Rethinking (and Retheorizing) Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion

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This roundtable began as the first panel of the International Communication Association dedicated exclusively to transgender studies. The articles of the panel investigated various domains of mediated representation, from television to newspapers to online pornography to Tumblr blogs. The differences in media, methods, and theoretical frameworks across the articles allowed for the panel to cover a broad swath of transgender representation in the current media environment. At the same time, their intersections allowed for conversation to move beyond theoretical understandings of media representation inherited from feminist and LGB studies to think about what transgender-specific modes of representation may be, how they differ from other modes of representation, and how the consequences of these transgender-specific modes may also, therefore, differ. After some time away to reflect, the panelists sat back down to answer important questions about how their work pushes both the theory and the practice of transgender media representation forward.

Keywords: transgender, visibility, representation, global media, cissexism

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This roundtable discussion began as a panel at the 2019 meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Washington, DC. The panel, organized by TJ Billard, was the first ever ICA panel dedicated exclusively to transgender studies in communication. The five articles that comprised the panel investigated various domains of mediated representation, from television crime dramas to newspapers to online pornography to Tumblr blogs, looking at both cis-produced and self-produced media. The differences in media, means of production, methods, and theoretical frameworks across the articles allowed for the panel to cover a broad swath of transgender representation in the current media environment. At the same time, their intersections allowed for conversation to move beyond theoretical understandings of media representation inherited from feminist and LGB studies to think about what transgender-specific modes of representation may be, how they differ from other modes of representation, and how the consequences of these transgender-specific modes may also, therefore, differ. After the panel, Billard reassembled the panelists to extend their conversation after some time away to reflect. With the addition of Erique Zhang, the panelists sat back down to answer important questions about how their work pushes both the theory and the practice of transgender media representation forward.

TJ Billard (he/him/they/them):
Each of our articles spoke to different media and to different kinds of representation within those media. Though we certainly didn't hit everything, the diversity of our articles meant we hit a large portion of the contemporary media landscape. So, let's start off simply: What kinds of transgender media representation do you look at in your work, and how do they distinguish themselves from the kinds of representation our field has already theorized?

Oliver Haimson (he/him):
I generally examine social media content produced by transgender people, and I use methods like interviews and surveys to complement my analysis. Hearing about people's experiences in their own words is quite different from traditional transgender media representation, which, as shown in some of my fellow panelists' work, often portrays stereotypes or cisgender views of transgender experiences. Yet even transgender people's own narratives of their gender transitions and lives are often affected by broader media influences. For example, in Tumblr transition blogs and my interviews with bloggers, many people discussed whether or not they felt "better" after transitioning, and people described conflicting emotions when they did not automatically "get better." These types of narratives—that transgender people's lives and well-being will and should improve throughout and after transition—are pervasive in the media and in social media movements like the It Gets Better Project. However, in reality, transgender people face many other life transitions and experiences during and after gender transition (e.g., relationship changes, job changes), as well as intersecting identity facets (e.g., race/ethnicity, class), all of which also affect emotional well-being over time. These intersections complicate the relationship between transition status and well-being. Nonetheless, I found in my work that many transgender people seem to internalize a cultural imperative to "get better" or "feel better" during and after transition (Haimson, 2020). I argue that the expectation to get better, and disappointment if one does not, is largely related to media representations of trans and LGBTQ people, along with overall societal expectations of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) often reflected in media, combined with a long history of coerced transition narratives required by gatekeepers to access medical transition. In this way, this dominant cultural narrative can be pervasive even in trans people's self-produced media.

