

After the Tipping Point: Investigating Visuals of Transgender Bodies in Magazine Media

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ABSTRACT: How do we trouble cisnormativity in a world that relies so heavily on gender identity? From the clothes we wear to the language we use, gender markers shape how we experience the world and engage with others. Too often, when we blur the boundaries of what “male” and “female” look like, we spur fear, confusion, and outrage. These sentiments have real-world repercussions: In 2017, Human Rights Campaign reported record-high numbers of fatal anti-transgender violence in America. *After the Tipping Point: Investigating Visuals of Transgender People In Magazine Media* seeks to explore the intersection of modern media and trans identities by analyzing editorial photographs of transgender individuals after *TIME*’s professed “transgender tipping point” in 2014. The project examines four key case studies from some of the U.S.’s most widely read magazines: Caitlyn Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* cover story (July 2015); Aydian Dowling’s *Men’s Health* photo spread (November 2015); *National Geographic*’s “Gender Revolution” issue (January 2017); and Ines Rau’s *Playboy* photo spread (November/December 2017), to investigate how, why, and for whom these images are produced and relate them to literature on the complex nature of publicly visible bodies. Because media content both manifests culture and informs it, magazines are a productive site for investigating public discourse on trans issues, including the shifts over time and limitations of such conversations. Though new photographs of transgender bodies have appeared in popular magazines post-“tipping point,” these depictions often fall prey to the familiar trappings of binary gender roles, highlighting the power of media representation as a force to both buck conventions and perpetuate them, sometimes simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: Journalism; Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Media; Magazines; Transgender Issues; Photography; Editorial Photography; Media Representation

Introduction: *TIME*'s "Transgender Tipping Point"

On May 30, 2014, transgender actress Laverne Cox, who famously portrayed Sophia Burset in *Orange Is The Next Black*, broke ground as the first trans person to appear on the cover of *TIME*. Four years later, her full-body portrait is still as commanding as it was groundbreaking: Sporting a form-fitting dress in a subdued shade of blue, Cox looks directly at the camera, demanding readers' attention (and inarguably securing her status as a trailblazing covergirl.) The actress is posed tall and proud, strutting forward as long, blond locks spill over her smooth, caramel-colored skin. Using Cox—a black transgender woman—and her unprecedented rise to stardom as a launching point, *TIME* reporter Katy Steinmetz boldly declared the moment America's "transgender tipping point":

Transgender people...are emerging from the margins to fight for an equal place in society. This new transparency is improving the lives of a long misunderstood minority and beginning to yield new policies, as trans activists and their supporters push for changes in schools, hospitals, workplaces, prisons and the military.

Cox's *TIME* cover story was a landmark achievement for transgender visibility: As of July 2017, the magazine had a circulation of more than 3 million readers per six-month period and is the world's most widely read news magazine (Alliance for Audited Media). As a legacy news magazine, *TIME* also exists in a unique space in media, offering more trend commentary and reflecting ongoing cultural dialogues more overtly than other popular titles (think *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*.) Though Steinmetz understood the complexity of transgender issues and admitted that there remained plenty of work to be done, her cover story set the tone for a slew of portrayals of trans people in magazines. In May 2015, transgender runway model Andreja Pejic became the first trans person to be profiled by *Vogue*. Born in Yugoslavia but raised in Australia,

Pejic spent the earlier part of her career walking in both men's and women's fashion shows as the world's first "androgynous" supermodel. She came out as trans in 2013, underwent gender-confirming surgery later that year, and resumed her modeling career after. Pejic appeared in a series of black and white images within the magazine, sporting a cleavage-baring tee, a sleek trench coat, and subtle makeup. In her *Vogue* profile, writer Alice Gregory (2015) questioned whether the supermodel's highly public transition and unprecedented success marked a "transgender turning point" in fashion:

Pejic's success neatly coincides with—and embodies—a kind of cultural and political mainstreaming of transgender identity...It's the distance between this seemingly inevitable future and where we are right now that makes the current moment so exciting and so fraught. Transgender people may be more visible, but they're also still objects of curiosity and scrutiny—not yet accepted as individuals with the right to lead lives as uninterrogated as everyone else's.

Months later, transgender bodybuilder and fitness model Aydian Dowling entered a nationwide search for the next "cover guy" of *Men's Health*, which reaches an estimated 1.8 million paid readers every six months (Alliance for Audited Media 2017). Dowling graced the cover of the magazine's "Reader's Issue" in October 2015, becoming the first transgender man to be featured on the cover of a mainstream men's magazine. (Dowling won the "Reader's Choice" portion of the contest, but his public support wasn't enough for him to secure the top seed: he lost to cisgender model Angelo Picoto.)

And, of course, no discussion of transgender bodies in magazines is complete without addressing Caitlyn Jenner's "Call Me Caitlyn" cover. In July 2015, Jenner, a former Olympian and reality TV star, came out publicly via a *Vanity Fair* cover story. Prior to her transition, Jenner hid her gender identity from viewers and loved ones. The cover image, which showcased

Jenner's newly feminized physique in a form-fitting white corset, was a step in Jenner's self-professed journey toward freedom. "Bruce always had to tell a lie," she told *Vanity Fair*. "He was always living that lie. Every day he always had a secret from morning to night...Caitlyn doesn't have secrets [anymore]."

These post-2014 portrayals of transgender bodies play an important part in the greater cultural cognizance of trans issues and acceptance of trans realities. However, media representation as a tool for liberation is more nuanced than it may seem. Too often, visible transgender characters or public figures perpetuate negative stereotypes, inaccurately represent the lived realities of trans Americans, or otherwise fall short of the needs and desires of the trans community. In this paper, I identify, justify, and explore four key cases of transgender representation in editorial photography post-"tipping point": Caitlyn Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover story (July 2015); Aydian Dowling's *Men's Health* photo spread (November 2015); *National Geographic*'s "Gender Revolution" issue (January 2017); and Ines Rau's *Playboy* photo spread (November/December 2017). (It is important to note that I use the terms "queer" and "LGBT" interchangeably, to encompass all members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer community. I also use "transgender" and "trans" interchangeably, though these terms specifically denote people who self-identify as transgender or gender non-conforming/gender non-binary and/or exhibit identifiably gender non-conforming characteristics.) First, I provide a historical context for transgender representation in the English language, in American print and visual media, and in the general public consciousness. Next, I outline the theoretical framework I use to unpack the significance of my case studies. I explicate my findings, paying particular attention to the nuances of which bodies are represented and for whom these images are shared. Lastly, I link these four case studies to recent shifts in public

discourse and public policy regarding transgender Americans. I argue that media representation as an impetus for social and political change is as limited and potentially hazardous as it is progressive.

Historical Context: Transgender Visibility, Then and Now

“Transgender” in the English language vernacular

As early as the mid-‘90s, the term “transgender” was used to identify non-cisgender individuals in newspapers and magazines (*The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Time Out New York*, etc.) It gained popularity both within and outside of the trans community in the late ‘90s, although the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) officially added the word to its lexicon in 2003. OED defines transgender as, “Of, relating to, or designating a person whose identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender, but combines or moves between these; transgendered” (OED Online 2018). Prior to 2003, medical and sociological scholars in the early ‘80s offered up “transgender,” and “transgenderism,” another form of the term, as a more accurate alternative to “transsexual,” which was previously synonymous with transgender. (“Transsexual” is also now seen as outdated.) The term “trans” as an abbreviated version of “transgender” or “transsexual” has been used since the ‘80s and ‘90s (OED Online 2018). In 1986, writer Rita Kempley for *The Washington Post* used “trans” in a review of French drama *Menage*: “[The film] concerns a triangle of lovers sampling their sexual options, from hetero to homo to trans to bi and beyond.” A source quoted in a 1993 *New York Mag* article called politician Antonio Pagán “[insensitive] to the trans community” (Taylor).

