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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

Article Publishing

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Editorial

by Johanna Schorn, independent scholar

1 The December issue of *Gender Forum* is dedicated to the topic of Transgender Studies. Transgender Studies is a field of academic inquiry that is interrelated with Gender Studies, Feminist Studies and Queer Theory. In her introduction to the first anthology in the field, Susan Stryker defined it as “concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood” (3).

2 In the roughly two decades that Transgender Studies has been formally recognized, the usage and popularity of the term “transgender” has proliferated and, most importantly, has entered the vocabulary of mainstream media. However despite these developments, transgender individuals remain the target of discrimination and violence and are often silenced. This may even include media that is purportedly inclusive of them, but which fails to give transgender people the opportunity to influence their own representation (e.g. the recent film *The Danish Girl*, based on the biography of the painter Lily Elbe, was criticized for casting male cisgender¹ actor Eddie Redmayne for the leading role).

3 For this issue of *Gender Forum*, scholars were invited to submit articles which explore the recent changes in media representation of transgender people, fictional as well as non-fictional, and to critically engage with questions of sexuality and gender. In the first paper, “Mundane Transphobia in Celebrity Big Brother UK”, Damien W. Riggs, Chloe Colton, Clemence Due and Clare Bartholomaeus discuss the representation of a transgender contestant on the 2013 season of Celebrity Big Brother UK. To this end, they analyze a selection of conversations between the transgender contestant Lauren Harries and other contestants, as well as conversations other contestants had amongst each other. Riggs et al found multiple instances of what they called “mundane homophobia” – a tension between proclamations of liberal inclusivity on the one hand discrimination in the form of mockery and a focus on anatomy on the other hand.

4 A similar theme of ambivalence continues into the following submission by Rhianna

¹ Cisgender describes a person who identifies with their assigned biological sex.

Humphries with the title, “I think journalists sometimes forget that we’re just people’: Analysing the Effects of UK Trans Media Representation on Trans Audiences”. Humphries, too, argues that greater inclusivity of transgender individuals does not necessarily translate to a respectful treatment. In this article, she presents her findings from extensive interviews with trans people to examine the ways in which they see their lives affected by trans media representations. Interviews and focus groups were conducted online with self-defining trans people as experts on the ways newspaper reporting affects their lives. The findings that emerged from interviews revealed newspapers repeatedly influenced daily lives especially in relation to transphobia, misgendering and misrepresentation, which were highlighted frequently.

5 The final paper presents a more hopeful note, focusing on representation of trans and non-normative gender roles in a children’s cartoon series. In “*Steven Universe* and the Queer Cartoon Carnavalesque”, Eli Dunn argues that some cartoon series are beginning to express queer alternatives to cisgender and heteronormative heroes within the realms of magic and fantasy. The medium of the cartoon gives *Steven Universe* the opportunity to represent trans and non-normative characters within the confines of a children’s cartoon, but it also displays gender fluidity and exploration more generally as a positive site of free play and learning. This representation, Dunn concludes, not only has obvious positive effects for queer children, it also brings to the fore questions of how we as adults view trans embodiment, fantasy, and queer desire.

6 The issue concludes with a book review by Andrea Anderson of bell hooks’ *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, published in 2013 by Routledge. In this book, hooks is writing at the intersection of class, race, gender, sexuality and religion and suggests new avenues for thinking and addressing race and racism. She proposes using the term ‘white supremacy’ as a more useful tool for discussing racism in the US, as it keeps in the forefront an awareness of the interlocking systems of oppression that are at work in our culture. The book goes on to feature a collection of essays by hooks, in which she analyses the ways in which race and its representation have been impacted by contemporary cultural texts.

7 We hope that this diverse collection of contributions enliven and enrich the field, and wish to thank the contributors for their work.

Works Cited

Stryker, Susan. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges. An Introduction to Transgender Studies." *The Transgender Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Mundane transphobia in Celebrity Big Brother UK

By Damien W. Riggs, Chloe Colton, Clemence Due, and Clare Bartholomaeus,
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Abstract:

Trans people have long experienced visibility within the media. Historically, such visibility has been largely negative, reliant upon pathologising understandings of trans people's lives. More recent representations, however, have been somewhat more positive, with a range of media outlets seeking to understand and include trans people's experiences. Yet despite this shift, media representations of trans people are arguably still sensationalist and often perpetuate mundane, though no less marginalising, forms of transphobia. This paper presents an analysis of interactions that occurred in the 2013 season of *Celebrity Big Brother UK* between a trans housemate - Lauren Harries - and three cisgender housemates. The analysis highlights four forms of mundane transphobia: 1) jocular mockery, 2) discounting discrimination, 3) focusing on anatomy, and 4) liberal inclusivity. The paper concludes by exploring implications both for media representations of trans people and for how cisgender people engage with trans people's experiences more broadly.

Introduction

1 Over the past decade, trans people (i.e., people whose gender differs from that normatively expected of their assigned sex) have become increasingly visible in the mainstream media, particularly on television. Examples include trans people engaging in conversations about their own lives (such as interviews with Thomas Beatie about his pregnancies), acting in fictional television programs (such as Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black*), and appearing as contestants in reality television programs (such as on *Big Brother UK*, *America's Next Top Model*, and *The X Factor Australia*). Whilst such recent representations are not uniformly positive, they are arguably an improvement on representations of trans people that have previously appeared in the media (such as on tabloid talk shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*), where trans people's lives have often been depicted through narratives of deception, predation, and abnormality (Gamson esp. 98).

2 However despite the fact that contemporary media representations of trans people are arguably more positive than those that have appeared previously, there is a degree to which they continue to be both normative (i.e., they ignore the diversity of trans people's lives) and marginalising. In this paper we present an analysis of interactions from the 2013 season of *Celebrity Big Brother UK*, focusing on the ways in which a trans contestant in this season – Lauren Harries – was marginalised in comments made by cisgender contestants. The analysis we present is framed by an understanding of “mundane transphobia”, which refers to “the

everyday ways in which non-trans people enact marginalisation towards transgender people despite claims to inclusivity” (Riggs 160). Such an understanding is important, we argue, because it allows for a focus on the commonplace ways in which marginalisation occurs, in addition to exploring ways in which marginalisation can be challenged. In the following sections, we first present an overview of research that has examined media representations of trans people, after which we outline our methodological approach and provide a brief overview of *Celebrity Big Brother*. We then present an analysis of four interactions that were aired as part of the 2013 season, before turning to a discussion of the implications of our findings, particularly with regard to media guidelines for how trans people are represented.

Previous Literature

3 Whilst, as we noted above, representations of trans people in the mainstream media have been increasingly positive, such representations remain both normative and marginalising (Eldredge and Imre; Hollar). For example, in the UK television program *There’s Something about Miriam* (a dating show featuring a trans woman) which aired in 2004, Miriam’s trans status was known to viewers but hidden from the six cisgender men competing for her affections, until the season final where she “revealed” the “truth” of her gender history. In this type of programming, trans people’s lives are used as plot devices to titillate a nominally cisgender audience.

4 The lives of trans men and women are also sensationalised through a repeated focus in media representations upon trans people’s genitalia. In such representations trans people are routinely asked invasive questions about their past, present, and future embodiment, as Namaste argues:

Access to the media is a whole other form of institutional discrimination. Transsexuals are required to give their autobiography on demand: how long have you known? Are you operated? How did your family take the news? It is astounding to me that within 15 seconds of knowing an individual is transsexual, some people feel comfortable enough to ask transsexuals to describe the physical appearance and sexual function of their genitals. How is it that cultural taboos regarding speaking openly about sexuality and genitalia with people you do not know well go out the window when it comes to transsexuals? (4)

5 An explicit focus on embodiment was clearly apparent in media discussions about Thomas Beatie and his pregnant body. Riggs, for example, explores how Oprah Winfrey marginalised Beatie’s own account of his embodiment by first framing his masculinity through a narrative of his past as a “beauty queen,” before then marginalising his account of his embodiment through the derision of his penis as “small” (‘The Pregnant Man’, The Oprah

Winfrey Show, April 2008). Trans women too are repeatedly subject to a focus upon their genitalia. For example, on one episode of the Australian talk show *Beauty and the Beast*, host Stan Zemanek referred to Carlotta – a prominent Australian trans woman – as “a bloke who cut off his penis to become a sheila” (quoted in McIntyre 29).

6 A pathologising focus on trans people’s embodiment also appears in the common media narrative of trans people being born in the “wrong body”. Barker-Plummer, writing about newspaper coverage of the murder of US trans teenager Gwen Araujo, argues that the utilisation of the “wrong body discourse” limits understanding of the broader issues that trans people face (such as violence), in addition to reducing gender to binary categories. The “wrong body” narrative was also evident in relation to Nadia Almada, the winner of *Big Brother* UK in 2004, whose trans status was known by the audience but not the other participants. For example, Almada was later described by the host Davina MacCall as a “woman trapped in a man’s body” who successfully “passed” because the other housemates did not know she was trans (Hines 132). While this “wrong body” discourse is sometimes used by trans people themselves (Hines), the ways in which the media uses this narrative typically serves to sensationalise trans people’s lives.

7 A final way in which trans people continue to be marginalised within media representations takes the form of desexualisation. Such representations are notable as they differ to past representations of trans people which often emphasised an account of trans people as sexual predators (Brinker and Maza). By contrast, the desexualisation of trans people denies trans people’s sexuality, an account that is arguably less sensationalistic, but no less marginalising. An example of this occurred in the thirteenth season of the US version of *Dancing with the Stars*, on which Chaz Bono appeared as a contestant. In their analysis of the season, Mocarski and colleagues highlight a number of ways in which Bono was positioned differently to other male contestants. For example, Bono was typically fully covered by clothing while other male contestants were often shirtless or wore half-opened shirts. The content of Bono’s performances was also noticeably different to those of other male contestants, the latter of whom typically remained in close bodily contact with female partners throughout their performances, whilst Bono often had little close physical contact with his dance partner. Similarly, the only female judge on the program that season framed Bono in a desexualised way, calling him “cute” and “cuddly”, in stark contrast to the ways in which she flirted with other male contestants (quoted in Mocarski et al 254).

8 The examples of mundane transphobia we have outlined in this section demonstrate our claim that contemporary media representations of trans people continue to be

marginalising, and to a certain degree sensationalising. What is lacking from previous analyses of media representations of trans people, however, has been a close focus on how transphobia occurs interactionally in conversations between trans and cisgender people. As demonstrated in the analysis we present below, such a focus is important as it serves to highlight both the presence of normative and sensationalising narratives of trans people within the media, and more broadly how transphobia occurs in everyday interactions, a dual focus that we return to in our discussion.

Methodology

Data and Context of Celebrity Big Brother

9 The data for this study consist of interactions that occurred between contestants on the 2013 season of *Celebrity Big Brother* UK. Specifically, our focus is on interactions between Lauren Harries – a housemate who identified as transsexual – and three cisgender housemates. These interactions were chosen for analysis as they included reference to Harries’ gender identity as a trans person, references that were made salient by cisgender housemates rather than by Harries herself. Whilst we identified at least five other instances in which Harries’ status as trans was made salient by other housemates, the four interactions we examine below were the most extensive and detailed.

10 As is typical of the *Big Brother* franchise, the 2013 season of *Celebrity Big Brother* followed contestants over an extended period of time (in this case 23 days). Hour long episodes were aired daily throughout the season, with audiences presented with selected ‘highlights’ from the previous day. As part of their time in the *Big Brother* house, contestants are presented with challenges that they must undertake in order to gain rewards (primarily related to food and alcohol), though a significant proportion of their time is spent unoccupied, thus engendering periods of ad hoc interactions between contestants. Whilst the ‘naturalness’ of these interactions is debatable (see Riggs and Due for a discussion of this issue), for the purposes of the analysis below we would suggest that these interactions are not scripted, and hence provide us with an instance of everyday interactions between contestants within the household (albeit within extraordinary circumstances, and within the framework of editing and production that shapes what is aired).

11 Throughout the season contestants nominate one another for eviction, with the results of evictions determined by public vote. In this sense, *Big Brother* is both a social experiment in terms of how a group of people who typically have not previously experienced a relationship with one another interact in the context of a highly regulated environment, and it

is also a popularity contest. Harries herself remained in the house for the entire season, and exited the house in third place during the season finale.

Analytic Approach

12 Membership categorisation analysis (MCA) was used to examine the four interactions. MCA focuses on the ways in which people – as culturally competent members of the society in which they live – draw on taken for granted categories through which to account for their own experiences and to question the experiences of others. Stokoe suggests that MCA may be particularly useful for understanding the experiences of people who are routinely treated as “exceptions” to a particular category. Of particular interest in the current paper are the ways in which cisgender people may question or challenge trans people’s category membership, which then places an onus upon trans people to account for their location within a particular category to which they are claiming membership.

13 MCA typically proceeds through the identification and analysis of membership categorization devices (MCDs), which provide category-bound rules for how a particular category is normatively understood. Importantly, and as Stokoe emphasises, categories are “inference rich” (474), meaning that our understanding of categories is often based on assumptions derived from what we treat as implicit to a category. For example, the category “male” is normatively treated as referencing predicates (such as “has a penis”), as including category-bound activities that are also normatively produced (such as assumptions about what men do), and as part of a collection (in which male and female are normatively treated as paired opposites).

14 For the purposes of the analysis below we draw upon previous research that has identified a broad range of MCDs in everyday interactions. Specifically, identity construction practices such as category entitlement are particularly pertinent since, as Sacks argues, these categories lead to a range of culturally-produced and readily accessible tropes concerning the qualities of people seen as belonging to particular groups (see also Wooffitt). Once such identities are made available interactionally, normative expectations of how a member of a given category should behave are elicited. In the case of members of marginalised groups, these expectations frequently result in characterisations which could be considered as marginalising (Wooffitt).

