

# THE PARADOX OF TRANS VISIBILITY: INTERROGATING THE “YEAR OF TRANS VISIBILITY”<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Transgender narratives have increased in the contemporary mediascape, bringing to attention important critical questions about the types of trans representation available to audiences. Using the mediated climate of the United States as a case study representative of wider global trends, this paper employs textual analyses and a historiography of the phraseology “paradox of visibility,” (Seizer, 1995; Tseelon, 1995; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Barnhurst, 2007) to interrogate which transgender images are proliferated and the consequences of their consumption. I argue that there is a paradox of trans visibility, which highlights portions of transgender existence while obscuring others – making it seem that society has progressed much further toward genderqueer tolerance than it realistically has. Furthermore, this paper posits that repeat representation of hyperfeminine, affluent transgender women is creating a trinary way of imagining transgender people and bodies that can intensify dangers transgender folks face.

Keywords: Transgender, social media, bathroom bill, internet activism, transgender representation, queer media, transgender tipping point, transgender visibility.

## INTRODUCTION

On February 27, 2016 Demarkis Stansberry, a 30-year-old Black, transgender man, was shot point-blank in the head in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He died. The gunman, Nicholas Matthews — a registered convict who could not legally own a firearm — told authorities he thought his clip was empty when he raised it to Demarkis’s face and pulled the trigger. The mainstream media was largely silent. Conversely, a very different transgender narrative blew up media the next day when Caitlyn Jenner “stunned” at her first Oscars celebration in a cherry-red dress adorned with a necklace of layered diamonds (Rayne, 2016). The invisibility surrounding the murder of Stansberry, alongside the hypervisibility of Caitlyn Jenner, lends itself as an example of “the paradox of [trans] visibility” (Seizer, 1995; Tseelon, 1995; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Barnhurst, 2007: addendum mine) underneath what, in 2014, Time magazine labeled

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“the transgender tipping point” that focused on “the recent rise in transgender narratives” (Molloy, 2014).

Simply put, transgender media narratives are steadily increasing, but so are homicides of transgender people. Yet corporate news coverage investigating the violence remains scant. Still, mainstream media lauded their representation of trans communities despite neglecting the prevalence of homicides against transgender people. Lending a sense of triumph, *Vogue* even declared 2015 as the “Year of Trans Visibility.” Given the invisibility of global violence against transgender people and everyday of oppressions such as disownment and housing discrimination, the trans visibility to which *Vogue* referred to begs complex questions such as: which bodies and material realities are seen, which bodies and material realities are ignored or erased in corporate media productions and to what effect? To convey the significance of this topic, we should first consider the climate of risk that transgender individuals encounter globally as reports have found that the epidemic of violence against transgender people is rising across the world. Strikingly, 325 “trans and gender-diverse” individuals were murdered between October 2016-2017, illustrating an increase of 30 homicides over the previous year (TvT, 2017). The most murders are reported in Brazil (171), Mexico (56), and the United States (25) (TvT, 2017). Yet mainstream trans narratives are also increasing – imploring that critical attention be paid to the role of visibility in this phenomenon. This paper utilizes the United States as a case study to explore this global phenomenon because a great deal of trans narratives are produced in the country and yet, according to data collected by Transgender Europe’s Trans Murder Monitoring Project, it is one of the deadliest countries for transgender people (though there is a sharp contrast between the three that lends itself to a variety of other cultural questions in need of attention).

Simply put, the celebration of trans narratives via headlines such as “transgender tipping point” (Time) and “year of trans visibility” (*Vogue*) assists in the continuation of a cultural narrative that appears to have progressed much further than it realistically has, effectively obscuring the stark realities transgender people navigate. It is the paradox of trans visibility that highlights (and at times exaggerates) particular narratives while silencing others. The paradox of trans visibility is therefore defined here as an apparatus that highlights some portions of existence while obscuring others and creating a hyperreal icon of transgender people that is not only near impossible to achieve but also dangerous to those who do not achieve it – through refusal or inaccessibility. Thus, progress narratives proliferate (look how far we have come) while posing a double-threat to populations stuck in the paradox:

1. Media representation can further isolate because, although the representation is of a person from their identity community, they are still not like that person.
2. Heightened visibility can augment existing dangers to the community (discussed at length below), with the dangers often being part of the obscured narrative.

Studying the paradox of trans visibility in mainstream media is, therefore, of dire import for critical scholars, as the messages consumed have great impact on ideological mores and behaviors in society (Hall, 2000). As evidenced by the increase in LGB representation, nuanced and three-dimensional narratives of transgender people could potentially create more acceptance (Bond & Compton, 2015; Jones &

Pugh, 2005) and positively impact regulation (Raley & Lucas, 2008). Yet it seems that such narratives flourish only in independent media productions created by and for transgender people on platforms such as YouTube (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2015), Tumblr (Fink & Miller, 2013), and trans-centered websites (Cavalcante, 2016) as the paradox of trans visibility present in mainstream productions continually obscures portions of the everyday that desperately need discussion and change.

### **THE PARADOX OF [TRANS] VISIBILITY**

The paradox of visibility (Seizer, 1995; Tseelon, 1995; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Barnhurst, 2007) is a theoretical phrase that seeks to explain the ways portions of existence are accepted, narrated, and sometimes lauded while others are left under-represented or invisible. When scholars began exploring visibility as paradox they did so in a cultural moment whereby lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations (LGB) were just emerging from invisibility to visibility and, in some cases, hypervisibility. The concerns that fed orientation paradoxes were (and are) different than the concerns that undergird transgender narratives. Yet transgender narratives were made possible only through the heightened visibility of LGB narratives because various facets of sexual identity (sex, gender, and sexual orientation) are interwoven. Therefore, this article contributes a definition of the paradox of trans visibility, considerations to the paradoxes of visibility for transgender communities, and a concise historiography of the phrase through its various, contextualized usages.