Of course, these approximations are limited by the dynamic nature of language. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, the word “gay,” now understood to refer to one’s sexual orientation, “was used to describe what some would now call being trans, in a way that didn’t separate orientation and gender identity” (Goetz 2017). Usually conflated in this way by people who didn’t identify as LGBT, the term “gay” in this sense reflected the general public’s poor understanding of queer subcultures at this time. Few mainstream media outlets actually covered LGBT movements or

communities up until the '80s, when the AIDS crisis erupted onto the national stage (Elliot 2016). Even then, the conversations were limited to terms that described gay and bisexual men, meaning the nuances of inner-community labels and identifiers could easily be lost on outsiders. Someone lacking subcultural literacy or context could easily misidentify an effeminate gay man as a transgender woman, or vice versa. Notably, “cisgender”—the antonym of transgender, coined in the late '90s—entered into the OED in 2015 (Kellaway 2015). This achievement is important, both as a literal affirmation of the term’s legitimacy, and as a symbolic validation of the lived realities of transgender versus cisgender individuals. Today, the term is commonly understood and respected as an important part of queer and trans discourse: when used correctly, “cisgender” is to “transgender” what “heterosexual” is to “homosexual.” But its widespread use is still contested by conservative political pundits, who argue that the term unnecessarily complicates a concept that was previously accepted as the norm. Last November, conservative commentator Dick Yarbrough poked fun at the term for *The Telegraph*:

While I may have thwarted a dread disease, I have now discovered that I am a (deep breath) cisgender. Why me? Why now? Where was a cisgenderologist when I needed one? Even worse, no one told me. I had to find out the hard way.

Yarbrough’s comments are incredibly insensitive, but his remarks point to the potential of vocabulary as a vehicle for visibility. By design, specific terminologies like “cisgender” and “transgender” allow us to mark “abnormal” bodies and identities, rendering them “visible” in the context of cultural and societal discourse. Importantly, the OED validation and subsequent proliferation of the term “cisgender” both permits and encourages a dialogue about the unmarked and assumed nature of gender identity: just as we are all assumed to be heterosexual until we

come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, we are similarly assumed to be cisgender until proven otherwise.

Images of transgender bodies pre-mass media

The focus of this paper is mainstream magazines, which constitute a large and enduring sector of mass media in recent history and contemporary America. Of course, mass media as we know it today didn't exist until the mid-20th century. But pre-mass media images of transgender bodies offer an enlightening look at photography as an agent of the gaze. These bodies have always existed, usually in specific subcultural spaces. Before the advent of mass media on a mass scale, marginalized gender identities just weren't "visible" to the mainstream public.

Jack Halberstam (2012) writes about early 20th century photographers who embedded themselves within queer and trans subcultures, ostensibly to obtain a more authentic and less voyeuristic look at a marginalized community. Brassai, a Hungarian-French photographer, operated in this manner, photographing lesbian women in the 1930s at a Parisian gay bar. At first glance, notes Brassai, the women appeared masculine. But at a second and third glance—the sort of detailed look enabled by the retrospective nature of photography—the nuances of his subjects, presumably masculine-of-center lesbian women, begin to surface. Brassai's subjects embodied a certain "transgender look," writes Halberstam: These cisgender lesbian women toyed with the confines of the male/female gender binary. Halberstam points to a gendered power shift inherent in this "transgender look": "A queer woman [relays] her looks through a male gaze" (2012). While these photographs (and, as a result, these gender non-conforming bodies) never quite reached the level of publicness as contemporary transgender imagery, their existence suggests a gender non-conforming subculture that thrived despite the rigidity of prevailing gender norms.

The advent of magazines: transgender bodies in print from the '30s to the 2010s

Today's popular magazines can trace their roots back to November 1936, when the first edition of *Life* hit the stands. Most notable for its unique design and style, *Life* featured editorial photographs front-and-center, shifting the emphasis from its written reporting. National magazines across the board adopted its more visual format, hinting at a greater cultural shift toward image-based media (Rose 2004). From the '20s to the '60s, national magazines continued to gain popularity, reaching circulation numbers in the millions. The advent of television "eventually hampered [magazines'] ability to maintain high popularity," and the proliferation of the Internet continues to complicate the medium's business model (Rose 2004). Regardless, the magazine remains a touchstone of American culture, adapting its form to fit the prevailing modes of media consumption around the world (Garvey 2003). This speaks to the enduring significance of magazines as a mode of visibility, and as a productive area to reflect on the perils of public visibility. While print magazines are now joined by other forms of media (particularly online media as popular methods of news consumption continue to shift), the medium continues to possess a unique sort of weight—both literally, as a tangible object, and figuratively, as a medium with a lengthy and prestigious legacy.

Prior to the '60s, popular magazines largely reflected the sociocultural traditions, beliefs, and mores of their audiences. Just as openly gay or transgender celebrities were hard to come by on the radio or on television, they were similarly difficult to find in the pages of glossy magazines. In perhaps the first instance of transgender representation in a mainstream magazine, a 1981 edition of *Playboy* featured actress Caroline "Tula" Cossey, a trans woman, in a visual editorial. At the time, Cossey, an American supermodel who'd appeared in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*, wasn't openly transgender—and her world came crashing down when she was outed by a tabloid. She lost family, friends, and career connections, and her public outing

“propelled [her] into activism.” It was partly out of necessity: “I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life feeling ashamed or apologizing for it,” she told *The Huffington Post* in June 2016. “And I didn’t think anyone else should either.” Because she was closeted at the time, Cossey’s ‘81 *Playboy* photoshoot isn’t neatly comparable to Cox’s 2014 *TIME* cover. Nobody knew she was transgender, so her inclusion in the magazine didn’t necessarily constitute a victory for trans visibility. However, Cossey was invited to model for *Playboy* again in 1990—this time, to grace the cover of the magazine, which she did.

In the early 2000s, transgender representation in film and television began to gain traction. Films like the on-screen adaptation of John Cameron Mitchell’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) and the American comedy-drama *TransAmerica* (2005) depicted transgender characters, as did CBS’s *The Education of Max Bickford* (2001) and ABC’s *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010). But representation in mainstream print magazines stalled almost entirely until 2007, when Candis Cayne became the first transgender actress to play a trans character on primetime television. Cayne, who starred in ABC’s short-lived *Dirty Sexy Money*, detailed her gender transition journey in a highly public blog—and in May 2007, *Newsweek* ran “Rethinking Gender: What Makes Us Male or Female?” a cover story tackling the science behind gender dysphoria alongside the lived experiences of transgender Americans. The piece even touched on the increased visibility of transgender people in media: “Now, as transgender people become more visible and challenge the old boundaries, they’ve given voice to another debate—whether gender comes in just two flavors” (Newsweek 2007). The years immediately following saw the introduction and rise in popularity of Logo TV’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-present), a reality television competition for drag queens that continues to blur the line between *performing* a transgender or gender non-conforming identity and *living* a transgender life. In 2013, Kristin

Beck, an elite former naval officer, released her bestselling memoir *Warrior Princess: A U.S. Navy Seal's Journey To Coming Out As Transgender*. That same year, Laverne Cox broke ground as a starring actress in Netflix's *Orange Is The New Black*, leading to her 2014 profile and cover story in *TIME* (Cavalcante 2018).

Indeed, these representations of transgender bodies from the early 2000s and 2010s laid the ground for the political and cultural movement for trans equality to come. Cox's starring role in *Orange* (and subsequent *TIME* cover) was a watershed moment for trans visibility, a breaking point caused not by any one instance, but rather by a steadily growing number of other depictions of trans realities in mainstream media.