Kelsey Whipple (she/her):

I study gender, gender identity, and class in the media. I've been particularly interested in how transgender people and topics are depicted in U.S. news. I've had a particular focus on both media depictions of trans people and public reactions to those depictions, using data sourced from news articles, news comments, and social media reactions to the news. My research has benefited immensely from recent studies analyzing depictions of trans people in popular culture, including work by TJ and Traci, in realms such as television and film (Abbott, 2013; Billard, 2019a). However, when it comes to news coverage of trans people and topics, little research has explored the increasingly prominent coverage of trans youth in particular (e.g., Billard, 2016, 2019d). And though previous studies examining trans characters in popular media have explored visual representations of trans identity (e.g., Baril, 2018; Billard, 2019c), this visual lens hasn't crossed over into journalism research. In my most recent study, I sought to help fill holes in the research about media depictions of trans people by examining both textual and visual news media coverage of both trans adults and trans youth. What I discovered was an overwhelming absence of visual coverage of trans people, as well as a specific absence of depictions of trans youth who are younger than 18.

Traci Abbott (she/her):

My research primarily examines fictional representations of gender and sexual diversity in American television and film. As a media studies scholar trained in feminist and queer literary and cultural theory, I agree with my roundtable colleagues that research is necessary to expose entrenched ideology, which I do with qualitative analysis that identifies trends and tropes present in narrative visual media. The objective of my current book is not to analyze the veracity of trans characters per se, but ask why such narrow, prejudicial stereotypes still dominate mainstream media. Fictional representations of trans people have been present in American media consistently since the early 1970s, but primarily as guest or secondary transfeminine characters constructed to uphold the hegemonic authority of cisgender masculine heterosexuality. However, scholarship tends to highlight film protagonists or regular characters, whether in *Boys Don't Cry*, *Transamerica*, *Glee*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Transparent*, or *Dallas Buyers Club*, including my own earlier work (e.g., Abbott, 2013). Genre analysis has been a useful lens to consider the function of these guest trans characters, and my article for this panel focused on police and legal procedurals, a consistently popular genre in scripted American television, as well as the most consistent purveyor of guest trans characters. Trans studies continue to produce amazing theoretical perspectives about the complexity of transphobia, like trans necropolitics, that often is not applied to fictional representations (Aizura, 2014; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013). So, I apply this theory to explain why transfeminine guest characters on more recent episodes of *Law & Order: SVU* and *The X-Files* may seem more sympathetic than predecessors like *NYPD Blue* or *CSI,* but they still stipulate that the affective worth of trans women is dependent on their death.

TJ Billard:

During my undergraduate education in Washington, DC, there was a rash of antitransgender violence, with multiple murders. The victims were then revictimized in the press by forms of ignorance and prejudice we were accustomed to then, but see less often now. It's hard to verbalize how scared the community was. For me, though, as a student of media, I was particularly caught up in anger at the press. So, I began my research career with a specific focus on news media, studying how the U.S. legacy press (de)legitimates transgender issues and identities as subjects of sociopolitical controversy (Billard, 2016). Since then, I've conducted further studies of transgender news coverage, looking specifically at how the rise of digital-native outlets and new

journalistic norms have transformed the amount and the focus of transgender coverage in U.S. news media (Billard, 2019d). But I've also expanded to study the content and effects of transgender representation in entertainment television (Billard, 2019a), pornography (Billard, 2019b), and even comic books (Billard & MacAuley, 2017), as well as in global, rather than merely U.S., media (Billard & Nesfield, 2020).

Looking back, I've regretted that my early work reduced transgender representation in news media, to a certain extent, to "good" coverage and "bad" coverage. Beyond oversimplifying the discursive complexities of transgender representation, it also (inadvertently) overlooked transgender agency in processes of collective meaning making. My work now is much more processual, focusing on the complex social dynamics at play in creating and contesting transgender media representation, as well as the ways representation produces social discourses that circulate outside the mediasphere (Billard, 2019c). There's been much wonderful work looking at transgender media representation and at how transgender audiences actively interpret it and produce their own, including work by Oliver and Stephenson. However, there's been very little work looking at how transgender activists operate within the evolving media system to leverage social and political power, so that's where my research is focused now.

