm to various communities. Through this process of legibility, the state can also redefine the scope

of the community, deciding based on its own means of categorization who belongs under the label of trans and who can be cast aside.

Mattel “Creatable World” Analysis

Mattel’s “Creatable World” doll line debuted in September 2019. This line is meant to “invite everyone in” by erasing labels-- the dolls are not gendered and allow the user to easily change the length of hair and mix and match various clothes, most of which are designed to be “gender neutral.” In one of the release videos promoting the new dolls, Mattel based its decision³⁴ to make a gender neutral design on shifting trends in how the next generation of children (coined “Generation Alpha³⁵”) are identifying in terms of gender. Mattel reported that its studies have shown fewer children are interested in traditional labels that place them firmly in one side or the other of the gender binary and instead are more likely to say they don’t want to be identified using labels at all³⁶. To stay ahead of the marketing curve, Mattel decided to craft a line of dolls supporting this interest in eliminating labels.

While this line has generated a lot of positive reviews and it could serve as helpful representation for gender nonconforming children, I want to problematize these dolls because they reinforce normativity at the same time as they provide innovative representation for an upcoming generation that may be even queerer than the last one. Although Mattel mentions the increase of kids who do not want to be labeled with a specific gender, the corporation has made very few actual references to queerness. The dolls are widely considered to be “gender neutral,”

³⁴ See “A Doll For Everyone’: Meet Mattel’s Gender-Neutral Doll.”

³⁵ Born between 2010 and 2025 (“Oh No, They’ve Come Up With Another Generation Label”).

³⁶ Specifically, according to a study done by the New York Times where Gen Z was asked to pick a label for its generation, the most liked response was “don’t call us anything at all.” (“We Asked Generation Z to Pick a Name. It Wasn’t Generation Z.”)

and a quick Google search of “Mattel gender neutral dolls” easily brings up the Creatable World line. However, in nearly every one of their advertisements Mattel makes no mention of the potential use these dolls could be to gender nonconforming or transgender children; they use certain imagery that could be considered queer (such as colorfully dyed hair and somewhat “unconventional” clothing choices) but never say anything concrete about a rejection of the traditional binary or attempt to actually align themselves with the nonbinary and trans community. “Mattel’s President Richard Dickson insists the doll isn’t intended as a statement. ‘We’re not in the business of politics,’ he says, ‘and we respect the decision any parent makes around how they raise their kids. Our job is to stimulate imaginations. Our toys are ultimately canvases for cultural conversation, but it’s your conversation, not ours; your opinion, not ours’” (Dockterman). They ride on the theme of “inclusion” broadly, but do not make the case for explicitly including queer identities. Many have celebrated these dolls because of the implicit assumption that by not assigning these dolls a sex or gender, Mattel has aligned itself positively with gender nonconforming people. I understand where this assumption comes from, but I argue that Mattel has not actively committed to standing with the trans community because the company is worried about alienating too much of their consumer base. By not leaning into the controversy, Mattel manages to carefully toe the line between full support of a controversial movement and ignoring it entirely, and it seems as if they only decided to tentatively dip their toes into the waters of binary disruption because of the potential profit they can make from this newest generation of kids³⁷.

³⁷ “Those kids [who identify as nonbinary], along with boys who want to play with dolls and girls who identify as ‘tomboys’ and don’t gravitate toward fashion doll play, are an untapped demographic. Mattel currently has 19% market share in the \$8 billion doll industry; gaining just 1 more point could translate into \$80 million in revenue for the company” (Dockterman).

The closest Mattel has come to recognizing the trans and nonbinary population that may see themselves represented in these dolls is in one Instagram post (see Fig. 1) that boldly uses the singular “they” pronoun. Other than this, the entirety of their advertisements relies on vague references to inclusivity and showcase a variety of children, some of whom could be considered to be breaking gender binary norms through their clothing and hair presentations. Despite potentially opening up a new avenue for woke advertising and products, Mattel in many ways is continuing to promote assimilation and normativity. As a multinational corporation, Mattel exists as an engine of conformity on a global scale.



