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Embodying Resistance Online: Trans Youth Reconfigure Discursive Space(s) of Visibility on YouTube

Abstract

Transgender youth who do not fit neatly into transnormative notions of ideal trans youth citizenship are left with limited choices to articulate their subjectivities and live their lives. Black, brown, poor, and disabled youth who do not see themselves reflected in mainstream representations of transness are further alienated within a sociopolitical context that does not validate their lived experience. This article looks to “being transgender at the mental hospital,” a video posted by YouTuber AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy, as a space where hegemonic understandings of transnormativity are resisted. In this video, Achilles, a transgender teenage boy of Pakistani descent, describes encountering various levels of institutionalized transphobia throughout being arrested and placed in what he refers to as a “mental hospital.” Through a close reading of Achilles’ video, I demonstrate how marginalized trans youth’s bodies, and how their labor—most often erased—unwittingly shore up the visibility of transnormative narratives of overcoming.

Trans youth who have overcome their “bad” transgender feelings are deemed most valuable in their capacity to align with a white heteronormative national body. Images of white, gender normative transgender youth are mobilized as part of advertising campaigns designed to promote diversity. These representations are most often leveraged in online videos meant to inspire and warm viewers’ hearts. For example, the story of Landon Patterson was featured in a YouTube video called “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen,” created by BuzzFeed, which garnered over 2 million views.¹ This video showcases Landon and her friends in beaded gowns, smiling and posing for the camera. Upbeat music swells over the images of these happy trans youth. The popularity of Patterson’s video attests to the affective power of transnormative narratives of overcoming. For transgender youth overcoming is most often defined as moving from one place to another: from an outcast, unhappy youth to one who is accepted by their peers. Viewers of this and similar videos can feel good about and share such narratives of progress for transgender youth in the US.²

Mobilizing certain trans youth in this way ultimately works to further devalue those youth

who are already positioned far from “visibility” in mainstream US discourse and far outside the sphere of ideal youth citizenship. Alternative possibilities for transgender young people to articulate their own subjectivities are foreclosed by only focusing on those who embody or are in close proximity to normative gender identity. In other words, trans youth—particularly those who do not fit neatly into transnormative notions of ideal trans youth citizenship—are left with limited choices with which to both articulate their subjectivities and live their lives.

Black, brown, poor, and disabled youth who do not see themselves reflected in mainstream representations of transness are further alienated within a sociopolitical context that does not validate their lived experience. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed writes, “the availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment.”³ This article is interested in marginalized trans youth’s bodies, and how their labor—most often erased—unwittingly shores up visibility of transnormative narratives of overcoming. To do this, I look to one such marginal representation, YouTuber AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy, a transgender teenage

boy of Pakistani descent. I specifically examine one of Achilles' videos entitled "being transgender at the mental hospital," in which he describes various levels of institutionalized transphobia throughout his experience of being arrested and subsequently housed in what he refers to as a "mental hospital."⁴

I argue that Achilles and other marginalized youth bear the burden of concealing their trans, racialized, and disabled bodies according to white, heteronormative, ableist notions of transness. Their online self-representations on YouTube demonstrate how this concealment is an affective experience. Specifically, Achilles bears an undue responsibility to conceal his "discomforting" identity from those who feel threatened by his embodiment. Centering these experiences serves to "reconfigure the discursive space" of transgender visibility more broadly.⁵ So much of mainstream media claims to represent the transgender experience, such that it becomes an explicitly political act for trans people to speak their feelings publicly and of their own accord.

Achilles' video can be seen as creating an affective space of vulnerability, wherein the labor of resisting imperialist definitions of gender is made visible. This is particularly significant for young disabled trans folks of color, who are often unable to "fade back in" to the population in the name of "proper" citizenship in the eyes of the state.⁶ As Aren Aizura reminds us, in order to be considered citizens trans folks must be able "reorient one's 'different' body into the flow of nationalized aspiration,"⁷ and for transgender young people who are already hypervisible to state institutions, the stakes of this imperative are particularly high. Achilles' experiences documented in this video demonstrates how "bearing the burden of concealment," or fitting his brown trans disabled body into the parameters of embodiment accepted by the colonial state, is a constantly negotiated series of affective encounters. Tracing these encounters makes his burden visible and connects this individual incident of transphobia to a broader culture that devalues trans lives and refuses them agency.