Stephenson Brooks Whitestone (she/her):
In studying transgender identity, I focus specifically on the control we have or do not have as trans people over our identity. Most of my work focuses on aging trans populations and on the disturbing practice of detransitioning trans people after their deaths—that is, of erasing their transgender identity and presenting them in the gender they were assigned at birth. My work reminds me daily of the deep need that trans people have to find spaces that are safe for our identities. Sadly, a coffin is not necessarily a safe space, nor is the mass media. For generations, trans viewers have observed a parade of demeaning depictions of trans people march across our various screens. Even as mediated representations in the 2000s afforded more three-dimensional views of trans characters, very little of that content was created or produced by trans people (Serano, 2007). The online world is profoundly different. Cavalcante (2016) calls the transgender online community a counterpublic—a place that "furnishes feelings of belonging and ideological affiliation" (p. 110). These communities provide a safe place to explore and nurture one's own identity while simultaneously offering high levels of control over the expression and enactment of that identity.

In my most recent study, I interviewed transgender erotica performers, and the desire to maintain control over one's identity was salient in interviewee responses. Most who had participated in both amateur-style performance and professional-style performance expressed a preference for the more amateur-style webcam work. In these DIY mediated interactions, trans people were, for once, producing their own content and creating their own characters. One respondent stated that when she moved into the more professional realm, she felt like a product. It was at the more amateurish level where she felt agency over her expression, and she stated that those experiences were "the heart of my process in which I discovered myself."

Erique Zhang (they/them):
My primary site of study is trans social media production, especially within the beauty community on YouTube. Existing research on beauty, fashion, and social media production have raised important questions about labor and economy vis-à-vis race and gender (e.g., Pham, 2015). Such work has been hugely influential in my own understanding of beauty and media production, particularly because of issues these

scholars raise about aesthetic and beauty labor, or the gendered ways in which women are expected to maintain their physical attractiveness. However, they generally presume an unmarked cisgender subject; cis womanhood as default thus remains largely unchallenged. On the other hand, existing work on trans YouTube has primarily focused on medical transition vlogs (i.e., those that document trans people's experiences with hormone replacement therapy and gender affirming surgeries; e.g., Miller, 2017), largely ignoring the aesthetic practices that transfeminine people engage in.

My research intervenes into these separate literatures to ask how transfemininity and beauty are co-constitutive. Along this vein, I have two major ongoing projects. My primary project looks at videos produced by transfeminine YouTubers such as Natalie Wynn (also known by her channel name, ContraPoints) and Gigi Gorgeous. Here, I analyze how these women discuss their trans experiences, paying particular attention to how they address beauty. While I find that these video producers largely conform to cisnormative beauty standards, the way that they talk about beauty is more nuanced and ambivalent; at times, they even seemingly reject cis beauty standards. My secondary project is an interview study with "ordinary" transfeminine people (i.e., people not in the public eye). This project is meant to complement the YouTube study by asking everyday trans people not only about how they conceive of beauty but also how they make sense of trans media representation.

TJ Billard:
One of the major threads that ran through each of our articles—and I think runs through all of our work more generally—is the uniqueness of transgender media representation. Each of us thinks, in different ways, about transgender representation on its own terms. That then begs the question, what does a transgender-specific mode of representational critique look like, and (why) is it necessary?

Traci Abbott:
Trans media studies has benefitted from intersectional queer and feminist media scholarship, yet it should not be viewed as merely an offshoot of either. There is a strong field of scholarship that interrogates trans studies' relationship with feminist studies (for a summary, see Hines, 2019), and many scholars have also analyzed what is overlooked or undervalued when trans subjects are examined from a queer media studies perspective (Fischer, 2018; Snorton, 2017). In turn, trans-specific media analysis benefits and enriches both fields, since recent trans media scholarship has generated theoretical viewpoints that critique, for example, pregnancy and childbirth as a heterosexual female domain (Abbott, forthcoming) or the consumeristic objective of normative femininity (Billard, 2019c). My article similarly demonstrates that a trans-specific media analysis integrates, but moves beyond feminist- and queer-specific critiques. These scholars explain how the hierarchy of victimization functions within the television crime genre, so that certain victims framed as responsible for their own maltreatment reinforce cultural censure against, for instance, promiscuity or fetishism (e.g., Rader, Rhineberger-Dunn, & Vasquez, 2016). These representations may rank one woman's worth as a sexual or reproductive citizen over another's, such as by valuing the middle-class wife over the lesbian or sex worker, but the inherent value of the cis female victim's sexual capital for heterosexual men remains undisputed. Since the transfeminine community is presumed to construct their gender identity to access "male sexualization and sexual advances" (Serano, 2007, p. 258), I argue that these fictional television narratives rationalize the cis male perpetrator's attraction to his transfeminine