In the mid-1990's Susan Seizer published a reflexive essay regarding her experiences as a lesbian anthropologist traveling with her partner through South India, where queer sexual orientations were not legible and as a result lesbian partnership was re-written as intimate friendship (1995). The essay, a culmination of fieldnotes, storytelling, and theory, detailed the many ways Seizer's self-accepted identity as a dyke was misread in Madurai given the inability of local culture to understand queerness as a form of sexual intimacy between people. As stated by Seizer, her lesbianism was erased from her identity. Her romantic partner, Kate, was erased from her life as partner and placed instead as a revered confidant – a "toli" who helps to prepare a young woman for her evolution into a bride (1995). That is, Susan and Kate's love was visible only in the locally understood context as two close friends who prepare one another for future marriage to a man. Yet the Madurai people noted there was a special connection between the two women, one not seen in other toli relationships, and acknowledgement of this led to the special descriptor of "uyir toli" or "female life companions or 'female soul mates'" (p. 88). Therefore, Susan's sexual orientation identity was both visible (indicated by the addendum to toli) and invisible (their love could be psychically intimate but not physically so). In short, the paradox of visibility presented a portion of existence is made visible, but only in as much as was culturally comfortable. The comfortable visibility then erases/obscures certain portions of existence that are too uncomfortable to name and face.

Tseelon also discussed the paradox in 1995 when discussing sexual identity, focusing not on sexual orientation but instead gender performances that encourage heterosexual coupling. Tseelon did not use the phrase "paradox of visibility" but instead continually referred to a paradox of womanhood that is both visible and invisible in mediated accounts. Tseelon interrogated femininity, positioning mediation of this gender performance as hypervisible when a hyperreal heterosexual femininity is

represented for conquest. Tseelon’s paradox rested in the omnipresence of the mediated, ideal woman whose body is always seen and many times positioned as an object on display. However, feminine bodies were rarely represented in positions of power — both because fewer women hold leadership positions and also because representing powerful women in the media removes them from the status of object to be obtained and places them instead as an agentic subject. Again, portions of femininity were allowed and even lauded whereas other portions were obscured — particularly portions that place leadership and power within the realm of “ideal” mediated femininity.

Jones and Pugh (2005) utilized Tseelon’s work one decade later and re-invigorated the theory following its hibernation, adding safety as another paradox that results from visibility. Their exploration of the intersectional nature of the paradox of visibility shifts focus back to sexual orientation, interrogating gay orientations as they intersect with age. Like Seizer and Tseelon’s work, the essay is bereft of a working definition of the paradox of visibility, but the authors do introduce safety as an important component to consider when discussing visibility. Visibility can mean greater acceptance for subcultural communities as the narratives work toward familiarization of the unknown. It can also create greater dangers for subcultural communities. Jones and Pugh point out that, as gay spaces became prominent so, too, did their appeal to heterosexual women looking for respite from the heterosexual masculinities they are often confronted with. Gay spaces became visible to heterosexual men hoping to pick up potential partners, and as such conflict occurred between these queer and hetero masculinities and, of course, bodies. Jones and Pugh’s work thus adds a necessary component to the working definition of the paradox of visibility — certain portions are made visible (even hypervisible) and, as such, troubles the concept of safe spaces while placing already vulnerable bodies in greater danger.

Barnhurst (2007) adds to Jones and Pugh’s concerns over safety when writing of “coming out narratives;” as “coming out is supposed to reap benefits but often destroys personal relationships and may lead to social death in some circles or physical harm in others” (p. 1). Barnhurst draws critical attention to celebratory tones undergirding the visibility of coming out, arguing that romanticism does incredible work for heteronormativity in that it camouflages the material realities queers face after coming out, such as disavowal by loved ones and employment discrimination (the list is far more extensive). Barnhurst adds another important component to the workings of visibility narratives—they assist in a progressive mythology of unconditional acceptance or, at the very least, tolerance through obscuring the inherent “contrast” that “present[s] impossible binds from which queers cannot escape” (p. 22). To use a metaphor — the paradox of visibility (using coming out narratives as an example here) acts as a lush, velvet cloak. Praising coming out narratives as acts of bravery and progress acts as surface-level celebrations of diversity, becoming the frill of the material that catches eyes and aesthetic senses. Yet the fancy fabric, delightful as it may be, also allows for the obscuration of myriads of discriminations and aggressions in need of attention and intervention. Power is left largely intact through this cloaking mechanism that disguises abuses (what happens after the individual comes out) and highlights small victories (they named their orientation). The narrative becomes “well, there is a transgender star on *Orange is the New Black*, so clearly we don’t have to worry about bathrooms,” or — one more familiar “but we had a Black president, so racism is clearly not an issue anymore.” Laverne Cox

– or Barack Obama – are visible, but that visibility is just as dangerous as it is captivating.