Fig. 1: 12 December 2019

Despite the fact that Mattel's Creatable World line includes dolls with various skin tones and users have the option of putting black hair styles (braids) on their dolls, the identical features Mattel uses for its dolls are based on a white-centric idea of what androgynous features look like, featuring a small narrow nose, hips, and lips. While this might not seem important, especially considering these attributes are not necessarily only white, as people of color can also have these features, this conception of what androgyny looks like is based on a long history of colonialism and white supremacy. From the start of colonization, in order to better control indigenous populations, European settlers imposed the rule of the gender binary onto native populations, but instead of assimilating them into the binary, indigenous people were forced into a subhuman category, where they were not allowed access to gender. María Lugones, in her work "The Coloniality of Gender," wrote that "the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of it" (Lugones 12). Instead of considering indigenous people as men and women (or respecting the other gender systems they used) colonizers considered them as male and female, and any deviation to this imposed norm was severely punished (and still is in many ways³⁸). María Lugones expands on this more in her piece "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." She writes, "I propose to interpret the colonized, non-human males from the civilizing perspective as judged from the normative understanding of "man," the human being par excellence. Females were judged from the normative understanding of "women," the human inversion of men. From this point of view, colonized people became males and females. Males became not-human-as-not-men, and colonized females became not-human-as-not-women" (Lugones 744). So now, as nonbinary genders are becoming more known

³⁸ For more information on this, see "Gender nonconformity as a target of prejudice, discrimination, and violence against LGB individuals" by Gordon and Meyer and "Gender Expression, Violence, and Bullying Victimization: Findings from Probability Samples of High School Students in 4 US School Districts" by Allegra R. Gordon et. al.

by mainstream corporate society, the nonbinary figure that is prioritized and considered to epitomize gender nonconformity is more often than not white, skinny, able bodied, assigned female at birth and masculine of center in presentation. Despite the fact that colonialism sought to eradicate all traces of (what we now call) nonbinary genders from indigenous populations, now that there is attention in popular culture around gender nonconformity, the symbol for nonbinary is still a white person³⁹. This kind of representation ignores the colonial history of the binary and seeks to separate it entirely from racial histories, and continues to lend more validity to white genders, even when they are non-normative, than to the genders of people of color. binaohan explains this historical violence with “Because, the binary as tool of oppression is not about legitimizing binary genders over non-binary genders, in a general sense, but about legitimizing a white notion of manhood and a white notion of womanhood. And, in turn, this is inextricably tied to who is considered ‘human’ and who isn’t. As in: There are only two kinds of human beings: white men and white women” (binaohan 126). Representations like Mattel’s Creatable World line perpetuate this binary even as they attempt to subvert it in as non-controversial a way as possible. The issue here isn’t only with Mattel, since it’s a much broader and ongoing issue in terms of nonbinary representation in many different forms of media. However, perhaps because of how few nonbinary representations are out there, it’s still important to criticize how marginalized groups are being presented and how our images are used as a way to make profits for a corporation that views us as a homogenous spending force with an up-and-coming genderqueer generation.

³⁹ Further information about this issue can be found in “The whitewashing and erasure of nonbinary people” by Rae Gray, “Gender Isn’t a Haircut: How Representation of Nonbinary People of Color Requires More Than White Androgyny” by Treavian Simmons, and by scrolling through the hashtag “nonbinaryisntwhite” on Twitter. Further research needs to be done to fully scope out this problem, however.

To return to the Coke ad briefly, this narrow understanding of nonbinary presentations is on full display in this ad. The one person meant to represent the entire population of people who use singular they pronouns is a skinny light skinned person, masculine of center but still stereotypically “androgynous.” They also sport a rainbow collar, just in case any viewers might be unsure if this is a nod to queer audiences. Coke’s singular depiction of nonbinary people plays into the same colonial histories that created the gender binary in the first place. The idea that to identify outside of the Western gender binary is to be white is related to the white supremacist notion that whiteness is the default, and that it exists as a kind of non-category⁴⁰. Since whiteness is seen as non-racialized and “normal,” it follows that to include more diversity you just add non-normative characteristics. Therefore, to be seen as “inclusive” representations of non-white people can’t be too far outside of the norm and have to remain recognizable to whiteness. So nonbinary representations are usually white, and queerness in general is more often represented using a white person. Having a person with too many non-normative traits (such as someone who identifies as a Jewish nonbinary black lesbian with a disability) is considered “too much” and as a type of “pandering.” The decision to represent gender queerness using white bodies allows Coke (and Mattel) to both expand their market base by appealing to more identities and also to retain their more conservative consumers who want to stay within the confines of white colonial ideology.

Mattel designed these dolls to be “gender neutral” but conceptualizes what this means in a very narrow way. Each doll is basically identical in terms of body and face shape with no distinguishing characteristics other than skin tone and some hair variation. A Times article

⁴⁰ More information about this concept can be found in Derald Wing Sue’s “The Invisible Whiteness of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism.”

