

Representing trans: visibility and its discontents

Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani & Jasper J. Verlinden

To cite this article: Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani & Jasper J. Verlinden (2020) Representing trans: visibility and its discontents, *European Journal of English Studies*, 24:1, 1-12, DOI: [10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040>



Published online: 21 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 146



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INTRODUCTION



Representing trans: visibility and its discontents

Anson Koch-Rein ^a, Elahe Haschemi Yekani ^b and Jasper J. Verlinden ^b

^aDivision of Liberal Arts, University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Winston-Salem, NC, USA; ^bDepartment of English and American Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue *Representing Trans*, the authors reflect on the radical changes in trans representation between the early 1990s and the present. Through brief reflections on *Pose* (2018-) and other landmark examples of trans representation in film and television, the authors show how these changes attest to complex interrelations between visibility, recognition, and violence. Beyond the realm of film and television, the introduction also discusses broader media representations that connect the question of visibility to political debates and the regulation of public spaces. Highlighting a variety of trans theoretical engagements with different forms of mediality (including literature), the authors propose a more expansive understanding of trans as a reading practice as well as a method of analysing and *transing* medial forms.

KEYWORDS

Trans; transgender; representation; visibility; media; television; literature; *Pose* (2018-)

Live! Work! Pose! The series *Pose* (2018-) is a fictional alternative narrative built from – among other elements and original contributions – the events, settings, aesthetics, and community covered in Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). As such, it offers a critical fan-fictional answer to both the violence and injustices represented in the film and to the gaps in representation *Paris is Burning* itself re-produced: the voices left out, the omissions due to documentary, historical, and perspectival constraints, the lack of trans and Black/Latinx involvement and agency in the production, the open-endedness of the story for lives continued, and the murderous rupture of narrative in Venus Xtravaganza’s death.¹ This is particularly true of season two, episode four, “Never Knew Love Like This Before” (Murphy 2019), which features the discovery of Candy Ferocity’s murder and her funeral. Like Venus Xtravaganza, Candy, played by Angelica Ross, is found in a motel room, presumably having been killed by a john. Written by Janet Mock and Ryan Murphy, the episode emphasises neither the act of murder nor the spectacle of violence and is careful not to give graphic visibility to the violation of a Black trans woman. The events leading to her death are not depicted, and her dead body is shown mostly in the context of an open-casket funeral service during which Candy’s ghost appears in a series of dialogues generating emotional closure with her friends, community, and parents. The story of her funeral even culminates in a fantasy drag ball lip-synch resurrection sequence. Throughout the episode, *Pose* foregrounds giving Candy a voice after death – ultimately singer Stephanie Mills’ voice in “Never Knew Love Like

This Before.” Perhaps ironically, Candy’s ghost thereby becomes a more central narrative presence than her character had in the show while alive.

Candy’s friends react to her death in what has become a ritual of trans visibility. That is to list murder statistics as when Angel Evangelista notes: “What is it, May? And eleven girls have been killed this year.” This situates Candy’s death in the context of other murders and of an increasing awareness of an often racialised anti-trans violence by keeping count.² In its writing, casting, and directing, *Pose* puts a share of the means of production into the hands of trans media producers. By re-working and taking fictional author- and ownership of some of the elements of *Paris is Burning*, the series reflects on the history of trans representation as much as on the current conditions of Black and Latinx trans survival (Live!), resilience (Work!), and community (Pose!) in the context of violence and increasing visibility, which, in the TV series, is represented by the popularity of voguing. As such, *Pose*, set firmly in the past, deliberately steps into and beyond our current moment in the development of mainstream trans representation and participates in staging what C. Riley Snorton calls a “usable history for more livable black and trans lives” (2017, 183).³

The success of *Pose* thus self-reflexively speaks to and is but one example of the radical shifts in representing trans, which in the 2010s has been shaped by a paradoxical simultaneity of unprecedented trans visibility in the arts and media and of ongoing transphobic⁴ violence, disproportionately affecting economically disadvantaged communities and communities of colour. Accordingly, in the *Somatechnics* issue on “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come),” editors Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak, and Eliza Steinbock attest that “[d]espite increased interest in and representation of transgender characters (mostly played by cisgender actors) in film and television, such ‘visibility’ has not yet resulted in improved conditions for transgender people as a whole” (2018, 6). Nonetheless, they also note that “media acts as a staging ground for the types of life that are permitted to become real and to shape reality in turn” (Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock 2018, 7). Thus, representing trans is a crucial debate that includes concerns about who can speak *for* trans people and *how* trans lives should be represented. But it is also testament to the fact that representation expands the realm of the intelligible.