The metaphor of visibility as a velveteen cloak is not a situational tool used to establish visibility as good or bad, progressive or regressive. Instead, the metaphor acknowledges the potency of visibility while also drawing attention to the fact that narratives obscure just as they make visible. Ironically, visibility narratives are quite similar to the metaphor of the closet in that they operate on and assist with propelling binaries that erase the nuances of experience and the multi-dimensional nature of identity and social relations. In short, binaries collapse people into boxes that exist in relation to one another and then normalize one of the boxes while casting the other as deviant or Other:

Condensed in the figures of 'the closet' and 'coming out,' this very specific crisis of definition has then ineffaceably marked other pairings as basic to modern cultural organization as masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation . . . So permeative has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of these indices in any context, in the absence of antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 72-73, also see Barnhurst for a different take on Sedgwick's work in conversation with this concept).

Just as the closet is a figure of linear progression from being in hiding to being out – with an imaginary end point – so too is visibility a specter of presence as acknowledgement/acceptance. To be visible is to be looked at, but it is not to be seen. The failure to interrogate these differences (to be looked at vs. seen, to be heard vs. to be listened to, etc...) and establish a nuanced analysis of visibility particular to the situation/s under discussion pushes forward dangerously uncritical notions of progress. The imaginary of progress then maintains an exclusionary status quo mired in heteronormative (and sometimes homonormative and now, arguably, transnormative) compulsions in various and intersecting ways.

In the case of Vogue's "year of trans visibility" (and the various transgender narratives that exist in the current popular media environment), mainstream representation of transness is not assumed an enemy to transgender people as DeBord asserted when he declared representation an "inversion" of truth (thesis 100). Trans representations in mainstream media have taken on systemic inequity and stimulated important discussions about the nature of gender in the digital, postmodern world. Yet these representations are positioned here as icons that, like the metaphor of the velveteen cloak (paradox of visibility), often obscure the material realities of transgender people while establishing a trinary way of being/doing trans that exacerbates the policing of gender outliers as they are first expected to perform the "natural" gender and then enhance that performance. That is, the paradox of trans visibility presents the same problematics as the paradox of visibility, yet it also adds another component (especially in regard to corporate, mediated representation). The paradox of trans visibility introduces a trinary way of thinking about gender that erases identities that do not embody a hyperreal performance of "ideal" gender established in and through the binary, thus furthering the aims and consequences of heteronormativity despite the existence of transgender narratives. This is because the paradox of trans visibility is largely due to mainstream media's reliance upon

“narrative’s heteroideology,” (Roof, 1996) a component of heteronormativity that impacts the stories told and consumed within a given culture.

Narrative’s heteroideology does one of two things with narrative: (1) it casts queer relations as deviant and dangerous or (2) it creates queer relationships that mirror normative, heteroideological ideals such as monogamous marriage and raising children (Roof, 1996). When discussing media production, independent or commercial, narrative’s heteroideology is one of the most important and timely sites to critique and complicate, a task beyond the scope of this paper but in need of attention. However, because this paper focuses more on content and message (ideology), as opposed to narrative’s structure and form, I instead use the term “heteroideological narrative,” inspired by Roof’s theory of narrative’s heteroideology.

Ideology is grounded here through Stuart Hall’s (2000) framework. According to Hall, ideology operates as such: it is multi-faceted, with one concept connected to various others (for example freedom and democracy in America). Ideology, specifically in the service of power, depends on intricate webs. Second, ideology is not a process of a conscious intention. Instead, people work within ideology – ideology “produces” “social consciousness” (p. 272). Finally, ideology “works” by constructing positions for subjects. Heteroideology acts as a component of hegemony, particularly heteronormativity, and works to keep complex fields of power intact through a consistently shifting narrative that is more of the same but appears as progressive and, importantly, seeks to obscure complex realities (Gramsci, 2000, pp. 196-199). This discursive, ideological move, in fact, relies upon a “theft,” fragmentation, or “limitation” of the entirety (Barthes, 1976, pp. 6-9). That is, the appearance of forward movement (any visibility as progress) allows for consensual return to hegemonic ideology (there are two true sexes and two resulting gender performances, even when transgender bodies are present – these two true sexes and genders make it possible for the dichotomy between straight and queer to persist). In this specific case, hegemonic ideology keeps divisive binaries of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in place through obscuring either the cost of visibility (safety, heightened gender expectations) or bodies that are refused visibility (trans masculine forms or bodies that do not pass). The “bathroom problem,” discussed at length below, is a culturally relevant example of how heteroideological narrative works through people, even those committed to radical social justice projects. Indeed, heteroideology that functions through narrative is so entrenched in heteronormative cultures that it is often replicated without realization, thus making it even more complex for “gender outlaws” (Bornstein, 1994) to survive in society, much less thrive.

### **THE PARADOXICAL YEAR OF TRANS VISIBILITY**

Vogue published a story entitled “Why 2015 Was the Year of Trans Visibility” on December 29, 2015, which detailed the increase in transgender narratives across mainstream media platforms (Taylor, 2015). The list highlighted both transgender celebrities (Caitlyn Jenner, Jazz Jennings, and Laverne Cox) and entertainment products released in 2015 (Tangerine, The Danish Girl, and Drunkentown’s Finest and streaming shows Transparent, Orange is the New Black, and television show I am Jazz). Listed, also, was trans activist Jennicet Gutierrez and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The list also named model Hari Nef; the first openly transgender White House legislative staffer Raffi Freedman-Gurspan; high school student Gavin Grimm; and fitness model Aydian Dowling (Taylor, 2015). The inclusionary list – drawn from entertainment, sport, activism, and politics - is quite impressive. Taken at face value it

seems that the transgender community has much to celebrate as culture appears to have moved toward greater acceptance of gender-bending people and practices. However, analysis of the list illustrates glaring invisibilities to interrogate. These invisibilities include (1) an absence of trans masculinities and transitioning bodies; (2) little to no mainstream representation of bodies that do not pass; (3) scant coverage of the rising rates of violence against transgender people; and (4) a lack of a truly intersectional analysis that highlights the dire material-realities that many transgender folks face.

