Comparative Feminist Studies foregrounds writing, organizing, and reflection on feminist trajectories across the historical and cultural borders of nation-states. It takes up fundamental analytic and political issues involved in the cross-cultural production of knowledge about women and feminism, examining in depth the politics of scholarship and knowledge in relation to feminist organizing and social movements. This series draws on feminist thinking in a number of fields, targeting innovative, comparative feminist scholarship; pedagogical and curricular strategies; community organizing, and political education. Volumes in this series will provide systematic and challenging interventions into the (still) largely Euro-Western feminist studies knowledge base, while simultaneously highlighting the work that can and needs to be done to envision and enact cross-cultural, multiracial feminist solidarity.

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CHAPTER 7

Queer and Feminist Approaches to Transgender Media Studies

Mia Fischer

When transgender actress Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine in June 2014 under the headline “The Transgender Tipping Point: America’s next civil rights frontier,” her appearance marked an unprecedented moment for transgender visibility in national discourse. In recent years, there has generally been a significant increase in the representation of transgender people on television and in news media: from Cox’s role as Sophia Burset in Netflix’s *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–), to Amazon’s hit-show *Transparent* (2014–), which is partially based on director Jill Soloway’s own experience with her parent’s transition, and TLC’s reality TV show *I am Jazz* (2015–), which follows the everyday experiences of...

Parts of this chapter are drawn from the introduction of the author’s forthcoming monograph, *Terrorizing Gender: Transgender Visibility and the Surveillance Practices of the U.S. Security State* (working title) with the University of Nebraska Press.

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transgender teen Jazz Jennings. Undoubtedly, the attention given to transgender visibility reached a culmination point when Bruce Jenner announced “Call me Caitlyn” on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in June 2015. As a former track-star, Olympian gold medalist, and member of the Kardashian clan, Jenner’s coming-out had been tabloid fodder for months preceding her official announcement. With all things trans currently being “hot shit” to quote filmmaker and trans rights activist Reina Gossett et al. (2016), there has also been an attendant surge in communication and media studies scholarship engaging with transgender people and issues.

In this chapter I want to provide a basic overview of this scholarship and offer some thoughts for future directions in regard to theoretical frameworks and methodology. First, I argue that transgender media studies scholarship can benefit from applying an intersectional theoretical framework to understand and scrutinize the multiple oppressions transgender people are subject to. Second, I advocate for a queer methodology in order to interrogate how transgender people themselves engage with media and how these representations impact their everyday lives. Before doing so, I will briefly map the intersections of and differences between queer, feminist, and transgender studies in academic and activist spaces.

**Transgender Studies’ Relations to Queer and Feminist Theory**

There is an extensive dialogue within transgender studies that concerns both the relationship between transgender and queer as well as its relationship to feminism (Stryker and Currah 2014). Defining an identity category like “transgender” is inherently difficult because there is always a risk of “assigning a normative telos to an identity category that is often employed to oppose this modernist, binary logic” (West 2014, 9). Susan Stryker (2008) particularly emphasizes the performativity and social construction of identity by referring to transgender as “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross-over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” (emphasis in original, 1). “Transgender,” or its shortened version “trans” is, therefore, commonly conceptualized to include a wide range of gender-variant practices, embodiments, and identities that challenge the assumed stability of, and relationality between, biological sex, the gender binary, and sexuality.¹

It can be theoretically and methodologically difficult to draw a clear-cut line between transgender and queer not least of which because these terms circulate with different meanings and uses—sometimes even contradictory ones—in multiple spaces.² As Stryker (2004, 212) succinctly writes, “if queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory’s evil twin.” Originally used as an epithet in the early twentieth century, “queer” reemerged as a radical political term among activists during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Concurrently, academics began to use queer to refer to a new post-structuralist academic theory that sought to challenge the naturalizing assumptions of heteronormativity and the stability of gender and sexual identities (see Jagose 1997; or Love 2014). Despite its anti-identitarian meanings in queer theory and in some queer politics, colloquially, today queer has come to be used as an umbrella term chiefly associated with non-normative sexual practices and desires but is also sometimes used to refer to gender non-normativity. Similarly, the acronym “LGBT” is often used to identify a collective of sexual and gender minorities and/or to the activism of mainstream gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights organizations. However, as Mary L. Gray (2009) points out, references to an allegedly coherent and tangible “LGBT community” often signify “the power of nationally mass-mediated conversations to manifest an ‘imagined community’ of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, whether L, G, B, and T-identifying people are present or not” (12).

