

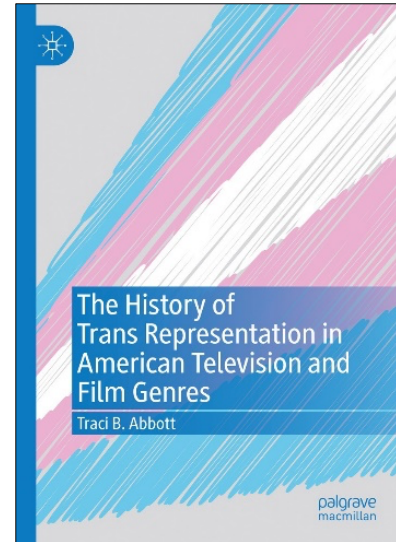
Traci B. Abbott, **The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 293 pp., \$109.00 (hardcover or paperback).

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If anyone tries to tell you that trans characters in U.S. TV and films are a recent development, hand them a copy of Traci B. Abbott's book. In ***The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres***, Abbott has conducted a thorough and edifying analysis of over 50 years of U.S. televisual representations of transgender people. While a "history" might connote changes over time—and Abbott does mention some ways that trans representation has changed in U.S. scripted media since 1965—the book's emphasis is instead on what has remained the same: the privileging of cisnormativity and the dehumanization of transgender characters.

Abbott's major contentions in this work are twofold. The first is that transgender representation in U.S. media is not a new phenomenon, despite being positioned as such in popular discourse—much like trans theory itself, which is positioned as always emerging in academic discourse (Keegan, 2020). This argument is clearly demonstrated by the numerous examples Abbott provides, both within the text and in the comprehensive Timeline of Trans Characters in Scripted American Film and Television, 1965–2018—an appendix that, in and of itself, will be a valuable resource for media researchers. Abbott's second contention is that rather than heralding greater acceptance of and support for transgender people, these televisual representations maintain cisnormativity and cisgender privilege; they "continue to present limited and harmful characterizations that reaffirm cisgender superiority for a cisgender audience" (p. 2). The bulk of the book is dedicated to this second claim, as Abbott meticulously interrogates trans representation across genres, outlining specific tropes and giving examples of their enactment over half a century of U.S. scripted entertainment media.

Chapters 1 and 2 give an overview of trans identity, U.S. media representations of trans people, and the historical context in which those representations occur. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the sitcom genre and interrogate what Abbott calls the "cis surprise" trope—in which cisgender people are surprised by the revelation of a transgender person's gender history—in the context of friendship or romantic partnership, respectively. In either iteration, the "cis surprise" trope foregrounds the cisgender character's (dis)comfort at the expense of the transgender person's autonomy and humanity. Chapter 5 examines the dramatic romance genre and the trope of tragic endings for cis/trans relationships. In the examples Abbott analyzes, "transphobic violence is still presented as an inevitable result" of cis/trans romance (p. 144), a formula that "upholds cisgender heteronormativity even while projecting empathy for the trans character" (p. 131). While transphobic violence is condemned within these media texts, "tragic romances *overpersonalize* the



circumstances in order to appeal to the average cisgender viewer” (p. 148, emphasis in original), placing responsibility on individual bad actors while refusing to interrogate systemic oppression of trans people.

In chapters 6 and 7, Abbott turns to two tropes that cut across genres: trans criminality and trans victimhood. Chapter 6 argues that the trans criminality trope’s association of trans characters with deception and “delusional or immoral behavior” (p. 172) is harmful to the trans community. Chapter 7 focuses on the trans victim, specifically as portrayed in crime dramas. Much like the tragic romances of Chapter 5, crime dramas shy away from confronting systemic injustice against trans folks; audience sympathies are redirected from the trans victim to the cis detective, “displac[ing] melodramatic identification from victims to the criminal justice authorities” (p. 197). In many crime drama scenarios, the maintenance of “cis heteronormativity is the rationalization for transphobic violence” (p. 205), and the trans identity of the victim becomes a justification for their suffering or death. Chapter 8 concludes the text with a brief gesture toward shifts in trans media representation from 2019 to 2021—years outside the scope of Abbott’s study—and also to the growing backlash against trans people in U.S. politics.