15 With specific regard to trans people, then, our suggestion in the analysis is that mundane transphobia occurs through the normative expectations that adhere to gender categories, in which trans people are treated as improper members of the gender category to which they claim belonging. For Harries, three particular cisgender housemates repeatedly

raised questions about her category membership, yet did so in a range of ways that appear aimed at mitigating any accusation of transphobia by Harries.

16 For the purposes of the analysis each of the identified interactions was transcribed using Jeffersonian-Lite transcription (Jefferson). This mode of transcription goes beyond a simple verbatim transcription to include a focus on intonation, modulation, and other features of speech that are salient to understanding how categories are evoked through the minutiae of interactional turn-taking. In the analysis the first two letters of each speaker's name are used alongside their turn.

Analysis

17 The analysis below highlights four forms of mundane transphobia: 1) jocular mockery, 2) discounting discrimination, 3) focusing on anatomy, and 4) liberal inclusivity. Whilst we are aware that framing each of the extracts by a particular account of mundane transphobia may be seen as pre-empting the contents of the categories evoked by the individuals, our intention is to highlight the broader patterns that we believe arise from each of the four sets of interactions. In other words, whilst utilising MCA requires us to focus on the specific ways in which each of the individuals constructed member categories, we nonetheless believe it important to consider how these constructions function more broadly to marginalise Harries in ways that each evidence forms of mundane transphobia.

Mundane transphobia as jocular mockery

18 The first extract is taken from an exchange between three housemates: Harries, Louie Spence (a dancer), and Sophie Anderton (a model). At the beginning of the season these three contestants were removed from the Big Brother household and placed in a separate area referred to as the "temple of celebrity". These three contestants spent two days in the "temple of celebrity", where they were required to view and comment on the activities of the rest of the housemates, and to select the first three housemates to face elimination. The other housemates were unaware that they were being watched by these three housemates, nor did they know that the three housemates were chosen by *Big Brother* to nominate those facing eviction.

19 The interaction that appears in the first extract followed on from Harries, Spence and Anderton watching an interaction in the house involving Ron Atkinson, who is well known in the UK for his professional football career:

1 So: I know nothing about football. I went to uh. I uh >it's
 2 just not my thing<
 3 (0.2)
 4 Lo: I know footballers
 5 (0.1)
 6 La: All I know is it's a ball
 7 (2.2)
 8 Lo: yeah (.)And we got rid of them didn't we? Hahahaha
 9 darling ↑it's all in jest you know that
 10 (2.0)
 11 La: Ye::s (.) I do

Extract 1 - Day One, 23/8/13

20 In this interaction, even though all three speakers made a comment about football, only Harries' statement was attended to. Specifically, Spence makes reference to Harries' gender affirming surgery in line 8. In so doing, he takes Harries' statement about football to initiate a new direction of talk, thus making Harries' gender embodiment interactionally relevant. This new conversational direction was introduced after a pause of atypical length. In conversation, speakers typically manage conversational transitions with no or very short gaps between speakers (Atkinson and Heritage). Longer gaps depart from this normative practice and can be indicative of interactional difficulties. The gap of 2.2 seconds may thus have been a product of the fact that any attempt at humour in regards to Harries' gender affirming surgery could be taken as offensive, prompting consideration before saying it.

21 The comment then made by Spence in lines 8-9 is an example of an attempt at jocular mockery, which has a range of functions according to the context of the joke (Haugh). Such functions include fostering affiliation or solidarity, diffusion of conflict, assertion of power, or a means of socialising others (Haugh). One of the key elements to jocular mockery is that it combines two elements: provocation and being playful. Spence's comment combines these two elements: first, a provocation about getting rid of balls (though a provocation that is softened by the use of the word "we" rather than "you"), and then an attempt at being playful, as evident in the clarifying statement "darling it's all in jest you know that". Spence's speech in this clarifying statement is noticeably quicker, potentially in an attempt at further softening his initial statement by making clear it was "all in jest".

22 Jocular mockery, however, is not always successful, and its accomplishment is dependent on the way the speaker builds up utterances and how the recipient responds to such

utterances (Haugh). When a speaker makes an attempt at a humorous remark intended to prompt laughter, this produces a sequential warrant for laughter from the recipient and, by adherence, this can produce interactional intimacy (Glenn). If laughter is not achieved in conversation following a joke, interactional intimacy is not achieved and instead the speakers are distanced. Distance produced by Spence's jocular statement is arguably evident in Harries' seemingly blunt response in line 11, and the hesitation with which she says "yes". This is understandable, given the implication of Spence's attempt at jocular mockery is that Harries' membership of the category "female" is questionable (i.e., given that women are not normatively understood as having "balls"), a form of implicit question that appears again in the following extract.

Mundane transphobia as a focus on anatomy

23 The following interaction also occurred in the "temple of celebrity", again between Harries, Spence, and Anderton, though this time on day two. It is important to note that the initiating sequence of an interaction was not always apparent. As such, it is unclear why the housemates were talking about Harries' vagina:

1 La: You can have a very deep vagina
 2 (0.1)
 3 Lo: yeah (.) so did you have a big willy then since
 4 you've got a deep vagina?
 5 (0.7)
 6 La: I ca:n't remember (.) but I know I've got a deep vagina
 7 (0.1)
 8 Lo: Oh so you had a big willy
 9 (0.6)
 10 So: It's fascinating (.) Was it incredibly painful?
 11 (0.9)
 12 La: Very (.) You couldn't eat for two weeks (.) And you
 13 were strapped to a bed
 14 (0.4)
 15 So: ↑Oh gosh
 16 (0.4)
 17 La: And you couldn't eat. So when I left I was five and a
 18 half stone
 19 (0.1)
 20 Lo: I've seen some friends of mine who have had sex change(.) they have showed
 me their fannys(.) and they have re::ally nice vaginas
 21 (0.1)
 22 So: Well I'd imagine, it's a ↑designer (.) vagina really
 23 (0.1)
 24 So: So I have to ask something quite personal (.) so is it (.) sensitive?
 31 (0.4)
 32 La: Yes.
 33 (0.1)
 34 So: >okay, sorry. That was my on[ly::<]
 35 La: [It's ex]a::ctly the same as any
 36 other woman, [yeah].
 38 So: [I w]asn't gonna ask you but I've never asked my
 42 friend (0.1) it's just never come up in conversation.

Extract 2 - Day Two, 24/8/13

24 In line one Harries makes a statement in regards to anatomy. Her use of the word “you”, however, distances this from being a directly personal reference. Spence’s response to this statement, however, positions the statement as being about Harries when he first asks her if she “ha[d] a big willy”, and then in the next turn states “oh so you had a big willy”. It should be noted that this was not a question, but rather a statement made by Spence, as evident in his pitch. This statement is subsequently authorised through a claim to category entitlement in lines 21-23 by reference to Spence having trans friends, thus building up his statement as factual and authoritative (Wooffitt). In making a claim to category entitlement Spence potentially mitigates any possible accusation of being prurient or even transphobic by authorising his statement about Harries’ vagina through reference to friends who “showed me their fannys”. This attribution of agency to his friends is important, as it makes it appear that the “showing” was initiated by them, thus preventing any suggestion that Spence asked them to show him.

25 In line 10 Anderton takes up the topic of surgery, referring to it as “fascinating”. The use of this term potentially serves to position Harries as different to other women. In other words, by only asking *Harries* about the “sensitivity” of her vagina (i.e., Anderton did not ask other women in the house about the sensitivity of their vaginas), Anderton treats Harries as an exception, thus evoking a normative understanding of the category “vagina” from which Harries is implicitly excluded. Anderton’s query is met with a hesitant response from Harries (seen in the long pause), triggering an attempted repair by Anderton. Anderton’s multiple and continued attempts at trying to repair the question (“sorry”, “I wasn’t gonna ask you”, and “because I’ve never asked my friend”) frame the initial question as troubled. Harries responds by explicitly refuting the suggestion that her vagina is anything different to “any other woman”, thus making a clear claim to category membership as a woman.

26 Extract three depicts another conversation that occurred between Harries, Anderton, and Spence, again in the temple of celebrity on the second day of being in the house. Similar to the previous extract, the footage aired did not include anything that would explain how the conversation on celibacy arose:

1 La: Well I've bee::n celibate for six year:s
 2 (0.6)
 3 Lo: for[how long?]
 4 So: [°you've bee]n celibate for six ye[ars?°]
 5 La: [six ye]ars
 6 (0.1)
 7 Lo: Six years? (.5) .H[hhh ↑really?]
 8 So: [OH I don't think I could do ↑tha:t]
 9 (0.3)
 10 Lo: No::: I couldn't (.) ↑but how long have you had your
 11 vagina?
 12 (0.6)
 13 La: Fifteen year[s]
 14 Lo: ↑[Fif]teen years? ↓so it has been use:d
 15 (0.6)
 16 La: Ye::s (.) yes (.) ↑but the thing is tho:ugh (.)↓I've
 17 had such bad reactions from men because they were
 18 (.) transphobic
 19 (0.1)
 20 Lo: Where did you have it done?
 21 (0.8)
 22 La: uh you know it was u::h I >was on so much medication
 23 [I can't even remember]< the hospital
 24 So: [a little bit of a blur?]
 25 (0.7)
 26 So: um I think that times have changed though now,
 27 ↓I do believe that (.) You know (.)I think people are
 28 becoming (.) you know (.) much more:: acceptable, accepting,
 29 to be hone[st]
 30 La: But sometimes, because I live in Cardiff (.) you know, it's a bit more (.)
 31 small mi[nded]
 32 Lo: [yeah]but everyone must know you there now, do
 33 you know what I me[an?]
 34 So: [>s]ee In London,
 35 they wouldn't blink an eyelash<

Extract 3 - Day Two, 24/8/13

27 In line 8, the response to Harries' initial statement is an example of what is termed "oh prefacing" (Heritage). Oh prefacing is a reaction to a source of surprise used to acknowledge new information, and is demonstrated through the gasp seen in line 7 and the use of the word "oh" itself in line 8. This type of surprise token is generally indicative of reluctance by speakers to further a conversational topic (Heritage). Spence did not further the conversational topic of celibacy, and instead asked a more personal anatomically-related question (seen in line 10 and 11). In so doing, Spence again makes Harries' gender affirming surgery interactionally relevant, and thus again raises questions about her membership of the category female in two specific ways. First, he questions Harries about how long she has had her vagina. Similar to Anderton's questioning in the previous extract about the "sensitivity"

of Harries' vagina, Spence's questioning of Harries positions her as different to the other women in the house (i.e., he doesn't ask any of the other women how long they have had their vaginas). Second, Spence makes the presumption that Harries must have "used" her vagina. Implicit in this presumption is the idea that trans women have gender affirming surgery in order to allow them to "use" their vaginas, thus creating a category in which the purpose of vaginas is to be "used".

28 In response to this question about "use", Harries states that she has had "bad reactions" due to men being transphobic (line 17). The two other speakers, however, do not immediately attend to this comment, and instead Spence quickly continues the topic of surgery. This appears not to have been a topic that Harries wanted to discuss, claiming instead that she could not remember and responding with "uh" and "u:::h" (seen on line 22). Although Harries' account of not knowing is a non-answer response, it is still preferred over not providing a second pair part to a question, given the interactional preference for the progressivity of a conversation (Stivers). Harries' account of not knowing thus fulfilled the two-part sequence of question-answer formation in conversation, however it did not offer any further explicit information within the conversation. Instead, Harries' apparent discomfort in regards to Spence's question appears to have been noted by Anderton who interrupts and attempts to finish off the question for Harries. This interruption potentially demonstrates that Anderton was aware of the sensitive nature of the line of questioning that Spence was pursuing.

29 Taking up the topic of transphobia in lines 28-32, Anderton uses the words "think" and "believe," positioning her statement as personal opinion rather than fact (Wooffitt). Generally, "I think" formulations are used to address sensitive matters delicately, and can also moderate the force of a response through framing the utterance as personal. Positioning her statements as personal and moderated may have been important given that what Anderton said effectively discounted Harries' account of transphobia (e.g., "times have changed," line 28). Furthermore, Anderton's statement about people in London "not blinking an eyelash" functions to evoke a membership category in which people who don't blink an eyelash are not transphobic. Given this membership category specifically references people in London, and given Anderton herself lives in London, the membership category positions Anderton herself as not transphobic. In this extract, then, not only does Spence again draw attention to Harries' gender affirming surgery (and thus implicitly questions her membership in the category "female"), but Anderton then effectively discounts Harries' experiences of transphobia by evoking a category in which Londoners are not transphobic. This type of

liberal inclusive logic elaborated by cisgender people in regards to trans people is further exemplified in the final extract.