For the longest time trans representations were closely tied to narrow and problematic depictions of gender non-conforming people as either dangerous psychopaths and sexual predators (e.g. *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) but also *Nip/Tuck* (2003–2010)) or as victims with little agency. These stories often relied heavily on now widely criticised ‘wrong body’ tropes of storytelling that reduced trans to transition. If we think about how the cinematic gaze spectacularised trans bodies in these reductive ways, the prime example is often the ‘reveal’ of the naked body of trans woman Dil in Neil Jordan’s 1992 *The Crying Game*, whose straight cis male lover Fergus becomes physically sick at the site of her penis.⁵ Following the broader trends of the so-called New Queer Cinema of the 1990s on the big screen, on TV, the new millennium initially presented viewers with a range of large-ensemble “queer” shows like *Queer as Folk* (UK 1999–2000, USA 2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009) in which trans characters were often only very marginally present. In the turn to the 2010s then there is a significant change of increased trans presence on TV, which Capuzza and Spencer (2017) have documented in a qualitative content analysis of the 2008 to 2014 season focusing on casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social interaction, and, feeding into this trend, *The L Word*, for example, has just been relaunched as *Generation Q* featuring a greater

visibility of trans masculinities. Hence, despite the ongoing precarious status of trans lives, there seems to be a proliferation of more, and more importantly, more complex, trans representations, both in narrative cinema and on TV.

No longer represented as spectacular signifiers of gender variance, trans characters now populate diverse narrative universes. This ranges from (internationally) successful TV series, such as *Hit & Miss* (2012), *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), *Transparent* (2014–2019), *Sense8* (2015–2018), *The OA* (2016–2019) and our opening example of *Pose*, to independent cinema with surprise hits like *Tangerine* (2015) (cf. Malone's essay in this issue) and the Chilean foreign-language Oscar-winner *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, 2017) (cf. de Waal and Armstrong in this issue), to an ever-growing archive of trans cinema, including experimental and documentary formats (cf. e.g. Raczuhn 2018; Rosskam 2018; Saalfeld 2018; Steinbock 2019; Straube 2014). On the one hand, this demonstrates that visual representations of trans lives now showcase an increasing number and variety of trans actors, producers, and directors drafting and shaping their own multiple stories. On the other hand, the proclamation of a "transgender tipping point" in public and political discourse in the June 2014 title of *Time* magazine, featuring Laverne Cox on its cover, seems prematurely optimistic given the harsh backlash under the Trump presidency in the United States. Trans representation shapes public discourse and affects politics (at a time when more trans people are running for political office than ever before). The current political climate is characterised by the simultaneity of more trans visibility and regressive legislative attempts to police access to public facilities generating a broader cultural 'bathroom panic,' but also media-savvy counter strategies by trans activists on social media.

Using the hashtag #wejustneedtopee trans media producers demonstrate the discrepancy between imagined sexual 'perversion' and the lived realities of trans people in relation to the effects such legislation might have in forcing trans folks into restrooms that match their sex assigned at birth but clashes violently with their current gender presentation. Thus, we see trans activists such as Michael Hughes with beard and cowboy hat provocatively asking whether he looks like he belongs in "women's facilities" or trans woman Kelly Lauren, sharing a photograph of herself wearing a tight-fitting red dress surrounded by men using the urinals in a public restroom, tweeting whether people would really want her in the same restroom as their husband or boyfriend. Social media thus becomes an effective realm to protest the supposedly straightforward legislation of the category "sex" by complicating it via the visual representation of the realities of lived gender expression.

Media representation is central to both the sex-segregating fearmongering of 'bathroom panic' and to trans counter strategies, which illustrates that visibility cannot simply be equated with social acceptance. Decoupled from trans activism and from a political commitment to trans rights, representation remains futile. In the influential 2017 edited collection *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, editors Reina Gossett [Tourmaline], Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, ascertain,

We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence. [...] This is the trap of the visual: it offers – or, more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as – the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives. Representation is said to remedy broader acute social crises ranging from poverty to murder to police violence, particularly when representation is taken up as a 'teaching tool' that allows

those outside our immediate social worlds and identities to glimpse some notion of a shared humanity. (2017, xv-xvi)

As Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton highlight, representation is not straightforwardly a remedy to broader acute social crises. The terms of “teaching tool” visibility are often gender-normative (#wejustneedtopee both uses this tool and exemplifies its limits) and otherwise exclusive. Even as non-binary representation increases with each celebrity coming out and discussion of pronouns, trans visibility remains often deeply and conflictingly gendered in a binary. This binary has long been characterised by a disproportionate, sensationalised visibility of (certain kinds of) trans femininities and a comparative lack of media attention to trans masculinities. “[T]here is still a mysterious fog obscuring transsexual and transgender men from public view,” writes Green (2016, ix), who attributes this difference to a mix of passing privilege and the way masculinity tends to be rendered as subject of rather than subjected to the objectifying gaze of media attention. Of course, with this comparative invisibility to media sensationalism also come the negative effects of a lack of representation, a denial of the means to access the supposedly primary path towards communicating a shared humanity. The recent expansion of trans representations has begun to shift but has not broken these binary patterns.

One notable exception to the invisibility of trans masculinity in the media is the spectacular image of the pregnant trans man (cf. Verlinden 2012). Though the moment of spectacularised hypervisibility was brief – arguably, it came and went with the U.S. media attention to the erroneously dubbed “first pregnant man” Thomas Beatie, which started with an article he wrote for the U.S. LGBT magazine *The Advocate* in 2008 and culminated in the publication of his autobiography later that same year – narratives of trans male pregnancy had been around before and have continued to appear in the media since. A recent example is the British documentary film *A Deal with the Universe* (2018), in which filmmaker Jason Barker, recounts his experiences with transition as well as pregnancy, using video diary entries. In contrast to the #wejustneedtopee campaign, in which trans men garnered visibility in (partially ironic) representations that were predicated on the incongruous juxtaposition between a hypermasculine gender presentation and the sex-segregated spatiality of women’s bathrooms, the idea of trans male pregnancy appears to break down the gendered binary altogether. While the spectacularity of the image of the pregnant (trans) man is also grounded in its perceived incongruity, the question of whether he belongs in “women’s facilities,” in this case rather the OBGYN’s office, cannot be answered with an unequivocal “No!”

In contrast and in the tradition of the media’s making of what became the most famous early U.S. trans media sensation, Christine Jorgensen, in 1952, the persistence of traditional patterns of trans feminine visibility in the 2010s is exemplified by the headline-grabbing coverage of Caitlyn Jenner’s transition.⁶ Despite her privileged status as former Olympian and reality TV star millionaire, the media responses to Jenner’s coming out highlight key features of the gender-specific, intersectional links between trans femininity, visibility, and violence.⁷ Trans feminine bodies and clothing choices are subject to surveillance, ridicule, and violence in ways that appear to be about targeting visibility with often particularly visible malice. This is not meant to downplay that gender non-conformity, broadly speaking, is subject to all sorts of violence. Some of this violence – family and relationship violence, suicidality, abuse by medical professionals, or structural

violence – thrives in and on invisibility. By contrast, the murders that happen at the intersection of the hypervisibilities of trans femininity, race, poverty, and sexuality do appear to be connected to visibility as a kind of exposure. Accordingly, it is vital to distinguish the violence that is linked to the invisibility of structural inequality and the exposure to violence that hypervisibility generates. In analysing the increase and changes in trans representation, we must recognise the violence of hypervisibility and distinguish it from recognition and track both visibility and invisibility as they continue to be produced to violent – or emancipatory – ends.

The term “representation” (with its three overlapping meanings of 1. to stand in for/to symbolise, 2. to speak/act on behalf of and 3. re-present events of the past) itself is contested territory. One such contestation is formulated through the concept of disidentification. Rather than codifying representation in a dichotomous system of ‘good’ vs ‘bad,’ disidentification, as formulated by José Esteban Muñoz, describes strategies of engaging with dominant structures and discourses that “neither [...] assimilate within such a structure nor strictly [oppose] it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11). Referring to disidentification as “a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance” (25), Muñoz frames it as a kind of “work” that minoritarian subjects perform in encounters with exiting forms of representation that can be reframed, re-imagined, and undone to a certain extent in order to produce new ones. Coming back to the example of *Pose*, one could say that, if it is a fan-fictional response to *Paris is Burning*, it is simultaneously an act of disidentification. Rather than fully identifying with or wholly rejecting the original source material, *Pose*’s trans producers have performed a kind of “disidentificatory desire” (3) with a set of representations that do not fully represent them but with which they nonetheless have a strong affective attachment. Furthermore, made possible by the failure of minoritarian subjects’ interpellation in the dominant sphere, disidentification marks a political and representational strategy for marginalised subjects that enables their (partial) identification across boundaries of identity. As such, as a mode of engagement, disidentification opens up a wealth of representations that can be decoded and recoded and thus made useful, not only for enabling new modes of identification that provide a “utopian blueprint” for the future (200), but also in carving out spaces in the present and forming new (if sometimes uncomfortable) alliances.

