

Television's Transgender Tipping Point

“The Everydayness of the Transgender Tipping Point”

Andre Cavalcante, *University of Virginia*

In June 2014, *Time* magazine announced we have reached a “transgender tipping point,” a moment when the transgender community is gaining unprecedented political and cultural ground. Indeed, the start of the 21st century reveals a turn toward televised transgender visibility and a culture coming to terms with gender variance. I argue this transgender turn in television is opening up a previously hidden terrain: transgender everyday life. This is a much-welcomed representational turn since historically media has represented transgender figures as freaks, deceivers, monsters, martyrs and victims, or superhuman deities.

During my ethnographic fieldwork with transgender individuals and communities in the American Midwest and San Francisco between 2008-2012, the people I spoke with routinely critiqued the media for their failure to represent the everydayness of transgender experience. They overwhelmingly agreed that popular media representations largely advance the delegitimization of transgender identity, the dehumanization of transgender people, and the articulation of transgender experience as tragic. As one participant plainly stated, “*I just want to see, you know, trans people living their everyday lives.*”

Everydayness is the connective tissue that links together disparate domains of the lived world: work, family, private life, leisure. It is a routine of the familiar, something we all know intuitively and take for granted. For the participants in my study, who occupied a highly stigmatized, marginalized, and precarious subject position, everydayness was a potent object of desire –something they could not take for granted.

They wanted to see it represented in media culture because it would signal that transgender everydayness lies within reach and exists within the realm of possibility.

Visions of transgender everydayness are perhaps most apparent on reality television, a significant cultural barometer because it promises (at least in part) to offer a more realistic and variable account of public and private life than other media forms. At the start of the 21th century, transgender people started to become most visible in the genre's representational matrix, appearing as regulars on the following series:

The Surreal Life (VH1, 2006)

Born in the Wrong Body (MSNBC, 2007)

America's Next Top Model (CW, 2008)

TransAmerican Love Story (Logo, 2008)

I Wanna Work for Diddy (VH1, 2008)

America's Best Dance Crew (MTV, 2009)

The Real World: Brooklyn (MTV, 2009)

Making the Band (MTV, 2009)

Ru Paul's Drag Race (Logo, 2009)

Transform Me (VH1, 2010)

Dancing with the Stars (ABC, 2011)

Project Runways All Stars (Lifetime, 2013)

More current reality television such as *I Am Cait* (2015-2016), *I Am Jazz* (2015-current), *Becoming Us* (2015-current), *New Girls on the Block* (2015-current), and

Transcendent (2015-current), in addition to streaming fictional television such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-current) and *Transparent* (2014-current), and popular web series such as *Her Story* (2015-current) are bringing transgender life and subjectivity to the ground, highlighting the low, the common, and the familiar. Importantly, I am not suggesting these shows do not traffic in sensationalism, exploitation, and melodrama. *I Am Cait*, for example, was at times a Kardashian merry-go-round. Yet this kind of heightened reality is very much part and parcel of popular media representation. These shows also generally rely on well-worn tropes and contexts: transsexual women and “born in the wrong body” discourses; a celebration of white, middle class lifestyles; and an acute focus on individuals who are traditionally attractive and who can “pass.” Absent are transgender men, the gender queer, those who cannot or do not pass, and the poor and working class.

Nevertheless, what the new transgender visibility does accomplish is similar to what Gamson (1999) argued talk shows of the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in doing, mainly they force open little openings onto marginalized life not seen in other parts of the television landscape. These shows offer glimpses into transgender dating, work, friendship, intimacy, and domesticity. Shows such as *I am Cait* exhibit the diversity of transgender communities, and address questions of everyday privilege and access. *Her Story* creates a window into transgender coffee shop chats and the challenges of finding love. *I am Jazz* and *Becoming Us* feature transgender individuals living within the nuclear family dynamic. For transgender audiences looking for mediated everydayness, these flashes of ordinary life are deeply meaningful and they highlight transgender self-authorship, agency, and ordinariness.