

Building the Future through the Past: Biopics and the Construction of a Queer History

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Abstract: The paper examines four biopics: “Markova,” “Piñero,” “Before Night Falls,” and “Beautiful Boxer,” which reconstruct the lives of four influential yet controversial individuals in the gay community: Walter Dempster, Jr. (Philippines), Miguel Piñero (Puerto Rico), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), and Parinya Charoenphol (Thailand). Each participated in important events in the history of the gay community, and the filmic representations of their lives contribute to the elaboration of a filmic timeline of gay history. They include Dempster’s exploitation as a “comfort gay” by Japanese soldiers during World War II, Piñero’s odyssey as a gay Neorican pimp, prisoner, and poet, Arenas’s gay adventures in a notorious Castro prison and his exploits as a gay outlaw, novelist, and AIDS patient, and Charoenphol’s struggle in becoming the first Thai transgender athlete to attain superstar status both nationally and internationally. My paper studies, from an international perspective, four contributions to the construction of a filmic history of the experiences of gay men in four periods and four nations that resist the notion that “queers” do not figure prominently in history. As I will show, each man resists the “chrononormativity” described by Elizabeth Freeman on various levels, first by being gay, then by “betraying” the “respectable” career paths marked out for them by society. These “betrayals,” however, will lead to each man making singular contributions to his local culture as well as to universal queer cultural history.

Keywords: Queer History, Biopics, *Markova*, *Piñero*, *Before Night Falls*, *Beautiful Boxer*

It is axiomatic that human beings create communities by establishing bonds based upon common experience and mutual understanding. Isolation produces a sense of marginality,

whereas recognition that one shares feelings, desires, events, joys, and/or struggles with others creates an awareness of similitude, a continuity, and, thus, a history. Scholarship has gradually been constructing histories of the gay community through the gathering and use of oral and written histories, memoirs, and correspondence, which have been made available in the form of articles and books, as well as through the collection of historical artifacts. With the increasing turn away from print and towards visual media—especially film—LGBTQI scholarship is now faced with the additional challenge of documenting gay history on celluloid or digitally. While the media employed may differ from print, source materials remain the same but now require the intermediaries of the producer, the screenwriter, the product -- the screenplay --, and the director. Nonetheless, the process of constructing the history of the gay community remains the same.

This study will consider four “biopics” (i.e., “biographical motion pictures”) that have contributed to a filmic history of the experiences of men in four periods and four nations, all of which resist the notion that “queers” do not figure prominently in history: *Markova: Comfort Gay* (Philippines, Directed by Gil M. Portes, 2000), *Before Night Falls* (United States, Directed by Julian Schnabel, 2000), *Beautiful Boxer* (Thailand, Directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003), and *Piñero* (United States, Directed by Leon Ichaso, 2001). The films seek to reconstruct the lives of four influential yet controversial individuals in the gay community: Walter Dempster, Jr. (Philippines), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), Parinya Charoenphol (Thailand), and Miguel Piñero (Puerto Rico/United States). Each man participated in important events in the history of the gay community, and the filmic representations of their lives contribute to the elaboration of a filmic timeline of gay history to include the study of Dempster’s exploitation as a “comfort gay” by Japanese soldiers during World War II, Arenas’s gay adventures in a notorious Castro prison and his exploits as a gay outlaw, novelist, and AIDS patient from 1959 until his death in 1992, Charoenphol’s struggle in becoming the first Thai transgender athlete to attain superstar status both nationally and internationally, especially during the late 1980s, and Piñero’s odyssey as a gay Neorican poet, prisoner, and playwright from the 1960s to the 1990s. It is interesting to note that all four films were released within three years of each other (2000-2003), attesting to the growing interest within the film industry in the creation of gay historical works on film. For such as mission, the “biopic” was particularly appropriate, as it not only focused on a story of “human interest” but also required the incorporation of historical details to give meaning to those human lives.