Intimacy and Affective (Dis)comfort

Posted in November 2014, "being transgender at the mental hospital" shares with viewers the

events that unfolded when Achilles was taken to what he calls "the local psychiatric hospital" after he was arrested for attempting suicide. In the broader context of media economies of transgender youth visibility Achilles' video stands out. It is not "heartwarming" or "inspirational" like the stories of transgender youth taken up by BuzzFeed and similar circulatory media outlets. Through it we can see how the stakes of complicating "trans youth visibility" are incredibly high. Scholars such as Laura Horak have written of the importance of self-published videos for transgender youth representation, and she argues YouTube specifically "has almost single-handedly transformed the trans mediascape."⁸ Achilles' video, in which he is seen in his bedroom, speaking directly to the camera with his head, neck, shoulders, and upper chest visible in the frame throughout the video, can be categorized as what Horak describes as a "trans 'talking head' video."⁹ In utilizing YouTube to record their own stories in this way, Horak explains, "[t]rans youth creatively exploit the platform's predilections in order to author and affirm their bodies and selves, in the process generating far-flung communities of support."¹⁰ Compared to the documentary film genre, where an outside "expert" may be called on to explicate the experiences of a subject, YouTube has allowed trans youth who make videos about their own experiences to be seen as the "experts" of their own lives. Achilles' video in particular demonstrates the importance, and explicitly political nature, of making visible his story as a young disabled trans person of color, whose embodiment renders him and others like him outside the narrow confines of transnormativity so widespread in mainstream media representation.

"being transgender at the mental hospital" is one of six videos found on Achilles' YouTube channel, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy. Each video has been posted between six and twelve months apart since his first introductory video posted July 25, 2012.¹¹ He acknowledges the long periods of time passing between videos at the beginning of "being transgender at the mental hospital" by apologizing to viewers for his absence, explaining that he "went stealth for high school" and therefore did not feel comfortable making videos in that context. Going stealth, or effectively erasing his trans embodiment for the purposes of survival, demonstrates from the

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outset one example of the labor trans young people must perform to resolve the institutional inability to cope with trans youth. Further, it elucidates the “concealment” required of him as a transgender student at his high school.

Achilles’ video has an intimate, amateur feel. He is in his own bedroom in the video; he appears to be making the video without the assistance of production equipment save for his own camera; and his video does not contain any text or visible editing apart from being uploaded to YouTube. Horak has also argued that such “formal qualities—close framing, a private setting, direct address, and amateur style” of trans youth’s YouTube videos “make the claim that this person is real and their statements true.”¹² Unlike overly-produced videos that encourage a distance between viewers and trans youth as “objects” of mainstream representation, Achilles’ video emphasizes his experience as “real” and authentic, making him the expert, and author, of his own life experience. As such, we can already see Achilles’ video as political in the context of mainstream media that may often speak about trans youth, but within which trans youth are rarely called on to speak about themselves.

Continuing, Achilles says, “I want to talk about something that happened over the summer that I just decided that I should probably share to let people know.” He often looks down or away from the camera, and he speaks in slow, uneasy sentences. Often stopping and re-starting phrases, which are frequently interjected with “um” or “uh,” Achilles chooses his words carefully and with much hesitation. He does not convey a sense of confidence in front of the camera that many representations of transnormative youth in mainstream representations emphasize.

A common refrain in these representations, such as BuzzFeed’s “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video, is that trans youth are “happy” when they are able to “be themselves.”¹³ Happy affect is conveyed in these representations as confidence or what we can liken to a level of “comfort” in front of the camera or with sharing one’s story. By emphasizing how comfortable these youth feel about sharing their stories, mainstream video producers draw attention to these youths’ proximity to (trans)normativity. As Ahmed reminds us, “normativity is comfortable for those

who can inhabit it...we don’t tend to notice what is comfortable, even when we think we do.”¹⁴ Those stories of trans youth that are shared openly and comfortably, such as those of Landon Patterson’s on BuzzFeed, are often those in closest proximity to whiteness and heteronormativity; they often attend universities and do not identify as disabled. Further, trans youth who are able to have their videos monetized on YouTube are most often those who embody this sense of “comfort” or at least the editing capacity to make it appear that they do.

Unlike these stories of transgender youth who often appear as smiling, well dressed, and surrounded by friends, in his own video Achilles appears neither “comfortable” nor happy. Indeed, such discomfort is conveyed in the video’s very title; “being transgender at the mental hospital” does not imply a heartwarming story will be presented to viewers in this video. Making this *discomfort* visible demonstrates further the political work that such a representation does in the context of mainstream media that would rather posit transgender youth as “just like everyone else,” or comfortable when their transness is not noticed. These ideal trans youth citizens are presented as fulfilling the terms Aizura outlines of trans citizenship: “fading back into the population (and exercising the rights of populist democracy)” and meeting “the imperative to be ‘proper’ in the eyes of the state.”¹⁵ The palpable discomfort in Achilles’ affective displays and speech patterns prevents him from “fading back” into the population that these terms require and presents a different affective engagement with viewers that draws attention to his experiences of non-normativity.