**PARADOX:** What of trans masculinities and moving bodies?

The films and television shows highlighted in Vogue's article featured trans feminine-centered narratives. There was little change in the paradox between the hypervisible trans feminine narratives and largely invisible trans masculine narratives in 2016. The narratives of trans masculinity conform to a very particular discursive formation of trans bodies that are perceived less threatening to binary bodies given the passability of the form. The trans male bodies centered in Vogue's story obscure the presence of malleability and fluidity (the spectrum between legibly sexed bodies). These stories offer comfort to established imaginaries of what sexed bodies should look like. Grimm and Dowling are the only trans men on Vogue's list. Dowling was featured because the bodybuilder was the first transgender man to grace the cover of a special edition of Men's Health, with a cover story headlined "The Reader Issue: Real Guys, Real Results;" Aydian was listed as "The Pioneer." Grimm entered the media spotlight when he filed a lawsuit in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union against his school district's policy that forbade him access to the men's restroom. The suit resulted in a victory for Grimm when, on June 23, 2016, the Fourth Circuit of Appeals Court ruled that he must be allowed access to the men's restroom, and the case was advanced to a hearing by the Supreme Court (Jacobsohn, 2016). Unfortunately, in March of 2017 the Supreme Court removed Grimm's case from their schedule and wiped the lower court's ruling in favor of Grimm following the Trump Administration/Department of Education's change (read: removal) of protections for transgender students (Williams, 2017).

Importantly, Grimm and Dowling do not appear transgender; it is only through their verbal outing as transgender that this portion of their identity becomes visible. Erased from their narratives is the malleability of their bodies, the historiography of change that marks them as bodies in motion.

Highlighting the victories of Dowling (a toned and lauded body) and Grimm (a teen taking on the school board over bathroom access) aids in the paradox of visibility through offering discourse to already familiar issues at the expense of discussing oppressions. Grimm's challenging of bathroom policies, for example, made far fewer waves than Dowling's appearance on the cover of Men's Health – illustrating a cultural celebration of toned and healthy bodies, forms that appeal to idealistic notions of appearance and performance. Stories that discuss political action receive far less attention, an especially alarming trend given the rollback in protection for transgender people under the Trump Administration (given that Grimm's fight was with the United States) and the increase of homicides against transgender people globally. Additionally, even within these narratives of political action we are able to trace what aspects of cultural norms and values are supported just as they are challenged. In the transgender bathroom debate, gender binarism – particularly traditional, hegemonic

codes of masculinity and femininity – is supported while simultaneously being deconstructed by activists opposing discriminatory spaces. The bathroom debate also illustrates one of the few spaces in contemporary media where trans masculine narratives are visible.

**PARADOX: Bathrooms as bastions of static bodies**

Halberstam (1998) referred to a hysteria similar to contemporary bathroom debates well over a decade ago, dubbing it “the bathroom problem.” Halberstam writes that the problem - when attended to - is indicative of how much work is left to be done in regards to sex and gender-based acts of discrimination and division, as “it illustrates in remarkably clear ways the flourishing existence of gender binarism despite rumors of its demise” (p. 22) That is, the bathroom exposes the paradox of visibility when critically considered because it puts progress narratives to the test by illustrating real-life consequences to gender outliers who seek a gender-affirming safe space to relieve themselves in. Halberstam posits that ambiguous bodies can be read as threatening when entering gender-specific places. This threat leads to a hypervisibility that becomes quite dangerous to systems of normalization. Those ambiguous bodies who defy “productions” of “polar gender” are endangered through “punishments” that “compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, 2007, p. 190). Thus, bathrooms are, and always were, an apt example for the ways in which space is designed to keep individuals oriented in a straight line (Ahmed, 2006).

What has changed since Halberstam and Butler’s writings is that now the “bathroom problem” is hypervisible in many Western mainstream media sources, especially following North Carolina’s 2016 discriminatory legislation (the “bathroom bill” HB2). However, the trans masculine and trans feminine narratives that are visible in this debate are seen when their sexed body is legible (passable) according to a binary (with gender expressions complementing). Indeed, opponents of measures such as North Carolina’s controversial HB2 bill<sup>2</sup> often rely on a narrative of “passing” -- or “presenting yourself as a ‘real’ woman or a ‘real’ man – that is, an individual whose ‘original’ sex is never suspected” (Namaste, 2000, p. 144) -- that maintains both hegemonic bodily appearances and gender expressions that reject ambiguity. This is evidenced in the transgender-led social media activism against North Carolina’s egregious, Jim Crow-like segregation bill whereby many transgender activists utilized imagery and text to ask, “Would you put me in that restroom?” In one of the most famous examples, photographer Meg Bitton posted an image of Corey, a young, White transgender girl with long blonde hair on her public Facebook page.<sup>3</sup> The original caption accompanying the image read “if this was YOUR daughter, would you be comfortable sending her into a men’s bathroom? Neither would I. Be fair. Be kind. Be empathetic. Treat others how you would like to be treated,” (Bitton, 2016). The post went viral. Many stories similar to Corey’s appeared – such as James Sheffield’s (image used with permission):

<sup>2</sup> Senate Democrats have been battling with this bill since its introduction. In April 2017 North Carolina overturned HB2, but with stipulations that allow for state-wide discrimination of transgender people until 2020 through banning local nondiscrimination ordinances (Silva, 2017). Also, worth noting is that HB2 not only discriminates against gender identity but also removes race and national origin employment protections (Glazier, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> You can see Meg’s post here:

<https://www.facebook.com/MegBittonPhotography/posts/10153063771317395:0>





Figure 1: A White transgender man poses for the camera to protest discriminatory bathroom legislation in North Carolina

These narratives, both trans masculine and trans feminine, followed an earlier, yet far less visible round of trans social media activism concerned with restroom issues. In June 2015 Michael Hughes initiated the #wejustneedtopee hashtag across Twitter to draw attention to proposed Florida legislation that sought to prohibit transgender individuals from using the restroom that complemented their identities (image used with permission).



