

Roxanne Samer

Transgender Media Studies

Editor's Introduction

Transgender media studies is a burgeoning field. As a member of the Queer Caucus Board at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, over the last three years I have witnessed a rise in the requests for trans media panel sponsorship. Nonetheless, in spring 2016 when I proposed this special issue, the publication of such scholarship did not appear to be aggregating in any particular place. By 2016 *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)* had been publishing incredible work in the broader field of transgender studies for two years, and while each issue promised another essay or two on the subject, organizing an entire issue on transgender media did not seem to be a priority. No cinema and media studies journal appeared poised to pick up the mantle either. And yet, every month journalists waxed on about the social and cultural significance of our “transgender tipping point,”¹ and Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner or another trans celebrity appeared on a different magazine cover, using their fame to raise awareness of trans lives. Cox, who rose to fame in her performance as the Black trans imprisoned woman and prison stylist Sophia Burset in Netflix’s *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–present), soon went on to produce *Free Cece* (2016), Jacqueline Gares’ documentary about Cece McDonald, who was charged with second-degree murder after defending herself when attacked by a group of transphobic white supremacists. As the film documents, McDonald eventually served prison time for a lighter sentence, thanks to the international movement that formed around her case. After coming out on a special edition of *20/20* in April 2015, Jenner, already entangled in the Kardashian reality series franchise, starred in her own E! reality series, *I Am Cait* (2015–16), taking a road trip during the second season with friends Kate Bornstein, Jennifer Boylan, and others, in which they discussed their different politics as

trans women as they made their way across the US. At the same time, Amazon’s *Transparent* (2014–present) was gaining critical acclaim. In the series, self-declared feminist showrunner Jill Soloway claimed to deploy a “female gaze” when depicting Maura Pfefferman, a character based on her own trans parent.² I conceived of this issue as a site wherein this eruption of transgender characters and stories as well as popular discourse around such trans representations could receive greater historical contextualization and deeper theorization.

In my CFP, I asked, “How have race, sexuality, and class informed the materialization of these representations and their circulation? What are their genealogies and how has transgender media changed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?”³ I also declared an interest in publishing contributions “devoted to the study of the work of lesser-known transgender media artists” and those about “the spaces that have been created within media or media cultures for genderqueer folks who live outside of the binary as well as how the stakes of visibility politics differ for trans women and trans men.”⁴ While the submissions I received touched on some of these questions more consistently or thoroughly than others, the resulting journal issue is one that I am proud to say tackles concerns regarding transgender representation in discerning and caring ways consistent with the inquiry of my initial call. In today’s popular media culture, trans women are much more visible than trans men, which means a greater public familiarity with their experiences and stories but also greater risk of violent backlash.⁵ Here I have published essays that analyze transfeminine and transmasculine media, sometimes alongside each other, and make arguments with such subjects’ well-being in mind. Contributors to the issue include trans men, trans women, non-binary people, and

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others, like myself, who consider themselves queer cisgender allies. Together, we study the activist work of both some of the most celebrated trans celebrities and the less widely known trans youth on YouTube; cisnormativity across media histories; and our own affective relations to gender nonconforming or gender variant filmmakers, actors, and characters, previously unstudied under the rubric of “trans.” I have organized the issue into three sections: “Transgender Media Archives,” “Theorizing 21st Century Transgender Self-Representation,” and “Sense8: A Roundtable.”

In “Transgender Media Archives,” five scholars write transgender media histories that carefully take into consideration the present from which they write and contextualize the terms they use, the media they study, and their locations within the histories of their particular mediums, genres, and genders. First, Laura Horak offers a survey of the rich and complex history of trans and gender variant filmmaking from the beginning of cinema to the present, while also making room for those untraceable gender variant filmmakers who worked in film and television without their gender history becoming known and others who made home movies now lost to history. Her essay serves as a database of sorts that she invites transgender media studies scholars to add to and flesh out in the years ahead. She is in the process of creating an online, collaborative research portal devoted to trans and gender variant filmmakers for this purpose. Next, Tom Sapsford analyzes the reality effect created by the erotic hybridity of genres, mediums, and genders in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1950-1) before arguing that Hoffmann’s valet Nicklaus (acted by Pamela Brown and sung by Monica Sinclair) offers a rare mid-century character who takes joy in their hybridity and difference. In the third essay, Quinlan Miller and Erica Rand author a tribute to actor Ann B. Davis of *The Bob Cummings Show* (NBC/CBS 1955-59) and *The Brady Bunch* (ABC 1969-1974). In conversation, they study how Davis’ performances draw out dimensions of gender normativities and cisnormativities as well as their own varied attraction to Davis, which in turn prompts critical reflections on how queer desires create and shape trans archives. Finally, Lucy J. Miller takes the cult film *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) as a case study in which she examines

how identification and emotion in horror films are structured through cisnormative ideology.