Mundane transphobia as liberal inclusivity

30 Extract four features an interaction between Harries and another housemate, Courtney Stodden (an American reality TV show star), this time in the context of the Big Brother house (i.e., after Harries, Anderton and Spence had left the temple of celebrity). Prior to the interaction Big Brother had showed the housemates footage of Harries making negative comments in regards to a dress worn by Stodden. The interaction below then followed this screening:

- | | | |
|----|-----|---|
| 1 | La: | I s:aid I thought the dress was slutty, hhhh |
| 2 | | (0.2) |
| 3 | Co: | No:: I don't blame you. I blame Big Brother |
| 4 | | (0.1) |
| 5 | La: | YES (.) THAT'S who to blame. Because they can ask you |
| 6 | | to do the same thing and you can't refuse. |
| 7 | | (0.3) |
| 8 | Co: | Right, but I would never say something I didn't think |
| 9 | | (1.5) that's why I'm so confused, ↑do you know what |
| 10 | | I mean? |
| 11 | | (0.6) |
| 12 | La: | Wha- wha:(.)? what did you say? |
| 13 | | (0.2) |
| 14 | Co: | I'm saying >like I would never say something I didn't |
| 15 | | think< (.) So >like if you walked into the house< (.) I |
| 16 | | wouldn't sa::y, (0.6) about your appearan- |
| 17 | | >you know because I'm not that kind of person< (.) >do |
| 18 | | you know what I mean?< Like I wouldn't say she's weird |
| 19 | | because of the wa::y she:: (.) >you know what I mean?< |
| 20 | | I just wouldn't do that, because I love transgenders |

Extract 4 - Day 3, 25/8/13

31 The notable point about this interaction appears in the final line, where it is revealed that Stodden's argument hinges upon a liberal account of inclusivity ("I just wouldn't do that, because I love transgenders"). In this line Stodden's extreme case formulation "I love transgenders" serves to encapsulate all trans people. In so doing, it reduces the experience of being transgender to something based on appearance, even though she has previously suggested (line 16) that she wouldn't make statements about a person's appearance. In this sense, Stodden's final statement is both an extreme case formulation and a disclaimer.

Disclaimers allow for inequalities to be reproduced within a conversation, but with the speaker shielded from an accusation of bias through depicting their statements as not reflective of their personal beliefs (Speer). Disclaimers thus serve a dual function, namely to express an opinion the speaker has while at the same time positioning their talk in an egalitarian way. The disclaimer on line 20 thus demonstrates Stodden's orientation to the possibility that her talk could be heard as transphobic. As such the claim that she "love[s] transgenders" is an attempt at both pre-empting and deflecting any possible accusations of transphobia by staking a claim to membership of a category (i.e., "loving transgenders") that is treated as inherently trans inclusive.

32 Furthermore, implied in Stodden's statement is a paired contrast between Harries' statement (made on Big Brother's command) that Stodden's dress looked slutty and her own non-statement about Harries. Stodden expresses concern over Harries making a statement about the dress, saying that "I would never say something that I didn't think". Stodden compares this with her non-statement about Harries' appearance, suggesting that she wouldn't make a negative statement about Harries' appearance because she "love[s] transgenders". Yet despite Stodden treating these as paired contrasts, they are in fact of entirely different registers. Harries made a statement, by Stodden's accusation, about something she thinks. Stodden did not make a statement about something she potentially thinks, because to do so would counter her "love [of] transgenders". Indeed, Stodden's entire statement in lines 14-20 rests upon the possibility that she could have expressed what she thought, if only she did not "love transgenders". In this sense, to be "that kind of person" (who would make negative evaluations about a trans person's appearance) is treated by Stodden as socially impermissible, but not necessarily wrong or transphobic.

Discussion

33 As we noted earlier, the analysis presented above has implications in two areas: media representations of trans people specifically, and more broadly the ways in which cisgender people interact with trans people. We now examine these implications in turn, both by referring back to our analysis and by extrapolating from our findings to broader issues relating to transphobia.

34 In a later season of *Celebrity Big Brother* UK (2014), a trans housemate (former boxing promoter, Kellie Maloney) accused a cisgender housemate (former boxer, Audley Harrison) of transphobia. Notably, in the season that we have analysed in this paper no such accusation was made. The difference between the two seasons, we would suggest, is that in

the season where an accusation was made, Harrison had stated that he was “uncomfortable” being around Maloney. In the season we have analysed in this paper, however, none of the cisgender participants expressed being uncomfortable around Lauren Harries. This difference is important, as it makes a distinction between what are treated as different “types” of interactions between trans and cisgender people. This requires ongoing attention given the fact that the examples of mundane transphobia we have examined in this paper are no less problematic than a statement about feeling “uncomfortable”, yet the examples we have examined in this paper were not treated as problematic within the season.

35 Despite the incidences of mundane transphobia identified in our analysis not being treated as problematic within the season, the GLAAD media reference guide suggests that many of its recommendations were not adhered to in terms of the representation of Lauren Harries on *Celebrity Big Brother*. Specifically, GLAAD states that the words “trans” or “transgender” are adjectives, not nouns, yet Courtney Stodden’s use of the word “transgenders” (a noun) was not addressed within the season. Similarly, GLAAD recommends that media representations should avoid a focus on gender affirming surgeries and that the phrase “sex change” should be avoided. Despite this, the term “sex change” was used by Spence, yet this was not challenged within the season. This lack of comment is notable given that it is common within *Celebrity Big Brother* for housemates to be given warnings about discriminatory language (indeed, Audley Harrison was cautioned in regards to the comments he made to Kellie Maloney).

36 Further, it is notable that aspects of the GLAAD reference guide itself fail to address issues that were apparent in the interactions analysed above. Specifically, the reference guide utilises the language of gender “matching” with assigned sex, and suggests that male and female are “opposites” (which is reinforced by the GLAAD terminology of “sex reassignment surgery”). In extract three, Harries makes the point that her vagina is “exactly the same” as any other woman’s vagina (lines 35-36). This statement by Harries suggests that the GLAAD guidelines, with their emphasis on “matching” and “reassignment”, may be inadequate in terms of addressing some of the subtle, mundane ways in which transphobia occurs in terms of discussions about trans people’s genitalia that are initiated by cisgender people.

37 Moving beyond media representation specifically, our analysis has broader implications for how cisgender people engage in conversations with trans people. An increasing number of organisations and individuals have produced what are referred to as “trans 101” documents: overviews of key issues pertaining to trans people that are

intended to be primers for cisgender people seeking to be allies to trans people. An example of a trans 101 is provided by the *Sylvia Rivera Law Project*, which takes as its central premise the diversity amongst trans people. This premise has direct implications for the interactions analysed above, in which the cisgender housemates often appeared to reduce Harries' experiences as a trans woman down to a specific set of coordinates that could then be mapped across to other people's experiences. Consider, for example, Spence's comparison in extract two between his friends' vaginas and Harries'. These types of responses to trans people fail to acknowledge the diversity of trans people's experiences, and indeed fail to acknowledge the contexts in which trans people live.

38 The issue of context is particularly pertinent in regards to how the cisgender housemates engaged with the experiences shared by Lauren Harries. The *Trans Respect Versus Transphobia Project* (Transgender Europe) documents the extensive violence (including murder) that is perpetuated against trans people worldwide every year. The reduction of trans people's lives to matters pertaining to genitalia, for example, ignores the extent of violence. This can be seen in extract three, where Anderton discounts Harries's experiences of transphobia. Our point is not that trans people might not want to talk about their genitalia (and indeed talking about genitalia in the context of intimacy can be an important affirmation of trans people's right to sexual expression), but rather that cisgender people must attend to the topics that trans people set as interactionally relevant, not vice versa.

39 The use of membership categorisation analysis in our analysis presented above served to highlight some of the specific interactional tools that trans people employ in order to manage what we have identified as forms of mundane transphobia. These include feigning forgetfulness, not taking up particular topics, and re-framing topics. Previous research has suggested that trans people learn to use evasion as a way to sidestep topics that are likely to contribute to their marginalisation (Bell, Özbilgin, Beuregard and Sürgevil). This would suggest that acknowledging such evasion in conversation should not be a cause of interactional concern by cisgender people in regards to trans people's honesty, but rather should be taken as an opportunity by cisgender interlocutors to reflect upon how their statements may have been received as marginalising.

40 To conclude, the analysis we have presented here suggests that whilst it may be positive that trans people – such as Lauren Harries – are accorded representation in the media, and whilst they may be received relatively well, such representations are not free from mundane transphobia. This finding suggests the importance of more detailed and nuanced understandings in regards to how media regulatory bodies monitor representations of trans

people, and that attention must be paid to the more mundane ways in which marginalisation can occur. Beyond the media sphere, and taking the interactions we analysed above as to a certain degree indicative of broader patterns of interactions between cisgender and trans people, it is clear that even cisgender people who believe they are inclusive likely still engage in the types of normative statements that have elsewhere been referred to as “microaggressions” perpetuated against trans people in everyday conversation (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong). Addressing these types of normativity, including those identified in the analysis above (specifically the focus on genitalia and surgery and the construction of a generic “trans experience”) has the potential to play an important role in contributing to the reduction of forms of everyday marginalisation that many trans people experience.

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"I think journalists sometimes forget that we're just people": Analysing the Effects of UK Trans Media Representation on Trans Audiences

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Abstract:

The increased focus on trans lives across a variety of media has brought to light the difficult relationship between trans audiences of this media and the content produced about trans people. The print and digital content of newspapers is an important site for investigation because it can be readily accessed and shared quickly across a variety of platforms and there is a significant volume of content produced about trans people. In order to critically engage with the content produced about trans people in UK newspapers the views of trans audiences are important to assess the impact this media has on their daily lives. Academic work addressing trans lived experiences has been invaluable in understanding healthcare and relationships (Girshick, 2008; Hines, 2007) but there has been comparatively little specific work on trans media representation. The work that has been done found patterns of misrepresentation of trans identities (Kermode and TMW, 2010). This notable absence presents a potential barrier to understanding the ways in which trans media coverage impacts trans lives. With qualitative interviews at the centre of this research methodology, this paper considers trans representation in UK newspapers and analyses the effects on trans audiences. Interviews and focus groups were conducted online with self-defining trans people as experts on the ways newspaper reporting affects their lives. Online methods are useful for media reception research because of the amount of media consumption that occurs online. In the specific case of trans audiences online methods become necessary as a means to work with harder-to-reach communities with concerns about participating in research. The questions asked of trans audiences were influenced by a critical discourse analysis of trans coverage in UK newspapers over the period of one year to provide a snapshot of content. This initial search also provided example articles. During this period the newspaper complaints body issued guidelines on trans reporting so questions on the effectiveness of these were also asked. Participants were interviewed online across online focus group and instant message software. The findings that emerged from interviews revealed newspapers repeatedly influenced daily lives especially in relation to transphobia, misgendering and misrepresentation which were highlighted frequently. Some participants focused on the sensationalist nature of reporting which led to feelings of othering, whereas others were more focused on opportunities for resistance to the tropes about trans people produced. This paper considers these interviews in the current context in which they are produced and the wider discourse of trans media representation to address the impact this media has on trans audiences. By critically reflecting on the ways trans newspaper coverage affects trans audiences, this paper offers a unique and community influenced perspective that seeks different trans media representation that does not cause harm for trans readers.

1 Local and national newspapers in the UK frequently produce content considering trans subjects. The aim of this paper is to analyse the effects that trans representation in UK newspapers has on trans audiences. The impact of this coverage on trans audiences is sought from interviews with self-defining trans people because they are the experts on the ways newspaper reporting affects their lives. The data comes from online interviews and online

focus groups. The questions and prompts for these interviews were influenced by a preliminary analysis of trans newspaper coverage over one year to consider emerging patterns. The time frame also allowed for articles to be in the recent memory of participants. These interviews are considered in the context of literature on trans studies, the media and gender theory.

2 The UK newspaper industry operates in a news environment increasingly located on digital platforms. Additionally, this industry has been subject to scrutiny in recent years over journalistic practice and methods of holding newspapers to account such as the Editors Code of Practice and the Press Complaint Commission (PCC), now the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). Trans media representation was considered within the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press but academic scholarship on trans media representation remains lacking. In a post-Leveson environment one year after the launch of IPSO it is an opportune moment to consider trans media representation and its relationship with trans audiences. Trans community organisations have produced important work in this area which will be considered - for instance the work of Trans Media Watch (TMW) documented the treatment of trans lives in UK newspapers and submitted evidence to the Leveson Inquiry. TMW and All About Trans work with the newspaper industry to address the problematic coverage of trans subjects. Academic research in this area will allow these important experiences to be considered from a sociological standpoint.

Literature

3 Work has been done on trans lives but experiences of healthcare dominate. There is some notable research outside of health experiences but little focus on the media (Beemyn and Rankin; Girshick; Hines, *TransForming*). Girshick suggests the media “establish[es] acceptable gender behaviours and exaggerate[s] gender roles” (38) which suggests the media has a policing role whilst simultaneously exaggerating gender practices so genders presented as ideals are removed from real experiences. However, not all media representations of trans people have negative consequences. Beemyn and Rankin suggest social media and increased news coverage can benefit young people questioning their gender (Beemyn and Rankin). The increasing representation of trans lives in the media can lead to increased participation in academic research. Hines analysis of research participation found a desire to increase awareness of trans lives and hypothesises this is because “representation of transgender people – especially in popular media and journalism – was associated with misconceptions of ‘who’ transgender people ‘were’ and, in turn, to discrimination” (Hines, *TransForming* 200).

4 Despite considerations of some research of the importance of trans media, there has been little specific work on trans media representation or trans audiences' reception. Work that has been done repeatedly found patterns of misrepresentation of trans identities. Oram's book on early twentieth century newspaper coverage of trans people in the UK finds use of shock and the "sensation factor" (Oram 13). In Oram's research to be trans is to be newsworthy but the news sought is evidence of sex assigned at birth. Oram notes significant use of "masquerade" as a descriptor for those that pass in everyday life which is contrasted with the use of "impersonator" for stage performers' crossdressing (4). Later work on trans representation in the media continues to find frequent sensationalism and othering. Raun finds media coverage of trans subjects to be "a tabloidization of transsexuality, often focusing on the artificiality of their gender" (Raun 118). Westbrook's analysis of articles they term "teaching transgender", due to definitions of transgender within them, in America from 1990 to 2005 finds examples of the media suggesting to be a trans man or woman is not to be a real man or woman although this is premised on the notion of gender as a binary with no consideration of other genders (Westbrook 55). This suggests the media represents binary trans people in ways that undermine their gender. Serano's work on trans women in the media suggests these identities are reduced to "two main archetypes: the 'deceptive transsexual' [and] the 'pathetic transsexual'" (Serano, "Skirt" 227). According to Serano, the deceptive transsexual archetype is predominantly reported on as a shock revelation because their "ability to 'pass' is a serious threat to our culture's ideas about gender and sexuality" whereas the pathetic transsexual archetype is presented as "harmless" but "barely a woman" (228). Serano's work finds a focus on trans women and an underrepresentation of trans men in the media that does not reflect population demographics and hypothesises that this misrepresentation is part of the media's sexism. Serano's work includes fictional depictions of trans women and broadcast media but does not consider newspaper representation.