Figure 2: A White transgender man poses with a White woman in a bathroom to protest discriminatory bathroom legislation

These instances of social media activism utilize bodily visibility to draw attention to discriminatory and dehumanizing spatial ordering. Indeed, these narratives are expressing a courageous and explicit disdain and, as such, are part of a wider social media network of activism around transgender issues (Shapiro, 2004). However, these images still presuppose that men and women – whether trans or cis – should look and act a certain way. These images subtly work towards dismantling the notion that women and men are formed at birth’s genital designation. However, they also promote the idea that – even if one is to alter their sexed body – a body should be legible at a glance as male or female (sex) and man or woman (gender). Julia Serano (2007) notes that gender is not only about performing gender but also about embodying gender expectations:

Many of us who have physically transitioned from one sex to the other understand that our perceived gender is typically not a product of ‘performance’ (i.e. gender expression/gender roles), but rather physical appearance (in particular, our secondary sex characteristics) ... While the way we ‘do’ gender may influence whether people perceive us as queer or straight and may tip the scales for those whose appearance is somewhat gender-ambiguous to begin with, the vast majority of us are gendered primarily based on our physical bodies rather than our behaviors (pp. 191-192).

These moments of expressive, pedagogical embodiment also play on tropes of fear and propriety that have long held normativity in place through spatial ordering based on bodies and gender performativity. The gender performativity presumes a “Victorian morality” insistent upon a “public propriety” through separation (West, 2014, pp. 61-62) wholly dependent on heterosexuality and therefore upon legible, sexed bodies that have a clear opposite. It is the widespread normalization of heterosexuality that presumes separate spaces for separate sexes must be maintained for such propriety. This normalized mythos of acceptable bodies and resulting orientations is so entrenched that even radical plays on sex and gender unconsciously support it. Trans activism against bathroom policing is radical in that it places the trans individual into a highly public sphere, thus endangering them (visibility and safety) while simultaneously turning conversation to real consequences for real people (effectively centering trans experience).

However, like the gender-neutral bathroom that relies on single stalls and space segregation, these moments of speaking out are also indicative of the deep entrenchment of “heteronormative, bigendered logics of public propriety” (West, 2014, p. 62) that are also evidenced in media created by and for transgender people. This ideological entrenchment does not erase the radical potential of the images above. Yet it does illustrate how embedded bigenderism is in the collective cultural conscience, so embedded in fact that even those actively working against such logics unknowingly promote them while complicating them. Examples such as those above are visible and arguably effective because, while they subtly disturb understandings of binary sex and binary gender, they also mitigate such disturbances through the reliance on tropes of vulnerability (femininity) and threat/protection (masculinity) that reinforce the very binary just complicated. Thus, bathrooms present a paradox to my own paradox by creating a space where trans masculine narratives are discussed, but only inasmuch as those bodies “pass” and thus threaten the delicate nature of normalized, vulnerable femininity. That is, the “bathroom problem” also begins the work of illustrating the crux of the paradox of trans visibility: certain trans bodies are hypervisible while others

are erased from seeing/knowing. Visible bodies are then policed as transmisogyny takes motion in mediated representations and local/state punishments.

**PARADOX:** Mediated representations of trans femininity as the hyperreal

The trans celebrities who take center stage in the mainstream mediascape of the United States are Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, as indicated by press accounts informing readers of “transgender celebs you need to know” (n.d.). CBS’s list, which contains 22 transgender “celebs,” illustrates the very invisibility surrounding trans masculinities highlighted previously – with only two individuals on the list being trans masculine, or roughly 10%. Clicking through the photo gallery also indicates another trend: the trans feminine narratives portrayed are illustrative of a hyperfemininity, discussed by Espineira (2016) as “over-gendering” toward “archetypical femininity” (pp. 326-327). This archetypical gendered imagery is heavily reliant upon class privilege and submission to a long-standing male gaze that “controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6) by presenting women as objects to be consumed as opposed to subjects with agentic capacity. The transwomen portrayed in CBS’s list, compiled four decades after Mulvey’s calling out of the male gaze, follow the rubric outlined therein. They are largely coiffed, heeled, and made up to conform to a very decorated ideal of femininity. Even trans women in sport, a domain largely associated with masculinity (Krane, 2001) and perhaps a place that would allow for more genderqueer expression, are presented to the audience with an exclusionary feminine “ideal” in mind.