describes the dolls: “Carefully manicured features betray no obvious gender: the lips are not too full, the eyelashes not too long and fluttery, the jaw not too wide. There are no Barbie-like breasts or broad, Ken-like shoulders” (Dockterman). This design is likely some sort of cost saving measure, as they effectively only have to design and produce one doll, and at least there is some diversity in skin color. I also know it may be unfair to criticize Mattel for not considering every single possible presentation and body type since they are the first major toy company to produce gender neutral dolls, and having only one example in the market unfortunately means something will always be left out. However, Mattel’s particular decisions on the design and production of this doll have the potential to re-inscribe normativity and may alienate consumers who might look to them to find representation of themselves. Mattel follows the typical trope of what “androgyny” looks like in mainstream US culture, choosing to showcase a perfect “in between” of masculine and feminine presentations. This assumption of what androgyny is supposed to look like impacts nonbinary and other gender nonconforming-identified people since it’s an impossible standard to achieve and it favors skinny, abled, white bodies. As discussed above, this assumption of androgyny is also a way of reproducing white colonial ideas of gender, since it’s born out of these ideas and doesn’t seek to disrupt the gender binary in any meaningful way.

Mattel’s Creatable World line advertises itself as a creative space to reconstruct identities and “keep labels out.” However, since their line offers only one other presentation to encompass all identities that don’t “fit into the box” Mattel effectively creates another label, just one that is meant to exist separately from the other two and demarcate a slightly expanded binary. Instead of destroying rigid binaries, Mattel has simply added another category, one which they can use to track consumers and determine whether this product will actually be lucrative. This new category

does not threaten the colonial origins of the classic gender binary, and in fact follows the same historical colonial thinking. For children who do not see themselves represented in these dolls, does Mattel actually invite everyone in, or do they continue to invite only a select number of a previously ostracized group and further exclude any body that does not fit neatly into the given categories? Beyond this, the Creatable World line has an additional limitation since (as of now) it's only available online and may only be available for a short amount of time. Some of the push back to this product is that Mattel may be using it as a last-ditch effort to desperately rake in a few more sales before they go bankrupt, as the corporation is apparently in massive amounts of debt (currently at \$3 billion⁴¹). The genderless approach for this doll may be more effective at disrupting binaries if it were released in brick-and-mortar stores, which appears to be a possibility if the line makes enough money in the year following its debut. It will be interesting to see if this doll disrupts any of the segregated gendered toy aisles or if it might prompt discussion about who is allowed to play with dolls and with what type of dolls, as well as what it even means to have a gender neutral doll. At this time, it's difficult to say what any far-reaching consequences of this may be, and I may not be giving it enough credit. However, unless Mattel continues down this path of expanding gender presentation and inclusivity, maybe by introducing more diverse body types or feminine presentations to show they understand that nonbinary can look like literally any presentation, then I'll remain skeptical about its impact.

Overall Mattel's product illustrates how high-modernist ideology results in the erasure of nuance and assumes all people within a community are virtually interchangeable from each other. The dolls represent a narrow understanding of nonbinary identities, and as they are one of

⁴¹ See "Mattel's Time Is Running Out Amid Federal Securities Probe, And Not Even Barbie Can Save It" by Jim Osman.

the few representations out there at all, regardless of whether Mattel explicitly set out with the intention of providing this kind of queer representation for their consumers, by virtue of just creating a doll that can be considered gender neutral they have done exactly that. Mainstream understandings of gender are still too rigidly binary for Mattel to be able to get away with debuting any product that attempts to blur these lines without inviting controversy, and although this has generated perhaps less upset than a similar product would have even a decade ago, they have still received a lot of attention for this line. For many, the concept of nonbinary genders is still somewhat incomprehensible⁴².

Part of why these identities are still incomprehensible to the wider public may be tied up in how the state and corporations render citizens legible to the institutions that (allegedly) work to serve them. With clear-cut categories in which to categorize an entire population, it becomes much easier to gather data on the population's employment, spending habits, family connections, average income levels, etc. By flattening out a population and attributing certain traits and trends with them, that population is changed and may come to represent more so what those in power assume they should be instead of who they actually are⁴³. Advertisements are a mechanism through which to make groups legible, mainly in that they work to convince viewers that we belong to a certain group or don't belong to a different one, and that by extension, we should then purchase whatever product more closely aligns with our ascribed group identity. For the

⁴² For an example, in the Times article about the Creatable World debut, many parents who were interviewed continually mixed up gender and sexuality and had difficulty understanding the idea of a gender-neutral doll. "A second mom in Los Angeles asked before seeing the doll, 'Is it transgender? How am I supposed to have a conversation with my kid about that?' After examining the toy and discussing gender-fluidity with the other parents, she declared, 'It's just too much. Can't we go back to 1970?'" (Dockertman)

⁴³ This ties back to Tania Murray Li's work on governmentality, as populations are re-conceptualized in forms that allow the corporate state to better categorize and track them, and are also convinced that they belong in specific categories so that these groups reproduce themselves without needing to be forced.