5 These texts do not consider trans audiences so it is necessary for a more sociological analysis of the effects of the presentation of trans identities on trans audiences. Kermode and TMW found the majority of their participants "consider[ed] newspapers to be the biggest source of problematic material" (Kermode and TMW 8). Their 2009-2010 UK survey of transgender people asked "about representations of trans people in the media" (2). Significant numbers focused on inaccuracies [78%] and expressed that the media did not value the thoughts of trans audiences [95%] (5). This research is unique in its consideration of the opinions of trans audiences and finds concerns about "inaccuracy, poor research and inappropriate use of language" (8). This research also links trans media coverage to daily

lives with respondents expressing feeling “frightened, intimidated and unsafe as a result of seeing negative items in the media” (10). This research also offers detailed examples of the ways trans audiences feel “misrepresented” (10) by the media and its use of stereotypes that “exclude people with more complex gender identities” (11) especially those that are nonbinary.

6 This pattern of media misrepresentation is part of a wider social issue of the misrepresentation and misrecognition of trans identities in daily lives. Halberstam offers a discussion of the dangers of misrecognition. Halberstam gives the example of a “trans male” that “lives as a male mostly” who is “recogni[s]ed by his community as a transgendered man in particular” (Halberstam 53). The community offers recognition as a man and recognition as trans but it implies the recognition as a man is conditional upon simultaneous recognition as trans.

7 Conditional recognition can cause further problems for multigendered, genderfluid and nonbinary individuals. Hines’s discussion of the *Gender Recognition Act 2004* (GRA) in the UK highlights that “the medical model of transgender, which influences access to the new framework of rights, remains tied to a gender binary” (Hines, *TransForming* 65) which positions failure to recognise and misrepresentation of nonbinary people at the centre of the UK law that currently offers the most recognition to trans people. While the GRA brings forms of recognition it also articulates further non-recognition and misrecognition for nonbinary identified trans people creating “new patterns of misrecognition” (Hines, *Gender* 67). The shift in types of misrecognition at sites of recognition in trans spaces is noted in relation to trans media representation by TMW’s Leveson Inquiry submissions. This specifically defines misgendering in the media as a form of misrepresentation offering an example in which an article on a trans individual “is misgendered throughout” (TMW, “Additional” 17). TMW offers a media specific definition of this: “misgendering – using inappropriate pronouns or placing the person’s identity in quotation marks to dismiss the veracity of the subject’s identity. This approach, along with repeated references to the transgender person’s past, serves to invalidate the individual’s experience” (TMW, “British” 11).

8 Misrecognition also constitutes groups as othered and excludes specifically in relation to those that are included. For instance, the inclusion of binary trans representation in the media can work to further exclude nonbinary representation but this representation is often in the form of stereotypes or ‘sex swap shock’ stories which do not allow trans voices to be heard and creates misrepresentation presented as representation. This reflects Taylor’s view

that “misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 75). These reflections are pertinent in relation to the variety of non-recognition, discrimination and violence experienced by trans people (Beemyn and Rankin). Accurate recognition and acknowledgement of trans lives in newspaper coverage and academic scholarship on this issue could reveal new insights into intersectional trans lived experiences. Intersectionality has been important in developing trans studies that is embedded in different lived experiences with conflicting narratives (Hines, “Queerly”). For instance, Serano writes of the experiences of trans women that are “uniquely positioned at the intersection of multiple binary gender-based forms of prejudice: transphobia, cissexism, and misogyny” (Serano, *Whipping* 16). However, this intersectionality is not always central to trans research which can create a homogenised trans subject. Roen finds “perspectives of whiteness echo, largely unacknowledged” and calls for more research (Roen 262).

9 Media reception studies have predominantly focused on audiences of film and television (Staiger) although some have considered newspaper audiences (McNair, *News, Sociology*). For McNair, journalists “are active agents in constructing the sociopolitical environment that frames” the news (McNair, *News* 27). Trans audiences have not featured heavily in considerations of newspaper audiences. Coleman and Ross discuss the ways in which the media “privileges the subjective feelings of ‘people like us’” which marginalises others through this (Coleman and Ross 134). Staiger considers that “reception research relies on recollections” (Staiger 196). Audience reception research may depend on participants’ memories of encountering media even with visual or textual stimuli. In the case of newspaper articles available online the extent to which they had been shared may have an impact on what is recalled. Kermode and TMW note that references to trans people in broadcast media “may be less readily recalled” whereas their research found several newspapers to have a “clear ongoing focus” on trans people (Kermode and TMW 8).

Methodology

10 Influenced by Kermode and TMW I used articles from 4th June 2013 to 4th June 2014 from UK national and local newspapers for an initial preliminary analysis of recent trans media representation to inform questions for interviews. Additionally, in June 2013 the PCC released new guidance on reporting on trans people. National and local newspapers were considered to include newspapers participants read regularly as well as those they may encounter due to online circulation. In order to formulate discussion points and locate

examples for interviews Newsbank and Lexis Nexis searches were conducted for every mention of the word “transgender” in UK newspapers between the timeframe. “Transgender” was chosen because trial searches revealed it to be used more frequently than “trans”. All articles were read for relevance and any that did not discuss transgender issues or people were removed. An initial discourse analysis was undertaken in order to highlight patterns, for instance common words used next to or near the word transgender as well as similar stories in different newspapers. This analysis helped to produce interview questions on representation accuracy; changes in representation; the relevance of trans histories; the use of terms such as “sex swap”; misgendering; harassment and discrimination attributable to media reporting; and repeated newspaper coverage of the same individual.

11 The focus of this research is to consider the effects that trans media representation in UK newspapers have on trans people so their voices are central to this research project. Semi-structured online interviews, via instant messaging (IM) software, and online focus groups, conducted on a qualitative focus group platform (Chat Cloud), were conducted with self-identifying trans participants to investigate the effects current articles in UK newspapers about trans people are having on trans audiences. There are number of benefits to conducting research online that were of importance to this project. For instance, trans people that are not out as trans may be reluctant to attend a focus group or meet a researcher in person. Additionally, online research into UK newspaper audiences occurs in the environment in which audience numbers are increasing (Marshall; McNair, News). In the context of trans media representation online methods can increase participation from those restricted by barriers relating to geography, time commitments and those not out. Participant recruitment was achieved through contacting trans specific as well as LGBTI organisations and groups for assistance in recruiting amongst their membership and contacts. Snowball sampling was used through encouraging participants to pass information and contact details on to anyone they thought might wish to participate. Participants self-defined as trans, were over eighteen and from the UK to ensure participants were familiar with UK newspapers.

12 I offered participants options of online focus groups or online interviews to increase participation and accessibility. The solo interview can get more in depth in ways focus groups cannot whereas focus groups can approach questions as a group. This can lead to a variety of answers but if a particular view dominates those that do not share it may feel less able to comment. The online interviewees may feel they have more time to “speak” and edit comments whereas flowing conversations in focus groups may offer less editing time. The numbers included in each focus group were small in order to reduce this possibility and risks

of excluding slower communicators. The small number in each focus group was chosen on the basis of Brügger and Willems's research comparing online and offline focus groups (Brügger and Willems). Participants could see if others were typing which reduced the risk of typing over each other or moving too quickly. However, others have noted the lack of nonverbal cues could be problematic (Wimmer and Dominick).

13 The uniqueness of online research involving images of the coverage under discussion also offered unique methods of communication through images that may not have occurred in offline research predominantly using voice. If participants are already using keys and a mouse to type responses then the move to use the same equipment to write and draw on images may feel more natural than picking up a pen to do so in an offline speech-oriented research environment. Poynter discusses the benefits of a shared image viewing and this research allowed participants to share editing too (Poynter). Many of the images of articles and headlines represented the lives of trans people in ways participants disagreed with, such as the terms "sex-swap" and "sex op" so the opportunity to edit these images allowed participants to change the text and alter the image to something they would rather see. The focus group had more instances of image annotation which may be explained by the fact all participants could see and interact with the image simultaneously within Chat Cloud. However, this was not possible with online interviews due to IM software differences.

14 Chat Cloud's text boxes revealed when participants were typing whereas the image function let all participants see lines as they were drawn and letters as they were typed giving more indication of self-censorship that occurs in online methods. This also offers opportunities to watch and read responses. One participant wrote on an image of a newspaper report of the PCC ruling that the newspapers that referred to the trans status of an individual were wrong to do so. This participant highlighted the image's text "have now admitted they were wrong" and wrote underneath "[b]ut still they keep on doing it": a sentiment made more powerful by the fact that the focus group watched the letters appear one by one and witnessed the removal and rewriting of the word "still" that could indicate hesitation or deliberate emphasis [see *Fig. 1*]. The emergence of this contribution appeared in real time so it took longer to appear than the instantaneous uploading of a comment making it more noticeable. Participants commented on being able to see these words appearing and in response "thumbs up" and "smiling face" images were used in the textual area of the focus group revealing the fluidity with which textual and visual data can be used to communicate in this environment.

15 The IM interviews featured less fluidity between textual and visual communication methods. However, in contrast to the focus group the IM interviews were frequently more

detailed and lasted longer. Cook warns of rapport building during long conversations leading to “over-disclosure online” (Cook 1336). In order to mitigate this risk participants were sent a copy of the findings to review. This offered opportunities of withdrawing consent, removing disclosures participants felt uncomfortable with, and editing responses to better reflect intention. Additionally this offered validation. For Namaste, “validating the interpretation of research data remains a crucial component of any reflexive sociological practice” (Namaste 266). This also shifted the power dynamic between researcher and researched because participants were considered the experts. Namaste advocates that “transsexuals and transgendered people must be actively involved in the construction of academic knowledge about our bodies and our lives: anything less advocates a position wherein knowledge is produced, in the first and last instance, for the institution of the university” (Namaste 267). Taking this further the research was shared with trans organisations that may benefit. Many of these organisations also sought participants so anonymity was important. The validation request also asked specifically that alongside checking they did not feel misrepresented they could check they had not revealed anything that could identify them. One participant opted for an IM discussion to give feedback which offered a more in-depth consideration of their views.



Fig. 1: Focus Group edited article image

16 Alongside concerns of anonymity there were safety concerns. The internet is not always a safe space for discussing trans identities, which participants made reference to in relation to comments on online articles, and this should be considered when recruiting participants that may associate online discussions of trans media representation with discrimination and transphobia. Atkinson and DePalma's online research into gender and sexuality in young people warned of online environments reproducing inequalities (Atkinson and DePalma). I had to ensure participants could use the focus group to challenge these inequalities in a safe environment without reproducing other inequalities and the use of private messaging helped me to check participants felt included.

17 The self-disclosure by some participants of other aspects of their identity that affected their experience of trans media representation offers interesting insights into online methods for research of this type. Wilson suggests online research participants "escape their own embodied identities and accordingly escape any social inequalities and attitudes relating to various forms of embodiment. Race, gender and physical disability is indiscernible over the Internet" (Wilson 149). While online environments allow participants more control over information disclosure that may have been available in offline research it does not remove participants from their bodies, gender, classes or other identities. Wilson's vision of online environments is not particularly accurate when discussing the transphobia experienced reading articles online. It is important to remember within this research that these individuals are speaking from specific contexts, locations, genders, classes, races and other experiences even though not all of these identities are able to be considered fully in relation to their responses. Many of the participants in this research indicated that they had been featured in newspaper coverage that increased risks of revealing individuals. In order to avoid potential identification, personal details such as ethnicity, age, location, disability and other identifying factors were not taken. The active recruitment of diverse trans populations will be useful for future research and taking participant demographics in this research may have revealed a diverse participant population. Liamputtong's analysis that research on "vulnerable people" with "small numbers" or "specific groups" can risk anonymity was central to the decision not to take participant demographics (Liamputtong 36-7).

18 During the research some participants self-disclosed class identities, disabilities and a variety of sexualities through answering questions but this information has been removed unless relevant to the analysis due to the number of participants featured in the UK media. TMW also found participants were featured as subjects in UK media and helped recruit participants. If participants had been involved in similar previous research their re-researched

status could risk anonymity increasing the need for little demographic data inclusion. When the disclosure of other information could offer opportunities for an intersectional analysis on how these experiences may differ this was undertaken but it was not possible throughout. Although this does potentially risk viewing participants as homogeneous the risks of identification were considered too great. There is scope for future research to investigate how experiences of trans media representation differ in relation to other intersecting identities. Differing experiences along intersectional lines can be useful in a project such as this because of the discourse analysis method that acknowledges competing power relations in the construction of discourse as well as what this means to individual lived realities. For Foucault, discourses “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 49) and this is important for an analysis of trans media representation and its effects. Foucault also states that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but also undermines it and exposes it” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 2 100-1) offering opportunities for trans audiences to challenge the construction of trans identities in the media. Locke’s discussion of critical discourse analysis notes “some discourses are more powerful than others and subscribers of non-powerful discourses are therefore marginalized and relatively disempowered” (Locke 37) and this is important to consider in relation to the representation of nonbinary trans identities in newspapers as well as the mode of dissemination of these less powerful discourses such as social media. This view of discourse can be seen in newspaper representations of trans identities as well as their interpretation by trans audiences because of the contexts of constructions of multiple contrasting meanings that trans audiences negotiate.