The Demonization of Homosexuals: Driven Underground

It was not until the coining of the neologism “homosexuality” by Karl Maria Benkert in 1869 that a rigid distinction began to be drawn between sexual acts performed by members of the same sex and the categorization of individuals according to their perceived sexual preferences (C. White 4). With this, the inception of a systematic opposition between the heteronormative

and those acts and individuals which were now perceived in the Christian West not only as morally repugnant but also as deviant, diseased, and politically subversive, a true barrier was raised that was meant to snuff out any attempt to legitimate the homonormative (Spencer 10). If, before the establishment of this seemingly impassible chasm, those who had harbored same-sex desires had dreamt of a refuge of acceptance, they had generally not dared to express their wishes except in highly-encoded images. Although it is as old as humanity itself, homosexuality and its long history have often been rejected or ignored by majority populations in an attempt to delegitimize the LGBTQI community.

The absence until recently of written histories of the gay experience has been interpreted by some as “proof” that no such phenomenon exists. Yet, as Benedict Anderson noted in the case of nations, and as can be posited of LGBTQI individuals the world over, there has existed a drive towards union that, however nebulous, is unending and compelling:

[I]t is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

What has been lacking until the second half of the twentieth century have been scholarly attention and public awareness of the size and geographical extension of the LGBTQI community. Debates rage between “essentialists” and “constructionists,” who propose, alternatively, that homosexuality has always been either biologically and/or psychologically inherent in a minority of humanity or that it is a culturally-specific conceptual category applied to certain actors and their acts (Greenberg 485). What no one disputes, however, is that history plays an essential, although different, role in helping members of the LGBTQI community to imagine the potential community to which they belong, as Anderson has observed: “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). The role of the historian now becomes critical in offering members of the LGBTQI community evidence of gay life in the past, thereby lessening the sense of isolation and providing examples of those who have shared something of the same experience. Whereas heteronormative society has sought to medicalize and criminalize same-sex desires and actions, LGBTQI scholarship has stressed that what is at stake is not a theoretical determination of the origins of homosexuality but rather the recognition and welfare of LGBTQI human beings, as Louis Crompton has so poignantly observed:

Whatever the vocabulary, two elements are present – the sexual fact and the possibility of human love and devotion. For many centuries in Europe, homosexuality was conceived

principally as certain sexual acts. This was because it was viewed theologically and in the light of the legal system this theology spawned – that is, as a sin and a capital crime. But we must not be complicit in this dehumanization. These “sodomites” were human beings with whom the modern gay may claim brotherhood and the modern lesbian recognize as sisters. To divide history in two in 1869 at the moment when the word “homosexual” was coined is to deny this bond. To adopt Michel Foucault’s view that the homosexual did not exist “as a person” until this time is to reject a rich and terrible past. (xiv)

It is with this in mind that the creators of “biopics” of gay individuals have undertaken the task of chronicling the lives of certain individuals who have played significant roles worthy of recollection by members of the LGBTQI community.

The Advent of Gay Histories and the Emergence of the “Biopic”

Film is particularly important in this educational enterprise of bringing positive examples of homosexuality and same-sex love to light, as it has the power to transform minds and imaginations. Speaking of the “Stalin Myth,” critic André Bazin has captured the vast potential of film:

The cinema is in its essence as incontestable as Nature and History—not only because cinema’s meaning and persuasiveness is incomparably greater than any other means of propaganda, but especially because the cinematic image is other, seeming completely superimposable with reality. A portrait of Petain or de Gaulle or Stalin, even if it’s blown up to 100 meters square, decomposes as it composes—in the end, it engages nothing. However, a cinematic reconstitution of Stalin, especially when it is centered on him, is enough to define forever his place and meaning in the world—enough to fix his essence irrevocably. (39)

Just as in the case of print media, this is the goal of cinema: to preserve forever the positive images of the LGBTQI individuals that not only attest to their actions but also serve as models for future generations. Dennis Bingham offers a comprehensive summary of the “biopic” in the creation of the history of a community:

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or, as with Andy Kaufman, to be that person’s audience. The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. Private

behaviors and actions and public events as they might have been in the person's time are formed together and interpreted dramatically. At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth. The function of the biopic subject is to live the spectator a story. The genre's charge ... is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there. (10)

As historiographer Hayden White has so convincingly proven in his now classic work *Tropics of Discourse* (1985), it is impossible to construct a completely "objective" history. Rather, histories, just like literary narratives, are the product of a selection of facts, creative ordering of those facts, the use of tropes, and the crafting of a narrative. "Biopics," like their historical and literary counterparts, in many ways represent the perceptions and desires of their creators as much as they highlight the factual elements of their subjects' lives.