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

The Public "Archive" as a Mode of Visibility

A brief history of photography as a means of systematic categorization

Since its advent in the early 19th century, photography has been used as a tool to systematically document and categorize bodies. The medium has long been described as an "art-science," even in its earliest days. Writes Mary Warner Marien (2006), "The term recognizes that photographic images were not only generated by a mix of science and art, but also applied in both activities." Indeed, scientists and scholars used photographs from the first commercially accessible cameras to both capture artistically and classify scientifically, creating implicit and explicit hierarchies often to the detriment of their subjects. One frequently cited example is Louis Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes. Agassiz, a Swiss-born biologist and scholar, photographed and cataloged the bodies of enslaved black men and women as evidence to prove his long-debunked (and superbly racist) theory of "separate creation." The theory purported that people of different races evolved from separate species, inherently endowing racial "types" (read: people of color)

with separate and unequal physical characteristics and mental aptitudes. Agassiz's photographs existed within a very specific sociocultural context: Writes Brian Wallis (1995), "Though strictly scientific in purpose, the daguerreotypes took on a very particular meaning in the context of prevailing political, economic, and aesthetic theories about race." And Agassiz wasn't the only theorist to employ photography as a method of substantiating and justifying systems of oppression: around the world, sociologists, anthropologists, and scientists used photography as a tool to document, categorize, and classify marginalized bodies. From the late 19th century to the mid 20th century, researchers in nations as widespread and diverse as Brazil, Russia, and the United Kingdom photographed poor and working-class laborers, capturing and inadvertently perpetuating prevailing notions of ethnic and socioeconomic "types" (Marien 2006). These images were widely created by and for white men—an important factor to note, writes Wallis, because "representation is governed by not only who makes the image but also by who looks" (1995). This highlights the importance of analyzing both the image itself and the audience to whom it is targeted, since both factors inform one another.

Photography as a tool for typologizing criminals and misfits also emerged in the mid-to-late 1800s. As early as the 1840s, photographers like Mathew Brady, best known for his prolific pictorial documentation of the American Civil War, also photographed inmates at mental institutions. Brady's images, preserved in illustrations from Marmaduke Sampson's 1846 book *Rationale of Crime*, affirmed the prevailing sociological theory that "criminals and cretins could be recognized by their outward appearance, that the mark of deviance was presumed to be emblazoned across the head and body like a stigmata" (Wallis 1995). Unsurprisingly, these photographs "structured the logic of racial classification" in the decades to come (Wallis 1995).

These problematic and oppressive practices are important historical examples of photography as a means of classification. The medium arguably begets selection and hierarchy: after all, the mere act of photographing a subject is highly subjective. Every photographer makes both conscious and unconscious technical choices in the act of photographing people and publishing the resulting images. Likewise, photography implies a hierarchy between the photographer and the subject. This implicit power imbalance is exacerbated by sociocultural dynamics of the individuals at hand, as well as prevailing political and cultural contexts: Writes Paul Frosh (2001), “Photography is invariably, although by no means only, a performance of the bestowal, exercise and revocation of social power through visibility.” Indeed, the photographer-subject relationship perpetuates this fluctuation of power. But these shifts must be understood on an individual level as well as a mass media level. Depending on the composition, context, and distribution of a photograph, subjects that become “visible” through images can be empowered or disempowered, heralded or further hindered.

Sekula’s “archive” as a lens for analysis

These complexities inherent to photography contribute to what photographer Allan Sekula (1986) calls the “shadow archive,” and what Wallis (1995) further describes as “that ultimate, imaginary ranking and organizing of information implied by the very selective and classificatory nature of photography.” The archive in this sense is a departure from the term’s most basic meaning: the Oxford English Dictionary defines an archive as “a place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept” (2018). Sekula and Wallis mark the archive as a cultural barometer of sorts. Images that enter into the public archive echo the sociocultural values of their respective time and place. Writes Sekula (1986), “the general, all-inclusive archive necessarily contains both the traces of the visible bodies, heroes, leaders, moral

exemplars, celebrities, and those of the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal.” The archive in this sense offers a telling glimpse into the people, places, and overarching trends deemed publicly and historically significant, either in a positive or negative light, by societal standards.

Much like the physical world it mirrors, the archive simultaneously “encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain” (Sekula 1986). Photography as a medium replicates real-world hierarchies of power and privileges certain bodies above others. If Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes and other historical examples of oppressive visual classification ring true, then the body of the white man reigns supreme. Women, people of color, and other marginalized bodies are treated as lesser in the ways that they are depicted, denied the complexity, nuance, and dignity of the white man. Transgender bodies, while similarly marginalized, are different in that gender nonconformity inherently positions them outside the dichotomy of male vs. female representation. Existing as a transgender person is a uniquely subversive and resistive act—sometimes covertly, in the case of trans people who “pass” as cisgender, and sometimes overtly, in the case of identifiably transgender people whose gender non-conforming bodies trouble the base-level mores of the “social terrain” they inhabit.

What’s gained (and what’s lost) by being in the public eye

Arguably, seeing print images of marginalized bodies so widely and so publicly is victory. Emergence into the public archive often parallels (and, in some cases, further encourages) progressive shifts in cultural attitudes and public policy. For instance, Cox’s groundbreaking *TIME* cover story ran in May 2014. One year prior, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) reclassified its diagnosis of gender identity disorder as “gender dysphoria,” a more sensitive and inclusive pathology that advocates claimed marked a “turning point for transgender issues” (Koh 2012). Likewise, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) expanded

its catalog of hate crime categories from 2013 onward, adding “gender-identity bias motivation,” “anti-transgender bias,” and “anti-gender non-conforming bias” to its public database. Similarly, more frequent, widespread print media coverage of specific bodies can correlate with cultural phenomena surrounding those bodies. Harkening back to Cox’s cover story, *TIME*’s coverage coincided with the proliferation of Netflix’s *Orange Is The New Black*. After its July 2013 premiere, the critically acclaimed series was Netflix’s most streamed show, much to the shock of higher-ups, who never expected the series to outperform other in-house spectacles (Greenwald 2014). *Orange* was notable for many reasons, including its racially and ethnically diverse cast; its female-led production team and cast; and its inclusion of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women front-and-center. It showed producers that a series created by women and featuring transgender women could succeed, both in terms of monetary gain and prestige (Greenwald 2014). Perhaps most importantly, print media portrayals help combat a documented legacy of “symbolic annihilation” of undervalued bodies (Gerbner and Gross 1976). First coined by Gerbner in the ‘70s and later expounded by Gaye Tuchman, term refers to the lack of visibility of marginalized bodies in popular media—and the “annihilation” of these groups from our collective culture and discourse as a result. In an image-first culture, visuals constitute the forefront of our consciousness—and the bodies we *don’t* see represented visually become less and less important. Visuals of trans women like *TIME*’s cover image of Cox, which commands the viewer’s attention and subtly subverts the conception of trans women as especially vulnerable, ensure that transgender people remain a part of our cultural cognizance and ongoing conversations.

Although media representation is a key component of validating and normalizing the existence of “abnormal” bodies, it comes with its own unique set of dilemmas. Firstly, not all

representation is created equal. While visual depictions of previously ignored bodies are significant, these portrayals too often play into stigmas or stereotypes associated with marginalized groups. The “mere presence” of marginalized bodies in popular media does not necessarily constitute a victory, as visibility “enables the reiteration of stereotypes” (Tuchman 1978). Indeed, depictions of trans bodies can fall into the trap of simplifying (or worse, outright ignoring) the real-life nuance and diversity of America’s transgender community. Writes Gross (2002), “When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda.” Indeed, representation of a marginalized group, especially in its earliest stages, is entirely dependent on gaining the permission of the white, patriarchal, cisnormative, and heteronormative powers-that-be. Often tied up in corporate interests, media gatekeepers may aim to make representations of abnormal bodies “palatable” to a mainstream audience, subsequently diluting the rawness of what it means to exist as an oppressed person. Logo TV’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which premiered in ‘09, is a good example of this. The series paved a path for trans visibility by cushioning trans and gender non-conforming themes, motifs, and characters in a series that was intensely marketable (everybody loves a reality television competition) and lacking any explicit dialogue about the lived experiences of transgender Americans (this is likely by design—after all, the queens compete to be the best performer in an isolated context). Capitalism plays a necessary part in the larger conversation about media representation as an ethically sound tool for progressive social change: Can representations really help a marginalized group or contribute to important social change if a separate group or individual is raking in a profit?

In order to narrow the scope of this research paper, I have chosen to focus on editorial photographs, not advertisements. This is not to say that advertisements aren't an important site of representation. They are, undoubtedly, but the explicitly profitable nature of advertisements, especially when paired with representations of historically oppressed bodies, is a separate body of research entirely.