Complicating a supposedly straightforward understanding of both “trans” and “representation” and thereby avoiding the “trap of the visual” that equates more (mainstream) representation with more societal recognition,⁸ this special issue of *EJES* engages the conversation on representing trans in a variety of media, focusing not only on popular forms but also on less explored archives of trans (self-)representations not limited to the United States. In this context it was important for us in putting together this issue to deliberate on how the predominance of U.S.-centred trans representations (for instance, the mainstream marketability and recognition of celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner but also Chaz Bono) reflects “the complex global flows of shared subcultural knowledges” (Aizura 2006, 291), and how trans representations circulate globally and are received, resisted, or repurposed locally. Are there specific national investments in a visibility of legible scripts of trans lives based on identitarian political representation, and how does this relate to visual representations of other non-normative forms of embodiment that might not easily fit such narratives? The collected essays address, among other themes, the mediality of

representing trans and the logics of visibility/invisibility *within* trans representations (rather than in opposition to a supposed homogenous mainstream), e.g. in relation to the privilege of whiteness and the attested relative invisibility of trans masculinity.

Concurrently, instead of limiting our understanding of “trans” to an identity category that requires adequate representation, restricted by the constraints of realism, Jack Halberstam proposes that “trans* can be a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix” (Halberstam 2018, 4–5). Moreover, our usage of “trans” follows Susan Stryker’s observation that the “asterisk after ‘trans’ [...] is gaining popularity precisely because it avoids, on the one hand, a welter of identitarian labels, and, on the other hand, opens up new affinities rooted in movements across categories.” Because this is a conceptual rather than a mere lexical move, “the asterisk may be omitted but is always implied” (Stryker 2017, 419), and we omit it in the spirit of just such a view of trans studies. We want to foster such an “expansive” interpretation of both terms “trans” and “representation,” which should be considered open for debate and not tied to any clear-cut definition, as the articles’ elaboration on both concepts aptly demonstrate. In such an understanding, “trans” itself can be understood as a methodological tool to analyse media. Keegan speaks of the “sense” of trans that uses cinematic forms “not merely to sense *for* transgender, but *as* transgender: a desiring feeling for what might otherwise go unrealized” (2018, 6) and Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock outline trans as a “trans-historical, transdisciplinary, and trans-medial” praxis “to move newly among times and spaces, across fields and forms, toward (im)possible sensations, affects, and futures – always *rooted in the material realities of transgender life* as it has been historically and bodily constituted” (2018, 3, emphasis added). In such a “speculative” (Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock 2018, 11) framing of trans, similar to the notion of queering as a verb (cf. Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 13–14; Rose in this issue), representing trans is fundamentally tied to the ambivalences of visibility in relation to embodied trans lives. Thus, we return briefly to the boom of trans representations on TV. Instead of framing this increase in trans stories simply as a progressive signposting of liberal inclusion and a celebration of more ‘mature’ and realistic depictions of trans lives, it can also be understood as attesting to a *transing* of TV genres and conventions.

Like *Pose*’s ‘woke,’ but at times anachronistic, conversations from the coffin and the splendour of its soapy lip-synched extravaganza, the recent musical finale of *Transparent*⁹ also resorts to defamiliarising aesthetic choices and thus can be read as part of such a queering/*transing* of form that departs more radically from the confines of realism. Violence and trauma are addressed in these shows in a tonality that – via moments of bursting into song and breaking the fourth wall – resists the confines of realism and instead uses TV as an escapist tool that celebrates trans visibility and resilience and offers hope, sometimes against all odds. In this context film scholar Amy Villarejo, for instance, identifies a progressive protective role of the camera in *Transparent*. In contrast to the mentioned violent exposure of the trans body to the audience’s scopophilia in films like *The Crying Game*, the protagonist of *Transparent*, Maura Pfefferman, is sheltered, as Villarejo explains:

Countering this dominant arrangement of the gaze, Soloway ensures that Maura is never objectified by the camera, not once, during the entire first season of *Transparent*. She is never looked at with judgment, which is to say that the camera's look at Maura – not Mort, but the emerging Maura – is never aligned with a character, nor a spectator, who would misrecognize, dismiss, judge, or mock her. (2016, 10)

Consequently, the politics of trans representation are not limited to the notion of 'authentic' or 'good' trans representations but ideally intervene and *trans* our ways of looking at the world.