victim as heteronormative desire, but then deny her personhood through his violent actions in order to neutralize her threat as a substitution for cis femininity.

Erique Zhang:
Something I grapple with in my research is how to imagine transfeminine beauty that is not predicated on passing. Discourses about passing seem to pervade media narratives of trans people. In the TV series *Pose*, for example, multiple storylines have centered on how well characters pass, effectively acting as a proxy for how successful they are at performing femininity. Similarly, Natalie Wynn, who I mentioned earlier, has discussed in some of her videos how trans women in particular are burdened with the imperative both to pass and to be beautiful, to the extent that the two become conflated. Indeed, in my own qualitative interviews with transfeminine folks, a few of my participants expressed how beauty and passing are difficult to disentangle for them; in other words, to pass is to be beautiful, and to be beautiful is to pass.

Of course, passing is vital for many trans folks, both for their mental well-being and to help to ensure their safety and survival (Billard, 2019c). However, my goal in researching trans beauty is to move beyond the narrative of passing to develop a trans-centered critique of beauty. As Traci discussed, trans media studies certainly benefits from more established fields of inquiry—as I mentioned earlier, my own work is heavily influenced by feminist media studies—but these fields fail to fully capture the complexities of trans experiences and representations. To that end, I see my work as an intervention into feminist theorizing about beauty and aesthetic labor to understand how trans folks do or do not resist beauty standards that privilege cisnormative aesthetics. To give an example, one of my interviewees offered this opinion about trans beauty: "I feel like there's a lot of space for trans women to still look trans, but not look like men, and to be beautiful." She contradicted the dominant narrative about passing, asserting instead that looking trans and being beautiful was not only possible, but was something she had come to take pride in.

Oliver Haimson:
I think one of the best ways to critique trans media representations is to create trans-specific media and technologies. To this end, my students and I have been researching a new social media site called Trans Time (https://www.transtime.is), which is an online space for trans people to document transition and build community. A space that is created for and populated by trans people allows representation of trans identity away from the cisgender gaze, which in our research, enabled people to present both the exciting and the mundane aspects of gender transition (Haimson, Buss, et al., 2020). I think this is related to Erique's insights about trans beauty—in a trans-specific social media space, people can more deeply consider their own conceptions of beauty and how they want to present themselves and be viewed, rather than primarily worrying about what a cisgender audience might think of their appearance or presentation. In addition to our research on Trans Time, my students and I have been holding participatory design sessions with trans people in which we ask them to envision and sketch "trans technologies" to address some of the challenges faced by trans communities. This has led to some exciting visions of how trans representation could be shifted using technologies. A few examples include a "body-changing laboratory," augmented mirrors and glasses that enable a person to see themselves the way they wish to appear, and wearable technologies that shift clothing based on preferred gender presentation in particular moments and contexts (Haimson, Gorrell, Starks, & Weinger, 2020). In this way, especially by involving trans people in the design process, technology can provide exciting ways forward for self-determined trans representation.