Importantly, being in the public eye also means subjecting oneself to the “collective and anonymous nature of the sovereign gaze” (Frosh 2001). In this sense, the sweeping and anonymous “sovereign gaze” of the public eye reduces those being observed to subjects and minimizes the individuality and humanity of those subjects. Likewise, visibility to the public eye offers no promise of protection from institutional prejudice or hate-motivated violence. Privacy—both on an individual level and a societal level—actually offers those most at risk for bodily harm or institutional bias a cloak of relative safety. Again, this is a significant concern for transgender Americans, who face unparalleled risks for hate-related violence (Human Rights Campaign 2017). Of course, being a publicly visible body also renders one able to be governed by the state. In entering into our mainstream discourse, transgender bodies inadvertently enter into the eyes of our socio-political leaders, who craft policies that can further legal protections for the trans community or erode them. Later in this paper, I will establish a correlation between the following four case studies of transgender representation in magazines and the growing governance of transgender bodies in recent U.S. legislation.

Research Methodology

For this project, I selected four case studies of transgender representation in editorial photography after Laverne Cox's May 2014 *TIME* cover. Each case comes from different contexts, in terms of both sociocultural climates during which they were published and the

publications in which they appear. As such, they all offer unique opportunities to discuss the nuances of representation from an intersectional feminist perspective. For instance, Caitlyn Jenner's July 2015 *Vanity Fair* cover story permits a discussion of privilege and celebrity as they pertain to mainstream transgender representation. Meanwhile, Ines Rau's landmark *Playboy* photoshoot from November 2017 allows an analysis of trans visibility in a hyper-sexual editorial context, ostensibly created for the cisgender, heterosexual male gaze. Due to the difficulties of obtaining archives, I was only able to obtain backorders of three out of the four magazines included in this research (*Vanity Fair*, *National Geographic*, and *Playboy*.) My analysis on the remaining magazine, *Men's Health*, was conducted using digital images of the cover and an accompanying editorial photograph from the magazine's website. To analyze these images, I employed principles of semiotics, a branch of philosophy which aims to make meaning from signs. When applied to photography, the practice allows for an in-depth analysis of an image, encompassing both the literal meaning of an image's composition (denotation) and its implied or figurative significance (connotation.)

Case Studies: Trans Bodies in Post-“Tipping Point” Editorials

“Call Me Caitlyn”: *Vanity Fair*

The significance of and buildup to *Vanity Fair*

A year after Cox’s groundbreaking *TIME* cover, former Olympic athlete and *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* star Caitlyn Jenner upped the ante by coming out publicly on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. The moment was inarguably significant and is a vital case study to include in this research paper, especially given *Vanity Fair*’s high circulation numbers and niche focus: As of 2017, the magazine has a circulation of more than 1.2 million paid readers over a six-month period (Alliance for Audited Media). Its readership skews heavily female, though its editorial content focuses on arts and entertainment coverage for a general-interest audience (McKown 2018). Since the publication isn’t explicitly for a queer or trans audience, Jenner’s coming out is doubly significant, providing a second example of the trans community’s relevance, or “newsworthiness,” to a mainstream, presumably cisgender and heterosexual audience.

Jenner, known prior to her coming out as Bruce, opened up about her physical transition from male to female in an exclusive *Vanity Fair* interview from July 2015. The buildup to her coming out was intense, predated by years of speculation about her “true” gender identity. In the months leading up to her *Vanity Fair* cover story, physical hints of Jenner’s burgeoning femininity—longer hair, a larger chest, painted fingernails—were “gleefully reported on” by gossip websites and print tabloids alike (Bernstein 2015). Anonymous sources weighed in on Jenner’s gender transition and how it affected the Kardashian-Jenners, her and ex-wife Kris Jenner’s combined family of models, entrepreneurs, and social media influencers. Legacy media even followed suit: In February 2015, an article in *The New York Times* addressed the rumors, months before Jenner first publicly identified as transgender:

[Jenner's] hair has grown past his shoulders, his nails have been painted various shades of red and pink, and breasts appear to be growing underneath his golf shirts. It is a remarkable transformation for a former Olympic athlete, the 1976 decathlon champion, who in his glory days appeared on a Wheaties box and seemed to be the paragon of male beauty... All of this gave journalists some cover, even as questions of etiquette remained. For example, it was not clear to editors whether they should use male or female pronouns to describe Jenner.

Vanity Fair's cover story was a relief to reporters, who could now address Jenner with female pronouns without fear of misleading readers, and a revelation to mainstream audiences, most of whom had yet to encounter a transgender woman with as much clout and prestige as Jenner. The cover was emblazoned with three telltale words: "Call Me Caitlyn."

The semiotics of "Call Me Caitlyn"

Jenner's cover photo, captured by the prolific Annie Leibovitz, is as striking as Cox's: In the image, Jenner sits cross-legged, hands locked behind her back. The camera is ostensibly peering down at her, implying a certain power on behalf of the photographer and, by proxy, the viewer. Her outfit is inherently intimate, showcasing Jenner's toned arms, legs, and shoulders—a nod to her athletic career of decades past—and conventionally feminine features—clear evidence of her having undergone gender-confirming surgeries (GCS) and a hormone replacement therapy (HRT) regime—in a white satin corset. Of course, lingerie as a styling choice suggests sensuality, while the stark white color of her corset connotes purity. The image is equal parts tantalizing and vulnerable, cluing readers in to a side of Jenner they have yet to see—and a part of her personal life the media has yet to touch. Jenner's cover story, penned by Buzz Bissinger, includes seven more images of the Olympian-turned-reality-TV-star. While the contents of Bissinger's 22-page feature are heartbreakingly raw (the veteran journalist spends weeks

reporting his feature, documenting Jenner's recovery from GCS for *Vanity Fair* with a palpable sense of sympathy and care), Leibovitz's photographs emit a distinctly polished vibe. Jenner is styled in sensual, hyper-feminine attire—a show-stopping, floor-length gold lamé gown; a black lacy floral corset; a tight-fitting red dress with sheer mesh panels—with her long, caramel-colored locks spilling over her shoulders. In images where she looks at the camera, Jenner's expression is sultry, coyly commanding attention. The styling choices are heavy-handed, though, rendering the intent clear: Jenner wants the world to call her Caitlyn, so she's performing femininity in a borderline ostentatious way. The details of her cover image alone—her white corset, Jenner's hands positioned behind her back, her coy gaze—depict Jenner as the “ultimate” woman: simultaneously demure and sensual, submissive and commanding. She's also the pinnacle of elite femininity; her outfitting provides just as much context about her social status as the brand names dropped casually in her interview with Bissinger.

The aftermath: Caitlyn Jenner as a (problematic) representative of the trans community

Weeks after Jenner covered *Vanity Fair*, the former Olympian accepted the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage, one of the most prestigious honors in sports, at the 2015 ESPY Awards. If her *Vanity Fair* cover was a second symbolic turning point for the trans community, then Jenner's Arthur Ashe Award was a literal one, a tangible representation of a burgeoning movement to normalize transgender bodies in the public eye. The controversy that unfolded after Jenner received her award—did she *really* deserve such a prestigious honor for simply living her truth?—only exemplifies this (Moyer 2015). In her acceptance speech, Jenner even took a moment to push the dialogue about transgender issues further, eloquently addressing the high rates of hate-motivated violence that the trans community faces every day:

Just last month, the body of 17-year-old Mercedes Williamson, a transgendered young woman of color, was found in a field in Mississippi stabbed to death. I also want to tell you about Sam Taub, a 15-year-old transgendered young man from Bloomfield, Michigan. In early April, Sam took his own life. Now, Sam's story haunts me in particular because his death came just a few days before my interview with Diane Sawyer. Every time something like this happens, people wonder, "Could it have been different if spotlighting this issue with more attention could have changed the way things happen?" We'll never know.