With these deliberations on the potentials and discontents of visibility in mind and before introducing the individual essays in more detail, we wish to briefly contextualise trans studies as a field that engages fundamentally with philosophical and aesthetic concerns and locate trans more generally within the academic field of English studies.¹⁰ Literary studies scholar and novelist Jordy Rosenberg opens his recent blog of "Ten Trans Books I Love" suggesting that "you could make an argument that Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is trans lit. You know why? Because one way of talking about trans lit is simply to say that it represents an intensification of what we mean in general when we talk about the relationship between the body and language" (*Literary Hub*, 26 June 2018). Susan Stryker, in fact, made a version of that very argument about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*¹¹ – implicitly establishing trans literary studies with it – as early as 1994 in her essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." With that landmark text, Stryker wrote literature and literary studies into the foundation of trans studies (cf. Carroll and Rose for a discussion of literary representations of trans in this issue).

As Heather Love notes in the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, trans studies and queer studies are often positioned quite differently in their disciplinary affinities as two seemingly interdisciplinary fields: "While queer studies continues to resist social science methodologies in favour of a more humanistic version of interdisciplinary or cultural studies, trans studies has stronger ties to legal studies, transnational analysis, the history of medicine, architecture and design, ethnography, and political economy" (2014, 174–175). This perception of trans studies as less humanistic or literary in its methodologies, archives, and practitioners' locations than queer studies is common and not exactly untrue. Yet it may partly be based on an incomplete appreciation of the longstanding presence of literary¹² and cultural studies methods in trans scholarship. When, in 2014, Alexander Eastwood contended that "trans studies has yet to flourish in literary contexts" (593) and suggested "that we trace how certain problems, ideas, strategies, or aesthetics that structure contemporary experiences of transsexuality find expression in literary history" (595), he overlooked that Stryker's work on *Frankenstein* is a prime example of precisely this approach of using trans epistemologies to "animate texts without specifically trans content" (595). Stryker's work arguably models concerns that later became key to queer literary studies. In her close attention to negative affect, Stryker prefigures, from a trans perspective, queer readings of negative affect in literature such as Love's *Feeling Backward*. Love argues that "'feeling bad' has been a crucial element of modern queer experience" (2007, 160) which she urges us to address through the study of literature, of "dark, ambivalent texts" (4). Stryker, in a prescient theoretical and methodological move, performed very similar work from a trans studies point of view in the early 1990s, even if that work has yet to be adequately recognised as a contribution to literary studies in

particular. In short, concerns about embodiment and representation – and about trans as centrally, methodologically invested in the reading of texts (most broadly defined) and interpretation of meaning – have made trans studies an often overlooked but far more than recent addition to English studies.¹³

This special issue takes up this tradition of trans studies to interrogate how representing trans plays out in a variety of texts, from narrative fiction, to popular media, and film. In particular, we want to highlight questions of method/media, production, and transnational flows. How can trans representations intervene in traditional gendered binaries of the “male gaze,” and how does this inform the dynamics of trans feminine hypervisibility and trans masculine invisibility? Further, how are these processes shaped by powerful norms of whiteness? Without postulating a simplistic notion of ‘good’ trans representations (and an eye towards negative affects), we begin with Rachel Carroll’s discussion of the problematic invisibility of whiteness in literary representations of trans. Revisiting Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* and Rose Tremain’s *Sacred Country*, Carroll discusses how in these canonical novels transgender identity is achieved, confirmed or normalised through the construction of racialised ‘others,’ demonstrating the need to develop a stronger intersectional lens on the (historical) narratives of ‘changing’ gender that have informed various literary genres of the twentieth century. Moving from the official literary market to more community-based narrative productions, Jonathan A. Rose sheds light on fanfiction as a realm of trans (self-)narrative. Focusing on fanfiction stories based on the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010-), Rose underlines digital platforms’ collective modes of storytelling as a means to counter the in_visibility of transmasculine sexuality and reimagine cisnormative readings of popular culture.