Abbott’s work participates in ongoing discourses around trans identities, trans rights, and trans representation that are taking place in political, popular, and academic spheres in the United States, but the book does not engage with media outside of the United States, interactive media, unscripted media, or trans self-representation. Readers looking for recent scholarship on trans media representations from outside of the United States might consult *Trans Representations in Contemporary, Popular Cinema: The Transgender Tipping Point* (Richardson & Smith, 2022), which addresses European, Latin American, and Anglophonic films, or *Trans Identities in the French Media: Representation, Visibility, Recognition* (Chareyron, 2022), an edited collection that centers French trans experiences. For readers interested in trans media representations beyond film and television, Sandercock’s (2022) *Youth Fiction and Trans Representation* integrates readings of picture books, graphic novels, and young adult fiction alongside television and films, and Raun’s (2016) *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube* considers self-produced online videos. Abbott’s work contributes to the ongoing discourse carried out in these other books, many of which were published in the same year, but representations outside of U.S. television and film are beyond the scope of Abbott’s project.

One of Abbott’s stated goals is to push back against the presumption, exemplified by *TIME* magazine’s oft-cited declaration of a “transgender tipping point,” that transgender media representation “has positively shifted the cis society’s acceptance of the trans community” (p. 2). Though its analysis considers televisual texts only through 2018, Abbott’s work helps to explain the present environment of backlash and hostility toward transgender people in the United States: even as transgender characters appear ever more frequently in scripted television and film, these representations continue to uphold cis- and heteronormativity and to place responsibility for transphobic violence on individual bad actors, leaving systemic oppression unchallenged. Where the text could go farther is in its engagement with trans theory and especially trans media theory. While Abbott references trans and queer media scholars’ pushback against the binary of positive or negative representation and has herself participated in debates around theorizing trans media representation (Billard et al., 2020), *The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres* does not substantially engage with these debates, instead mostly focusing on demonstrating the transphobia pervasive in U.S. televisual media. Readers interested in critiques of media and representation from a specifically transgender

standpoint will find more in Keegan's (2022) "On the Necessity of Bad Trans Objects" or Billard and Zhang's (2022) "Toward a Transgender Critique of Media Representation."

The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres is organized thematically, not chronologically. This makes it easier to understand the representational throughlines that Abbott outlines but does not emphasize the character of different historical periods of trans representation or the changes that occurred over time. In other words, rather than organizing the book around how trans representation differed in different periods or has evolved over time, Abbott has organized it around representational themes that are traced *through* time. This helps to support Abbott's argument that, despite surface changes, media representations of trans people continue to privilege cisnormativity, but may surprise readers who were expecting a chronological focus. Also, while Abbott's book is thorough and comprehensive within its scope and is packed with specific examples of trans representation, it is sometimes difficult to follow those examples. References to numerous characters and complicated plots can be confusing, and it is sometimes difficult to make sense of the examples without prior knowledge of the media texts. This does, however, present an opportunity to pair Abbott's book with media screenings, especially using the book's comprehensive timeline of trans character appearances to track down specific television episodes.

Overall, *The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres* is a powerful reminder that trans media representation is neither a new phenomenon nor an uncomplicated boon for the trans community. The text will interest researchers in trans studies and media studies but is also well-suited for classroom use. Abbott's writing is clear and avoids excessive jargon, yet the book does not shy away from complex topics like trans necropolitics, analyzing and unpacking specific media examples to skillfully explain these concepts. This text will be an excellent teaching tool for instructors of LGBTQIA+ media studies or U.S. televisual media history and a valuable resource for scholars of transgender representation.

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