Markova: Comfort Gays

Gil M. Portes' *Markova: Comfort Gays* (2000) is a filmic *Bildungsroman* that traces Walter Dempster, Jr.'s (a.k.a., "Walterina Markova," 1924-2005) development as a transgender Filipino and the last surviving "comfort gay" who had been pressed into sexual servitude by invading Japanese soldiers during the occupation of the Philippines from 1942 to 1945. The winner of numerous awards, including the prestigious Brussels International Film Festival's "Prix de la Meilleure Interprétation" (2001), as well as "Official Selection" at the Brussels International Film Festival (2001), the Seattle Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2002), and the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2002), *Markova* has been dubbed by Filipino critic J. Neil C. Garcia to be among the most outstanding gay films produced in the Philippines because of their concrete local grounding: "The more remarkable of these films are those that locate themselves firmly in the national social context, and force a rethinking of so-called traditional Filipino values, gender and sexual identities, heroism, and the political and imaginative act of 'telling history' itself" (424). Adding to *Markova's* gravitas was the film's protagonist -- Dolphy (Rodolfo Vera Quizon, Sr., 1928-2012) --, one of the most celebrated contemporary actors in the Philippines, who was nominated for "Best Actor" by the FAMAS and Gawad Urian Awards in 2001, and "Best Performance" by the Young Critics Circle in the same year. Strong performances were also rendered by Eric Quizon and Jeffrey "Epi" Quizon, the recipients of various awards, who played "Walterina" in middle-age and in youth, respectively. Also of note was the performance of Loren Legarda, a highly-regarded journalist, environmentalist, and senator, who played herself as an interviewer of "Walterina," and his experiences as a "comfort gay."

Of the many films produced by the Philippines, *Markova* is unique in being a historical chronicle of the experiences of a member of the LGBTQI community. What is more, it is the

only film in the world to document the experiences of “comfort gays” in Asia, and specifically in the Philippines during World War II, as well as documenting many of the attitudes of Filipinos towards homosexuals over the period of the 1930s to the 1990s. For this reason, *Markova* will be the central focus of this study. The film is especially significant given that the Philippines was bombed by the Japanese more than any other Asian nation, and suffered the greatest number of civilian deaths at the hands of the Japanese during World War II. As the film demonstrates, Philippine society, although it has generally been recognized as among the most tolerant of homosexuals in the world, has still been far from treating members of the LGBTQI community with equality and respect (Whitam and Mathy 144-146; Tan 119; Itiel 10).ⁱ

Screenplay writer Clodualdo Del Rey, Jr., makes impressive use of flashback and stage performance, and begins the story *in medias res*, with Dempster awakening from a bad dream of an encounter with Japanese soldiers; he then makes a simple declarative statement: “My name is Walterina Markova, 73 years old. Comfort gay. This is the story of my life ... one bad dream ... A nightmare ... but every bit real.” Walterina begins to tell his story; he is living in the “Home for the Golden Gays”. “Never heard of it?” he asks, “There are many things you don’t know.” He then proceeds to recount the history of the home, which was established by the transgender journalist, activist, and City Councilor Justo Justo in 1996 as a place of refuge for aging gay men. Going down to breakfast, Walterina hears the young and highly-effeminate server calling the residents to the table: “Hey you antiquated fags! Food!” Walterina rebukes the youth sharply, telling him to “call them—nicely—the Flower Queens.” The server, who has been justly chastised, sarcastically calls out, “Oh most beauteous gays ... Breakfast is ready!”, and walks off in a fit. Thus, Walterina early establishes his role as an instructor of the next generation of gays.