While the LGBT movement in the United States has celebrated unprecedented legal victories in recent years, including the passage of federal hate crime legislation, the repeal of the military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, and, most prominently, the legalization of gay marriage in June 2015, these victories have often benefitted mostly white and middle-class cisgender gay and lesbian constituencies, while systematically excluding and/or ignoring the contributions and needs of trans, gender non-conforming, and poor people as well as people of color (see, e.g., Cohen 1997; Duggan 2004; Ferguson 2005). These exclusions are evident in the very mythology surrounding the origins of the modern LGBT movement. Despite the fact that the activism of drag queens and trans women of color was a fundamental part of the riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, their contributions have been all too frequently erased from LGBT history. Subsequent decades have further illustrated that activism surrounding issues of sexuality and gender identity do not necessarily always align themselves with one another and have, at times, been very contentious. For example, when
Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning was arrested in 2010 for leaking thousands of classified documents to WikiLeaks, none of the major national LGBT organizations voiced support for her, fearing that Manning’s “betrayal” of national security and alleged confusion over her sexual orientation and gender identity may jeopardize the repeal of DADT (see Brownworth 2014; Fischer 2016a). Once DADT was overturned in 2011, gays and lesbians were allowed to serve openly, yet transgender personnel remained banned under a dubious medical clause.

Similarly, persistent transphobic discourses within certain radical feminist spaces, which posit trans women as “unwanted penetrators” into cis women’s spaces, continue to cause rifts between feminist and transgender communities. In 1979, Janice G. Raymond’s publication *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* cemented anti-transgender sentiment in certain feminist communities with her transphobic contention that “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (1994, 104). Raymond argued that male-to-female transsexuals were agents of the patriarchal oppression and that their presence in cis women’s spaces violated cis women’s sexuality and spirit. Some of these TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminism) debates have recently been revived with Sheila Jeffreys’ (2014) publication, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. As transgender studies has become an increasingly vibrant field of interdisciplinary inquiry in academia, its increased institutionalization has also fueled debates about trans studies’ place within women and gender studies programs because it continues to “problematize the political efficacy of the category ‘woman’” (Stryker and Currah 2014, 6).

And while the national Women’s March in January 2017 drew record crowds in numerous US cities—significantly with many participants wearing pink “pussy hats” that equated gender status with genitals—the organizers faced criticism for continuing to sideline trans women and their concerns despite nominally inclusive principles in their mission statement. Similarly, award-winning novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who has gained recognition for centering a strong feminist perspective in her work, elicited a fierce debate after giving an interview in March 2017 in which she claimed that trans women differ from “real” cis women because trans women allegedly universally benefit from male privilege (Fischer 2017). Thus, while it may be easy to assume that quarrels over identity politics and over whether trans is really part of feminist and LGBT activist as well as academic spaces are in the past, the difficult, and at times contested, relationship in and between these communities provides an important socio-political context for understanding the larger implications of this current moment of transgender visibility.

**SITUATING TRANSGENDER MEDIA STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP**

An initial wave of scholarship from media and communication studies pertaining to transgender visibility specifically focused on the murder of Brandon Teena and its subsequent movie adaptations *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) in the early 2000s. This scholarship points to a prevalence of pathologizing and disciplining discourses surrounding Teena’s trans identity, which sought to reinforce the gender binary and commonly portrayed him as a trickster and deceiver (Sloop 2000; Squires and Brouwer 2002; Henderson 2013). In *Disciplining Gender*, a foundational text for communication and rhetorical studies, John M. Sloop (2004) uses Teena’s case to illustrate how troubling gender does not always subversively work to de-naturalize gender, but rather reinforce prevailing cultural expectations of heteronormativity and heterosexuality. C. Jacob Hale (1998) notes that the visibility of transgender and gay political activism around Teena’s case also worked to harden the borders between butch lesbian and female-to-male identities through essentialist constructions between the vagina and womanhood.

More recently, particularly the publication of the anthology *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories* edited by Leland Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzzo (2015) has made important contributions to understanding trans identities in the broader context of health, interpersonal, and organizational communication as well as media framing analyses. Looking especially at news media, scholars have noted some positive recent trends when discussing trans people and issues, including a decrease in misgendering, focus on genitals, and dead-naming; however, there generally remains very little coverage to begin with, and this coverage disproportionately revolves around trans women, while trans men and non-binary folks remain notably absent (Billard 2016; Capuzzo 2016). Sourcing practices also reveal that journalists continue to rely on non-transgender “experts” as proxies, rather than letting trans people tell their own stories, which often individualizes struggles and failures but does not address the systemic nature of intersecting oppressions (Capuzzo 2014). Particularly notable is the prominence “wrong body discourse” which is
frequently deployed as a “fixing strategy” to explain and acknowledge trans identities, yet as Bernadette Barker-Plummer (2013) notes, this discourse reasserts the gender binary, ignoring more fluid understandings of gender. Elaborating on the “wrong body” trope, Michael Lovelock (2016) argues that trans has become “fashionable” in recent years precisely because of a larger cultural imperative that encourages women to express their “true” femininity via bodily transformation and makeovers, as exemplified by trans celebrity figures, such as Caitlyn Jenner. However, as Lovelock acknowledges, this visibility is fraught with exclusions around race and gender normativity as it problematically works “to demarcate ideals of ‘acceptable’ transgender subjectivity” (1).