Though her comments are well-meaning, Jenner inadvertently draws attention to one of her most-cited criticisms: She is a transgender activist with an immense amount of privilege. Fame, conventional beauty, astronomical wealth, and whiteness are all on her side—factors that make her comments, however heartfelt they may be, feel ingenuous and borderline opportunistic. (Her televised docuseries *I Am Cait*, which aired on E! from 2015-2018, also attempted to address the lived realities of the trans community, though with more gusto, enlisting the help of lauded trans trailblazers like actress Candis Cayne and author Jennifer Finney Boylan.) And her longstanding history as a proud Republican is something LGBT advocates and allies continue to find deeply concerning. In the 2016 presidential election, Jenner openly supported Republican Ted Cruz—and, after Cruz dropped out of the race, media-mogul-turned-conservative-mouthpiece Donald Trump (Hod 2016). In July 2017, when news broke of Trump's ban on transgender Americans serving in the military, Jenner backpedaled: "There are 15,000 patriotic transgender Americans in the U.S. military fighting for all of us," she wrote on Twitter. "What happened to your promise to fight for them?" Naturally, members of the LGBT community were quick to call Jenner out, accusing her of "selling out" to the Republican party and blindly ignoring anti-transgender rhetoric from members of the Trump administration (Finkelstein

2017). The apparent disconnect between Jenner's public platform and personal politics both affirms her critics' frustrations and epitomizes the patriarchal constraints of which bodies are allowed to achieve prestige. Compared to other trans activists of her time, Jenner—a wealthy, conventionally attractive white woman who could likely “pass” as cisgender with conservative political beliefs—was a palatable choice, someone whose rise to icon-level status could be lauded by the liberal left and begrudgingly swallowed by the conservative right. Frosch's (2001) aforementioned quote about photography as an “exercise and revocation of social power through visibility” comes to mind: Jenner's case is proof that these beauty ideals apply to transgender women as much, if not more, than cisgender women—and that the “social power” that trans women “exercise” by entering into mainstream media often comes at the expense of being able to buck gender norms.

“The Reader Issue: Real Guys, Real Issues”: *Men's Health*

The curious case of Aydian Dowling

In 2015, Aydian Dowling, a white transgender man and Instagram-famous bodybuilder, competed to be the next *Men's Health* Ultimate Guy. A victory would have made him the first transgender man to grace the magazine's cover. Sure enough, months after “Call Me Caitlyn” blew up, Dowling defied the odds and made it all the way to the final round of *Men's Health's* 2015 Ultimate Guy search. The homegrown social media star, 28 at the time and residing in Eugene, Oregon, even won the reader's voting portion of the annual contest, cementing his status as a fan-favorite competitor. “Having a trans person on the cover would tell people that no matter who you are, you can be the man you want to be,” Dowling told the magazine in July 2015, months before the winner was announced (Daniels). “It's fully possible if you put the time and effort and balance it takes to find the man in you.” Ultimately, Dowling lost the title to cisgender

model Angelo Picoto. But the editors of Men's Health decided to feature Dowling on a shared cover spread with four other runners-up in the November 2015 "Real Guys, Real Issues" reader issue. Effectively, Dowling did become the first transgender person to make it onto the cover of *Men's Health*. (To this day, he marks the occasion in his Instagram bio, proudly proclaiming himself the "1st TransMan on @menshealthmag.") His story is unique and important to include in this paper for a few key reasons. For one thing, he is one of the only, if not *the* only, transgender man to appear on the cover of a mainstream print magazine in recent history. (*Men's Health* covers men's fitness, lifestyle, and wellness issues, with a six-month paid circulation of 1.8 million readers [Alliance for Audited Media 2017].) For another, *Men's Health's* readership, unlike *Vanity Fair's*, is a vast majority male with a median age of 44 (Rodale 2018). Dowling covering *Men's Health*, even if he shared the moment with other men, marks yet another symbolic "win" for trans representation in a markedly male, cis-hetero space.

The semiotics of "Real Guys, Real Issues"

The cover of the 2015 "Real Guys, Real Issues" special edition sees Dowling tangled in a mess of limbs with four other men. The five men are pictured in motion, their body language—shoving limbs, bent knees, wide grins, bulging muscles—denoting a playful scuffle. The connotation is decidedly masculine: Dowling and his four fellow competitors could just as easily be on a football field, rough-and-tumbling to their heart's content. Dowling himself is pictured at the far left in the image. He sports a black sleeveless t-shirt, black gym shorts, and white sneakers, further connoting that same hyper-masculine athleticism. He's labeled "The Pioneer" by editors (quite literally, as the label hovers above his head on the cover itself.) Notably, the left half of Dowling's body is partially cut off by the layout, while the bodies of three out of the four other men are captured in full. (Another man at the far right of the image, the only clearly

identifiable man of color on the cover, is similarly cutoff by the edit.) Dowling's full facial expression is rendered somewhat indiscernible by his positioning: On the cover, he's shoving another man, lunged sideways on bent knees, face twisted in profile. Though easy to miss at first glance, this symbolic disembodiment implies that Dowling is of less importance than the other men on the cover. He isn't even afforded the luxury of a full-body shot, while the man he's shoving aside on the cover is.

In the centerfold of the magazine, Dowling appears again. This time, he's shirtless, crossing his arms over his muscular chest. His short hair, knowing smirk, and bulging pectorals clearly suggest masculinity; however, his crossed arms obscure the scars left behind by Dowling's GCS. Whether intentional or not, the image obscures a lived reality encountered by most trans men who elect "top surgery," a popular GCS in which breasts are removed and a "male" chest is reconstructed. It's a stark contrast to Jenner's cover, in which the signs of GCS—Jenner's breasts and feminized face—are clearly on display. (It would seem, then, that overt transness is only acceptable when it can be sexualized by the male gaze, a factor that doesn't apply to Dowling, a trans man.) Both this erasure of Dowling's visible transness and his symbolic disembodiment are, to lesser degrees, forms of Gerbner's "symbolic annihilation," though perhaps even more sinister. Dowling, a trans man, *is* represented and does appear on the cover of a mainstream magazine; however, the manner in which he is represented is incomplete, calling into question both the intent and the impact of his "visibility."

(Trans) masculinity: Dowling's incompleteness

Though Dowling's *Men's Health* cover broke ground for trans representation in men's media, his photographic depictions are far from complete. For one thing, he's symbolically disembodied on the cover, a stark contrast to the majority of his co-stars, who appear in full.

(Lifestyle site Splinter News even called this out in its reporting on Dowling’s landmark cover, with writer Jorge Rivas titling his article, “Trans bodybuilder manages to half his body on the cover of *Men’s Health*.”) For another, Dowling is portrayed in a decidedly hyper-masculine way. His appearance—from his styling, to his grooming choices, to his positioning in both images—abides by viewers’ expectations of what a man *should* look like, *should* act like. Not unlike Jenner, Dowling, a transgender man, is made to abide by binary gender norms. He’s a bodybuilder, a fitness enthusiast, and his physical exterior—lean frame, muscular build, tilted grin—is conventionally attractive. Dowling could easily “pass” as cisgender. Of course, muscly, conventionally attractive men are the sort of subjects *Men’s Health* readers have come to expect from the magazine. But the nuances of how Dowling is represented reaffirm that trans bodies must conform to binary conventions of beauty to be accepted by mainstream audiences. And even then, if Dowling’s case is any indication, trans bodies are less worthy of a full-body feature on the page than their cisgender counterparts. Arguably, the same could be said about the black man who appears on the cover to the far right, also symbolically disembodied. It seems that men whose identities that don’t fit racist, patriarchal, cis-hetero normative ideals are afterthoughts—or, in the case of this *Men’s Health* cover, literal bookends to the white men who take center stage.

“Gender Revolution”: *National Geographic*

A new tipping point for a new era

In January 2017, *National Geographic* published its gender issue, aptly titled “Gender Revolution.” Published the same month Trump was inaugurated into office, the print issue was accompanied by a documentary of the same name, which aired that February. The magazine had two covers that month: one with a group of young people from around the world, and another

with a young transgender girl on its cover. Unlike Jenner (or, to a degree, Dowling), the girl is nameless at first glance, as ordinary and decidedly not-famous as any other child her age. This is actually pretty typical of *National Geographic*. With a dedication to journalistic integrity that dates back to 1888 and a six-month paid circulation of more than 3 million readers, the magazine is one of the most widely read publications in the U.S. (Alliance for Audited Media 2017). As of 2018, its readership skews 54/45 male to female, with millennials (born between 1977 and 1996) comprising the majority of subscribers (National Geographic 2018). Unlike *Vanity Fair*, which focuses heavily on celebrities and arts and entertainment, *National Geographic* bills itself as a general-interest publication with an eye for “science and innovation, adventure and exploration, critical issues, culture, and the natural world.” An issue centering changing attitudes about gender parity and gender binaries isn’t entirely off-brand for *National Geographic*, but it is culturally significant, marking a moment in which feminist agendas were deemed noteworthy enough for a general-interest, mixed-gender (and again, presumably cisgender and heterosexual) audience.