Mattel ad, by anticipating shifting market trends, they are forging a new market demographic (although it's based on pre-existing ones). The studies Mattel did that led them to make the Creatable World dolls resulted in a design that mirrors mainstream assumptions of what gender neutral should look like; instead of dismantling hierarchies or expanding perceptions of gender, these dolls follow colonial legacies of gender. They prefer masculine presentations to feminine ones, and allow more flexibility in presentation to AFAB people with a lack of obvious gender identifying characteristics than they do to AMAB people, because to do otherwise may threaten the long-standing hierarchies that place masculinity above femininity and assume that it's only natural for girls to want to embody masculine characteristics but it's freakish if boys want to embody feminine characteristics. Designing the dolls in this way makes them legible to cis het audiences, as they do not quite disrupt the gender binary but instead re-inscribe it by perpetuating assumptions that are created from it and provide only a narrow alternative venue for self-expression that few people can fit into.

Ongoing Issues with Transgender Oppression

Why is this all a problem? Debates about legibility and representation can be very abstract and at times are not grounded in lived experience. So in this section I discuss the ongoing issues of transgender oppression, issues which disproportionately affect trans women of color and/or with disabilities.

There is a disconnect between the messages of these brands and what many trans people actually experience in their everyday lives. These ads (and many others like them) portray the idea that trans people are accepted, that we are normalized and that we are all part of the same community. Of course this is a comforting narrative and I don't think advertisements should

instead always showcase oppression, but in light of the other criticisms I've made against these ads it's important to recognize the very real violence many trans people face every day of their lives, violence which isn't dispelled by these ads. The disconnect between the presentation of these ads and what goes on in trans people's lived experience can be dangerous, since this presentation assumes that by providing positive representations of marginalized groups it mitigates the oppressions that keep these groups marginalized. Positive representations can be liberatory in certain ways, but it doesn't make up for the fact that these corporations build their profit off the backs of marginalized people and therefore have a vested interest in keeping them marginalized⁴⁴.

The neoliberal systems that produce these trans ads also produce many of the challenges negatively impacting trans people's lives:

But one persistent fact within this complex history of uneven neoliberalism has been the universal tendency to increase social inequality and to expose the least fortunate elements in any society... to the chill winds of austerity and the dull fate of increasing marginalization... It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism. [Harvey, 118-119]
 These trans ads parrot neoliberal talking points, emphasizing choice ("limitless

possibilities" from Mattel, a Coke for every individual unique person from "The Wonder of Us") and individuality. These talking points are in tandem with the rhetoric of individual trans rights discussed in the previous section-- they emphasize uniqueness and "being yourself" above true community, active social justice, coalition building, or anything that may threaten the status quo

⁴⁴ Examples of corporations exploiting marginalized groups can be found in the prolific use of sweatshop labor among MNCs (The International Textile Garment and Leather Workers' Federation made an extensive report on the labor conditions of 83 factories in 2011, and there is extensive research on the state of *maquiladoras* on the US-Mexico border-- one source for this is "Back to the Future: Sweatshop Conditions on the US-Mexico Border" by Rafael Moure-Eraso et. al.).

and do more for marginalized people than run an ad showing them having a good time. They push the idea that trans equality is already won, and we simply have to celebrate together to erase long-term suffering.

Of course trans equality has not been fully won, and although there have been strides for certain populations, marginalized groups still face rampant discrimination, poverty, and violence. The disconnect between what's being represented on-screen and what goes on in reality could potentially cause movements to lose momentum, if allies and people who do not face these oppressions believe that this struggle is in the past and that we are progressing forward. Trans ads can provide a rosy picture of trans liberation, presenting us as living in harmony with one another and living out and proud as our best selves, but headway has only really been made for select groups within the trans community-- notably white, able-bodied trans people. Pretending we have already reached acceptance obscures the fact that trans women of color are still being murdered around the world multiple times a year. In 2019, the count of trans murders in the US was 26 ("Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019") and the number worldwide was 331 ("Murdered, Hanged, and Lynched: 331 Trans People Killed This Year"). These numbers are striking because the estimated percentage of transgender adults in the US is only about 0.6%, which, despite accounting for over a million people, means that trans people are targeted at higher rates than cisgender counterparts, at least depending on which source you use. An issue with the data on violence against trans people is that it is frequently underreported, and the numbers of deaths may in fact be much higher. Trans people are often misidentified in terms of gender and name in legal reports and so it can be difficult to access information about exactly how many trans people are killed each year ("Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019"). Rebecca Stotzer, in "Data Sources Hinder Our Understanding of Transgender Murders,"