“Terrorist” Bodies and Racialized Trans Panics

After this introduction, which sets the affective tone for the video, Achilles explains the events that unfolded when he arrived at the hospital:

So, one of the first things they asked me was obviously, ‘What’s your name?’ And being that I’m just 16, my name on my birth certificate or ID has not been changed, so when I told them it was Jack it became apparent that there was some sort of discrepancy between those

two so...They didn't like the transgender thing.

Explaining his treatment upon his arrival to the hospital introduces this traumatic experience of institutionalized transphobia, and provides an example of how Achilles, like many trans youth of color and disabled trans youth, continues to face unprecedented discrimination.

Following his recounting of this arrival at the hospital, Achilles explains, "Being that the hospital was in Texas, no one really likes that stuff here, so... I'm basically going to describe the frankly really bad conditions and what it's like to be a transgender person in the mental health field." At this point in the video, Achilles has affectively conveyed the experience of administrative violence at a "mental hospital" to which he was sent in order to contain the danger to himself that his suicide attempt presumably presented. He has also explained how his transgender identity was further contained by medical professionals and the medical institution to which he was delivered. Achilles' tone conveys confusion and disbelief, and his slow and uneasy explanations underscore how he felt stripped of autonomy in these situations.

Achilles goes on to describe various instances of harassment he endured while being treated at the hospital, including being told by a hospital staff member that the reason why he was in the hospital was "not because you tried to kill yourself, it is because you are transgender and you need to be fixed." Further, after a trigger warning that he was going to be discussing sexual assault, Achilles recounts:

I didn't read over the rules...I was kind of panicking, and I was taken into a dark room, by myself, and I was told to take off all my clothes. Um, I said no, and I was told that if I did not comply I would be in trouble and that it was the rules of the hospital and that every patient had to remove their clothes upon coming in, to check for like knives, or anything that could be used to harm yourself. Like they said it was a safety procedure.

At this point viewers see Achilles make quotation marks in the air with his fingers as he

says "safety procedure." As he shakes his head "no," while under his breath says, "no it wasn't," viewers are again reminded of the pain of Achilles' experience. Horak notes that trans vlogs have the ability to "position the viewer as a secret confidant. Despite the public nature of YouTube, trans vloggers often act as if they and the viewer are the only ones in the room."¹⁶ Achilles, recounting the reality of his experience in the form of a whisper and silent gesture of quotation marks in the air as he says "safety procedure," reiterates the intimacy of the video and elicits a collectivity that Horak has argued contributes to the political power of trans youth vlogs.¹⁷ As if he was speaking to viewers in person, Achilles reiterates the particularly traumatic experience of being dehumanized by the nurse by lowering his voice, as if he could not bear to speak it aloud, in sharp contrast to those trans youth who tell their stories boldly and with confidence.

As he continues to describe his encounter with the nurse, Achilles reveals that eventually, he was forced by this nurse to "remove everything so that she could see my genitals." As he looks at the camera, the trauma that he experiences recalling this particular incident is invoked by the distraught expression on his face. Achilles' recounting of the details of this incident makes it visible to viewers. However, he also importantly connects this individual incident of transphobia to a broader culture that devalues trans lives and refuses them agency. He looks down after a brief pause and continues to explain:

A lot of the questions that I've heard transgender people being asked is basically, what's going on downstairs. And basically this nurse took it upon herself to answer that question and abuse her power as a medical assistant. And when I asked all of the other patients they reported to me that, um, I was actually the only one who was forced to take off all of their clothes.

As he recounts the hospital's refusal to allow him to have his name on his identifying nametag, he also explains how staff members at the hospital repeatedly forced him and another young trans patient to deny their trans identities by requiring all of the young people at the hospital to say their "birth

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names” upon regular introductions. He explains,

They would try to trick me into telling them my birth name, how to pronounce it, because you know, I’m from Pakistan. I have a really long, complicated birth name, it’s really hard to pronounce. And they would try to be like, ‘Oh, where are you from?’ ‘How do you pronounce your name?’ and I was just like...you’re just trying to trick me into pronouncing it so that that’s the name you’ll call me by.