Taking a keen interest in the punk scene, Gareth Schott considers Laura Jane Grace and the songs of her anarcho-punk band Against Me! not only as the artistic productions of a trans performer, but as an articulation of “transgender as punk.” Carefully situating Grace’s work in the context of punk’s anti-normative politics and DIY aesthetics, Schott uses close readings of Grace’s song lyrics, interviews, and writings to trace the band’s work, gender politics, and critical reception before and after Grace’s transition to show how her music uses punk defiance to question gender norms and expose harassment, stigma, and inequality.

The following three contributions take films, both fictional and documentary, as their objects of investigation. Ariane de Waal and Felipe Armstrong problematise the transnational reception of Sebastián Lelio’s film *Una mujer fantástica*. Identifying a tendency to universalise and neutralise the experiences of Lelio’s trans protagonist Marina (Daniela Vega) in international reviews, de Waal and Armstrong offer a reconsideration of the film in relation to other Chilean trans representations and discuss the movie as part of a larger body of work which they term “trans necronarratives,” that is, narratives that foreground grief and mourning as central to the constitution of trans subjectivity and vitality. Shifting the perspective from transnational reception to the means of production of trans visibility, Meagan Malone presents an original take on how Sean Baker’s feature film *Tangerine* employs the iPhone as a filming device to simultaneously interrupt viewers’ expectations of what a film *and* a woman ought to look like. Contrasting the reception of *Tangerine* to D.A. Miller’s famous critique of the “rope trick” that hid queer identities in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film *Rope*, Malone argues that Baker’s use of the iPhone is not a “gimmick” but an aesthetic choice that foregrounds trans identities by intervening

into cisnormative visual grammars. Turning to another national context, Nicole Anae analyses short documentaries on Australian Indigenous trans subjects, including *Brotherboys Yarnin': Indigenous Australian Transgender Brothers* (2014), *Brotherboy* (2015), *Being Brotherboys: coming out as transgender* (2015), *Introducing Taz* (2015), *Taz's Story* (2016), and "Max," Episode 1 of Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Transblack* (2018) series. She interrogates the function of the short documentary format as a site for narrative and audio-visual experimentation with traditional "men's business," self-identification, and the creation of Indigenous "Brotherboy" community identity, understanding the short documentary as a form of political activism both within and beyond the Australian trans Indigenous community.

Finally, turning a critical lens on media narratives, Van Slothouber's engagement with the popularity of so-called 'sex change regret' and de/retransitioning narratives in recent mainstream media articles (from 2015–2018) demonstrates once more forcefully that the contemporary increase in trans representation and visibility – often lauded as a sign of political progress and social acceptance – has, in fact, been accompanied by a political backlash. Slothouber shows how the articles cite 'political correctness' as a reason for why discussions of de/retransition are supposedly silenced. They then elaborate on (white, cisgender) children and the need to protect them from misdiagnosis excessively, thereby, in fact, reinforcing the gatekeeping of access to gender affirming medical care for trans individuals.

The broad range of topics addressed in this issue underlines that representing trans in the twenty-first century is not only a 'product' of mainstream visibility. It is also the result of various modes of *transing* media and trans media practitioners' intervening into but also moving beyond the sphere of the visual.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the violence of subsequent interpretations of Venus Xtravaganza's death, cf. Namaste (1996) and Prosser (2006), for a critique of the gaps, cf. hooks (1992). The film's role and reception as a "queer classic" is discussed in detail by Hilderbrand (2013).
2. Since 1999, listing the dead on "Transgender Day of Remembrance" has served this function, but in the late 2010s, mainstream news coverage has increasingly taken on this body counting task, too (<https://www.glaad.org/blog/tdor-memoriam>).
3. A special issue of *The Black Scholar* edited by Smalls and Powell (2019) showcases essays that discuss, among other topics, print media and photography, Ayana Jackson's visual art, the late pop star Prince as well as autoethnography as specific forms of a "Black Queer and Trans* Aesthetic."
4. While some scholars prefer "anti-trans" violence, the concept "transphobia" remains relevant in contexts of officially outlawed legal 'trans panic' defences where "violence justifies itself by characterizing non-normative gender as itself a violent act of aggression and reading the expression of gender identity as itself a sexual act," as Salamon (2018, 5) explains in her critical phenomenology of transphobia *The Life and Death of Latisha King*.
5. Halberstam, for instance, has discussed this shortcoming of the film in the chapter on "The Transgender Look" in *In a Queer Time & Place* (2005, 76–96). For a discussion of "spectacular" male femininities and trans desire in narrative cinema, cf. also Haschemi Yekani (2007).
6. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz discusses the continuities between the stereotypical representation of Jorgensen's transition and that of Jenner, "the stereotypical masculine success once connoted by 'ex-G.I.' has morphed into 'former Olympian'" (Politico.com, 16 June 2015).