Findings

19 This section discusses the overarching themes and analysis from the online interviews and focus groups. These themes can be broadly categorised as the social impact of newspapers; transphobia, misgendering and misrepresentation; sensationalism and othering; and resistance.

20 Several respondents expressed the media’s social impact was having a detrimental effect. Jake discussed “links between negative media reporting and negative backlash for trans people in the street” (*Jake, IM interview*). Jake suggests the media’s negative reporting of trans people can lead to increased instances of violence or harassment. Chris shared a similar sentiment on the links with harassment but added the “media is opening some peoples’ eyes and can allow them to understand” (*Chris, IM interview*). Ashley found misgendering “worse when it’s done in media, because you would hope newspapers etc. would get facts

right but that very rarely happens” (*Ashley, Focus group*). There is a sense here that there is a responsibility to gender trans individuals correctly when they feature in articles as well as a wider duty to recognise trans identities. Rose states “the media’s insistant[sic] use of ‘sex change’ ‘sex swop’[sic] and focus on surgery as ‘changing persons sex’ means that public perception never gets [a] chance to change” (*Rose, IM interview*). Rose highlights the media’s focus on surgery and use of “sex swap” and “sex change” as descriptors for trans people. The “insistent” here implies journalists are reluctant to change terms and this is preventing realistic presentations. Ashley stated they “hate the use of phrases like sex-swap” describing it as an “overly simple way to describe something much more complicated” (*Ashley, Focus group*).

21 Participants did have positive points to make about some articles. Beemyn and Rankin’s conclusions on the media’s capacity to help young people questioning their gender identity was confirmed by Fiona’s childhood experience of newspapers but Paula’s story critiques this because her childhood newspaper experiences left her hiding her identity (Beemyn and Rankin). Fiona reflects on how out trans individuals in her “local paper saved [her] life” (*Fiona, Focus group*) as a child. There are benefits for trans people, especially those that are not out or unsure of their identity, to read newspaper articles on other trans people but issues arise when real lives are not represented well. Paula’s “earliest exposure to trans people was through the media, and it made [her] feel like a freak, and [she] tried to live as someone [she’s] not for 10 years” (*Paula, Focus group*).

22 Even when trans people are interviewed, their voices are not always presented accurately. Participants repeatedly felt failed by trans media representation especially those that had interacted with the media directly. Several participants had featured in articles and they felt their stories had been misrepresented by newspapers to “fit their narrative” (*Paula, Focus group*). Several questioned if there would have been a story if they had not been trans. Kate found one newspaper “worded the article how they felt” (*Kate, Focus group*) ignoring her interview. However, Fiona suggests some “people have told their own stories, and then had them re-reported pretty fairly” (*Fiona, Focus group*). There is a difference between articles that focus on issues directly relating to trans people and those that sensationalise trans lives or mention trans histories unrelated to the story. For instance, an article on an Edinburgh woman’s restricted access to a public bathroom that although refers to her as a “sex op” woman does deal with the issue of bathroom restriction and several participants noted this as an important issue deserving of coverage. However, participants were disappointed with coverage focusing on trans histories regardless of relevance such as the woman who was

attacked by a stag in the highlands. There is also a notable difference between those that offer their story to newspapers and those whose stories are picked up by newspapers. For instance, Fiona “lived in dread of tabloids” (*Fiona, Focus group*). Fiona lives “stealth” which presents an additional fear of media coverage. Girshick describes “stealth” as a type of “passing [that] is quite complete” (Girshick 109) and for Namaste passing usually means hiding a trans history (Namaste).

23 Others focused on the medium of print media. “Printed media [is] also more critical and more likely to target trans peoples[sic] personal lives” (*Rose, IM interview*). This suggests newspapers construct stories out of trans identities. Newspapers are considered worse for this behaviour with Kate, Michelle and Paula and Rose all using the term “freak show” to describe this. Newspapers are competing in a news environment increasingly dominated by online media and may be seeking stories more likely to get an audience either through physical sales or website hits. The concept of “clickbait” was mentioned by Rose and Michelle. Hess’s research focuses on clickbait stories that are named so because they are unusual and designed to attract attention (Hess). For Tandoc clickbait allows editors to gauge audience reaction to articles based on clicks and views rather than volume or content of comments (Tandoc). However, clicks and views offer no indication of audience opinion. In Tandoc’s research into online newspaper environments, site traffic is important therefore controversial or offensive stories are used. Several participants focused on the ways trans stories were used to boost sales and readership through sensationalism. “Sex swap” in headlines and articles were highlighted as examples of this which participants found transphobic and harmful as well as an inaccurate misrepresentation.

24 Eight of nine participants directly referenced that they felt newspapers used “the word transgender/sex-change/sex-swap [because it] sells stories” (*Michelle, Focus group*). Michelle also suggests that if the media “ruin soimebody’s[sic] life in the process, then [they] are merely seen as collateral damage” (*Michelle, Focus group*). Media professionals were seen as unconcerned with individuals in stories that may be hurt by inaccuracy or sensationalist reporting nor those that may experience increased transphobia in society. Those that interacted with their local press had a better experience than those that interacted with the national press. Rose, who had experienced both, found local journalists to present trans issues more accurately. Jake considers terms such as “‘sex swap’ etc. to be transphobic” which is partly because he only sees them “in the depths of the internet when people actually know they are being rude and transphobic” (*Jake IM interview*). This suggests newspapers are either knowingly transphobic or use these terms with little understanding. For others, articles

with comment sections have the most potential for transphobia. Paula said their “heart always sinks whenever there's an article on trans* issues that's open to comments” (*Paula, Focus group*). Several participants called for comment moderation but others focused on the harm articles do. Michelle offered that negative articles can “make somebody who is thinking about coming out and transitioning fall back into shame - which can lead to depression, self-harming, suicide ideation and even suicide itself. By continuing with this negativity it is actually harming people” (*Michelle, Focus group*) which directly links associating negativity with being trans and transphobia to harm.

25 Frequently participants felt othered by newspapers’ false representation of their lives and the lives of trans people more broadly. Paula commented on “non-acceptance and othering” (*Paula, Focus group*) which is similar to the findings of Kermode and TMW’s research (Kermode and TMW). This othering was located within a conceptual framework of good and bad trans people comparable to the cultural image of the good gay and bad queer that can be invoked in relation to homonormativity. Duggan links homonormativity to capitalism and productive gay members of society that contribute to it (Duggan). For Warner “the image of the good gay is never invoked without its shadow in mind – the bad queer” (Warner 131). This implies that these binary tropes sustain each other but the “good” status is not necessarily sustainable. Rose states positive media coverage is offered to those “who were doing well in society but if they didnt[sic] follow social[sic] rules or broke the law” (*Rose, IM interview*) they received negative media coverage relating to trans status. Rose suggests in these instances journalists “stop using correct pronouns and gender terms” (*Rose, IM interview*). In this example a socially conforming trans person contributing to society would receive accurate media representation but someone accused of crimes or expressing nonconformity would not. This suggests that appropriate gendering and representation is removed from those that break rules as a form of newspaper punishment.

26 Rose suggests the media’s focus on a pattern of offending or mental health issues experienced by some trans people can other trans people but they do not address the ways this pattern affecting some trans people could be exacerbated by a transphobic society and media. For many participants the extent of this othering was dehumanising. Pat expressed a concern that “I think journalists sometimes forget that we're just people” (*Pat, Focus group*). The deliberate sensationalising and othering of trans people because they are trans misrepresents trans lives and represents them as something other than ‘normal’ or other than human.

27 Misrepresentation in the media was a common theme in the literature (Hines,

TransForming; Serano, “Skirt”; Kermode and TMW; TMW, “Additional”). Serano and Kermode and TMW’s research also found a greater focus on trans women and lesser focus on trans men which was considered in this research (Serano, “Skirt”; Kermode and TMW). The trans women in the research made reference to several examples of the misrepresentation and negative portrayals of trans women but did not suggest representation of trans women was more negative or more prevalent although this could be inferred from the volume of examples. Fiona noted “women get as bad comments” in discussion of comments on online articles on trans people and suggested that “both need action” (*Fiona, Focus group*). The “both” in this quotation is the sexism and transphobia found in reader comments on online articles. This linking suggests the lack of focus on negativity specifically towards trans women may be because they experience it as women and as trans women. This discrimination is experienced at the intersections of transphobia and sexism, as noted by Serano and Doan, which cannot be easily separated (Serano, *Whipping*; Doan). Jake felt the insufficient coverage of trans men meant “representation is not particularly reflective of my own experience” (*Jake, IM interview*).

28 The nonbinary research participants felt their lives were excluded completely from media coverage. Ashley stated that they “don’t feel newspapers representations reflect [their] life, mainly because they tend not to focus on people who don’t fall into gender binaries” (*Ashley, Focus group*) which offers an additional failure of newspaper’s coverage of trans identities. There is a freedom from the associated discrimination aimed at binary trans people in newspaper coverage but the complete exclusion further erases nonbinary subjectivities in a UK context that lacks legal recognition of these identities.

29 Several participants noted misgendering in newspapers. Jake said journalists should not be “referring to someone by their birth/previous name” (*Jake, IM interview*). Misgendering was noted as inaccurate and offensive for participants whether reading misgendering of themselves or others. Participants that mentioned they had been misgendered in their personal lives may feel an affinity with those suffering public misgendering in the media. This can make the reading of the misgendering of others more personal. These personal experiences made participants more forgiving of mistakes blamed on lack of understanding but less forgiving of repeated misgendering. Education and training was advocated by many participants and the work of TMW and All About Trans were offered as organisations working well on this. Some of the worst examples of misgendering were offered in relation to the misrepresentation of children.

30 Participants were shown articles featuring the same trans boy over a nine month period. The *Sunday Mirror* wrote of his acceptance onto a puberty blocker trial in June 2013, followed by a story of his struggle for their administration by his GP in September 2013 and a final story of his joy at receiving them in December 2013. In May 2014 the *Mail on Sunday* made reference to the same boy in an article about puberty blockers suggesting they were “sex change drugs” and implying they should not be available to young people. All four articles included photos, quotations and referred to his former name. The coverage of trans young people was criticised by participants for misrepresentation, misgendering and presenting these individuals as too young to know themselves. Participants were concerned about newspapers influencing cisgender parents of questioning trans youth preventing access to treatment or encouraging negative reactions to those coming out. For Ashley much of the coverage of trans children suggests they are “‘going through a phase’ and imply the child doesn’t understand” (*Ashley, Focus group*). Several participants were unhappy with the inaccuracies and negative implications of the 2014 article. Kate was particularly distressed by “‘Sex change drugs’, like you just pop some pills” (*Kate, Focus group*) because it ignored the reality of access and options. Michelle worried it might “frighten parents into rejecting a child” (*Michelle, Focus group*).

31 This failure to accurately portray trans lives has led to some trans people to tell their stories using social media but they cannot get the same audience numbers as national newspapers. The majority of participants attempted to dispute media articles in some way with most submitting complaints to the PCC. Michelle was the only person to have success. She had “one out of the 7 complaints upheld - but the apology was printed at the bottom of something like page 22 in small type - and as it took months to settle, it became almost irrelevant” (*Michelle, Focus group*). The length of time involved in settling the complaint as well as the insubstantial apology highlight some of the system’s failings. Michelle states “5 of the complaints were rejected on the grounds that [she] personally wasn’t the person affected by the story” (*Michelle, Focus group*) to which Paula responded “even though you are affected by the story” (*Paula, Focus group*). Here Paula and Michelle are referencing the rules about complaining to the PCC on the grounds of personal discrimination. Problems arise because this complaints body does not acknowledge discriminatory and transphobic articles impact on trans people regardless of whether they are directly mentioned.

32 For others the success of complaints was linked to access to legal services which goes against the advice of the PCC/IPSO. Participants thought the academic that had reference to her trans status removed from articles about her due to a PCC ruling was due to “efficient

representation” (*Fiona, Focus group*). This individual’s experiences did not match participants’ experiences that failed to have complaints upheld. In June 2013 the PCC issued new editorial guidance on the reporting of transgender people. This guidance calls for consideration over language and advises “taking care to ensure that it is not pejorative or discriminatory” (PCC 1). Additionally it advises considering if the article would be newsworthy if individuals mentioned were not transgender and the relevance of trans status. This guidance specifically requests journalists “refer to an individual using the pronouns that they use to describe themselves” (PCC 1). It also promotes accuracy in relation to costs of surgery, numbers of trans people, and the dangers of inaccurate representation of treatments. Much of the advice in this guidance has not been successfully executed and several participants noted the prevalence of these failures. Furthermore, trans audiences negatively affected by failures of newspaper representation of trans people are further failed by the complaints they have submitted. The guidance contains many of the changes participants wished to see but without adequate enforcing or changes to the complaints procedure it remains ineffective.

33 Despite these failings the majority of participants expressed that media coverage is improving. For Kate “things are getting better slowly” and she thinks this is because of trans people willing to tell stories. Trans people are able to construct a “reverse discourse” on trans representation in the media (Foucault, *Sexuality* 1 101). Paris Lees and Juliet Jacques were suggested as examples of people “willing to tell the media how it is” (*Kate, Focus group*). Others such as Paula, Michelle and Rose praised the work of TMW and All About Trans in their work to challenge and improve the media.

