

CULTURE

This Short Film Shows What It's Like to Be a Black Trans Woman in America

In this short film by the ACLU, 29-year-old Eisha Love shares the daily struggles Black trans women face in Chicago and across America.

BY TYLER RICHARD

October 18, 2018





WATCH

Eisha Love: A Trans Woman of Color in Chicago

With trans visibility at an all-time high, we must remember that visibility is not a substitute for equality. Trans filmmaker Cary Cronenwett tackles this disparity in a new short film series with the ACLU: *Trans in America*.

The three-film series delves into the lives of three trans people in different stages of their lives. In the second of the three films, as seen above, 29-year-old Eisha Love finds herself unable to obtain gainful employment after being incarcerated in a men's jail. Love's story explores the many issues trans women experience on the street, in prison, and after being released from prison, such as sexual assault, physical violence, and rehabilitation.

Each of the three narratives speaks to the everyday struggles trans people experience in the U.S. To discuss the current state of trans politics, safety, and representation, the ACLU's communications strategist Tyler Richard spoke with Cronenwett about the series.

What made you want to tell Eisha's story?

The number of transgender women of color being murdered is staggering. Often we are learning the names of the women after their deaths. I found something moving about Eisha Love's story of survival in this context. While I'm not personally in any physical danger, I don't feel safe, psychically, in a society where this is happening. It's the responsibility of a society to protect the people who are most at risk for violence.

Eisha's story highlights a broken criminal justice system with rates of incarceration through the roof, where people are held without trial, where jails aren't safe for anyone — and are particularly dangerous for trans women. I hope these films move people to act. We need laws that better support people as they reintegrate into society after incarceration. We need more humane treatment of prisoners and less incarceration.

I wanted to help Eisha share her story because she wanted to tell it. I think both sharing and hearing other people's stories is an important part of healing from trauma. Our society needs to heal.

What made you want to become a filmmaker?

I started making making films because I didn't see enough representation of trans men in the media or in the world around me. I was looking for representations that made me feel included, a queer or gay trans sexuality and a softer, more fey masculinity; I was looking for the men I wanted to become.

My early work is characterized by my casting trans and genderqueer actors into imagined, historical settings that are homoerotic and definitively all-male (boys school, naval base), thus redefining what it means to be male. I created a world onscreen where trans men are beautiful and heroic.

I started working on my first film in 1999, and as I was coming out as transgender and starting my transition, I felt pushback by men in the gay scene. I identified as nonbinary or genderqueer, though at the time, I didn't yet use those words to describe my identity. Looking back, I suppose, I was beginning a dialogue about desire and identity that I wasn't quite ready to verbalize through making films. I desperately wanted to change the world, to make it more inclusive and to carve out a space for myself and others. While my documentary work is quite different from my early narrative imaginations, the throughline is that my work is driven by my desire to change to world around me.

Do you think hateful rhetoric from politicians contributes to the way transgender people are portrayed in media? If so, how?

ADVERTISEMENT

As the country is becoming more polarized and as the center continues moving towards the right, there is a progressive movement that is gaining traction as well as a lot of people mobilizing to change the course of where the country is heading. I hope that the #MeToo movement continues to shake things up in Hollywood. In this current political climate, we expect producers to make the right decisions and choose to be part of a solution moving forward. We expect more from directors. We expect trans actors to play trans characters. We expect to see trans writers and trans directors telling their unique stories. Only with a full range of voices can trans people be properly portrayed in the media.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Get the best of what's queer. [Sign up for our weekly newsletter here.](#)

ACLU EVERGREEN FILMMAKER BLACK WOMEN TRANS WOMEN TRANSGENDER VIOLENCE FILM SHORT FILM

Read More

POLITICS

ACLU Short Film Series Highlights the Resilience of the Trans Community

BY CHASE STRANGIO