Additionally, Jorgensen's "spectacular mediation" emerged in stark contrast to the coverage, or lack thereof, of Black trans women, as Snorton shows (2017, 139, 142).

7. For a more detailed discussion of Jenner's publicised transition, cf. Lovelock (2017) and Koch-Rein (2015).
8. Quite the opposite, Beauchamp links more visibility to technologies of surveillance and control: "Efforts towards more recognition of transgender identities and bodies within surveillance systems may reduce harm for certain individuals, yet they also facilitate the workings of surveillance, bringing those identities and bodies more efficiently under biopolitical management" (2019, 19–20).
9. For more elaborate readings of trans representations in *Transparent*, cf. e.g. Villarejo (2016); Hess (2017); Poole (2017); Krauß (2018); Parsemain (2019).
10. For a more elaborate overview of how trans studies emerged as an academic field, cf. Stryker and Aizura's introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (2013), and, in the German-language context, also Baumgartinger (2017).
11. Cf. Koch-Rein (2019) for a trans reading of *Frankenstein*.
12. As Céal Keegan notes, trans studies "has long been concerned with narratology" (2020, 387). For example, Stone (1991) uses genre to theorise trans subjectivity, and Prosser (1998) discusses the narrative work of transsexuality.
13. Eveline Kilian (2014), for example, discusses the visibility of transgender formations and identities that challenge gender norms in a variety of media and cultural scripts, thus demonstrating the various aesthetic strategies of making transgender legible. Cf. also Carroll (2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Anson Koch-Rein  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5054-0748>

Elahe Haschemi Yekani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4125-2795>

Jasper J. Verlinden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1891-3348>

References

- Aizura, Aren Z. 2006. "Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of (Trans)sexual Citizenship." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7 (2): 289–309. doi:10.1080/14649370600673953.
- Baumgartinger, Persson Perry. 2017. *Trans Studies: Historische, begriffliche und aktivistische Aspekte*. Wien: Zaglossus.
- Beauchamp, Toby. 2019. *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Capuzza, Jamie C., and Leland G. Spencer. 2017. "Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series." *Communication Quarterly* 65 (2): 214–230. doi:10.1080/01463373.2016.1221438.
- Carroll, Rachel. 2018. *Transgender and the Literary Imagination. Changing Gender in Twentieth-Century Writing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Eastwood, Alexander. 2014. "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read? Notes toward a Trans Literary History." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (4): 590–604. doi:10.1215/23289252-2815111.
- Gossett, Reina, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. 2017. "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*." In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, xv–xxvi. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Green, Jamison. 2016. "New Foreword." In *FTM: Female-To-Male Transsexuals in Society*, edited by Aaron Devor, ix–xi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Halberstam, J. J. 2005. *In a Queer Time & Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Halberstam, J. J. 2018. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Haschemi Yekani, Elahe. 2007. "Transgender-Begehren im Blick: Männliche Weiblichkeiten als Spektakel im Film." In *Unbeschreiblich Männlich. Heteronormativitätskritische Perspektiven*, edited by Robin Bauer, Josch Hoenes, and Volker Woltersdorff, 264–278. Hamburg: Männerschwarm.
- Hess, Linda M. 2017. "'My whole life I've been dressing up like a man': Negotiations of Queer Aging and Queer Temporality in the TV Series Transparent." *European Journal of American Studies* 11 (3). doi:10.4000/ejas.11702.
- Hilderbrand, Lucas. 2013. *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- hooks, bell. 1992. "Is Paris Burning?" In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 145–156. Boston: South End Press.
- Keegan, Cael M. 2018. *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Keegan, Cael M. 2020. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 67 (3): 384–397. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1530885.
- Keegan, Cael M., Laura Horak, and Eliza Steinbock. 2018. "Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (And Then, and to Come)." *Somatechnics* 8 (1): 1–13. doi:10.3366/soma.2018.0233.
- Kilian, Eveline. 2014. "Claiming Space: Transgender Visibility in the Arts." In *Transgender Experience. Place, Ethnicity, and Visibility*, edited by Chantal J. Zabus and David Coad, 85–107. New York: Routledge.
- Koch-Rein, Anson. 2015. "'Have You Seen Him as Her?' – Gender, Clothes, and the Body in ABC's Guided Tour of Caitlyn Jenner's Closet." *Talk at Middlebury College, Clifford Symposium: The 'good' Body*. September 26. <http://www.middlebury.edu/newsroom/archive/646969/2015-clifford-videos/node/502043>.
- Koch-Rein, Anson. 2019. "Trans-lating the Monster: Transgender Affect and *Frankenstein*." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 30: 44–61. doi:10.1080/10436928.2019.1560878.
- Krauß, Florian. 2018. "Ist Trans das neue Queer? Transgender-Repräsentationen in der Webserie Transparent." In *Queer Cinema*, edited by Dagmar Brunow and Simon Dickel, 165–188. Mainz: Ventil.
- Love, Heather. 2007. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Love, Heather. 2014. "Queer." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (1–2): 172–176. doi:10.1215/23289252-2399938.
- Lovelock, Michael. 2017. "Call Me Caitlyn: Making and Making over the 'Authentic' Transgender Body in Anglo-American Popular Culture." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (6): 675–687. doi:10.1080/09589236.2016.1155978.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murphy, Ryan, director. 2019. *Pose*. Season 2, episode 4. "Never Knew Love Like This Before." Written by Ryan Murphy and Janet Mock. Aired October 30, 2019. FX Networks.
- Namaste, Viviane K. 1996. "Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity." In *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*, edited by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, 183–203. New York: New York University Press.
- Parsemain, Ava Laure. 2019. *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Poole, Ralph J. 2017. "Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television." *European Journal of American Studies* 12 (2). doi:10.4000/ejas.12093.
- Prosser, Jay. 1998. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Prosser, Jay. 2006. "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle 257–280. New York: Routledge.