Shortly after, Walterina and his companions watch a report about the plight of Filipino “comfort women” at the hands of Japanese soldiers during World War II. The director of the home notices that Walterina is disturbed and knows that it is related to the documentary. He later seeks out the deeply religious Dempster in a local church, and Walterina explains that he would like to tell the story of Filipino “comfort gays” to the world, just as Nana Rosa has told the story of “comfort women.” Anxious to help, the manager contacts a friend, the noted journalist Loren Legarda, who did the story on the “comfort women,” and invites her to interview “Markova.” When the journalist arrives at the home she asks for “Mrs. Markova,” and cannot understand when Walterina appears. In a flashback, Walterina recalls growing up gay and the treatment he received in his family home. Notable was the contempt his brother Robert showed for him, a hatred that grew more intense over time and which often devolved into violence, a phenomenon common in the Philippines among male siblings (Tan 119). In Walterina’s case, his brother even arranged for him to be raped by a family friend, underscoring that even though homosexuality is often tolerated in the Philippines this does not preclude the possibility of violation and physical abuse.

Much of the film focuses on the bonds established between Walterina and four transgender friends, Carmen, Anita, Sophie, and Minerva. Living, working, and engaging in adventures together, these gays function as entertainers and “call girls,” and constitute a small community of like-minded individuals. During the Japanese occupation, the five “girls” go to a nightclub dressed in their most alluring evening gowns, and there they are wined and dined by Japanese officers. Eventually, they are brought back to a swanky hotel for further adventures. When the ranking Japanese officer realizes, in the midst of foreplay, that Walterina is a man and not a woman, Markova and the other “girls” are put into military trucks, brought to a warehouse on the outskirts of the city, and repeatedly raped by soldiers. This represents one of the most important moments in the film, and illustrates that “comfort gays” were subjected to the same violence, torture, and sexual degradation as “comfort women,” and, as *Markova* also shows, transgender gays did their part in the struggle for liberation, often paying a high price. Carmen was tortured and put on public display by the Japanese for theft, Sophie died in prison, and Minerva was never seen again.

After the war, Carmen, Anita, and Walterina formed another singing group, and now performed for the many American servicemen who were stationed in the Philippines. This was the age of Philippine independence; normalcy was returning, and relative peace and freedom returned. But this was not to last. The film then moves forward to the time when the AIDS epidemic broke out in the Philippines, ravaging the gay community and spreading fear everywhere. During this time Walterina had retired from stage performance but was employed as a make-up artist in theaters and on some movie sets, and also worked as a dance coach for young Filipina’s preparing to go to Japan as top-dollar call girls. What is more, having dodged the bullet of contracting AIDS, Walterina performed corporal works of mercy for some of his ailing “sisters,” and especially consoled Carmen, who in her old age needed triple-bypass surgery but could not afford it. With age, Walterina also became increasingly pious, spending many hours praying the rosary in various churches, and becoming something of the “grande dame” of the neighborhood.

Markova has been highly significant in the construction of the gay history of the Philippines on numerous levels. As an aged Filipino who had endured many years of domestic and foreign oppression, Walterina symbolized the strength and resilience of both the Filipino and the LGBTQI communities, as highlighted in everyday occurrences and in moments of crisis such as the Japanese occupation and the advent of the age of AIDS. Still living the horrors of past abuse many decades after World War II, Walterina struggles to make the world accept his story and recognize the reality of who he truly is. One of the Filipina call girls preparing to go to Japan makes a very perceptive observation: “If nobody listened to the comfort women, why’d they listen to you? Now they’re dying one-by-one. Comfort gays ... wow, that’s fantastic!” The interviewer, Leona Legarda, echoes the same sentiment: “But what if nobody believes you?” And this is precisely the purpose of the film: to remember that members of the LGBTQI

community are just as much a part of history as are others, even though majority populations would oftentimes prefer to obscure their presence and participation in world events. Walterina asks Legarda if she believes him; she hesitates and says that she still needs to investigate, which provokes a bitter response from Dempster: “Only one thing will set a person free – the truth. How will you know the truth if you refuse to believe my story?” With this statement, Walterina highlights another of the film’s central messages: majority populations that seek to blot out gays from history not only steal true freedom from the LGBTQI community, they also choose to live in the bondage of lies by not accepting the reality of history. Walterina snatches the tape that Legarda has been using to record the interview, at which she exclaims, “That belongs to me!” Walterina retorts, “This is *my* life! Come back for it when you believe already [sic]!”