Conclusion

34 The aims of this paper were to critically address trans media representation in the UK and its impact on trans audiences. The findings addressed the relevance of the literature to the findings of the focus groups and interviews with misrepresentation, sensationalism and othering noted by Hines, Serano, Kermode and TMW, Oram, Raun and Westbrook to be the most prevalent of the literature’s findings in the participants’ views (Hines, *TransForming*; Serano, “Skirt”; Kermode and TMW; TMW, “Additional”; Raun; Westbrook). Theories of misrecognition are also helpful for addressing the findings (Taylor). Participants experienced this misrecognition differently along lines of binary and nonbinary genders and nonbinary participants experienced nonrecognition rather than distorted recognition in the media.

35 For Girshick the media constructed acceptable and exaggerated gendered behaviours as a form of policing gender and the qualitative findings took this idea further suggesting the media punished gender transgressors with inaccurate reporting while invoking cultural tropes of the good trans person and the bad queer (Girshick; Warner). The most common form of misrecognition noted was misgendering. Former names and identities were repeatedly used in newspaper articles in the presentation of trans subjects and participants found no need for such revelations. Future newspaper coverage should consider the relevance of these life histories.

36 Several participants advocated improving education and understanding within the media but for others it was already provided by trans organisations, such as TMW, All About Trans, and the PCC's transgender reporting guidelines so flouting of this guidance was viewed as deliberate transphobia in instances of repeated misrepresentation (TMW, "British"; PCC). While some participants made links between media coverage and street harassment other participants focused on articles constituting harm through inaccuracy and transphobia. Negative news articles as well as articles that focused on trans histories were highlighted by several participants as particularly troubling. Participants were also disappointed by inaccurate reporting from misgendering to the use of terms like "sex change" and inaccurate information on medical costs. Inaccurate coverage of medical treatment was referred to as dangerous by participants, especially when discussed in relation to trans youth whose access to treatments may be conditional upon others' consent. When these repeated inaccuracies and harmful terms are viewed together over the span of a year a pattern emerges that shows the media continue to ignore guidelines on reporting on trans lives and this reporting is consistently damaging to trans audiences due to individual content and the wider impact this can have influencing public perceptions.

37 The majority of participants had complained about newspaper coverage and were dissatisfied with their lack of success and the inability to complain about discrimination against groups. Previous research has also noted stealth individuals outed by newspapers may be concerned complaints will prolong unwanted media attention (Kermode and TMW). A year after IPSO replaced the PCC newspapers continue to flaunt the trans reporting guidelines and complaints procedures continue to fail trans audiences. IPSO and newspapers may learn from this research that their output is harming trans audiences and the media industry is not providing adequate opportunities to challenge this.

38 There is a failure of this research to adequately account for the intersecting identities that influence the experiences of trans media representation amongst participants. The reasons for

not taking demographics on participants were in the best interests of preserving anonymity but it does limit the intersectional analysis and therefore the scope of the findings. Future work must investigate experiences of class, race and sexuality in relation to trans media representation and the ways these intersecting experiences shift these experiences to avoid constructing the homogenised trans subject Roen critiques (Roen). It is an important time for work on trans media representation and future research should consider this area in the context of changing news environments and spaces for trans voices to emerge in online environments such as social media. Future research may wish to compare traditional newspaper coverage with responses and alternative coverage of the same issues in blogs and social media written by trans individuals. There is scope for further research in this area and it is hoped this research will be a useful addition to the field and helpful evidence for trans and LGBTI activists working in this area.

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Steven Universe, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnavalesque

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Abstract:

Steven Universe is radically revolutionizing trans representation in media by being willing to give voice to less often represented gender identities. It provides us with a framework with which to investigate how agender and genderqueer identities and experiences can not only function but thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon. This genre, and here Steven Universe serves as an exemplar, tends to embrace a particular reliance on “magic” to define its set of narrative rules, images, and possibilities. An emphasis on magic in the fantasy cartoon makes for an intriguingly complicated and layered pathway to trans representation, and the unique magical constructs within Steven Universe become the key narrative techniques which open the possibilities of what can be called a queer cartoon carnivalesque space. Trans bodies in Steven Universe are malleable, unfixed, ever-changing and able to combine at will. Therein lies their power. The genre of the fantasy children’s cartoon and its incarnation in Steven Universe is thus able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media. In doing so, the show offers us a glimpse into how we can move beyond the magic realm that lends such power to Steven Universe’s gender nonconforming characters, and into a more ubiquitous media representation of a variety of trans identities.

1 In an early episode of *Steven Universe*, the main character Steven breaks out his ukulele to sing a song about his two friends, urging them to work together to magically transform themselves into a greater entity: “You might even like being together,” he sings, “and if you don’t, it won’t be forever, but if it were me, I’d really want to be a giant woman, a giant woman. All I wanna do is see you turn into a giant woman” (“Giant Woman”). This is the world of *Steven Universe*, a Cartoon Network show in which bodies are changeable and combinable, and a young boy sings matter-of-factly about wanting to be a giant woman. Children’s cartoons have seen something of a queer renaissance recently, with shows like *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* willing to bring queer relationships into their worlds. However, even within this recent past, representation of queer characters in children’s cartoons has been mostly confined to lesbian or gay characters, and these relationships often downplayed or unconfirmed. *Steven Universe* is radically breaking that tradition apart by being willing to give voice to other, less often represented queer identities. It provides us with a framework to investigate how trans (and more precisely, agender and genderqueer) identities and experiences cannot only function but also thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon. This genre, and here *Steven Universe* serves as an exemplar, tends to embrace a particular reliance on “magic” to define its set of narrative rules, images, and possibilities. An emphasis on magic in the fantasy cartoon makes for an intriguingly complicated and layered pathway to trans representation, and the unique magical

constructs within *Steven Universe* become the key narrative techniques which open the possibilities of what can be called a queer cartoon carnivalesque space. Trans bodies in *Steven Universe* are malleable, unfixed, ever changing and able to combine at will. Therein lies their power. The genre of the fantasy children's cartoon and its incarnation in *Steven Universe* is thus able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media. In doing so, the show offers us a glimpse into how we can move beyond the magic realm that lends such power to *Steven Universe*'s gender nonconforming characters, and into a more ubiquitous media representation of a variety of trans identities.

2 *Steven Universe*'s interaction with trans representation relies on separating gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation in the mind of its viewers. Essential to that separation is the alien race called the Crystal Gems, who take their names from their defining stones. The three members of this race living in *Steven Universe*'s Beach City are known as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. The protagonist of the show, Steven is the son of the now deceased Gem Rose Quartz and Steven's human father. Throughout the show Steven lives with Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, who are trying to help him develop his Gem powers. While Gems all seem to take on female forms and pronouns (and each of the main three are voiced by female voice actresses), writers and animators from the show have asserted that they are agender, or at least outside the human gender binary (Jones-Quartey). In a recent Reddit AMA, the show's creator Rebecca Sugar specifically stated that "Steven is the first and only male Gem, because he is half human! Technically, there are no female Gems!" (Sugar AMA) The Gems' agender identities are asserted in the actual show as well as in outside comments by creators. Gems have bodies that they are able to change at will, and this magical ability to mutate their bodies makes the standard feminine features that they often display less important in defining their gender. In an attempt to explain this to the viewer (and to Steven), Pearl calls Gem bodies "human constructs" ("Reformed") and Garnet asserts that Gem bodies are "only an illusion" ("Fusion Cuisine"). Their bodies also have no vital organs and no heartbeat ("Nightmare Hospital") meaning that the inside of their forms are both as malleable and as arbitrary as the outside. Gem bodies need not take human form and features, let alone display female traits. The flexibility of Gem bodies (and the frequency at which they change) sets up their feminine gender traits as illusory. The Gems' bodies serve as projections, allowing them to blend into their human environment, and their use of female pronouns is similarly arbitrary.

3 All the Gems, but most frequently Amethyst, shape-shift into other forms, sometimes

even assuming the forms of the other Gems (including Steven) to mock them or make jokes (“Cat Fingers”). In “Tiger Millionaire”, Amethyst shape-shifts into a large wrestling alter-ego which she names Purple Puma. Puma displays physically male sexual embodiment, including huge muscles and a skimpy wrestling outfit that shows a vast quantity of chest hair. Steven uses male pronouns to refer to Purple Puma when explaining his wrestling background to the other Gems, saying that “He was the wildest cat in the jungle, so wild, the other cats couldn’t take it. So she, I mean he, went to look for somewhere he fit in, somewhere with other people who felt misunderstood” (“Tiger Millionaire”). While Amethyst is using the persona of Purple Puma as a disguise and wrestling character, and Steven is telling the story of that character, the audience is also meant to see the similarities between the character and Amethyst herself. For the time in the ring, Amethyst literally becomes Purple Puma. Her ‘body’ is transformed to display male physical characteristics, and her pronouns are male. This gender performance makes her no less Amethyst in the eyes of the other characters, and no comment is made by the show on the fact that it is her body in the ring that literally becomes her wrestling costume. If the male body that she takes on as Purple Puma is a performance, it implicates her normal appearance as a kind of costume as well. Her appearance as male is no less performance, costume, or construct than her normally female-gendered body. Any appearance she may choose to wear becomes performance. The Gems use their changeable bodies to subvert standard markers of gender, asserting that their bodies are not real in the way that humans perceive bodies as real.

4 It may be useful here to take a moment and examine the importance of magic and disbelief as it is at work within *Steven Universe*’s universe. When we talk about the genre of children’s fantasy entertainment, we often remark upon the imagination and wonder that it provokes in children. But as adult viewers, we’re conditioned to watch cartoons with a willing suspension of disbelief that allows us to accept and enjoy its magic constructs. Simon During critically examines the way that suspension of disbelief works in the realms of fiction and nonfiction, asserting that suspension of disbelief “seems to make it possible both to believe and not believe in magic” and that such this process is the “way consumers of modern culture learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction, and another in relation to the everyday world” (During 50). If we consider During’s framework as it is applied in *Steven Universe*, we can extend this theory even further. While readers of fiction may always have to suspend disbelief, the audience of fantasy cartoons *expects* to suspend disbelief and to a greater degree. This suspension, this release from reality is what makes the genre pleasurable. But it is also what gives *Steven Universe* power. It is the working of

specifically cartoon magic that allows gender identity to be so thoroughly and easily disconnected from physical gender traits/manifestations. It is not surprising to the audience that cartoon bodies are malleable and differentiated from real bodies in their plasticity, and *Steven Universe* takes advantage of the fact that the audience expects a level of body magic from the cartoons, more than from other fiction.

5 During asks us, “If one believes (or disbelieves) in magic implicitly in order to commit oneself to a wider set of values, then what is the effect of that language game which allows us to suppose that belief is also a subjective state?” (49) Gem magic is perhaps how we can begin to answer During’s question in the context of *Steven Universe*. The ability of the Gems to change their gender presentation at will is a type of magic that fundamentally disconnects notions of perceived gender from gender identity in the mind of the viewer. When the viewer is told that the Gems’ bodies are constructed or unreal, the viewer is forced to reconsider the implications of the female-coded body traits that they may see when they look at Garnet, Amethyst, or Pearl. The show even disconnects gender identity from pronouns; none of the Gems see themselves in terms of human femininity, and yet they all use ‘she/her’ in reference to one another. It is precisely the “language game” of *Steven Universe* that allows gender identity to be so thoroughly and easily disconnected from both the physical language of the characters’ embodiments and the language that they use to communicate with one another. Within *Steven Universe*, belief is a subjective state, and its effect is that the show’s magic opens up the possibility of representing a diversity of gender expression and embodiment. During ultimately places magical entertainment at the “ideological crossroads of superstition and enlightenment,” where he claims that it is “nugatory (in theory) and powerful and profitable (in fact)” (51). Magic, and the fantastical far from diminishing the power of whatever narrative it features in, can actually become the vehicle that supports an expansion into new lines of thought.

6 The very functions and facts of the Gem race therefore begins to open up the possibilities for queer representation in the show. Other magical abilities they have push the representation of trans gender identities even further. The Gems’ agender identities come into play again during the process of “Gem Fusion”, a magical construct in which Gems can fuse their bodies together. These Fusions have greater magical and physical power than the individual Gems, and take on the physical and personality characteristics of both of the Gems involved. Fusion is achieved through a series of elaborate dance moves the two Gems perform together, during which the two individuals must be perfectly coordinated and of the same state of mind. It is Fusion that pushes the magic of the fantasy cartoon to its most useful

for queer representation in *Steven Universe*, as Fusion serves as the prism through which the show addresses agender desire and genderqueer representations. Not only does this representation through Fusion break down barriers for the representation of genderqueer and agender people, it represents a distinctly queer carnivalesque space where gender-play and performance are integral to social interactions and identity-formation.

7 The movements and magic required in order for Gems to fuse, and indeed in the world of the Gems in general, allows for the relationships between the Gems to stand in a sort of carnivalesque atmosphere, one that subverts traditional distinctions between body and mind, relying instead on performance to shift and create the material of the Fusion's body. Most Fusions in *Steven Universe* are not only produced by ritualized, synchronized dance but also accompanied by or closely followed by song, strongly linking the performance and inhabitation of Gem Fusion to the type of "folk carnival humor" that Bakhtin identifies as characterizing the carnivalesque. The spectacle of Fusion itself could certainly be considered as falling under what Sue Vice reads as "Ritual spectacles" like "carnival pageants" or "comic shows of the marketplace" (Vice 345). Fusion is meant to be performative, and to be identified by both the participants and the audience as a symbol of change and power. Its routinized but individualized series of movements makes it simultaneously a ritual and a process of individualization. Because Fusion allows two individual Gems to combine, it undermines the dominant order of the corporeal body, equating the physical substance of the body not with a fixed, rigid or imposing structure but as something malleable, combinable and more powerful in its enactment of fluidity. While the Gems have the ability to change their own bodies at will, only Fusion actually increases their physical and magical capabilities. It is the total destruction of the individual body, in favor of intimately combining with another being. While the Gem Fusion is sometimes resorted to in *Steven Universe* in order to help the Gems fight a particularly difficult battle often Fusion is a site of play or light-heartedness, an expression of emotional and physical closeness, or a mechanic for humor. According to Vice, carnival allows for the "free and familiar contact between people who would usually be separated hierarchically", for "unusual combinations" and also for a bringing down to "the level of the body" (Vice 346). Fusion operates within exactly this kind of time and space; magic acts as the vehicle that transports the Gems (as both actors/participants and spectators) into the literal combined body of the Fusion performance. In performing a Gem Fusion, the individual Gems temporarily cease to exist, becoming one conjoined entity, in a state of "becoming, change and renewal" (Vice 346). The Gem Fusion is the literal embodiment of carnival time within the show.