The photos of Renee Richards (known for a tennis career in the 1970’s) and Fallon Fox (contemporary MMA fighter) illustrate the image-conscious presentation attributable to femininity throughout the ages. Richards (p. 17), whose image was taken on the court, has her hair pulled back – no doubt for practical reasons regarding mobility, sight, and bodily temperature – but perhaps also to highlight her delicate golden hoop earrings, perfectly tamed and trimmed eyebrows, and shadowed eyes. Fox (p. 19), whose image has clearly undergone digital retouching, is shot from above, an angle that strips power by making forms look smaller and looked down upon. Her face, a bronze tan, is illuminated by light. One arm is up to either flex a muscle or illustrate the importance of her fist for sport, but her face beams with a smile. Her back is curved, shoulders arching backwards – illustrating Goffman’s “ritualization of subordination” through her bodily cant, which Goffman characterizes as an “acceptance of subordination, submissiveness, and appeasement” (1979, p. 170) typically associated with binary “ideal” femininity. Fallon’s photo does, however, refuse “licensed withdrawal” that would avert her gaze from the camera (p. 57) – bringing her eyes directly to the viewers. Yet her playful stance, large smile, bronzed tan, perfect eyebrows, and subtle black, smoked eye penciling remind viewers that femininity demands a certain looking upon-ness. Yet these women face two oppressive intersections within their identity: (1) their position within sport whereby they present as hyperfeminine to “protect themselves from prejudice and discrimination” in a world hostile to their gender identity as women, let alone trans women (Krane, 2001, p. 120); (2) their position as trans feminine whereby recognition (read:safety) depends upon conformity to particular gender acts while simultaneously complicating understandings of binary sexed bodies. Indeed, the pressure to hyperfeminize appears to exist for all trans women and trans feminine persons.

Laverne Cox, when interviewed by bell hooks in 2014, came under fire for hyperfemininity, with hooks alluding to Cox’s implication in the patriarchal gaze. Cox replied to hooks: “I’ve found something that feels empowering. And I think the really honest answer is that I’ve constructed myself in a way so that I don’t want to disappear. I’ve never been interested in being invisible and being erased” (qtd. in Mirk, 2014, para. 9). Cox’s statement speaks to the importance of understanding trans feminine people as individuals under strict, sexist dictates whereby their recognition/safety depends upon a heightened gender performativity that can further harm already vulnerable subjects. As Brownmiller writes, “the extremes of femininity are harmful only – only! – to women themselves in the form of a self-imposed masochism (restraint, inhibition, self-denial, a wasteful use of thought and time) that is deliberately mistaken for ‘true nature’” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 236). Such a trend should act as a kind of stimulant for feminist scholars and activists - urging the centering of the double-bind many trans feminine individuals face given the intersection of heightened gender expectation that, as Brownmiller stated, inflicts a “masochism” already upon cisgender women whose sex is not circumspect in the binary paradigm, thus intensifying that masochism for those whose sex is circumspect.

This dangerous double-bind should also be considered as part of the paradox of trans visibility inherent in mainstream media artifacts – meaning hyperfeminine trans bodies are the center of trans media narratives, often resulting in praise that resituates femininity as wholly dependent upon looks (that velveteen cloak). This is evidenced by a publication in *The Mirror* whereby Caitlyn Jenner’s resemblance to supermodel Cindy Crawford is fawned over, Evans and Strang (2015) writing, “ever since she made her debut as Caitlyn we have always thought she was a stunning woman” (para. 1). Similarly, hosts and guests of *The View* remarked upon Jenner’s transition following her 2015 *Vanity Fair* magazine release, with Whoopi Goldberg stating that Bruce looked better than her as a man and “Caitlyn is still cuter” than her now. Guest host Raven Symone added that Jenner is “a hot woman” (Maglio, 2015, paras. 7 and 5). Nor is this commentary surrounding Jenner isolated. Mainstream media lit up regarding Jenner, with a majority of the commentary centering how “hot” or “cute” Jenner looked following her transition.

The discourse surrounding trans femininities therefore seems dependent upon the transgender individual being able to perform an exaggerated ideal of femininity that – as alluded to by hooks when chatting with Laverne Cox (Mirk, 2014) – can be regressive for various communities of women, especially trans women. Trans women who refuse hyperfeminization (either because of personal choice or inaccessibility) are thus placed into greater danger through first failing to meet the binary dictate of “natural” femininity and then failing to meet the trinary dictate of the “hyper.” The trinary dictate of hyperfeminine is grounded here through Baudrillard’s hyperreal, which presents a simulacrum in order to establish a “utopia.” In the United States, indeed in most Western masculinist cultures, utopia rests on the shoulders of binary sex and gender systems because having only TWO points of reference makes it easier for ONE to hold power over the other. This move toward the “hyper” trans – largely through celebrity culture – has two dire consequences for transgender people without affluence or those who choose gender ambiguity:

- 1: it erases ambiguous bodies given their threat to binary identification systems (thus leaving a multitude of transgender people without any mainstream media representation)

2: it allows for certain bodies to enter into acceptability via a conditional trinary that polices the way a trans person must look to avoid danger.

Of utmost import is that failure to perform hyperfemininity via body and acts, whether because of inaccessibility or refusal/resistance, increases the likelihood of discrimination and physical violence (Bazargan & Galvan, 2012; Testa, Sciacca, Wang, Hendricks, & Goldblum, 2012), as evidenced by the rising rate of homicides against trans women (Steinmetz, 2015) with 2017 being the deadliest year for transgender people across the globe (TvT, 2017).