Dempster goes off to look through an album of photos of himself across the decades. In each he sees himself dressed as a woman, and crying, after each one he utters a different derogatory term: “Homosexual ... Faggot ... Queer ... Queen ... Gay ... You are being true to yourself ... but all they see ... is a sham.” After this, he makes himself up and says, “I am Walterina Markova.” Dressed in a long purple and blue evening gown, with a frizzy purple wig and a gaudy long necklace, Walterina waltzes about a stage, and is soon joined by mid-life Walterina, and then by the young Walterina, all dressed in the same purple and blue gown. Perhaps coincidentally, these are the colors of Lent (a time of penance and suffering leading up to death on the Cross and Resurrection) and Advent (a time of preparation and anticipation before the new life of Christ’s birth) in the Roman-Catholic liturgical cycles. Finally they all dance together and are blended back into the aged Walterina, who throws up *her* arms, and smiles. Walterina has at long last come to be at peace with *herself*. She has told the world the truth about her life; now, it is up to the world to accept or reject that truth. What is more, Walterina has established the fact that there were, indeed, “comfort *gays*,” and that there has been a land-standing and long-suffering LGBTQI in the Philippines for many decades. Screenwriter Clodualdo Del Mundo, Jr. has made a powerful statement about the suffering that Walter Dempster, Jr. experienced over decades which led up to the birth of the truly free “Walterina Markova.”

Before Night Falls

Beginning with his recollections of a childhood of poverty, violence, and homosexual yearnings, *Before Night Falls* is the filmic rendition of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas’s (1943-1990) autobiography of the same title (in Spanish, *Antes que anochezca*). Raised on a poor country farm with his single mother, a grandmother, an ignorant and violent grandfather, and several aunts, Arenas recognized his homosexual desires very early in life, but was aware of the rigid strictures of *machismo*. In Cuba, the sexual code of *machismo* was more about public image than reality, such that, in Arenas’s words, “It is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man”; but these relations always had to be undertaken in private (as

quoted by Lumsden 32). The sexual act performed by two men was of itself inconsequential; men's sex drives were considered to be so insatiable that almost any form of satisfaction was considered understandable (Lumsden 31; Bejel 144). Despite all of the invectives of the Roman Catholic Church, the practices of *machismo* are deeply rooted in Cuban culture, and also govern the unspoken rules of same-sex relations:

To have sex with another man is not what identifies one as homosexual. For many Cubans, a man is homosexual only if he takes the passive receiving role. And a man is suspected of being homosexual only if his behavior is not macho: if he does not show interest in rough games, or is not physically strong and muscular; if he is gentle or quiet or perhaps has a nurturing sensibility to other people's feelings; if he does not care to control others or to posture and aggressively compete with his fellows. Then his behavior is seen as inferior, inadequate, and deficient; that is, it is labeled effeminate, the behavior of inferior, secondary people. (Leiner 22)

Given this cultural backdrop, *Before Night Falls* tells the tale of Arenas's (played by Javier Bardem) broken family life, his sexual exploits in the countryside, his early sensitivity to words and language, his desire to follow in the revolutionary path of Fidel Castro, and his deep wish to flee from to the city. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the film, the young Reinaldo's teacher goes to the farm and tells his grandfather that the boy has an extraordinary sensitivity for poetry. Enraged, the grandfather grabs his hatchet, slaps the boy on the back of the head, and storms out of the cabin. Passing trees on which Reinaldo has carved poetry, he comes to the tree with the most writing and hacks into it. From an early age, Arenas was made aware of the perception that any interest in poetry was believed by ignorant country folk to be a sign of effeminacy, if not an outright declaration of homosexuality. So great was the grandfather's shame that shortly thereafter he moved the entire family to the eastern city of Holguín.

Arriving in Holguín at just about the same time as Fidel Castro's revolutionary troops, the young Arenas believed that the new leader would bring not only political freedom to Cuba, but also social liberation for homosexuals. In the city, Arenas quickly entered into literary and homosexual social circles, and garnered several important awards for his writings. As *Before Night Falls* demonstrates, however, public attitudes towards homosexuals were hardening, especially after the definitive seizure of power by Fidel Castro and the proclamation by the regime of the birth of the "New Cuban Man," who was to be pure, virile, morally upstanding, and completely dedicated to the service of the Revolution. Homosexuals were quickly identified as being the antithesis of these values, and, as *Before Night Falls* shows through the events of Arenas's life, a strange dichotomy existed between homoeroticism and militarism; same-sex sexual relations were at once forbidden but at the same time actively pursued and even proliferated during the early years of the Revolution.

