

## **Television's Transgender Tipping Point**

Claire Perkins, *Monash University*

The popular notion that the western world is currently experiencing a 'transgender tipping point' is based on the broad premise that trans lives are more visible than ever before. Television is here understood as a key agent of social awareness, with post-2013 series including *Transparent*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Sense8*, *I Am Cait*, *I Am Jazz*, *The Switch*, *Becoming Us* and *This Is Me* celebrated by the American popular press for putting trans people 'everywhere' and presenting 'rich' transgender stories. This discourse emphasizes a shift from the historical trope of the trans figure as victim and/or pathology to the *authentic* trans figure who, through empathetic and 'realistic' narratives, is coded in terms of transformation and legitimacy. This conversation puts television's trans turn at a familiar place within queer TV studies, where the positive recognition of tools like GLAAD reports intersects with a critique of the style of visibility politics that automatically equates accelerated media representation with civil and material change.

So, what is really at stake in this recent turn in representation? The broadly 'positive' shift described above has characterized mainstream, cis-produced trans portrayals over the past decade or so, through films such as *Transamerica* and TV series including *Glee*, *Ugly Betty* and *Degrassi Junior High*. Critics engaging with these texts have identified a defining trope of 'transnormativity', where the trans character journeys from negative feeling to an authentic and liberal individuality. Eliciting the empathy of audiences through the emotive portrayal of a journey from dysphoria to emancipation, these texts discharge the threat of trans difference by reducing it to the neoliberal narrative of the 'true self', which, once achieved, typically reinforces a binary system of gender.

Does the contemporary trans turn on American television challenge this transnormative trope to the extent that it can genuinely be considered a 'tipping point'? While the authenticity narrative is still very powerful, it's my contention that aspects of these new series – and the discussions they have provoked - do modulate this dominant paradigm by starting to expose the complications and consequences of transnormativity in a manner that is unprecedented in the popular sphere. A defining aspect of this shift comes from the fact that trans people are for the first time producing and consulting on their own representation.

Caitlyn Jenner's E! docuseries *I Am Cait* forms a central example. The show, like many others in the current wave, follows Jenner's life after transition – capitalizing upon her forceful coming out appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2015. This was a watershed moment for trans awareness in western culture, not because Jenner is part of the Kardashian clan - 'America's royal family' - but because of the consciousness-raising that occurred in the storm of debate that followed it. Jenner's story was presented as an archetypal example of the transnormative narrative – for 60 years she had been oppressed by the social expectations that accompanied being assigned male at birth; by coming out as

Caitlyn she was finally able to be ‘herself’, with ‘no more lies’. Instantly, though, this claim to authenticity came under attack in the mainstream press for the way in which Jenner’s ‘true’ self was presented as a seemingly instantaneous transformation, when it actually relied upon vast resources of wealth and celebrity inaccessible to most trans people. Simultaneously, she was criticized for reinforcing binary gender terms by equating authenticity with a traditionally sexualized image of femininity. Suddenly, two central issues for trans experience – the materiality of transition and the western world’s stubbornly binary conception of gender – were in the spotlight.

Sutured to Jenner’s new celebrity image, these issues shape *I Am Cait* in important ways. Its journey is not just the familiar passage from negativity to redemption; instead it starts from her self-actualisation and proceeds to reveal how this personal triumph can and can’t connect to better social conditions for trans people. For the goal-focused Jenner, this attempt at progress is the proposed arc of the series: in its very first shots, she discusses her responsibility to the trans community, claiming ‘we don’t want people dying over this’ and ‘I just hope I get it right’. As befits the docuseries format, this journey is intensely pedagogical: it involves the education of Jenner herself on how to be an ethical trans celebrity, not just a ‘good’ trans citizen in the individuated, binary mould. The series’ key mechanism here is the team of ‘experts’ that Jenner gathers around herself – academics, activists, actors and writers from a range of backgrounds who explain trans issues to Jenner and the audience.

Ultimately, though, I believe *I Am Cait*’s most potent critique of the authentic transnormative narrative comes from Jenner herself, who, behind her emotionally and politically actualised persona, holds attitudes that are toxic to the trans community. When these are revealed and debated as the series goes on – most infamously her claim that Donald Trump would be ‘very good’ for LGBT and women’s issues – the optimistic liberalism of her coming out narrative is starkly shown to be powerless in the real fight for trans rights.

I’m interested in discussing if and how other series in television’s contemporary transgender turn thematize these issues regarding transnormativity, and to what extent this can really be understood as an affirmative step.