In her letter explaining the magazine’s deep dive into gender identity, Editor-in-Chief Susan Goldberg writes that “beliefs about gender are shifting rapidly and radically”:

As Robin Marantz Henig writes in our story on page 48, we are surrounded by “evolving notions of what it means to be a woman or a man and the meanings of transgender, cisgender, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, agender, or any of the more than 50 terms Facebook offers users for their profiles”... Yes, youngsters worldwide, irrespective of gender, face challenges that have only grown in the digital age. But in telling these stories, we are reminded again how dangerous girls’ lives can be—and how much work lies ahead to change that.

During the anxiety leading up to Trump's inauguration, Goldberg eloquently makes a case for why a gender issue mattered in 2017. Post-election, changes in our cultural conversations about gender were shifting yet again, though arguably in a less progressive direction. *National Geographic's* "Gender Revolution" predates the Trump administration, offering a time capsule of America's perception of the trans community in that precarious limbo period between Obama and his successor. It was a veritable "tipping point" part two, marking a moment in time in which the lived realities of the trans and gender non-conforming community entered our cultural conversations, mainstream media, and public policies anew.

The semiotics of "Gender Revolution"

"I Am Nine Years Old," *National Geographic's* gender issue cover story, opens with a photograph of 9-year-old Avery, a white transgender girl from Kansas City, Missouri. (The image, which appears on page 31 of the magazine, doubles as one of the issue's two covers—and marks the first time an openly transgender person graced the cover of the magazine in its 130-year history.) Jackson is pictured wearing pink leopard-print pants and a pink t-shirt with a screen-printed purple cat and yellow heart over her chest. Her hair, grown out past her shoulders, is dyed pink and purple, blending in almost seamlessly with the printed image on her shirt. It's no mistake that Avery sports pink. The color connotes a saccharine, Barbie Doll sort of girlhood that is both innocent and undeniably feminine. The styling provides a not-so-subtle clue to viewers that Jackson, however gender-neutral her name may be or ambiguous her sharp facial features may appear, is a girl. In the composition, the vibrant pinkness of Avery's clothing and hair is stark contrast to her dimly lit surroundings. The girl lounges in the foreground on the arm of a brown chaise, with a fireplace and bookcase just visible in the blurred-out background, hinting at her family's affluence. Her positioning—a casual pose, one arm dangled over the chair

and another scrunched in her lap—suggests openness, as if Avery is inviting readers into her life. She’s photographed at eye level with the viewer, although the upward tilt of her head and blankness of her expression conveys a solemnness that seems uncharacteristic of someone her age. Writer Eve Conant provides context, offering a clue as to what meaning Jackson’s heavy-beyond-her-years expression could hold:

Avery spent the first four years of her life as a boy, and was miserable; she still smarts recalling how she lost her preschool friends because “their moms did not like me.” Living since 2012 as an openly transgender girl, the Kansas City native is now at ground zero in the evolving conversation about gender roles and rights.

“I Am Nine Years Old” includes 14 more images of 9-year-olds from around the world. However, none of them explicitly self-identify as transgender or gender non-conforming to the magazine. For the sake of this project, I am shifting gears to “Rethinking Gender,” the next editorial spread in the gender issue. This story opens with an image of twins Caleb and Emmie Smith. Both born in ’98, the twins were “hard to tell apart,” writes Robin Marantz Henig. Emmie, who came out as transgender at age 17, has since undergone GCS and clarifies that she’s “no less of a woman before it, and I’m no more of one today.” Emmie’s positioning in the composition—closely sat beside her brother, laptop on her knees, one arm on her bed, another in her lap—is casual and appears candid. She smiles lightly at her brother, who stares at her laptop. Both Caleb and Emmie seem blissfully unaware of the photographer or viewer. Like Jackson, Emmie also looks markedly feminine, donning a floral black-and-white dress and wearing her blond hair in a long bob. Again, her femininity is unmistakable, lest readers wonder.

“Rethinking Gender” includes 10 more editorial images of young people who are explicitly marked as transgender or gender non-conforming. (Notably, there is an additional

image in the spread, but the subject is not explicitly marked as transgender or gender non-conforming, so I have elected to exclude that image from my analysis.) From pages 52–73, photographer Lynn Johnson highlights Ray Craig, a “trans guy” middle schooler from New York pictured getting fitted for eighth grade prom; Oti, 9, a transgender girl playing on a tree swing in an orange t-shirt and pink skirt; Carlos, 12, a boy assigned female at birth who has a rare enzyme deficiency that prompted him to grow male genitalia during puberty; Emma, 17, an intersex teen who alternates between male and female identities, pictured playing with dolls; Sandy, 12, and Mandy, 10, two gender non-conforming youth from Samoa; Trina, a Jamaican trans feminine sex worker pictured in conventionally feminine clothes; English and Sasha, two of Trina’s gender non-conforming friends; Henry, a “gender creative” child outfitted in a striped two-piece short set; Trinity, a 12-year-old black trans girl photographed at the doctor’s office; and lastly, Hunter, a 17-year-old trans teen pictured shirtless, his top surgery scars plainly on display. The photographs of these 12 young people show similar patterns to Avery and Emmie’s compositions: In all of the images, the subjects are pictured either looking away from the camera, looking at somebody or something else in the frame, or gazing at the photographer with a vacant expression. The portraits are evocative and compelling, with subjects universally positioned toward the center of the image in sharp focus. The diverse range of subjects depicted in the photospread—in terms of race, nationality, class, and specific gender identity—reads like a genuinely inclusive gesture, nodding simultaneously to the highly individual nature of the “trans experience” and the omnipresence of gender non-conformity around the world. Perhaps most interestingly, though, subjects whose gender identities are binary (i.e., trans girls or trans boys versus gender non-conforming or “gender creative” youth) don outfits, hair styling, and other external aesthetic choices that reflect the sociocultural expectations of their chosen gender.

The public's reception to a "Gender Revolution"

National Geographic's gender issue garnered plenty of talk among both LGBT and mainstream media circles, prompting the editorial team to issue a digital article addressing some frequently asked questions. Regarding her decision to put 9-year-old Avery Jackson on the cover, Goldberg was clear and succinct: "We put Avery on the cover because she symbolized a lot of the complex and current conversation occurring around gender." Indeed, Avery's cover image in all of its pink, hyper-feminine glory encapsulates both the complexity of transgender identities and the ostensible simplicity of transgender acceptance into mainstream culture. Again, we see external appearances reinforcing conventions of masculinity versus femininity, further validating the hypothesis that trans bodies are deemed "acceptable" if they abide by the expectations and standards of the cis-hetero patriarchy. While Avery and her fellow subjects aren't sexualized like Jenner—rightfully so, since they're young people—the binary-compliant nature of their visibility (for those youth whose identities fall along the gender binary) caters to the gendered expectations of *National Geographic's* audience. Visibility in this sense, much like Jenner and Dowling's cases, hinges upon abiding by societal norms. This harkens back to Gross, who asserts that "when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda" (2002). In this case, the "biases and interests" are gender conformity—and the "powerful people who define the public agenda" are white, cisgender, heterosexual men, who (both literally and figuratively) permit images of non-normative bodies to enter into mainstream media with the condition that they perpetuate deeply held notions of what men and women *should* look like.