Imprisoned for “ideological deviation” Arenas was sent to El Morro, the Spanish colonial fort that had been converted by the Castro regime into a prison. There, he suffered multiple forms of torture, and was exposed to the various forms of “deviancy” that were being punished by the State, including homosexuality and transvestitism. Eventually released, Arenas was imprisoned again many times, almost always for “anti-social” activities, which was the Castro regime’s moniker for homosexual practices (Bejel 105-106). Finally, as part of Castro’s plan to purge Cuban of those who were “undesirable,” “antisocial,” and “scum,” Arenas was released as part of the 1980 Mariel flotilla in which 125,000 Cubans were launched to the United States (Bejel 107). *Before Night Falls* captures Arenas’s joy at finally being free – able to be openly gay – but, sadly, how he came to realize that the crushing demands of capitalist life could be just as confining and oppressive as the strictures of life in a Communist state. Even worse, Arenas was found to have contracted AIDS, leading to even greater personal despair and a sense of urgency in trying to finish his autobiography—*Before Night Falls (Antes que anochezca)*—before death carried him away. The film ends with scenes of Arenas committing suicide by overdosing on pills and large quantities of alcohol, followed by a reprise of the initial scene of the film, with Arenas as a baby, sitting naked in a deep hole in the dirt. “I am that unlikeable child,” Arenas says, “definitely unwanted, with the round dirty face, who before the giant street lights or under the grandames [sic] also illuminated or in front of the little girls that seem to levitate projects the insult of his dirty face.”

Beautiful Boxer

The partial life-story of Parinya Charoenphol, who was born to a very poor family in Northern Thailand, *Beautiful Boxer* portrays how “Nong Toom” – “Lil Sis Toom” (b. 1981) came to be one of the most celebrated *muai tai* fighters in Thailand. A form of martial arts that combines devastating kicks, clinching, lightning-fast punches, and wrestling, *muai tai* is the national sport of Thailand and has come to represent the very essential of Thai masculinity. From a very early age, Charoenphol knew that he was not like other boys, and embraced his femininity unabashedly, even hoping to have sex-change surgery from the first time that he learned of its possibility (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 227). He writes of the gentle spirit and love of nature that he remembers having since his youngest days, an aspect of this personality that is presented in the earliest scenes of the film:

I loved collecting flowers and often climbed up trees to collect the orchids clinging to their branches so that I could place the prettiest ones above my ears. I admired women with long, straight hair. I would wrap a towel around my head and pretend it was my hair. I would gently sway my head so that my imaginary mane could flow freely down my back. (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 227).

These desires to be a woman placed Charoenphol squarely in the Thai tradition of the *kathoey*, which, in traditional Thai culture, included “all forms of gender/sex variance,” but which, since the 1970s, has referred exclusively to “a person who is born male but subsequently enacts a feminine role (male transvestite) or undergoes a sex change operation (male-to-female transsexual)” (Sullivan and Jackson 16).

A chronicle of a life of struggle, *Beautiful Boxer* shows the hardships Charoenphol (played by Asanee Suwan) endured to help his family survive. After his mother was imprisoned unjustly due to local corruption, the boy assumed the care of his father, who had been severely injured, and also worked tirelessly until he was able to procure the release of his mother. Charoenphol both loved his mother and was inspired by her fortitude in the face of suffering, a lesson that was reinforced in his mind during his three years of service as a Buddhist monk. Although he ultimately turned to the violence of *muai tai*, Charoenphol, who donned make-up and lipstick when he fought, never forgot the teachings of endurance and benevolence professed by the Buddha. He comments wryly on the events of his life: “At the time, I didn’t fully recognize the irony of my situation: participating in such a masculine sport so that I could ultimately become more feminine” (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 233). As the film shows, preparing for each match the fighter performed the traditional dance called “*sao noi pra paeng*” (“girl putting on facial powder”) as a means of honoring his teachers (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 225). After defeating an opponent, Charoenphol kissed him, an action that was received by Thai audiences as both hilarious and terribly insulting to the loser. Yet, as the boxer notes in an interview, he performed the action “to show that I didn’t bear any ill feelings towards them” (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 225).