8 That carnival time of Fusion is made possible by a performance of the Gem's desire for one another. *Steven Universe* insinuates through its various displays of Fusion that to the Gems the act of Fusion is an intimate and perhaps inappropriate or private occurrence. Each Fusion dance is slightly modified to take into account the specific personalities of those participating in it. In "Giant Woman" we learn that not only must Gems be in physical synchronicity during their dance, but they must also be mentally synced in order to perform Fusion successfully. We also learn that if they fall out of sync, the Fusion dissolves, leaving them as individuals once more ("Giant Woman"). This indicates that Fusion requires an extremely high and sustained level of mental and physical intimacy between Gems. When Garnet and Amethyst fuse in "Coach Steven" Pearl covers Steven's eyes to try and stop him from watching the dance that Garnet and Amethyst perform to fuse into the stronger Sugilite ("Reformed"). There can be no doubt that Fusion is a semi-sexual or at least desire-coded occurrence. Apart from the fact that Pearl deems the dance inappropriate for young Steven to see, there is the body language of the dance itself. When Pearl and Garnet attempt to teach Steven the process of Fusion, there is obviously a coded desire between them in the closeness and movement of their dance which includes flushed cheeks, heavy breathing, and daringly deep dips.

9 The Fusion dance can be nothing other than a specifically queer performance, one that continues *Steven Universe*'s project of actively distancing gender identity from both the physical body and sexual desire. The carnivalesque space of Fusion in *Steven Universe* is one in which Judith Butler's assertion that "the phantasmatic nature of desire reveals the body not as its ground or cause, but as its *occasion* and *object*" is physically realized (Butler 96). According to Butler, there is no disconnect inherently present in the idea of agender or unsexed desire (and I do not mean to conflate these terms here, but use them together to illustrate a being completely outside normative frameworks of sex and gender). After all, desire is not intrinsically connected to any piece of the body, rather it is determined by its phenomenological object. "The strategy of desire is," Butler continues, "part of the transfiguration of the desiring body itself" (96). While desire as abstracted from both gender and physical sex may be impossible in the culturally restricted 'real world', it seems to be present and at work within the carnival time that is *Steven Universe*. The process of Gem Fusion insists upon the intimate, sexual, and romantic implications of the transformation into one body at the same time as it continues to champion and indeed rely upon the agender status of its participants. In this case, the phenomenological object of the Gems' desire literally transforms the body, not merely by signifying gender upon it, as in Butler's work,

but actually allowing the desiring subjects to combine their bodies. *Steven Universe* therefore insists that desire is disconnected from gender identity, and that agender beings such as the Gems experience the same desire for romantic, sexual, and emotional closeness as cisgender people. In fact the show goes a step further, in attributing a special and immense physical and emotional power to a Fusion formed of two Gems.

10 One of the most powerful representations of Fusion comes to the viewer in the surprise reveal that Garnet herself (remember, though they are genderless, the Gems all use female pronouns) is a Fusion, and has been throughout the previous forty-eight episodes without ever becoming unsynchronized. We've seen previously how difficult it is for Gems to maintain their fused states because of the deep harmony of mind and body that Gem Fusion requires. In "Jailbreak" we find that the two beings whose Fusion creates Garnet, Ruby and Sapphire, have been separated and are desperate to return to their fused state. Ruby thinks nothing for the other trapped Gems (Pearl, Amethyst, and Lapis) when Steven helps her escape. The same can be said of Sapphire, who Steven also frees from her cell. The two run through the spaceship, ignoring the plight of their fellow Gems in search of one another, even ignoring Steven (who Garnet is usually desperate to protect). When they find each other they immediately run to one another and embrace lovingly and Sapphire kisses Ruby. "Did they hurt you?" Sapphire asks and Ruby responds, "Who cares?" They laugh, and Ruby picks Sapphire up, spinning her around and around ("Jailbreak"). Their spinning fuses them once again, their laughter turning to Garnet's and her jubilation at being restored is obvious upon her face. Ruby and Sapphire's Fusion is a rush to reunite, to be whole again by becoming one body and mind again. As the reunited Garnet fights opposing Gem Jasper, she begins to sing:

We are here to stay like this forever. If you break us apart, we'll just come back newer. And we'll always be twice the Gem that you were. I am made of love. Of love. Love love. This is who we are. This is who I am. And if you think you can stop me, then you need to think again. Because I am a feeling, and I will never end[...]Cause you think that you've seen what I'm made of. But I am even more than the two of them. Everything they care about is what I am. I am their fury, I am their patience, I am a conversation. ("Jailbreak")

The bond between Ruby and Sapphire is so complete that they cannot see themselves without each other. Their power is their synchronicity, their closeness of their thoughts, feelings and bodies. *Steven Universe* represents the Fusion of these two Gems in terms of a deep and powerful relationship and not just any relationship, but a specifically and unequivocally romantic one. Garnet's song highlights the fact that Jasper is "single" in both senses of the word. Garnet's creation is one not only of a tight bond but a synchronicity that is the product

of complete and total love. She is made of the emotions and attributes of both Ruby and Sapphire, the physical embodiment of their closeness, the “conversation” between them. It would be hard not to read Garnet’s existence as a manifesto for a kind of queer love, one that defies fixed gender and stable embodiment and which celebrates the desire of those that lie outside the gender binary. Not only is the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire not based on normative binary gender identifications and sexuality, but also they choose to spend their lives as one combined consciousness. Garnet is a product of Ruby and Sapphire’s agender desire, passion, and love. Such a symbolic union is possible in the realm of cartoon magic, which allows the symbol of the joined lovers to become actualized. In no other show is an agender relationship shown so beautifully, powerfully and with such acceptance.

11 Fusion becomes an important tool for the representation of another form of nonbinary gender embodiment in the Fusion that Steven achieves completely by accident in “Alone Together”. The Gems attempt to teach Steven how to fuse with another Gem, with Amethyst standing in as Steven’s dancing partner. However, the instruction does not work, the two instead merely fall over each other laughing. Nor does Steven’s attempt to fuse with Pearl come to fruition. Pearl tells Steven not to worry, that Fusion is a difficult skill to achieve for a variety of reasons, and that they are not even sure that Steven will have the ability to create a Fusion because he is half-human. When Connie (Steven’s best friend) later asks him if the Gems can write down the steps, he asserts that the dance is only part of the process towards Gem Fusion: “No...I don’t think it’s just about the dancing. When they fuse, they glow and kind of...phase into each other. I don’t know if I can even do that.” (“Alone Together”) Steven understands and reiterates to the audience that Fusion is about more than just movement, it is about a level of togetherness that he is not sure he can experience. Steven invites Connie to conquer her fear of dancing in front of other people and to dance there on the beach with him. They hold hands and as they dance harder and harder together, they laugh and indeed begin to glow. At that moment, Connie catches the falling Steven (looking as if she has dipped him over her knee) and the two perform a Gem Fusion by accident. Their Fusion, nicknamed Stevonnie by Amethyst later in the episode, is not only the first Fusion between a Gem and a human, but the first gendered Gem Fusion. Because Steven is the first Gem that openly associates himself with a gender, and he happens to identify as male, and Connie identifies as female throughout the show, Stevonnie cannot be said to be agender. Their Fusion therefore is unique from both a species and gendered point of view.

12 Stevonnie goes home to announce themselves to the Gems in hopes that the Gems will know what to do about their Fusion and to celebrate the fact that Steven achieved Fusion in

the first place. Their announcement of their Fusion is with pride, rather than trepidation. The scene is a coming out of sorts for Stevonnie. While Pearl asserts, worriedly, that they should be separated immediately, Garnet is absolutely beside herself with happiness (dramatic considering Garnet's usually deadpan demeanor). She grabs Stevonnie and looks at them with a huge smile on her face: "Listen to me. You are not two people. And you are not one person. You...are an experience! Make sure you're a good experience. Now GO HAVE FUN!" ("Alone Together") Stevonnie and the experience they are having in this new body is perhaps particularly legible to Garnet, since she herself is a Gem Fusion (though neither Steven nor the audience know this at the time of "Alone Together"), and thus Garnet emphasizes that the level of closeness in Fusion is one to be embraced, celebrated even. Stevonnie takes this advice to experience and enjoy the moments as a Fusion seriously. By urging Stevonnie not to worry about the combination of their separate identities and the implications of their new body, Garnet is reconstituting the Fusion that worries the other Gems as a place for play and learning. This Fusion is about experiencing life in the moment, about play and most of all about a deep celebration of closeness. Garnet obviously thinks that Steven and Connie can learn something from the experience of sharing a Fusion together. The events that brought their Fusion together in the first place were, after all, a moment of play, trust, and pushing boundaries.

13 Never has carnival time been more relevant to *Steven Universe*. The very bodily performance of Stevonnie subverts and undercuts hierarchical imposition of gender and heterosexuality. Stevonnie is not, as in the case of the other Gems and their Fusions, deliberately outside the gender binary, since both Steven and Connie claimed their respective gender identities before their Fusion. On the other hand, Stevonnie does not (either physically or mentally) fit within the categories of male or female. They are deliberately genderqueer and display androgynous physical features. Importantly, Stevonnie herself never comments on feeling strange or out of place in their physical body. Far from being worried about the gender of that body, they seem to take the new body they have been given as an opportunity, as Garnet puts it, for "a good experience". Stevonnie runs down the beach, doing cartwheels and flips, relishing in the strength and grace of their body, appreciating it for its abilities. They lie in the ocean and let it wash over them, seemingly totally content with their Fusion.

14 Stevonnie's sole purpose for the rest of the episode seems to be to investigate the space afforded to gender ambiguous or genderqueer persons within the world of Beach City. They take the androgynous bodily performance and try it out on the 'real world'. The magic Fusion of Steven and Connie into Stevonnie allows both of them to experience a full range of

gendered interactions and correspondingly exposes the audience to the impact that perceived gender has on our everyday experiences. Stevonnie's body is ambiguously gendered based on their representation as an amalgamation of both Steven and Connie, but it is their interaction with members of Beach City that point out the perceived non-normalcy of such a genderqueer presentation. Gayle Salamon's excellent work may be able to help us encode the social signals that Stevonnie faces. Salamon contends, "the importance of the body for establishing a gendered subjectivity has less to do with its morphological configurations and more to do with how flesh must be signified and resignified, where this resignification will sometimes involve changes to the body, and sometimes will not" (Salamon 128). In the case of Stevonnie, the body has changed, but the resignification of that body comes not from the internal perception of self, but from the cultural resignification of that body by external forces. This normalizing force is even more felt (by both Stevonnie and the audience) because Stevonnie's body resists easy categorization. And Beach City's reaction, its general attempts to comprehend and signify gender upon Stevonnie, is mixed.

15 When Stevonnie walks into the doughnut shop both the female and male employee (with whom Steven is friends throughout the rest of the show) blush. Neither of the employees recognize Steven within the Fusion, as his body has changed dramatically. Stevonnie orders two doughnuts, and both employees seem to be unable to take their eyes off them. Each of them also expresses some form of unease during the encounter, whether it is the flush of their cheeks or the halting quality of their speech. Whether these expressions of nervousness around Stevonnie are from attraction to Stevonnie or from a confused reaction to their ambiguously gendered body is not entirely clear, but it is clear that the interaction both of them have with Stevonnie is uncomfortable. Presumably, Stevonnie is not used to an interaction which calls to the fore the configuration or expression of their body in a way that the genderqueer body of Stevonnie does. They leave the doughnut shop and there is a moment of conversation in which Stevonnie speaks to themselves about the possibility of breaking back into two people: "Are you okay?" Stevonnie asks themselves, "We can stop if you...No. No. Don't worry." ("Alone Together") There is a sense of melancholy about the experience with the two employees that seems to stem from the misrecognition of Stevonnie, a change from the welcome reception that Steven usually receives from his friends that work there. This unspoken awkwardness, the misrecognition and the discomfort that Stevonnie has with the experience speaks to the common experience of genderqueer and trans people out in the world where they face an experience defined by their gender presentation and identity rather than their individual humanity. *Steven Universe* presents Fusion as a site of play, but it

does not gloss over the social stigma against nonbinary gender expression. The strength of its representation of the trans and genderqueer experience is that it both celebrates expression and teaches acceptance. There is no shying away from the pain of being misrecognized or misgendered.

16 Later, at a dance that Stevonnie is invited to by an older kid, the character of Kevin allows the show to further explore the mixed social experiences of genderqueer people. Kevin comes up to Stevonnie at the dance, expecting to dance with them. He calls them “baby” in his introduction, immediately making the space between them one of potential romance and sexual tension. While the audience notices this tension, Stevonnie seems to be momentarily unaware of it. Kevin’s advances escalate when Stevonnie leaves the dance floor:

STEVONNIE. I don’t (pushing Kevin’s hands away) - I don’t want to dance anymore.

KEVIN. What are you talking about? We’re the best thing that’s ever happened to this place. Come back out with me.