The passages above necessitate an interrogation of the intersections of Achilles’ trans, disabled, racialized, “terrorist” body and the affectivity of those intersections. As he recounts in this video, those in power read Achilles’ body as threatening and attempt to contain it in violent ways. His disabled embodiment was met with criminalization when he was arrested for attempting suicide; his visible transgender embodiment was then denied and used as justification for verbal and sexual assault during his hospital stay; and further attempts to discredit his Pakistani name and embodiment also sought to contain his “terrorist” embodiment. The ways in which he recounts these incidents intimately and in their entirety demands viewers think about transgender experience in intersectional ways.

Thinking of Achilles’ experiences through this lens, we can read the actions of the medical assistant—“tricking” him into revealing his Pakistani “birth name” and forcing him to remove all of his clothing under the guise of a “security protocol”—as affective exchanges of fear and hate. Fear of Achilles’ trans body is particularly amplified by what Puar terms “nationalist paranoia.” The potential terrorist body is “a new visual category, the ‘terrorist look-alike’ or those who ‘look like terrorists’” in the post-9/11 era of contemporary US society. These bodies experience heightened surveillance and are particularly “sticky.”¹⁸ Rhetorics of fear and hate stick to these bodies as a way to shore up the US homonationalist project.

Achilles is contained—stripped of clothing and forced to reveal his “birth name”—as a way of maintaining “safety” for the majority, curtailing the possibility of “impending violence” that his racialized trans embodiment presents. In the post-

9/11 US context, fear does not reside in a body but “could be materialized in any body with a particular profile range, [which] allows for the figure of the terrorist to retain its potent historical signifiatory ambiguity while it also enables the fear to ‘stick’ to bodies that ‘could be’ terrorists.”¹⁹ The fear that sticks to Achilles’ trans racialized body therefore allows the nurses’ violence against him to be seen as justified. Rather than seeing their abuse as violence imposed on Achilles, they see his inherently threatening body as needing to be curtailed.

‘I’ve endured a lot of treatment like this. And so far, that was the worst.’

Achilles’ publicizing of his feelings throughout this video uncovers that which neoliberal multiculturalist logic renders unintelligible. The complex intersectional subject positions that youth like Achilles occupy are not often seen in mainstream media. Such discourses often attempt to (re) present transgender youth as universally struggling for assimilative recognition by the nation-state. Stories such as that of Landon Patterson circulate widely and are characterized by their happy affect. Progressive narratives of trans youth overcoming are pervasive in the contemporary media sphere, often being shared in major media outlets to elicit inspiration among large numbers of viewers.

However, this pervasiveness also works to foreclose possibilities for transgender youth to articulate their own, often “unhappy” or transgressive narratives. The lived realities of young people like Achilles are not only erased but provide the surplus for transnormative stories of white, heteronormative, non-disabled transgender youth happiness to gain value. Therefore, the self-representations found on YouTube from Achilles and other transgender youth whose lived experiences do not fit neatly into mainstream narratives create important spaces of political action. Achilles’ articulations of his experience on YouTube reveal how, when understood as part of the systemic, institutionalized refusal of dignity and respect to trans youth, these videos can become rallying points.

In the conclusion to his video, Achilles explains that he has recently reported the sexual assault that he experienced while at the hospital and encourages others to do the same:

I just would like to tell anyone that if this happened to you or if you know of anything similar, if you could please tell me. And if you haven't already, please report it because reporting it is honestly the first step to stopping all this. And making sure that when people are in such a time of need that they need to be, um, entered into a psychiatric hospital, that that is not a weight that they have to carry at that point.

Describing his experiences and capturing his affective reactions in his video allows Achilles to make institutionalized transphobia visible. His video demonstrates how many marginalized trans youth must also navigate entrenched structures, such as nationalism and racism, which bolster transphobia. The stakes of this navigation are particularly high for those youth who do not fit neatly into the confines of transnormative embodiment. Not only does Achilles' video make visible his experiences, but he also calls for a collective naming of others' similar experiences. He recognizes that the racialized, transphobic abuse suffered at the hands of gatekeepers like the medical professionals he encountered is an additional "weight" for disabled youth looking to such resources for assistance. In contextualizing his own experience as a point of entry for collective resistance to transphobia, Achilles' video works to open new spaces for marginalized trans youth to be heard and come together.