When “Anaconda,” his first opponent in Bangkok, threatens to “crush Nong Toom’s chest over him,” the protagonist mildly responds, “This transvestite boxer has knocked out eighteen real men in the past twenty-two fights.” Later, at the “weigh-in” before the fight, a local approaches and says to Toom, “A real man should not be shy about letting others see his ‘thingie!’” The shrewd Charoenphol retorts, “Yes, and only sissies would flock to see what a real man has got.” “Nong Toom” goes on to defeat Anaconda soundly, curtsying to the thrills of the crowd and bringing himself one step closer to sex-change surgery. *Beautiful Boxer* concludes with a scene in which Charoenphol’s parents must give their consent for him to undergo the surgery. His father, who has never approved of his son’s feminine tendencies, finally agrees to sign the papers. Near the end of the film, in a scene reminiscent of *Markova*, seven Parinya Charoenphols, each from a period of his life from childhood to the present, wait for a bus. In the background, the interviewer asks, “One final question. Which is more difficult, being a woman or being a man?” Charoenphol replies profoundly, “It’s hard being a man. And it’s difficult being a woman. But the most difficult thing is trying not to forget who you really want to be.” As the door opens, the bottom of the dress and the gold shoes of the future Parinya, now fully a woman, move down the steps.

Beautiful Boxer concludes with a scene in which the transformed Charoenphol, now a woman, is making herself up in front of a large mirror. In the background, she is visited by the younger version of herself as a fighter, who says that he will be leaving her: “You don’t need me anymore, right?” Saddened, she hesitates; “I ...” The younger Charoenphol responds wistfully, “Don’t worry. When you do, just like me know.” The film ends with a post-script: “Nong Toom is now a model and actress in Bangkok. She no longer has to hide in toilets to put on her makeup.” Just like Markova and Arenas, Charoenphol is able to live openly and freely.

Piñero

Finally, we consider *Piñero*, which tells the story of the bisexual drug addict, thief, prisoner, poet and playwright Miguel Piñero (1946-1988), who lived much of his brief life with a male lover, the Chinese-American artist Martin Wong (1946-1999). In this sympathetic portrayal of the life of the conflicted yet brilliant Piñero, Leon Ichaso attempts to reconstruct the sentimental life of the protagonist, who was never fully able to accept his homosexuality, and who faded in and out of the gay scene of the Lower East Side of New York City from the 1960s until his death by cirrhosis of the liver and complications of AIDS in 1988. For the purposes of the construction of a filmic gay history, *Piñero* is significant for its insinuation, but baldly obvious omission, of the central role homosexuality played in the poet’s life, especially in his later years. Troubled by alcoholism, drug addiction, and the memory of a sexually abusive father, Piñero had frequent bouts of depression but also many moments of near clairvoyance into the hearts of so many in society who suffered but could not express their pain.

The film offers several moments in which viewers are asked to consider Piñero’s (played by Benjamin Bratt) homosexual proclivities. First, when he is seduced by “Sugar” (played by Talisa Soto) a woman he has known since his youth, Piñero does not respond sexually as she had hoped. Disappointed, she makes an off-handed but telling comment: “I guess it’s true what they say about jail. What’s with you; little boys?” Piñero is very offended and tells her to get out of his apartment, but Sugar confesses that she has wanted Miguel for years. The scene ends with the two having sex in the shower, a moment that was to mark the beginning of an ongoing sexual relationship between them. This, however, did not mean that Piñero would now follow a fulfilled heterosexual relationship only with Sugar. Later in the film, he is pictured watching a woman’s strip show with his younger protégé, Reinaldo Povod (1960-94). He asks Povod, “What do you think of the girl?” to which Povod replies, “She’s not my type.” As he says this, Piñero slowly runs his hand over Povod’s upper thigh and crotch as the two men look intently into each other’s eyes. Finally, a later scene depicts Piñero running his hand over the shoulder of a young man who has been watching a performance by the poet as the former leaves the stage.