says that “International efforts to track the murder of transgender people suggest that a transgender person is murdered at least once every three days. However, in the United States there is no formal data collection effort that can be used to describe the nature, frequency, or extent of transgender homicides.” She goes on to discuss how the data available shows that trans women of color face much higher risks of murder and in fact are subjected to higher levels of violence in general: “Not captured are the types of violence that transgender women of color experience, a phenomenon called ‘overkill’ because the severity of injury far surpasses the violence needed to kill them.” Despite CSR campaigns and corporate support and woke ads, the death toll of trans people has not seen a significant decrease since the Trans Murder Monitoring project began collecting this data in 2008. The majority of these murders are of sex workers, an occupation that is not presented in any of these corporate campaigns⁴⁵, which allows them to further promote a normative model of a productive trans person who fits neatly into the status quo while ignoring the most marginalized groups who desperately need support and solidarity but who are seen to threaten normativity.

In 2015 the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) conducted the largest survey of trans people in the US to research lived experiences. The US Transgender Survey (USTS) reported that “the findings reveal disturbing patterns of mistreatment and discrimination and startling disparities between transgender people in the survey and the U.S. population when it comes to the most basic elements of life, such as finding a job, having a place to live, accessing

⁴⁵ This isn't to say that sex work is trans-specific, and sex work as a whole is almost never presented in any ad campaigns. But due to the lack of employment opportunities for many trans people, sex work is inherently tied up in the lives of much of the trans community, and, as stated above, occupations like this increase the risk of violence trans people face, and so when talking about the statistics of trans murders, it's important to talk about the connections of this with sex work. Ignoring the prevalence of sex work and the violence that can occur within this industry further depoliticizes trans people and can dangerously overlook many pressing issues.

medical care, and enjoying the support of family and community. Survey respondents also experienced harassment and violence at alarmingly high rates” (8). Here are some of the key take-aways:

When respondents’ experiences are examined by race and ethnicity, a clear and disturbing pattern is revealed: transgender people of color experience deeper and broader patterns of discrimination than white respondents and the U.S. population... Undocumented respondents were also more likely to face severe economic hardship and violence than other respondents. In the year prior to completing the survey, nearly one quarter (24%) of undocumented respondents were physically attacked. Additionally, one half (50%) of undocumented respondents have experienced homelessness in their lifetime, and 68% have faced intimate partner violence. Respondents with disabilities also faced higher rates of economic instability and mistreatment. Nearly one-quarter (24%) were unemployed, and 45% were living in poverty. Transgender people with disabilities were more likely to be currently experiencing serious psychological distress (59%) and more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetime (54%). They also reported higher rates of mistreatment by health care providers (42%). [10]

These findings reiterate what most trans people already know: that trans people are still disproportionately affected by poverty, homelessness, lack of access to healthcare, and other oppressions, and that these oppressions are much worse for trans people with multiple marginalized identities, such as trans people of color, undocumented trans people, and trans people with disabilities. The lack of this representation in ads reflects how mainstream ideology approaches trans issues as if they have already been solved, which has the potential to lose momentum for trans liberation movements if allies and trans people who do not face the same oppressions listed above assume that progress has already been achieved.

Corporate Surveillance and full-fledged disasters

If corporations co-opt social movements, do they render that movement unable to fully resist dominant regimes (such as corporate control) through making trans people legible to mainstream (cisgender) society? Becoming legible in this way makes trans people easier to

control by making them easier to categorize; at the same time it forces other less normative trans people out of the legible category, which can both give them more power to resist and also limit opportunities to access government services, legal rights, and other institutions. This also may lay the groundwork for another aspect of high-modernist theory, which Scott calls a “full-fledged disaster.”

The fourth aspect of high-modernism is a “prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans” (Scott 5), these plans meaning high-modernist plans, such as neoliberal pushes to make sweeping changes to government processes and social services. “In sum, the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build” (Scott 5). My worry is that corporate co-optation may provide some of the means for re-directing mobilizations to avenues that no longer threaten corporate state power and convince the public that powerful private firms are the key to our liberation, as opposed to a large assortment of roadblocks that try to keep that liberation at bay. Part of this is accomplished through re-categorizing marginalized groups in ways that alienate us from each other, creating rifts between those who can assimilate and those who do not have the opportunity (or the desire) to. This re-categorization is how the corporate state renders its population legible to its institutions, allowing it to make predictions of trends and incorporate itself into various movements. It allows people in power to understand just enough about the trans community to grant enough freedoms and rights so that it feels like progress has been made, but not enough to fully liberate anyone who does not already have a strong connection to power. It makes it so people are placated just enough to prevent actual revolts, which could put power back in the hands of the civilians.