At one point in reflecting on his experience at the hospital, Achilles he looks directly into the camera and says, "I've endured a lot of treatment like this. And so far, that was the worst." A sentiment rarely seen in mainstream representations of happy trans youth, such a statement echoes those of other trans youth vloggers of color. For example, Levi Whitfield's video "To My Fellow Queer POC," questions why more trans youth of color aren't

more visible on YouTube.²⁰ Spencer Adams' video "The Worst Day of My Life," describes a meeting with his employer "about being trans, and going by Spencer, and he/him pronouns" as "probably the worst thing [he has] ever experienced in my life."²¹ Eli Brown's video "Poem in Response to Leelah Alcorn's Suicide" captures the hopelessness felt by many trans youth whose stories aren't otherwise reflected in the mainstream, and are often forgotten.²² These videos paint a different picture of transgender young people than the smiling image of Landon Patterson in her crown and bejeweled homecoming gown. As young people who do not present a straightforward stories of progress for trans youth, these vloggers confront viewers with a more complex and uncertain future. While popular representations of transnormative youth promise happy endings and the hopeful futurity of a tolerant nation, these vloggers force us to examine which stories that are left out, and why.

While mainstream media celebrates the election of transgender homecoming queens, videos from YouTubers like Achilles, Levi Whitfield, Spencer Adams, and Eli Brown call into question a universal narrative of progress for transgender youth. The transgender future that is articulated in these narratives is made more tentative and vulnerable by the lived experiences of disabled trans folks of color publicized on YouTube. "So, thanks for listening" Achilles says in the last few seconds of his video. With a smile and another look at the camera, he tells viewers, "I'll be back with more videos now." If we are to consider a world wherein all narratives of trans youth are valued, then those videos from Achilles and others like him should be our starting point. In addressing their experiences of systemic oppression, videos from these young folks present transphobia, racism, classism, and ableism as inextricably linked, and force us to understand trans youths' lived experiences in ways much more complex than simply overcoming "bad" feelings in order to become "happy."

Rachel Reinke received her PhD in Gender Studies from Arizona State University, where she teaches classes in Queer Studies and Cyberfeminisms. Her research interests include, broadly, transgender childhood(s); cultural and media studies; and (bio)political economies of late modernity. Her dissertation, *Getting to be Seen: Visibility as Erasure in Media Economies of Transgender Youth*, examined how transgender young people utilize online self-representations to negotiate their subjectivities with and against the regulatory discourses surrounding them.

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Notes

- 1 "Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen," YouTube video, 2:17, posted by BuzzFeed Blue, Oct. 11, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMfQHNIcaTM> (accessed Oct. 23, 2015).
- 2 Similar videos include: "To My Fellow Queer POC," YouTube video, 3:32, posted by Levi Whitfield, Sep 16, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BM9a1JVaKyE> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017); "The Worst Day of My Life," YouTube video, 4:05, posted by Spencer Adams, Apr. 8, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT5ECdrdpgM> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017); and "Poem in Response to Leelah Alcorn's Suicide," YouTube video, 3:20, posted by thatbrownone, Dec. 31 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ19VrjStbg> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017).
- 3 Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 149.
- 4 "being transgender at the mental hospital," YouTube video, 7:54, posted by AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy, Nov. 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgG4NtXj04g> (accessed Sept. 1, 2015).
- 5 Tobias Raun, "DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-Representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube," in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, eds. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 179.
- 6 Aren Aizura, "Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of (Trans)Sexual Citizenship," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7.2 (2006), 295.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 295-6.
- 8 Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.4 (2014), 572.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 573.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 573.
- 11 "Introductory Video," YouTube video, 4:22, posted by AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy, July 25, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3p8_A-T064Q (accessed Jan. 10, 2017).
- 12 Horak, "Trans on YouTube," 575.
- 13 "Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen," YouTube video, 2:17, posted by BuzzFeed Blue, Oct. 11, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMfQHNIcaTM> (accessed Oct. 23, 2015).
- 14 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 147.
- 15 Aizura, "Of Borders and Homes," 295.
- 16 Horak, "Trans on YouTube," 575.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 575.
- 18 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 175
- 19 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 186.
- 20 "To My Fellow Queer POC," YouTube video, 3:32, posted by Levi Whitfield, Sep 16, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BM9a1JVaKyE> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017).
- 21 "The Worst Day of My Life," YouTube video, 4:05, posted by Spencer Adams, Apr. 8, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT5ECdrdpgM> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017).
- 22 "Poem in Response to Leelah Alcorn's Suicide," YouTube video, 3:20, posted by thatbrownone, Dec. 31 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ19VrjStbg> (accessed Jan. 5, 2017).