In “Theorizing 21st Century Transgender Self-Representation,” three scholars study the recent contributions of trans celebrities to trans discourse of the current media moment. Increasing visibility, they reveal, need not (and often does not) mean increasing acceptance or understanding on the part of cisgender publics but can nonetheless provide opportunities for critical intervention. Eliza Steinbock analyzes two transmedial moments from early 2014, in which Laverne Cox and Janet Mock made important interventions in the stigmatization surrounding contemporary transgender bodies and lives in the US. By confronting Katie Couric and Piers Morgan, these two Black trans celebrities, Steinbock argues, following W.E.B. Du Bois, did the critical work of calling attention to the media’s framing of trans people as a problem. Steinbock and scholars from the first section analyze the pervasiveness of *cisnormativity*, as media histories, genres, and platforms continually fail to imagine or image the world from perspectives wherein gender does not align with sex as assigned at birth. Meanwhile, in her essay Rachel Reinke examines the contributions of YouTuber AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy as exemplary of the work of Black, brown, poor, and disabled trans youth who create spaces to resist *transnormativity*. While images of white, gender normative transgender youth are becoming increasingly mobilized in advertising campaigns’ promotions of “diversity,” Reinke examines how those whose gender expressions do not align with white heteronormative national ideals use YouTube to document and critique their recurring experiences of oppression at the hands of state and medical institutions. Finally, John Musser studies pop singer Nomi Ruiz’s contribution to Nicola Formichetti’s pornographic commercial for the Mugler fashion house, *Brothers of Arcadia* (2011), arguing that Ruiz resists the typical fetishization of the transfeminine body in pornography, instead creating new possibilities for trans subjectivity through a deliberate staging of the sublime.

In “Sense8: A Roundtable,” eight scholars, myself included, think through key questions regarding one of today’s most impressive trans-produced mainstream media productions, Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s Netflix series *Sense8*, which

has received surprisingly little critical attention. The Wachowskis are most well known for the work they made prior to coming out publicly as trans, including *Bound* (1996), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003), *V for Vendetta* (2005), and *Cloud Atlas* (2012).⁶ In *Sense8*, the filmmakers' first foray into television, Lana and Lilly teamed up with J. Michael Straczynski to create a transnational vision of global connectivity and resistance with a trans protagonist named Nomi Marks, played by Jamie Clayton, who is herself trans. While many have questioned cisgender Jill Soloway's direction of *Transparent* as well as her casting of a cisgender male actor, Jeffrey Tambor, to play Maura, very little critical attention has turned to the Wachowskis and Clayton. One notable exception is Cael M. Keegan, who is currently completing a monograph on the Wachowskis in which he reads their body of work as an evolution of transgender consciousness and aesthetics.⁷ I myself have written about *Sense8* in the context of the history of feminist science fiction and its imaginative depictions of queer kinship.⁸ In organizing this roundtable, I invited Keegan, and six other scholars I knew to be thinking through this series' aesthetics, politics, and position within the Wachowskis' oeuvre to discuss what the series has contributed in its one season (and Christmas special) and what it could accomplish in later seasons.

In the roundtable, Moya Bailey, micha cárdenas, Laura Horak, Lokeilani Kaimana, Cael M. Keegan Geneveive Newman, Raffi Sarkissian, and I analyze how *Sense8* both follows and breaks from the Wachowskis' prior approach to narrative; offers a distinctly trans* engagement with the histories of cinematic and televisual genres; often relies on western colonial conceptions for its global imagination and marginalizes characters of color; and theorizes contemporary media spectatorship in its appeal to affect and eroticism. We do so believing *Sense8* to be an important cultural interlocutor, not only with regard to the exploration of transgender representation but also questions of sexuality, race, and capital in the global present. However, we also share a conviction that the series' potentiality still leaves substantial room for growth. While admirable for its ambitious attempt to depict a transnational family of sensates, who care and support each other in their personal

struggles as well as unite in order to evade their shared enemy, *Sense8* often rushes through their negotiations of difference. Will, the cop in Chicago, for example, somehow instantaneously knows how to not be transphobic, correcting Nomi's mother when she misgenders her daughter before spending substantial time with Nomi himself. At the same time, we see in the series a glimmer of the kind of global utopian envisioning very much needed in our ceaselessly dystopian present. *Transparent* has been given the opportunity to grow as a creative enterprise, making more room for trans directors, actors, and other team members and arguably creating more robust narratives with each additional season. Those of us contributing to this roundtable would likewise love to see *Sense8* grow through the writing of narratives in which the sensates' negotiations of difference might be explored.