To centralize these ideas, I will return to the Mattel Creatable World doll. The process for designing this doll is a good example of the ways gender nonconforming identities become legible to a corporate system. The company used data from their targeted demographic (children) to create a doll line that matched what these kids reported. “Generation Alpha” apparently mostly said they didn’t want to be boxed in by labels at all, and because Mattel wants to remain relevant and appeal to their consumer base, they created a doll that’s not supposed to be confined by gender at all. The kind of monitoring and data analysis that produced this doll is used by virtually every corporation to effectively target consumers⁴⁶-- one massive data collector, Acxiom, claims to have gathered data on 2.5 billion consumers and provided about 10,000 “attributes⁴⁷” to various companies. Right now, this data seems to be mostly used to sell us things by tailoring advertisements to individual interests and needs. But there are increasing worries of where this data goes, and who controls it. It certainly doesn’t seem to be the consumers, and legislation is still trying to figure out how to hold corporations accountable for things like data breaches and even just selling off users’ “attributes.” What happens if an agency like Immigration and Customs Enforcement buys the data of undocumented migrants in order to deport them⁴⁸? Or if a contentious social movement is connected with certain individuals who the corporate state determines would be less threatening if they were dead⁴⁹? Beyond catering

⁴⁶ See “Here Are the Data Brokers Quietly Buying and Selling Your Personal Information” by Alex Pasternack and “Corporate Surveillance in Everyday Life” by Wolfie Christl.

⁴⁷ See “Why we can’t stop debating whether Facebook sells data,” by Casey Newton and “Should Consumers Be Able to Sell Their Own Personal Data?,” *The Wall Street Journal*.

⁴⁸ This is an actual fear for people worried about Amazon’s facial recognition technology called “Rekognition” since the company will not say whether it works with ICE or not, but there is plenty of evidence that much of its software is made available to ICE and groups like it: “The software, the report [“Who’s Behind ICE?” by National Immigration Project, Immigrant Defense Project, and Mijente] noted, is ‘designed to be compatible with federal immigration databases,’ and would allow ICE ‘unprecedented access to information about employers, associates, and hangout spots’” (Alba and O’Donovan).

⁴⁹ For instance, various social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) have previously come under fire for selling the user data of activists (primarily Black Lives Matter activists) to software companies that aid police surveillance (Sam Levin, “ACLU finds social media sites gave data to company tracking black protesters”).

products to our individual liking, this constant monitoring means corporations get an inside look into mobilizing efforts and can twist the aesthetic and rhetoric of activism to suit the needs of the corporation instead. The constant need to stay ahead of the curve leads companies into our most intimate spaces, where they can watch what we do and learn how to replicate what we say to convince us they're on our side as opposed to only venturing into these spaces in order to make money.

The combination of this control over populations and lack of resources available for marginalized groups to move in opposition to this system may result in designs that do not have our well-being in mind, and do not allow us to rebel against them if we realize it's not in our best interest. If the bottom line for the most powerful state actors is to expand markets and make ever-increasing profits, then if it makes them more money to harm us, they will do so. And if they harm us and we have no recourse to fight against it, then it may spell catastrophe for various groups.

Excess and who is left out

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) manifesto⁵⁰ highlighted the need for solidarity between many different groups, of varying degrees of marginalized status, since the movements of the 1960's and '70's required mass coalitional efforts to succeed. The revolutionary black and brown trans women who founded groups like STAR understood the need for solidarity across movements and resisting the pull of assimilation and normativity. In the early 1970's the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) began forcing out trans people from its ranks, and this kind of exclusion has rippled through the gay

⁵⁰ See "Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) Research Guide."

rights movement and continues today. This kind of exclusion happens because enough people within a movement decide that standing up for the rights of more marginalized groups, of people who are closer to the fringes and who don't fit into normative society, will hinder their own progress and so should be cut out for the benefit of the rest of the movement.

In her speech “Bitch on Wheels” in 2001, Sylvia Rivera said “We were all involved in different struggles, including myself and many other transgender people. But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts. The only reason they tolerated the transgender community in some of these movements was because we were gung-ho, we were front liners. We didn't take no sh-- from nobody. We had nothing to lose. You all had rights. We had nothing to lose. I'll be the first one to step on any organization, any politician's toes if I have to, to get the rights for my community.” This quote illustrates the power of transgender mobilizing, and also speaks to how their marginalized status in certain ways bolstered their participation in the front lines of movements. As a group who is already constantly in danger, black and brown trans women, at least according to Rivera, have less to lose and everything to gain. This also ties into the theory in revolutionary movements that if the most marginalized among us are liberated, then the rest of us are as well, since that would require dismantling all the oppressions that plague each of us to varying extents. However, due to how threatening full liberation is to people in power, the most marginalized groups are often further marginalized, and kicked right out of social movements that had claimed to support the rights of all.

