

Television's Transgender Tipping Point

“On Tipping Points and Moving to the Margins”

Curran Nault, *University of Texas at Austin*

Indicative of an accumulation of small changes guiding us to the precipice of something more grandiose, in the best of circumstances, a “tipping point” proffers the promise of progress. Such is the case with the contemporary discourse of the “Transgender Tipping Point,” framed by the prompt of this roundtable as a “rapid rise to celebrity” of “trans actors, academics, activists and athletes,” which has, among other things, resulted in an unprecedented televisual turn to “serialized trans characters, performers and creators at the *centre* of their narratives” (my emphasis). Exciting and overdue, this “centering” of the pleasures, politics and problematics of transgender lives is definite cause for celebration. At the same time, in thinking through the recent, and rather remarkable, slate of trans TV, I am reminded that the center is not always the most productive or compelling place to be—leading me to query how we might exploit the potentials of the margins, as trans TV audiences and scholars alike.

It goes without saying that the center is a fraught place. This is perhaps especially true for transfolk who have often found themselves in “the middle of things” against their wills—from occupying the focus of the scrutinizing, prescriptive and pathologizing gazes of the medical and psychiatric establishments, to being invoked as the penultimate devils within hateful right wing rhetoric (think, for example, of how the recent defeat of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance pivoted on a conjuring of imagined trans bodies and practices). Given this ambivalence, we might point to Laverne Cox’s and Caitlyn Jenner’s lauded magazine covers—for [Time](#) and [Vanity Fair](#), respectively—as instances of both empowering arrivals and disappointing reassurances: Pathblazing and galvanizing, these media “firsts” are also inexorably entangled within a logic of visual domination that demands transgender bodily display, reveling in the spectacle of the reveal, and taking comfort in a stabilizing return to norms of beauty and gender presentation.

Indeed, trans TV tends to privilege those individuals who most closely adhere to standards of beauty and who are less likely to irrevocably upset the gender binary: often at the center of the texts in question we find pretty, white transwomen, while (with important exceptions) the gender nonconforming, transpeople of color and transmen are positioned on the sidelines—or outside the texts all together, awaiting our notice. Here, I am reminded of the documentary feature that I am currently Associate Producing, [Justice for Jennifer](#), about the brutal murder of a Filipina transwoman by a US marine. A major news story in the Philippines, this hate crime with postcolonial import has, for obvious reasons, received scant mention in the US, televisual or otherwise: Some trans stories remain untellable within the bounds of commercial culture.

Providing a laundry list of trans TV grievances is an easy task. But, what interests me are the ways that these texts might acknowledge their limitations and point our eyes elsewhere. [I Am Cait](#) seems instructive in this regard. Centered on celebrity Caitlyn Jenner, a newly “out” transwoman and ardent supporter of transphobic Republicans like Ted Cruz, Jenner is, at best, a conflicted and confused spokesperson for the trans community. Presumably aware of this, producers wisely populate *I Am Cait* with a cavalcade of trans luminaries, from authors [Jennifer Boylan](#) and [Kate Bornstein](#), to activist [Chandi Moore](#) and actress [Candis Cayne](#). A show that

ostensibly revolves around Jenner, it is the voices of these transwomen that are often given greatest authority in the text, continually pushing our attention toward the fringes. Elsewhere, *I Am Cait* (re-)encourages a movement outwards, whether evoking the absent-presence of trans teen suicide victim [Kyler Prescott](#) in episode one or directing us to the [Trevor Project](#) at its end.

While other trans TV shows are not structured the same, we might be motivated to explore their edges on our own. With [Transparent](#), for example, we might: recall the sociopolitical histories attached to such side characters as [Holly Woodlawn](#); turn to the radical performance art of producer [Zackary Drucker](#); revisit the button-pushing, dildo-chopping [punk performances](#) of the show's first trans director, [Silas Howard](#); or might even look to under-acknowledged precursors, like the clever, and decidedly DIY, trans sitcom [Falling in Love with Chris and Greg](#).

All of which is to say, in thinking through, and against, the consolidating thrust of the “tipping point,” I wonder how we might apply a decentered and transitory logic to our studies. How we might look to trans TV with sideways glances or approach its texts slightly askew, giving due consideration to the peripheral histories, ideas and peoples they evoke. How we might even turn our focus to what's not there—as a possibility more than a lament. These are concerns I am hoping we can engage during our roundtable conversation, perhaps contemplating other ways to constructively align ourselves with trans TV's margins.

Word Count: 800