#### PARADOX: Hyper-violent ramifications and their intersections

The majority of homicide victims are transgender women of color (Schmider, 2016), but discussion of gender identity can overshadow the importance race plays when discussing violence. Violence against transgender women of color draws to the center the importance of a truly intersectional approach when understanding the material realities of transgender people. Feminist thought from the 1980's onward has "increasingly employed" an intersectional framework (Shields, 2008, p. 303) to understand how systems of power privilege or marginalize those in society based on axes of race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation (Shields, 2008). Yet, the tragic rates of homicide of transgender women of color illustrate that – despite decades-long, extensive theorizing of and alongside intersectionality – little has changed for those with identities that are vulnerable to intersectional, systemic oppressions. The "global genocide" (Kidd & Witten, 2008) of transgender people should urge scholars and activists to strive to understand trans experience through an intersectional lens and then utilize intersectionality as a framework for dialogue and, hopefully, change. Yet, merely naming a project intersectional has produced little change. Perhaps, then, it is important to revive particulars within the theory of intersectionality in an effort to move theory to action and accountability. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), who coined intersectionality, wrote that women of color face "intersectional subordination" that "is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (p. 1249). Intersectional subordination is experienced by transgender women of color in regard to violence, systemic racism that creates and propels poverty, disownments and discrimination on the basis of gender expression, failure of the justice system to protect transgender people, and stereotypes emerging from the employment necessities of some transgender women.

Lakyra Dawson, a transgender woman of color living in Detroit, has born witness to a great deal of violence against the transgender community. Remarking on the violence Dawson said "people say we're not normal, we're freaks or something. They just kind of feel like they can dispose of us, because we don't really matter to them" (qtd. in Holden, 2015, para. 10). Dawson's commentary alerts people to the vulnerabilities of transgender people – particularly as she discusses normality and deviance. However, even this staggering quotation has the potential to center Dawson and her sisters' transgender identities as the sole signifier of their subordination, particularly when less than half of the states in the United States offer protection for transgender and gender nonconforming people. However, Dawson's race and class augment the dangers she faces as a transgender woman. Here systemic racism and

classism, in conversation with violent masculinity, intersect with gender identity to place vulnerable bodies in dangerous spaces. In Dawson’s case the space is Detroit’s Palmer Park, an area known to locals as one where transgender woman gather, largely as sex workers. The gathering is often necessary for survival as:

families ridicule or beat transgender girls when they try to come out. Kids tease them at school, and teachers punish them for wearing clothes that clash with gender expectations. They leave home young, often without diplomas, and move to cities and neighborhoods where they can find transgender families that offer emotional support. And then, turned away from employers who make empty promises to “call you back,” (Holden, 2015, para. 22).

While the above excerpt centers gender expression, it implicitly illustrates that marginalization based on gender identity creates or augments poverty in such a way that, as trans woman of color Beyonce Carter said, prostitution is necessary for her survival. “I don’t want to be out here – hell no. But some days I just say ‘fuck it, I need some money” (Holden, 2015, para. 4). Unfortunately, the stereotype of transgender people as sex workers has arisen because of the dire need for some modicum of economic return that has placed some transgender people on the streets as sex workers. This stereotype then presents another intersectional subordination as popular culture creates and propels “externally defined controlling images” (Collins, 1986, p. s18) that deny the complexity of subjecthood for Black women and now transgender women of color. Furthermore, those who turn to sex work, for whatever reason, are impacted by the stigmas surrounding their profession, gender expression, and race. This presents yet another subordination – the illegality and woeful protection of sex workers in the survival economy, an issue exacerbated by systemic racism that keeps people of color impoverished (Hartman, 2014). The violent policing of transgender women of color, which at its most extreme leads to homicide but also results in various other discriminations, is also indicative of the intersection between race and sexuality as “the well-developed fear of Black sexuality served primarily to increase white tolerance for racial terrorism as a prophylactic measure to keep Blacks under control” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1272). Crenshaw positioned rape as a policing mechanism, and that has been a consequence for transgender women of all races. Yet homicide has become a plague that largely impacts transgender women of color, with little coverage by media and doleful protection by the criminal justice system.

These murders, when covered by the press, do little good for transgender folks, as reporters often (and perhaps inadvertently) frame the transgender victim as “deceiving” an (often) romantic partner as their gender identity conflicts with the reading of their sexed body (read: a glance at genitalia) (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Sadly, the homicide of transgender folks and the narrative of deceit and trans abnormality that allegedly pushes the charged to murder is so pervasive that it has been labeled the “trans panic defense strategy” in court. This strategy, if argued convincingly, leaves a human being dead while the murderer is acquitted and a lesser charge assigned (Lee & Kwan, 2014; Serano, 2007, pp. 247-276). This leads to yet another subordination that illustrates the various ways the intersections between gender, race, and class come to form stereotypes that demean the lives of vulnerable transgender people as institutions designed to protect and serve offer little protection. This may account for the hesitancy transgender people of color may have when involving authorities – a hesitancy also discussed by Crenshaw in regards to violence

endured by cisgender women of color (1991). What appears clear is that intersectionality is ever important in contemporary times.

In sum, the illusion of recognition and acceptance in mainstream media trans narratives obscures dire and intersectional situations many trans folks without celebrity status navigate. The hyperreal performances that are compelled onto trans celebrities exacerbate the expectations of performance for transgender people around the globe, as a new "norm" is created under a binary slowly unfolding into a trinary. These issues are far more pressing than the color of a dress or the length of a heel. Yet it cannot be ignored that we must have trans narratives in the mainstream media, as they have opened the floor for wider cultural conversations regarding trans experiences. However, the bodies that have been centered are trans feminine and indeed, by and large, hyperfeminine. What of trans masculine people? What of bodies that do not pass? What of an intersectional analysis that highlights various portions of identity as in conversation with gender expression? The paradox of trans visibility presents a great number of tensions to consider, many of which depend upon the questions of which bodies are allowed to be visible and in which ways? The trans narratives present in mainstream media present very particular trans bodies – bodies that pass, because mainstream media is drenched with heteroideological narrative. This narrow form of storytelling is insistent upon easy categorization into a sex binary that insists gender performances match body parts, specifically genitalia, so that reproductive dictates under heteronormativity (fueled in part by heteroideological narrative) are fulfilled.