This idea of unwanted marginalized groups who are threatening to normative society is elaborated on in Deborah Vargas' essay “Ruminations on *Lo Sucio*” where she discusses the

ways certain populations become labeled as “excess” and as a kind of “pollution⁵¹.” She focuses on queer working class Latinx people, but I think her theory is important to the discussion of exclusion and excess in general⁵². Vargas describes *lo sucio* (or more broadly “*suciedad*-- a Latino vernacular for dirty, nasty, and filthy” (Vargas 715) as a “Latino queer analytic” to understand how Latinx folk are required to not be “too black, too poor, or too sexual, among other characteristics that exceed normativity” (Vargas 715), and how this also shapes how these groups are made to exist in “contemporary neoliberal projects that disappear the most vulnerable and disenfranchised by cleaning up spaces and populations deemed dirty and wasteful: welfare moms, economically impoverished neighborhoods, and overcrowded rental dwellings” (Vargas 715). These “cleaning up” projects, enforced by the corporate state under neoliberal ideology, further oppress these groups by forcing them even further to the margins and considering them a “drain” on society, rhetoric which then allows normative society to justify violence against them. The continued survival of non-normative groups threatens the status quo and so they are demonized due to their “lack of productivity.” Not producing effectively in the eyes of the corporate state allows it to render them a burden on the state and lays the groundwork for further

⁵¹ This concept of pollution draws on Mary Douglas’ work, specifically her book *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. One quote from the chapter “Powers and Danger” adds more context to her analysis of pollution: “A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone... Pollution can be committed intentionally, but intention is irrelevant to its effect-- it is more likely to happen inadvertently” (Douglas 12). This idea of intentionality is important since it shows how people can be considered a kind of pollution to society if they fail to fit into it in normative ways, and because of the consequences of this (ostracization, hate crimes, etc.), this failure of normativity is generally unintentional. This highlights how those who fail to fit into society are punished for it, even though the real issue is the bigotry produced by societal norms, as opposed to people who are simply living as themselves (so long as these people are not actually harming others).

⁵² I want to explain here that I don’t want to erase any of Vargas’s theory that applies only to working class queer Latinx people, because the examples she gives in her piece as well as a lot of the in-depth theorizing is specifically about that group and not other marginalized people more broadly, since there are certain experiences that connect queer working class Latinx people that people of other identities and backgrounds would never experience, myself included. For the purposes of this thesis, I want to mention her analysis of excess to situate that process within larger themes of exclusion and violence against trans people, especially non-normative trans people.

suppressing these groups in an effort to eradicate them from society. This line of thinking does not consider the many ways marginalized groups are kept out of institutions that may otherwise allow them to “contribute” to society in a productive way (such as how a lack of employment opportunities can lead to an increase in poverty and then an increase in the number of people on welfare), and also does not consider how many people of dominant groups also do not live up to this idealized form of productivity. People with extreme amounts of wealth, for instance, actually drain societal resources in many ways, due to tax evasion⁵³, environmental damage⁵⁴, and refusing their workers’ access to healthcare benefits⁵⁵, among other things.

The danger of “excess” to normative society could also be called the danger of “the masses.” The threat of many different marginalized groups working together is a real challenge to the establishment, since those who are oppressed make up a larger and potentially more powerful population than those in power. It’s in the interest of people in power to divide up the masses and pit us against each other; we can see this in action in the way only certain groups are allowed to become normalized, as discussed earlier with who is represented in trans ads. This partial normalization also allows governments or corporations to point to whatever strides were made in the liberation of certain groups within the LGBTQ community as a sign of progress having been made, so allegations of homophobia/etc are invalid, even if a major part of the LGBTQ community continues to suffer. People who don’t fit into legible frameworks of what it means to be LGBTQ, such as queer and trans people of color, people with disabilities, neurodivergent people, and undocumented people, risk further marginalization even from the

⁵³ See “How big is the problem of tax evasion?” by Gale and Krupkin.

⁵⁴ See “World’s richest 10% produce half of carbon emissions while poorest 3.5 billion account for just a tenth,” Oxfam 2015.

⁵⁵ See “Workers Unhappy With Health Benefits as Companies Cut Back,” by Japsen.

communities that claim to support these groups. If these woke trans ads are considered positive representation for the trans community, do they act as a beginning point to further, more expansive representation? Does this representation, even if it's positive, actually materially benefit marginalized groups? Does it re-categorize communities, forcing wedges between certain demographics and allowing certain populations to assimilate at the expense of others? Is being legible to the corporate state actually liberatory or does it result in increased control and further divisions between us?