STEVONNIE. Why should I?

KEVIN. Because we’re angels walking among garbage people. We’re perfect for each other.

STEVONNIE. (Angrily) How can you say that?! You don’t even know us!

KEVIN. Oh, woah. I’m just looking for a dance! Don’t get crazy! (“Alone Together”)

The figure of Kevin is perhaps a daring choice for a children’s cartoon, but it shows that Steven Universe is willing to go further than other children’s shows. Stevonnie’s interaction with Kevin at the dance is one in which they are sexualized, even despite their protests. Kevin sees Stevonnie as a sexual object, he even tries to pull them back on to the dance floor. Unfortunately, this is also a realistic part of the trans experience. Genderqueer and trans people face a statistically much higher rate of sexual violence, with as many as one in two transgender people reporting being sexually victimized, often more than once (Stotzer 173). The sexualization of trans people becomes a part of Stevonnie’s experience as well, and their reaction to this manifests itself as anger: “I’m not your baby!” Stevonnie tells him, before going off to dance aggressively by themselves (“Alone Together”). Steven Universe does not avoid the negative experiences that Stevonnie occasions, instead it uses those experiences to teach Steven, Connie and its young audience what it feels like to be in the shoes of trans people. Any viewer familiar with the show would know that this is not the same treatment that Steven usually receives, and so this episode is different. It is different precisely and exclusively because Steven’s gender presentation/identity as Stevonnie is different. Ironically enough one of the most seriously and dangerously ‘real’ moments of the show is brought

about because of the magic of Fusion.

17 Steven and Connie's Fusion eventually breaks apart, leaving the two in their original bodies, and at some level it seems to come as a relief to them. While Stevonnie was an experience that both of them enjoyed when they were alone on the beach or with the supportive Gems, out in the semi-realistic world of Beach City the social gender stigma made the overall experience a mixed one. Stevonnie's importance for the queer carnival of Steven Universe is that their experience highlights that all identities are socially dependant, and that queer bodies or identities can present both a space for wonderfully subversive gendered play and open up different (and sometimes negative) social interactions based upon that gender play. As mixed as Stevonnie's experience is, that experience is a form of revolutionary representation for trans individuals across the gender spectrum. Steven's time as Stevonnie teaches him about experiencing social stigma and being treated merely as a romantic/sexual object. It also teaches him that gender is fluid, shifting, and defined however the individual wants it to be defined. It teaches Steven (and the audience) empathy for those facing negative or violent reactions to their gender identity, but also that there is power in gender expressions across the spectrum. In one of Steven Universe's more recent episodes we see that Steven has incorporated gender play into his life outside of Fusion, when he dresses in drag to perform a song at the Beach-a-Palooza (a talent competition being held by the town). The show makes no mention of his heels and makeup, treating his drag costume as just another aspect of Steven's performance ("Sadie's Song"). Perhaps Steven's time as Stevonnie taught him to be more open to the possibilities of gender and performance (this time without the need for magic), just as it is trying to teach viewers the same.

18 When we think about trans representation in media, we often think of adult shows where such themes may be deemed more 'appropriate', then we hope that subsequently such representation will slowly move into children's shows. But with Steven Universe we have an exact reversal of this process. Steven Universe is a show that makes use of its specific kind of narrative magic in a variety of ways to teach and entertain its young audience. But the show has found fans amongst older viewers as well, precisely because it is willing to push the boundaries of gender representation. Not only is Steven Universe perhaps the queerest children's show, it may be the most gender-progressive show on television. It achieves the representation of genderqueer and agender characters through the magical formal elements that naturally belong in a cartoon universe. In cartoons magic provides the opportunity for imaginative play and learning. Children's shows, and children themselves, are willing to suspend disbelief and open themselves to possibilities that are not fully culturally accepted

and they are less socially conditioned to be biased against experiences or people that are new to them. Relevantly, within this genre the expectations of older viewers are conditioned to allow them to accept magic and its function within the world of the fantasy cartoon, so that they can follow and enjoy its story. Steven Universe takes advantage of this narrative expectation to imbue its magic with the power to represent queer gender expressions and changing bodies. The utopian play space, the cartoon carnivalesque space that the show creates, functions equally as powerfully for viewers of all ages and allows for genders outside the spectrum to exist and even flourish in a concrete way. It may be that shows like Steven Universe are examples of children teaching their parents, and adult audiences, how to open up to allowing trans identities the space and respect in media that they deserve.

19 Granted, there is much work still to be done. Like *The Legend of Korra* or *Adventure Time*, Steven Universe is a show steeped in fantastical, the carnival time. While it may be grounded more in our own world than other cartoons, the representation of trans people in Steven Universe still hinges on the magic that allows bodies to change at will or fuse together. During creator Rebecca Sugar's Reddit AMA, a questioner asked her about trans representation in the show, and Sugar focused on the safe space that fantasy provides, calling it "the best use of fantasy" to represent and tackle difficult issues: "The weird fun cartoon doesn't stop to talk about this, it just is this, in the safe space of fantasy. It's very important to me that this show makes people feel represented" (Sugar AMA). But trans identities are being lived without the aid of such magical constructs everyday, outside the safe space of fantasy. What would it mean for children's media to begin to represent these identities without the aid of magic or the fantastic? A show like Steven Universe should be applauded for its willingness to take on difficult and complex topics and representing trans characters (especially those genders that are usually deemed too complicated for television). However, the next evolution in such representation may lie outside of fantasy, out in the 'real world'. While the narrative power of Steven Universe is that we carry its message of gender play and acceptance with us, we must still encourage media makers to represent trans characters outside fantasy's comforting bubble.

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***Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* by bell hooks. New York:
Routledge, 2013**

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1 As a black feminist and social activist, bell hooks addresses the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and religion, and their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and domination. In her latest work, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, she attempts to strategize the ways in which scholars, activists and readers can challenge and change systems of domination. In *Writing Beyond Race*, bell hooks provides an insightful and compelling analysis of the discourse and media representations of race and racism, and provides suggestions for the ways in which people can bridge cultural and racial divides.

2 *Writing Beyond Race* is a smart, engaging and passionate book about thinking beyond race in order to fight white supremacy through critical awareness. hooks introduces the admittedly awkward phrase, "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy", to capture the intersections of various systems of domination that characterize contemporary American life. In understanding how imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy works to oppress everyone, hooks challenges the reader to think about white supremacist practices that are the foundation of all systems of domination based on skin color and ethnicity. In describing systems of oppressions in the United States, hooks uses this phrase to describe the interlocking political systems that are the basis of American life. hooks explains that she has found this phrase useful because it does not prioritize one system over another, but rather, offers a way of thinking about interlocking systems of oppressions that work together to maintain the status quo (4). That said, in her work hooks illustrates how the United States was founded and colonized on the beliefs of white supremacy. This approach makes the collection an important contribution to research and writings on race and racism.

3 For hooks, the term white supremacy is more descriptive of race relations problems in America than racism. She critiques the lack of discussion of white supremacy in feminist writings and suggests thinking about white supremacy as the foundation of race and racism because it allows us to see beyond skin color (hooks 6). hooks identifies the system of dominating patriarchy as the real divisive factor between people.

4 The book consists of a collection of essays, divided into 18 chapters offering stories of resistance and strategies for change as it relates to white supremacist thought and black

self-determination. The book begins by exploring ways to consider post-racial America and offers a compelling discussion of the need to move beyond the term racism because, as hooks argues, it evokes the notion of overt discrimination. In her introductory chapter, hooks addresses the use of the term white supremacy as it “allows for the uncovering and exposure of all the covert and insidious ways that coping with trauma” and the stress associated with the term “may diminish one’s chances of being in good health” (22). hooks explains that in using the phrase ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, she wanted to adopt language that would remind the reader of the continuous interlocking systems of domination that define our reality. Gender and race are important issues. Yet, by using this particular phrase in this way, she attempts to establish a concise way of articulating the way that racism, sexism, and classism are actually functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives. Further, as hooks explains it, as a black female of a certain age group, if she wanted to better understand what is happening to her in this moment of her life, she would not be able to understand it only by looking through the lens of race, or through the lens of gender or simply looking at how others, - white people - see her. For hooks, this is an important breakthrough in her work. By using the term white supremacy over racism she argues that racism in and of itself does not really allow for a discourse on colonization and decolonization. Rather, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of colour allows for things to be kept at a level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion.

5 The remaining chapters contextualize the way(s) race and racism has been talked about, particularly in the post-racial era within the United States. hooks provides harsh criticism of a number of books and films and their impact on race and representation. These include *The Help*, the *Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and recent autobiographies of Malcolm X (hooks 70). In her critique, hooks offers her unique perspective as an African American woman. She illustrates in the chapter on the stories told in the book and movie, “*The Help*”, the analysis of media and its appropriation of black female narratives. hooks argues that both mediums purport to deconstruct class and race relations, yet reinscribe the same harmful social tropes movie goers have come to expect: cat fights and an inability for women to display partnership. Through excerpts of a conversation with filmmaker Gilda L Sheppard, hooks also thoroughly addresses the movies *Crash* and *Precious* and their pornography of violence (134). She also includes more personal essays about her parent’s marriage and living as a black woman in a predominantly white community. She further reflects on the contemporary significance of African American leaders such as W.E. Dubois,

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and highlights the contributions of black women writers such as Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and Sonia Sanchez. Subsequent chapters weave together discussions of the importance of putting academic theories into real life practices to end discrimination. Returning back to the power of white supremacy, hooks argues for self-awareness and self-determination in order to unlearn racism and, in turn, white supremacy (144).

6 The reminder of the book is centered on an examination of love as a means to address oppression. By focusing on the role of love in ending discrimination, whether by addressing issues of racism, sexism, homophobia or classism, hooks argues for love and learning to accept other people's differences (1). In the final chapter, hooks suggests developing a critical consciousness, - a decolonialization of the mind - by becoming aware of the influences of white supremacy's sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and colonialism while simultaneously holding out hope for change (193). hooks encourages healing and reviving solidarity among people of colour to thus become empowered to live with purpose and dignity. As a cultural critic, hooks is at her best in *Writing Beyond Race*, using models of diversity to criticize existing books and films to put forward her vision of a better American society.

7 bell hooks wrestles with the complex, and emotionally charged topic of race and racism in America, but does so in a readable and accessible manner. *Writing Beyond Race* is particularly important contribution to race writings because it promotes moving beyond our general understanding of racism in order to adequately address the complexity of white supremacy. Additionally, the themes in hooks' book resonate with current discussions of the reality of racism and sexist oppression occurring in communities throughout the United States. For example, following her approach presented in *Writing Beyond Race*, the recent demands of the 'Say Her Name' movement in the United States as a means to adequately address the previous lack of inclusion of women in the discussion of victims of state misconduct, must be understood under the implications of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Because of its focus, a number of audiences will find this book interesting and valuable.

8 If you are not familiar with bell hooks writings, then *Writing Beyond Race* is, overall, an excellent introduction to her work. Thoughtful and provocative, *Writing Beyond Race* collects many of hooks' major writings on a variety of topics (film, love, race, pedagogy) and cleverly provides an overview of her critique of white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy as the hegemonic discourse that oppresses everyone. While everyone is affected by

the dominant culture, she notes that some suffer more than others and in different ways. Throughout the book, hooks urges for partnership and mutuality and argues for a truly intersectional view of hegemony where many issues converge to oppress. She maintains that issues of race, class, and gender all interlock to produce culture and that if you want to deconstruct one, you must address the others as well.

List of Contributors

Damien Riggs is an Associate Professor in social work at Flinders University and an Australian Research Council Future Fellow. He is the author of over 150 publications in the fields of gender/sexuality studies, mental health, and marginalisation. He also works in private practice as a Lacanian psychotherapist, specialising in working with young trans people. **Chloe Colton** is currently undertaking a graduate diploma of counselling and psychotherapy at The University of Adelaide. **Clemence Due** is a lecturer in The School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide. Her research interests focus on the wellbeing of marginalised children and families, including gender diverse children, refugee children and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. **Clare Bartholomaeus** is an adjunct Research Associate at Flinders University. She is currently working on several projects, including an examination of pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge of transgender issues and an audit of picture books with trans and gender diverse characters (with Damien Riggs and Yarrow Andrew).

Rhianna Humphrey is currently an ESRC funded PhD student at the University of Glasgow. Her research addresses trans and intersex rights activism and relationships in social movements in Scotland, Malta and Australia. She holds a BA(hons) in English Studies from the University of Stirling, an MA in Critical and Cultural Theory from Cardiff University, and an MRes in Equality and Human Rights from the University of Glasgow. Her research interests include gender, queer theory, and sexuality. She has published on queer methodologies for community-based research; barriers to education faced by trans students; and is currently working on publications on gender based harassment in online gaming communities. In addition to academic work she has been involved in sexuality, gender, disability, and student activism for a number of years.

Eli Dunn is an MA student in English Department at the University of Virginia where they study queer theory, film, television, and contemporary literature. More specifically, their work interrogates the representation of trans and nonbinary characters in media, with a particular interest both in the narrative tools that make this representation possible, and its audiences reception. Eli's current project questions the relationships between gender identity, narrative form, and uniquely queer temporal frameworks in television and contemporary literature.

Andrea Anderson graduated from York University with an Honours degree in Political Science and Law & Society. She received a Master of Arts from the Centre for Criminology, University of Toronto and earned her Juris Doctor from the University of Windsor. After working with a prominent Toronto criminal defence firm, Ms. Anderson pursued her Master of Laws at Osgoode Hall. Her research focused on the implications of racial discrimination in wrongful conviction cases in Canada. She returned to Osgoode as a candidate in the doctoral program. Her current research interests include critical race, gendered & racialized violence, policing, racialization of crime and punishment.