"Meet Your November 2017 Playmate": *Playboy*

Playboy's first transgender playmate

More than six months after *National Geographic's* "Gender Revolution" issue, *Playboy* magazine (yes, that *Playboy*) broke ground with its November 2017 issue. Though unremarkable at first glance, the issue was undeniably special: Editors had selected French model Ines Rau, a transgender woman of color, as its Playmate of the month, marking the first time an openly trans person nabbed the coveted feature within the publication. (As previously mentioned, actress Caroline "Tula" Cossey, who appeared in a 1981 edition of *Playboy*, was the first trans woman to grace the magazine, though she was closeted at the time of her feature.) Notably, Rau also appeared once before in the magazine in 2014, posing nude for photographer Ryan McGinley, though her designation as an official Playmate carried more weight. Rau's selection made headlines among the LGBT media circuit and mainstream media alike. She was originally slated to appear on the cover of the magazine; however, the passing of *Playboy's* iconic founder Hugh Hefner took precedence, and images of Rau appeared instead inside the issue (Respers France 2017).

Semiotics of "Meet Your November 2017 Playmate"

Rau's interview and photospread, titled "Enchanté, Mademoiselle Rau," spans more than 10 pages of the magazine. Photographer Derek Kettela plays off of the time of year, portraying a scantily clad Rau in front of a series of red and black backdrops. Out of Kettela's seven photographs of Rau, four images feature her partially nude. One image—a striking composition on page 84 of the issue in which Rau's brown skin and dark hair are illuminated by a string of Christmas lights draped around her nude form—is particularly explicit, showing the entirety of Rau's exposed breasts, nipples included. Her poses—legs lifted, back arched suggestively—are clearly staged for the photographer, lacking the candor of *National Geographic's* portraits,

though not surprisingly. Rau is outfitted in alternating white and black lingerie, connoting both purity and sensuality, innocence and a lack thereof. Her sensual styling, accented by all the hallmarks of conventional femininity—glossy brown locks, ample, post-GCS breasts, a sculpted backside, a lithe and seemingly flawless form—abides by the same beauty standards expected of cisgender women. It's Jenner's *Vanity Fair* editorial all over again, except more explicitly catering to a majority-male and presumably cis-hetero audience (and, of course, more explicit, period.) In the context of *Playboy*, such an overt display of female sensuality is to be expected. As of December 2017, the magazine boasts a six-month paid circulation of more than 321,000 readers (Alliance for Audited Media), a whopping 82.7% of which are men (Frontline 2017). Based on readership alone, the magazine is no *Vanity Fair* or *National Geographic*; however, what it lacks in numbers it makes up for in a strong brand identity. Since its inception, the magazine has famously featured nude and semi-nude models in its centerfolds, though it officially stopped including full-frontal nudity in the print magazine in October 2015 (Samaiya 2015). Rau is one of hundreds of Playmates the magazine has featured in its decades-long history, and although her identity makes her feature special, the images themselves are entirely typical of the series.

A “more open world?”

If tweets shared by Cooper Hefner, Hugh's son and the acting Chief Creative Officer of Playboy Enterprises, are any indication, Rau's photospread earned the magazine some flak. “We should collectively be fighting for a more open world, not one that promotes hatred and a lack of acceptance,” Cooper asserted on his personal Twitter account in October 2017, with the official *Playboy* Twitter page likening the landmark moment for trans inclusion to the magazine's decision to feature Jenny Jackson, its first black Playmate, in March 1965. Indeed, Rau receiving

the title of Playmate and posing nude for the magazine is significant in that it marks a key shift in public opinions of transgender people, specifically trans women. In her *Playboy* feature, Rau isn't just included; she's objectified, made to be hyper-sexual in a way that is unsubtle and undeniable given all of the aforementioned factors. Rau, not entirely unlike Jenner or even Dowling, is deemed worthy of Playmate prestige because she neatly conforms to gendered expectations of beauty. She's someone male audiences can objectify without hesitation, and though the magazine makes no pretense, clearly addressing her gender identity in her interview with writer Anna Del Gaizo, Rau, for all intents and purposes, "passes" as cisgender. (Her hyper-femininity on the pages of *Playboy* is especially interesting given what she tells Del Gaizo: "Being a woman doesn't mean being extremely feminine all the time... Being a woman is more than just being a woman.") Cooper's call to "[fight collectively] for a more open world" comes to mind: Is the objectification of transgender women promoting a "more open world," or furthering reinforcing the harmful notion that trans women and trans feminine people must conform to gendered beauty standards to be valued? Again, Frosch's (2001) analysis of the power of photography to both empower and hinder is at play here. What Rau and the trans feminine community gain in terms of mainstream representation, they simultaneously lose in their capability to be radical, to stray from the patriarchal beauty standards that bind women in the public eye.

Conclusion: Making Sense of Visibility

Overall Findings: Case Studies

The four case studies I explore in this project all bring different things, in terms of both intersections of identities and the contexts in which they were published, to the proverbial table. However, a few key themes emerge that are difficult to miss. Most noticeably is the way that these representations of marginalized bodies in mainstream media conform to the gendered expectations and conventions of mainstream audiences. For trans women, like Jenner or Rau, it usually means being objectified and hyper-sexualized, performing femininity in an exaggerated way as if to assert that they are, in fact, “real” women. The same goes for trans men; as we see in Dowling’s *Men’s Health* photographs, trans men must be “manly” in an overt way and carry all of the telltale physical markers of conventional, cisnormative masculinity. Even children, like Avery on the cover of *National Geographic*’s gender issue, are not exempt from these binary gender norms. Arguably, conforming to the highly gendered expectations of a mainstream audience—in terms of how subjects are outfitted, positioned, and depicted with context clues in the surrounding texts (captions, interviews, etc.)—allows trans and gender non-conforming subjects to enter into the zeitgeist with ease. Trans people who abide by the conventions we’ve been groomed to expect are less jarring to the untrained eye, less foreign to someone who might not understand the complexities of being transgender and transitioning socially and physically. But seeing transness represented in this monolithic way—in which the only trans bodies deemed “valid” enough to appear in magazines are those that conform to the gendered expectations of the cis-hetero patriarchy—isn’t a positive thing. At best, it’s an incomplete picture of the trans experience, excluding members of the transgender community whose gender identity and/or gender presentation don’t neatly align with the binary. At worst, it’s actually harmful,

perpetuating the antiquated notion that only trans people who “pass” as cisgender (and can be sexualized in a way that is equal or comparable to cis people) are valid—and endangering the wellbeing of trans people who *don’t* “pass.”

A second trend that emerges is the borderline sensational nature of most of these cases, both in terms of the images selected for publication and the written features themselves. Of course, all of these case studies *are* historic in that they each a literal trans-centric “first” for the respective magazine (first transgender cover star, centerfold subject, Playmate, etc.) But, save for the *National Geographic* gender issue, the narratives in which the majority of these images are framed—Jenner’s literal coming out in *Vanity Fair*; Dowling’s landmark runner-up “win” in the manliest of competitions in *Men’s Health*; and Rau’s historic moment as a *Playboy* Playmate, the pinnacle of womanly sexuality—create a sort of spectacle of transness. Likewise, the actual images—almost all staged portraits, mostly with the subject alone—contribute to this air of sensationalism. It’s as if trans bodies are only “worthy” of mainstream media coverage if there is a juicy “hook” (i.e., coming out), a landmark “first” (i.e., first trans runner-up, first Playmate), and a conventionally attractive subject on which to center. Importantly, this type of trans visibility—which centers a subject’s trans identity as the priority, a lens with which the images and features are to be consumed—is, fundamentally, a form of classification. This speaks to the aforementioned power of photographs as tools to typologize and classify (Wallis 1995); regardless of whether these images break ground for trans inclusion, they inevitably categorize these subjects as trans, furthering binary-compliant notions of what transness “looks like” throughout our collective public archive. In regards to both of these points, *National Geographic*’s “Gender Revolution” issue actually stands out as an example of the contrary: the issue tackles transgender issues with depth and nuance, including both images and analysis of

gender non-binary trans youth. While the subjects who do have binary trans identities indeed abide by stereotypical notions of gender presentation, the magazine offers no sensational “hook” to draw readers in. Rather, the trans youth included on the cover and within the issue reveal details about their day-to-day struggles, offering a more humanized and less sensationalist counterpart to the other cases I explore.