Conclusion

Woke ads can provide needed positive representation and may be a sign of shifting trends in who is accepted by normative society. However, through this process of normalization, they also render certain groups legible to mainstream society and to the corporate state, which can result in fractured communities as only some people are allowed to assimilate while the rest are pushed even further to the margins. Corporate co-optation sanitizes movements by co-opting only the most palatable parts of it and diverts attention away from actual mobilizers, pushing resources to corporations instead of to the movement.

It's important to remain critical of corporate involvement in social justice, especially since this co-optation is likely to continue for any marginalized group that is seen to have sufficient buying power to make the co-optation worthwhile. A possible future group that may see corporate involvement is DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients, depending on the US political landscape in the next few years. There is already a lot of support rallying behind this group since aiding people who came to the US as children instead of as adults is seen as less controversial by many, and immigration reform in general is an important

topic in contemporary politics. Despite the fact that this group is considered “undocumented,” by virtue of being DACA recipients they are already made legible to the corporate state in some ways, and this documentation can easily lead to further documentation of buying power, spending habits, and productivity. If these metrics are considered valuable to corporations, it’s likely that businesses attempting to align themselves with progressive movements will create woke ads alleging support to this group. If that happens, it’s important to pay attention to the way undocumented people’s images are being used and to consider how this co-optation affects any movements pushing for immigration reform and equality for undocumented people. This is just one example of a potential future occurrence of corporate co-optation, but I have little doubt that this trend will continue for as long as woke advertising is profitable to corporations.

If corporations really must be involved, potential ways for their campaigns to actually benefit the people whose images they profit from could include things like working in combination with nonprofits or grassroots organizations that are proven to materially benefit trans people (and donating 100% of the profits from things like Pride Month collections to organizations like this). It would also be good if corporations that engage in CSR campaigns actually aligned their stated values with their business practices-- if Coke, for instance, actually did move completely to sustainable resourcing and gave every single one of their workers reasonable wages and benefits, and stopped murdering union organizers, then I think they could make a much more meaningful impact and would limit some of their hypocrisy.

It’s also important for corporations that attempt to show solidarity with marginalized groups to continue making meaningful contributions to support them, as opposed to donating a paltry sum of money just for Pride Month and never extending support to these communities

ever again. If a business is going to show solidarity, they must make an ongoing commitment to the cause and continually evaluate how much they can do to support the cause.

To think outside of what businesses can do, instead of our current neoliberal system that prioritizes corporate interests over civilian ones, I think there are many possible avenues to ensure diversity and inclusion efforts actually benefit the marginalized groups they're supposed to. Dean Spade makes the case for moving from a model of "trans rights" (a narrow focus that relies on the oppressive systems that keep trans people marginalized) to "critical trans resistance."

If we shift our framework from trans rights to critical trans resistance, we find ourselves with new analysis of the harms that people who defy gender norms face, and new ideas for how we might dismantle systems that produce and enforce gender norms. Such a shift means that we move from demands for recognition and inclusion in law to demands for material changes to our lives... This resistance refuses to make itself legible in a neoliberal framework, to articulate demands for rights that reproduce racist, ableist, anti-poor, xenophobic frameworks of deservingness and undeservingness, to sell off transformative goals for funding opportunities, or to endorse violent institutions for a chance at being nominally invited to be part of them" [Spade 13]

Spade also advocates for radical transformations to society such as wealth redistribution, prison abolition, and immigration reform. His model is based on centering the most marginalized people within a system; in order to create change that benefits everyone, we must prioritize those who are hardest hit by the regime we all live under.

I agree with Spade's suggestions, and I also want to push back on the idea that the only way to create meaningful change is to do it through the private sector. I also don't think the only alternative is working within existing government models-- there are other options, such as collective community organizing from a grassroots level. Overall, I think it's necessary to focus

more on community and less on individualism⁵⁶. In order to truly celebrate diversity and ensure everyone has equal access to the same inalienable rights, we must emphasize our connections to each other and understand how we rely on each other. The world is a better place because of black and brown trans women, undocumented people, nonbinary people, people with disabilities, and every other marginalized group. Until corporations no longer make their profits off the backs of these people then no woke ad they make will create the change it envisions. It's important to remain critical of institutions that have power over us, and to investigate any campaigns that appear on the surface to align themselves with subaltern groups-- while they talk about standing with oppressed groups, their business model may be in fact based on maintaining the oppression of the group. Pay attention to the work grassroots organizations, nonprofits, and community members are doing more than corporations-- the real work is being done here.

⁵⁶ I'm not arguing here that we fully erase the differences among us, since I think that would not be useful for community building and long-term organizing. Instead, I think we should overall make a cultural shift in the US from focusing almost entirely and solely on the individual to more considerations of how communities are affected and how we rely on each other in our everyday lives. We shouldn't entirely lose sight of the individual, though.

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