TJ Billard:

My perspective on the need for a transgender-specific mode of representational critique is greatly informed by Cáel Keegan's (2020) powerful writing on the uncomfortable position in which transgender studies sits vis-à-vis both women's studies and queer studies. As he discussed, women's studies is fundamentally rooted in (and continues to be heavily invested in) a model of sexual subordination in which men and women are discrete categories and the former subordinates the latter, while queer studies is, at its core, invested in the deconstruction of the male/female binary as a means to "unravel[ing] heteronormativity" (Keegan, 2020, p. 387). Neither is, then, a particularly welcoming home for transgender studies, which simultaneously disrupts the subordination model of feminist theory by deessentializing gender and disrupts the deconstructionism of queer theory by maintaining the validity of binary gender identification. Moreover, in women's studies, transness is always understood vis-à-vis womanhood, and so trans women are only legible as women who have become women, trans men are only legible as men who were "socialized as" women, and nonbinary people are only legible to the extent their oppression can be located within the template of misogyny. As for queer studies, transness is always understood as some "ultimate form" of queerness that manifests literally the metaphor of gender transgression, and so trans people are only legible to the extent they embody an *offensichtliche* ("obvious" in German; literally, "opensightly") subversion of gender norms.

Though Keegan (2020) discussed transgender studies as a broader discipline, his critique remains highly relevant in the specific context of transgender communication studies. Indeed, in the field of communication, "transgender" is often picked up as an "extension" of queer and/or feminist scholarship, as a new object of study belonging to these existing theoretical domains (Fischer, 2018). Accordingly, communication scholars often feel entitled to speak with authority on trans subjects by virtue of their expertise in feminist or queer studies. But rarely do these scholars welcome transgender studies' "specific material or political investments" (Keegan, 2020, p. 386), instead positioning the investments of trans studies as mere extensions of queer and/or feminist investments. And as Traci, Stephenson, and Erique have amply addressed, the investments of queer and feminist studies in communication often do not align with those of transgender studies. So instead of chopping off transgender communication studies' heel to fit into feminist and queer communication studies' slipper, and instead of letting transgender scholarship be dominated by feminist and queer communication scholars, we need to develop a distinctly transgender mode of critique. As for what that mode looks like, I'm really encouraged by the work scholars like Erique and Oliver are doing, and, like them, I want my work to be rooted in the productive practices of transgender people, coming to understand how the community constructs its own standards of representation rather than importing an inherited set of theoretical ideas from feminist and queer media critique. I also think that a transgender-specific mode of critique needs to break us out of thinking of gender as a hierarchical system of categorical subordination and to instead allow us to think of gender as a vector of oppression—which would be a beneficial shift for queer and feminist theorizing, as well.

Kelsey Whipple:

Although I, like many of my fellow panelists, am deeply influenced by intersectional queer and feminist theories, enacting a transgender-specific mode of representational critique requires spending less time grounding research in comparisons to other paradigms and more time examining what trans and gender-nonconforming representation is and means in and of itself. In that way, the goals of this mode of critique

reflect some of the same recommendations our work makes for trans media representation, such as avoiding thematic comparisons between gender identity and sexuality, such as, in the case of my research about visual representations of trans people in U.S. news media, not using the gay flag to represent trans people. In addition to the insights shared by my colleagues, I would like to emphasize the importance of trans and gender-nonconforming scholars crafting and furthering this trans-focused mode of critique in ways cisgender scholars like myself cannot. If scholars are to cultivate a transgender gaze, they must incorporate and, indeed, prioritize trans perspectives at all levels of consideration, including in the realm of academic inquiry.

TJ Billard:
The most critical comments we received on the panel were that all of our articles were U.S.-centric—and it was a valid critique. We are all based in North America and our work largely focuses on North America, as well. Shaking ourselves out of this Americentrism, what does our work contribute to global perspectives on transgender media representation, and how might global perspectives problematize the work we're currently doing?

Erique Zhang:
As an Asian American scholar, I pay a great deal of attention to transnational flows of culture, especially between the U.S. and East Asia. I am particularly interested in how beauty standards travel across nations. The South Korean beauty industry has not only exerted significant influence over the beauty cultures of neighboring countries such as China and Japan, but has expanded into Western nations, as well. For example, the South Korean beauty industry permeates YouTube beauty communities (Raymundo, 2019). Again, much of this work presumes a cisgender female subject, and it is difficult to imagine how I might offer a trans critique of these flows of beauty without being deeply integrated in those specific cultural contexts, which I am not. Doing so without understanding how gender is constructed in those cultures would entail imposing a culturally imperialist, Western understanding of gender. This is not to say that I am not interested in engaging in that critique, but that I might not be the best equipped person to do so.