Since I began organizing this issue, noticing the lack of aggregated scholarship on transgender film, television, and new media, *Jump Cut* has released a dossier on the subject. The dossier in fact sprang from a 2016 SCMS panel, sponsored by the Queer Caucus and chaired by Alexandra Juhasz with papers by micha cárdenas, Nicole Erin Morse, and Dan Udy, that I was fortunate enough to attend.⁹ The dossier features a conversation between Juhasz and Sam Feder on trans activist media as well as essays by Morse on transfeminine history in *Transparent*, Udy on genre and politics in *I Am Cait*, and cárdenas on writing the transreal body through game design.¹⁰ This special issue of *Spectator* echoes the *Jump Cut* dossier's contributors' calls for careful considerations of trans representation and visibility. In addition, the authors here offer contributions on trans authorship, arguments for increasingly intersectional considerations of trans media representation, and creative approaches to trans histories that complement those found in *Jump Cut*. Since issuing my own CFP, Laura Horak, Cael M. Keegan, and Eliza Steinbock, all contributors to this issue, have issued a CFP for a special issue of *Somatechnics* on "Cinematic Bodies," in which they "petition[ed] contributors to reflect on how cinematic experiences might transition bodies in characteristically trans* modes of wayward gendering, inspired by definitions of transgender as 'a movement away from an unchosen starting point' (Stryker 2008) and trans* as a 'movement across

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vitality' (Hayward and Weinstein 2015)."¹¹

It is my hope that the field of transgender media studies continues to flourish, as more histories become uncovered and more media gets produced. At a November 2, 2016 special event at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, "The Trans/Gender Tipping Point? Representing Gender Variance from *Tangerine* to *Transparent*," Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, the earliest trans members of the *Transparent* team and two of the series' producers, expressed their fear that this "transgender tipping point" is but a brief moment, describing their advocacy for more trans creative talent as an attempt to usher as many through Hollywood's door before it closes again.¹² Six days later, the US national election marshaled in an unrelenting period of fear, which includes fear for the safety of LGBT

people, especially those marginalized or targeted as immigrants, refugees, and/or people of color. With the subsequent threats that have been made to national and local arts and education organizations, the future of scholarship such as that published here appears only more precarious. If you find this issue's essays and roundtable as compelling as I do, I hope you will support their authors by citing and assigning them widely. In conclusion, I would note that I received few submissions addressing trans representations created outside of the US, Canada, and Europe and was regrettably unable to publish any here. As the field of transgender media studies moves forward into the uncertain future, pursuing and supporting international and transnational scholarship will become ever the more necessary.

Notes

1 Katy Steinmetz, "A Nation in Transition," *TIME* 183, no. 22 (June 9, 2014), 38-47; Buzz Bissinger, "Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story," *Vanity Fair* 57, no. 7 (July 2015), 50-69.

2 For a greater theorization of this "female gaze" and an account of the series' critical reception, see Amy Villarejo, "Jewish, Queerish, Trans, and Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway's *Transparent* and the New Television," *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (Summer 2016), 10-22.

3 Roxanne Samer, "Transgender Media" CFP, <https://roxannesamer.com/2016/06/07/spectator-cfp-transgender-media/>.

4 Ibid.

5 See micha cárdenas, "Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No. 6 (2015), doi:10.7264/N3WH2N8D; and Cael M. Keegan, "Junk Politics: The Visual Economy of Trans Male Genitalia," in *Below the Belt: Genital Talk by Men of Trans Experience*, ed. Trystan Cotton (Transgress Press, 2016), 7-18.

6 Lana Wachowski came out just before *Cloud Atlas*' release in 2012 when she accepted the HRC's visibility award. "Lana Wachowski receives the HRC Visibility Award," YouTube video, 31:09, posted by the Human Rights Campaign, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crHHycz7T_c. Lilly came out in March 2016. For further information about their coming out stories and how they relate to their work, see "Sense8 Roundtable" in this issue.

7 Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

8 Roxanne Samer, "A Kiss Away From Reality: *Sense8*, *Orphan Black*, and Transgender Futurity," National Women's Studies Association, Montreal, November 11, 2016. More in the conclusion to my forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *Receiving Feminisms: Media Cultures and Lesbian Potentiality in the 1970s*.

9 micha cárdenas, Alexandra Juhasz, Nicole Erin Morse, and Dan Udy, "Troubling Transgender Media: Fact, Fiction, and Compromise" (panel, Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Atlanta, GA, April 2, 2016).

10 "Trans Media," *Jump Cut* 57 (Fall 2016), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/index.html>.

11 Laura Horak, Cael M. Keegan, and Eliza Steinbock, "Cinematic Bodies" CFP, <http://carleton.ca/filmstudies/2016/cinematic-bodies/>.

12 "The Trans/Gender Tipping Point? Representing Gender Variance from *Tangerine* to *Transparent*," University of Southern California, November 2, 2016.