## **CONCLUSION**

Stories are especially significant to consider during this "transgender tipping point," because narrative is the way that transgender individuals make sense of who they are, how they are seen, and who they wish to be – it is the "bridge" between the person they were assigned to be at birth and the person they are sacrificing to become (Prosser, 1998, p. 9). In the current mediascape these narratives flourish not on corporate media, but instead on social media. Trans producers are creating the subversive stories that are, in many ways, disrupting heteroideological narrative and the resulting paradoxes of trans visibilities. In an increasingly digital, connected world it has been illustrated that independent media productions are necessary to "everyday survival" of gender nonconforming persons given their ability to create a transgender community that "furnishes feelings of belonging" and thus "help[s] them manage the trials and complexities of everyday life" in a "world created without them in mind" (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 110).

There are a great many independent media makers stepping up to complicate the paradox of trans visibility. They are found on YouTube (Raun, 2015), Tumblr (Fink & Miller, 2013), and "transgender themed websites" (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 110), among others. Emmett Jack Lundberg, creator of the award-winning webseries *Brothers* (described by the series' website as "a pioneer effort: the first narrative series about a group of trans male friends to not only feature the stories of transgender men, but also cast trans actors in the main roles") ([brotherseries.com](http://brotherseries.com), about, 2018) mentions lack of complex representation as a main inspiration for creating the show, stating about his writing:

It had to do with my own personal journey and realizing that there weren't these stories. You know the stories were not out there and I was a filmmaker. I was a writer. So, I was like, why not create it myself? Um...I really feel like there's something different when someone is writing from their own experience you know (Lundberg, personal interview, September 26, 2015).

Jamie Casbon, the actor who plays character Devon on *Brothers*, adds to Lundberg's concern regarding the lack of visibility, stating that you cannot trust mainstream representations of transness on television and in film for a variety of reasons, including: a lack of trans talent playing the characters, normalized depictions of transness, and utilizing a trans character as spectacle to be rid of when the shock of the character begins to falter. Casbon cites *DeGrassi High* as a prime example of the failure of mainstream media when it comes to representing queer identities. “The actress playing her got tired of having to wear a binder and have short hair and so they put her in a car crash. Done. That's all. That's all you need to do to get rid of a trans character.” Casbon went on to add that:

Like when you're looking at mainstream media to be telling your story like you can't really trust it if you're a trans person and um so yeah like, having this representation out there and, uh like... even ... even though I'm a part of it [*Brothers*] it's really...it feels important seeing that this is slice of life. That it feels real and showing like you can be a trans person and you can just be living your life the way that a normal cisgender heterosexual whatever person is living their life. Like there is a life for you out there (Casbon, personal interview, September 25, 2015).



Figure 3: Four White trans masculine people pose for the camera for promotional materials, season 1 cast

*Brothers* is careful to include aspects of queer life that are often erased from mainstream narratives given the lack of representation of the trans experience and the whitewashed representation that often occurs in mainstream accounts (Peters, 2011). That is, *Brothers* works against heteroideological narrative's tendency to create



paradoxes of trans visibility through pulling back the cloak to expose dangers. In just one season of the show – comprised of eight episodes that are roughly eight to ten minutes each – *Brothers* represented the suicide epidemic that plagues trans communities, lack of healthcare access, difficulty funding surgical procedures, shifting sexual orientations, dependencies on psychological professionals to obtain medical treatment, and polyamory. It is dizzying to consider to the various complexities that trans folk navigate and this could be part of the reason why mainstream trans narratives fall flat, Lundberg says:

I mean I think for the first season in particular there were a lot of issues that I wanted to address that I wanted to make sure were talked about in the season. Um. And for me it feels like those type of things are just kind of these daily things that you think about or you deal with . . . I really feel like there's something different when someone is writing from their own experience you know. (personal interview, September 25, 2015).

The distribution of *Brothers* illustrates that stories such as those told in the web series are in demand. *Brothers* premiered on YouTube and was housed there for well over a year before being picked up by four different distribution sites: the omnipresent Amazon Instant Video, Vimeo On Demand, Canada's OUTtv, and India-based Half Ticket. Simply, the world is watching, and waiting for a show that moves beyond the one-dimensional portrayals of gender queerness. However, this distribution move also meant that *Brothers* remove episodes from the free website YouTube. This decision did not come easy to Lundberg and producer Sheyam Ghieth given that streaming their show now requires a subscription to one of the aforementioned platforms, which may not be accessible to many within the trans community given the intersections between gender identity and poverty. Yet, the cost of the show acted as a major impetus to move forward with other distribution options – as kickstarters to raise money to create the show have failed in the past and left Lundberg and Ghieth in the red. However, there are still a plethora of three-dimensional trans masculine narratives available on YouTube for free, though instead of taking the form of a scripted webseries they are virtual diaries available to the public as personal narrative video blogs. They, too, do the incredible work of making visible that which is obscured in mainstream media. Yet the question remains: what can critical media scholars do to fill in the gaps created by the paradox of trans visibility?

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