However, one potential avenue for a transgender, transnational critique of beauty is cosmetic surgery. Using Asian eyelid surgery as a case study—a procedure that was developed by Western military doctors intervening in Korea during the Korean War—feminist scholars have explored the uneasy racial tensions undergirding cosmetic surgery, as well as the ways in which Western media is quick to pathologize women of color (e.g., Asian women) who choose to undergo such procedures (see Heyes, 2009; Lee, 2016). To this end, Eric Plemons (2017) shows how facial feminization surgery (FFS) also relies on racist beauty standards, having been informed by scientific racist methods of anthropological skull analysis that relied on a normative European (read: White) feminine figure. Thus, facial features that diverge from this norm are deemed in need of correction to make them appear not only more feminine but more White, as well. As such, we can begin to see how cosmetic surgery and FFS could be a site of analysis to understand the deep entanglements of race, empire, and gender. While this may not necessarily get at a global or transnational approach to trans critique per se, I also look to work that approaches a trans of color critique, acknowledging the Whiteness of the transnormative figure (Skidmore, 2011) and calling for an intersectional analysis of the experiences of Black trans people and other trans people of color (see Glover, 2016; Green & Bey, 2017; Snorton, 2017).

TJ Billard:

I think we first must note that it's not really possible to discuss "transgender" identity without centering Europe and North America to the extent that "transgender" as a category of identity has a distinctly Euro-American genesis and cultural context (Stryker, 2006). That is, "transgender" is the label created to describe a particular concept of gender variance constructed largely within a Western psychomedical epistemology, and one that is, beyond being Euro-American, largely White in its origin, as well (Boellstorff et al., 2014; Gill-Peterson, 2018; Snorton, 2017). To extend Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) line of argument from *Provincializing Europe*, "transgender" is a European (and North American) concept, and to hold it up as a self-evident category that we should expect to find universally in modern society is to essentialize European social categories as the natural state of social existence.

Moving beyond this observation, it's important to consider how gender variant identities in non-Euro-American cultures (e.g., *muxe*, *hijra*, *waria*, *nádleeh*) are being recast as "transgender" identities (e.g., Boellstorff et al., 2014; Chatterjee, 2018), why and how this recasting is happening, and what the consequences of this recasting are. Sam Nesfield and I (Billard & Nesfield, 2020) examined the specific role of global media industries in driving this homogenization of gender variance across cultures, as the discourses of European and North American media reverberate in global contexts. As we argued, there is an ambivalent tension between the "Westernization" of non-Euro-American identity categories, on the one hand, and the development of cross-national/cross-cultural modes of identification, on the other. While the remaking of other gender identities in a Euro-American model involves familiar dynamics of cultural imperialism, it simultaneously makes nonnormative gender identities legible in a global context and enables a transnational movement for recognition and acceptance. As for how global perspectives problematize the work I do that does focus on North America, I think they raise a series of important questions about the web of consequences that U.S.-based activism to (re)define transgender identity in American society has beyond the intended local ones, which necessarily makes understanding U.S. activism a small portion of a broader project of understanding networked activism around gender variance across the globe.

As a final point, I think it's important that we consider the monolingualism of the academy. Important research on transgender media representation is being produced by scholars writing in French (e.g., Baril, 2017) and Spanish (e.g., Olveira Araujo, 2019), as well as in Portuguese, Mandarin, Thai, and countless other languages. These works have different relationships to the category of "transgender" and consider different social, cultural, and political contexts that shape their analyses in important ways beyond the Anglocentric perspectives of the academy. But we, as Anglophone scholars working in an English-dominated industry, are unlikely to encounter this work, much less integrate it into our own analysis and theorizing. This is a serious shortcoming for each of us personally and for the academy as a whole, and it's a key area for us to address both in terms of our personal citational politics and in terms of how our professional organizations create space for multilingual scholarly exchange.