As a film, *Piñero* is a powerful mix of flashbacks and readings from his various works, and focuses on the staging of his most important work, *Short Eyes* (1974). Its major contribution

to filmic gay history, unlike the other films considered in this article, is to document the life of a man who was never able to accept his homosexuality and suffered enormously for it. Like many gay men, Piñero was haunted by the specter of failing a heroic mother who had suffered greatly but who had always loved and inspired him. In one of the most moving scenes of the film, Miguel, who is in prison a second time, promises his mother that he will change: “O.K., mami; I’ll make you proud of me.” Piñero certainly did achieve acclaim for his work, yet, sadly, at the time of his mother’s death he was still incarcerated in Sing Sing Prison in New York City. The film concludes with a very moving tribute to Piñero. According to his wishes, upon his death family and friends gathered to read his celebrated poem “Lower East Side Poem,” a tribute to the neighborhood he loved, as his ashes were scattered about the streets.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the subject of each biopic resists the “chrononormativity” described by Elizabeth Freeman on various levels, first by being gay, then by “betraying” the “respectable” career paths marked out for him by society (62). These “betrayals,” however, will lead to each man making singular contributions to his local culture as well as to universal queer cultural history. In the cases of Markova, Arenas, and Charoenphol, their combined legacy is that of the freedom of liberation that came from the acceptance and realization of self. Perhaps just as important in the chronicling of the gay experience is the life of Piñero, who, like so many men, never fully accepted his homosexuality, and went to the grave with his demons. Did Piñero’s inability to accept his “gayness” lead to his alcoholism and difficulties in loving? There is no causal connection. Nonetheless, the lives of all four men demonstrate that chrononormativity was impossible for any of them, forcing them to seek fulfillment by extraordinary means, along uncharted paths.

Elizabeth Freeman invites us to avoid the tired narrative of LGBTQI men and women that focuses on the victimization of the community and to shift our attention to the pleasures of being gay. Until the LGBTQI community can openly exist without ridicule, persecution, or unequal treatment, “victimization” will of necessity continue to be the core narrative gay history. The personal pleasures of being gay will always exist; however, the potential for the complete joy of the community cannot be achieved until all forms of oppression are eliminated. The legacy of all four subjects of the biopics can in many ways be summarized by a comment made by Dempster: “As humans, we won’t live long. Revealing my own story is my way of inspiring other gays who continue to be oppressed today. By my act, I may have probably given freedom to many other gay people.” The act of self-revelation, whether it be complete transparency or simply sharing some of our struggles, is a gift to any community; however, in the case of the LGBTQI community, such revelations ensure the continued existence of what is very much an “imagined” community. Homosexuality has always existed and was “transnational” centuries before “transnationalism” was conceived. The LGBTQI community, however, may be said to

have relatively recent origins, as it only came into the public forum for investigation in the Late Modern Era. Lest its legacy remain hidden and possibly be lost, it is essential that scholars and members of the LGBTQI community continue to document the activities of that community as they unfold over space and time in the future. If one can speak of the “chrononormativity” of the majority population, perhaps we should adopt the neologism “homodivergence” as an equally compelling construct of time and space, which befits the quality and reality of life of LGBTQI men and women. Life writing through biopics plays a critical role in the preservation of those human experiences that otherwise would have been lost, to the detriment of us all.

Notes

ⁱ Regarding the high degree of tolerance of homosexuality in the Philippines, Whitam and Mathy write that, “Filipinos, unlike Anglo-Saxons, view homosexuality as natural and inevitable in certain individuals and something about which little can or should be done. Such tolerant attitudes may be related to large families. In a family of eight or ten children it is not so important if one is homosexual, since it is probably the others will be heterosexual” (67). This is strongly contested by J. Neil C. Garcia who retorts that, “The oppressibility of being bakla cuts across all classes, and despite the seeming omnipresence of kabaklaan in nearly all areas of popular culture, homosexual love remains outlawed within polite Filipino society. (In truth, a few years before Itiel published his book, American sociologist Frederick Whitam has studied the bayot and the “swards” of Cebu City, and had arrived at the same delusional conclusion)” (68).

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