Does representation equal equality?

Media discourse, both within LGBT circles and outside of them, tends to paint a picture of “visibility” as a universal good. Of course, visibility in media is meaningful as a way of marking symbolic entry points into mainstream conversations. It’s also incredibly powerful for people from marginalized groups to see themselves represented in media, since seeing oneself onscreen or in the pages of a popular magazine reaffirms the validity of one’s lived realities. However, these “wins” and “firsts” for representation do not inherently equal equality—and often come with a palpable cost. Clearly, being visible as a marginalized person means conforming the expectations of mainstream audiences (and sacrificing some reality and humanity in favor of a certain sort of sensationalism.) Becoming visible to the general public, as I have previously established, also means becoming visible to the state. In being represented photographically and textually in popular magazines, the transgender community also becomes a subject of governance and surveillance, of policing and categorizing. One prime example is the government’s records of anti-transgender hate crimes in the U.S. Currently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has publicly accessible records of hate crimes statistics from select police departments nationwide dating back to 1996. But the FBI’s data doesn’t include “gender identity” as a category for bias motivation from 1996-2012. It wasn’t until 2013—the same year *Orange Is the New Black* premiered—that the FBI began including the category of “Gender-

identity bias motivation,” broken up into “anti-transgender bias” and “anti-gender non-conforming bias,” in its hate crime database (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2013). Every available report through 2016 includes similar language. Importantly, I am not arguing that *Orange Is the New Black*’s popularity, or Cox’s rise to stardom, caused the FBI to begin tracking anti-transgender hate crimes. Rather, I am establishing a correlation between representation of marginalized bodies in popular media; subsequent increased cultural awareness of marginalized identities; and public policy that shifts in tandem.

Yet another example of such a correlation is the evolution of the pathologizing transness in the U.S. The most recent edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM), Western medicine’s standard for diagnosing psychological disorders, was also released in 2013. Prior to that, medical literature referred to transness as “gender identity disorder” (GID), a now-defunct way of explaining a disconnect between one’s assigned gender and one’s perceived identity. A diagnosis of GID, which first appeared in the DSM in 1980, was marked by “strong and persistent preferences for cross-sex roles in make-believe play or persistent fantasies of being the other sex” (Psychiatric News 2003). Publishers also broke the diagnosis down into three categories: “transsexualism,” “nontranssexualism,” and “not otherwise specified.” However, the publishers of 2013’s revamped DSM-5 altered the diagnostic criteria for GID—and renamed the condition “gender dysphoria.” Writes Wynne Parry, “The drafters of the new DSM-5 wanted to emphasize the importance of distress about the incongruity for a diagnosis. The DSM-5 uses the term gender rather than sex to allow for those born with both male and female genitalia to have the condition” (2013). The change was heralded as a victory by trans advocates, reflecting a changing cultural awareness of what it means to be transgender.

Trans visibility in the age of Trump: Is more at stake than ever?

Of course, no talk of works published in post-“tipping point” America could omit the ever-looming threat that is Donald Trump’s presidency. In November 2016, Trump won the bid for president of the United States. His campaign—fueled by intensely polarizing political rhetoric, grandiose goals for policy, and a vague promise to “Make America Great Again”—was a success, targeting a growing group of Americans who were sick and tired being “politically correct.” But Trump’s election into office brought with it a wave of intense fear from marginalized communities. His politics were in stark contrast to those of his predecessor, Barack Obama, a Democrat and America’s first black president. By January 2017, writers for *The New York Times*, *CNN Politics*, and more began to speculate what a Trump presidency could mean for the LGBT community. Their predictions, affirmed by spokespeople for LGBT advocacy groups like HRC and the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), were dismal. “All across America right now there are millions of people who are terrified,” Mara Keisling, executive director for NCTE, told *The New York Times* (Stack 2016).

Since Trump’s inauguration into office, the trans community has received blow after blow to their legal protections and constitutional rights. The so-called “trans military ban” is perhaps the most notable example. In July 2017, Trump took to Twitter to announce a full ban on trans personnel serving in the military (Avery 2017). In the media frenzy following the tweets, LGBT advocates and military personnel confirmed that the announcement was just a tweet, not official White House policy. For months, the Trump administration tried to ban trans recruits from joining the military, eventually stalling its efforts in December 2017, after several challenges in federal court (Porter 2017). In March 2018, Trump finally issued a policy barring most transgender Americans from joining the military, though courts around the country continue to object to the policy. The “trans military ban” is notable given the sheer scope of

people it could affect. A 2014 report from the Williams Institute at UCLA estimates that about 15,500 active-duty military personnel identify as transgender—and more than 134,000 veterans and National Guard or Army Reserve retirees identify as trans, too (Gates and Herman 2014). The study extrapolated numbers from responses to the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, which garnered more than 6,500 valid responses from trans Americans nationwide. More recently, a 2016 report from the RAND Corporation estimates a much smaller percentage of trans personnel in the military's 1.3 million active duty service members: The group estimates that there are anywhere between 1,320 and 6,630 active-duty transgender service members (Schaefer, Iyengar, et al. 2016).

Post-Obama, transgender Americans have endured similar cuts to their legal protections under federal law. Under the Obama administration, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or Title VII, was used to defend transgender Americans in the workplace (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2011). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) affirms that trans people are protected under Title VII's sex discrimination clause:

EEOC interprets and enforces Title VII's prohibition of sex discrimination as forbidding any employment discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. These protections apply regardless of any contrary state or local laws.

In December 2011, landmark Supreme Court case *Macy v. Dep't of Justice* maintained this interpretation of Title VII, although the Trump administration has repeatedly attacked it. But in March 2017, Trump signed an executive order gutting a handful of Obama-era laws, including a 2014 policy that protected LGBT federal employees from employment discrimination (McGowan 2017). This policy allowed queer and trans employees of the state to express themselves without fear of harassment, exclusion, or otherwise unjust treatment by higher-ups at

work. Its revocation signals a move backwards for LGBT rights, re-instilling a sense of fear of coming out and living openly in the workplace. Given the relatively recent nature of increased cultural awareness about transgender issues, the trans community is uniquely and especially vulnerable to such discrimination. Likewise, transgender youth in American public schools are no longer protected by federal law. In February 2017, the Department of Justice and Trump-era Education Secretary Betsy DeVos withdrew Obama-era federal protections for transgender students (De Vogue and Grinberg 2017). These policies reaffirmed the rights of trans students to use the bathrooms that align with their self-determined gender identities. In February 2018, after a slew of anti-transgender discrimination lawsuits from high school-age students came to a head, the Department of Education confirmed it would no longer investigate any allegations of anti-trans discrimination in public schools nationwide (Holden 2018). This is yet another excellent example of a pitfall of visibility: prior to the Obama administration's legislation, the rights of transgender students weren't even explicitly addressed by the Department Education, meaning trans youth and teens could likely use the appropriate restroom without initiating intense controversy. Entering into the mainstream discourse was a "win" for representation, sure, but it also coincided with a clear uptick in policing at the hands of authorities, both on a local level and a federal level.

How can media do better by the trans community?

As important as it may be to identify problematic representations of the trans community and highlight the limitations of visibility as an inherently progressive thing, it is even more crucial to figure out where and how mainstream media can actively do better. GLAAD's online Media Reference Guide (2018) sums up my proposed solution succinctly: "Transgender people are the experts to talk about transgender people." As simple and obvious as that may sound, trans

creatives—writers, actors, photographers, artists, directors, etc.—are seldom permitted to tell the stories that directly involve their lives, their identities, and their communities. In addition to simply including trans characters in popular media, I posit that trans people be allowed to own their own narratives. Allowing an inner-community point of view to shape the trans narratives we see in the pages of our favorite magazines or on our television screens can help combat the nuance and diversity that popular depictions of the trans and gender non-conforming community too often lack. Though being visible makes vulnerable groups even more susceptible to the perils of governance, trans-controlled media representation may help diversify the general public's perception of the trans community, humanizing a community and an identity that has become hyper-politicized by both allies and antagonists.

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