Traci Abbott:

I agree this concept is relevant, but also challenging based on the theoretical and epistemological foundation of transgender identities in Western contexts. Like Erique, I have more often sought transgender media studies scholars that challenge this Eurocentric identity hierarchy in primarily U.S. media, but I agree with the need to contest the imperialistic foundation of this White ideal. Global and transnational approaches are

outside of the scope of my research or expertise, but in the scholarship on trans necropolitics I previously mentioned, Aizura (2014) is particularly useful in this respect, since this article foregrounds the "homonationalist" foundation of trans documentary to establish a racialized continuum about the treatment of "trans women of colour" as subjects without discounting "different biopolitical models of inclusion" (pp. 131–132). In my research, this type of global analysis seems to be more common in trans identity studies than for trans media scholarship on scripted narratives, with some exceptions (Leung, 2012; Mackie, 2008) or only on certain texts, like *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (e.g., Riggs, 2008). Trans media scholars, including myself, can do more to expose how such narratives validate white transfemininity against a non-White "other," particularly when, as Erique points out, doing so reconstitutes colonist perspectives. With that in mind, I would like to consider more carefully the imperialist assumptions behind the inclusion of non-White, non–North American trans feminine characters by cisgender directors in 21st-century films like *Belly of the Beast*, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, *Journey to the End of the Night*, and *The Hangover, Part II*, including how the director displaces non-White transfemininity from its cultural, economic, and political contexts.

Stephenson Brooks Whitestone:
In considering online porn and erotica in terms of a more global perspective, it must first be determined how that sense of internationalism should be understood. Are we referring to the nationality or ethnicity of the performers? The location of the production shoots and/or production offices? The source of the funding that financed the production and marketing of the content? Or the geographic location of the viewer(s)? We cannot address each of those questions here, but suffice to say that the Internet blurs lines of physical location and commonly traverses even the strictest of national borders.

About the subject of my study—the use of transgender erotica as an imaginary for developing trans identities—the one non-U.S. born participant in our study indicated a strong drive to seek out and view trans erotica (usually print material) in her native Mexico. She referred to those materials as comics-like publications that one could buy at the corner store and then immediately throw away before raising suspicion. But those "comics" were encountered as a part of her "attraction to knowing." It is precisely that attraction to knowing that can become vitally important in areas where queer sexualities and gender identities are harshly repressed. South African queer person of color Jabu Chen Pereira explains how porn (often hidden in cupboards and drawers) can work to counteract portrayals of all Africans as HIV positive or victims of sexual violence, allowing them to see themselves as "people who enjoy sex and people with desires" (Matebeni, 2012, p. 63). For Pereira, access to queer or trans erotica is an important contributor to those conversations. The degree to which trans porn might have an effect on the development of positive gender-nonconforming identities would assuredly vary from country to country and from culture to culture, but when accessed, queer and trans erotica has the potential to affirm trans and queer identities in ways that the mainstream media in many areas cannot or will not.

Conclusion

This roundtable brought together six scholars working across a broad range of communication subfields to discuss their work on transgender media representation. Taken together, the insights offered by the panelists provide a starting roadmap toward transgender-specific modes of media representation and

critique (see also Billard & Zhang, forthcoming). Along the way, they point to key disjunctures between trans theorizing and theorizing inherited from (or, at other times, imposed by) women's and queer studies. Importantly, they note several key ways the emerging field of transgender communication studies must develop further, including paying greater attention to global (rather than merely U.S.) media, incorporating and advancing work by non-U.S. and non-Anglophone scholars, and expanding the scope of which types and facets of transgender media representation are considered worthy of analysis. Future work in this area should incorporate the critiques and analytic perspectives offered in this roundtable to produce more robust analyses of transgender media representation.

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