- Raczuhn, Annette. 2018. *Trans*Gender im Film. Zur Entstehung von Alltagswissen über Transsex* in der filmisch-narrativen Inszenierung*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Rosskam, Jules. 2018. "Making Trans Cinema: A Roundtable Discussion with Felix Endara, Reina Gossett, Chase Joynt, Jess Mac and Madsen Minax." *Somatechnics* 8 (1): 14–26. doi:10.3366/soma.2018.0234.
- Saalfeld, Robin K. 2018. "Das Unsichtbare darstellbar machen. Kritik filmästhetischer Vermittlung von Transgeschlechtlichkeit am Beispiel von Tom Hoopers *The Danish Girl*." In *Queer Cinema*, edited by Dagmar Brunow and Simon Dickel, 153–164. Mainz: Ventil.
- Salamon, Gayle. 2018. *The Life and Death of Latisha King. A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia*. New York: New York University Press.
- Smalls, Shanté Paradigm, and Elliott H. Powell. 2019. "Introduction: An ImPossibility: Black Queer and Trans* Aesthetics." *The Black Scholar* 49 (1): 1–5. doi:10.1080/00064246.2019.1548054.
- Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides. A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Steinbock, Eliza. 2019. *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stone, Sandy. 1991. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 280–304. New York: Routledge.
- Straube, Wibke. 2014. *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes. A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film*. Linköping: Linköping University Press. <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:742465/FULLTEXT02.pdf>.
- Stryker, Susan. 1994. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (3): 237–254. doi:10.1215/10642684-1-3-237.
- Stryker, Susan. 2017. "Transgender, Queer Theory, and Psychoanalysis." In *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory*, edited by Eve Watson and Noreen Giffney, 419–426. Goleta: Punctum Books.
- Stryker, Susan, and Aren Z. Aizura, eds. 2013. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. London: Routledge.
- Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. 2008. "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (3–4): 11–22. doi:10.1353/wsqr.0.0112.
- Verlinden, Jasper J. 2012. "Transgender Bodies and Male Pregnancy: The Ethics of Radical Self-Refashioning." In *Machine: Bodies, Genders, Technologies*, edited M. Michaela Hampf and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, 107–136. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Villarejo, Amy. 2016. "Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, and Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway's *Transparent* and the New Television." *Film Quarterly* 69 (4): 10–22. doi:10.1525/fq.2016.69.4.10.