Similarly, scripted and fictional content engaging trans characters often reasserts heteronormativity rather than challenging or subverting gender binaries in efforts to appeal to dominant, cisgender audiences (see e.g., Booth 2011; Miller 2015; Patterson and Spencer 2017). Furthermore, particularly crime shows continue to problematically rely on storylines that solely depict trans people as deceptive villains, prostitutes, and murderers (Lester 2015). Comparable to news coverage, scripted and fictional shows, therefore, have yet to fully acknowledge a variety of trans experiences, including non-binary ones, as a political constituency and social movement (Capuza and Spencer, 2017).

More recently media scholars have begun to explore specifically the importance of social media spaces for counter-hegemonic trans cultural production. Particularly, tagging practices as well as new modes of self-representation and self-definition on Tumblr and Twitter constitute modes of resistance to the co-opting and fetishizing of trans identities by mainstream media and the ongoing violence trans communities face (Fink and Miller 2014; Dame 2016; Jackson et al. 2017). While this exponential growth in communication and media studies scholarship focusing on transgender people and issues is commendable, in the remainder of this chapter, I would like to map two future directions—one theoretical, the other methodological—that I invite scholars to consider when engaging with mediated transgender representations.

**Future Directions**

The first direction pertains to theoretical framing. There is a persistence in some media and communication studies scholarship to employ “LGBT” and “queer” as broad umbrella terms that end up focusing predominantly on representations of white, middle-class cisgender gay and lesbian subjec-

**tivities, without addressing how race figures into representations of gender identity and sexuality.** In his recent book C. Riley Snorton (2017), for example, illustrates how the erasure of Phillip DeVine, a black man and amputee who was also killed by Teena’s murderers, from the “Brandon archive” and larger public memory raises questions about the circulation of anti-blackness and able-bodiedness in regard to which LGBT subjects become digestible and legible for mass-mediated consumption and which ones do not (see pp. 177–198). While intersectionality has been incorporated widely into feminist, ethnic, and sexuality studies and has emerged as an important analytic in queer of color critique, its uptake in communication and media studies remains scarce. With origins in black feminist thought, intersectionality, a term originally coined by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is an interpretive framework that rejects additive models of identity and oppression, and instead highlights how they interlock. In other words, neither identities nor oppressive institutions function separately, one layered on top of the other, but are mutually constitutive; for example, the racism Black women experience cannot be separated from the sexism and classism they are often subject to as well.

In my own work I take intersectionality as a key framework for understanding how mediated representations of transgender people are linked to their daily interactions and experiences with systems of state power and violence. For example, in the case of CeCe McDonald, a black trans woman who was charged with murder for killing her attacker during a transphobic and racist assault in 2011 in Minneapolis, it is impossible to separate her trans identity from her identity as a poor woman of color. McDonald and her friends were viciously attacked by a group of white bar patrons because of not just homophobia and transphobia, but racism as well (Erdely 2014; Johnson 2013). Yet local news media and state prosecutors denied these intersecting oppressions, leaving McDonald undeserving of legal protection. Instead, her attacker, Dean Schmitz, was frequently idealized as a loving father figure in the news and the judge refused to admit his swastika tattoo as evidence of his belief in white supremacy (Simons 2012; State of Minnesota v. McDonald n.d.). While mediated and legal discourses sought to condone and recuperate the violence of a white perpetrator, McDonald’s gender non-conformity rendered her as a threatening subject whose actions did not qualify as self-defense. Because gender identity is always already produced in and through other social formations such as race, sexuality, class, and able-bodiedness, media and state institutions continue to conceptualize trans people as deceptive, deviant, and threatening precisely
because they fail to account for these lives at the intersections of multiple identity categories (Fischer forthcoming).

Secondly, I encourage media studies scholars to step away from solely using textual analysis of their objects to (re)consider what these media representations actually do and how they impact the everyday lives of trans communities. I do not mean to evoke a media effects framework here, rather than an understanding of how trans people themselves engage in meaning-making processes and what the relationships are between cultural representations and their material consequences. Doing so requires a conscious de-centering of media as the sole object of analysis and, instead, paying “greater ethnographic attention to the uptake and meaning of media in our everyday lives” as Mary L. Gray (2009, xiv) notes. A turn toward a queer methodology can allow us to achieve such a de-centering, as it deliberately combines different theoretical and methodological approaches, for example, textual criticism, (auto)ethnography, archival research and historical surveys. For J. Jack Halberstam (1998), queer methodology becomes a “scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (13).

Getting up from behind our computer screens to reflect and, when necessary, reconsider our methodological tool-kit enables scholars to broaden their research perspectives. Andre Cavalcante (2017), for example, productively uses ethnography to explore trans people’s engagement with first-of-its-kind media “breakout texts,” such as Boys Don’t Cry (1999) and TransAmerica (2005) to analyze what “queer identity work” they elicit. A turn to such “on-the-ground” observations fused with critical discourse analysis can reveal new and different insights into how media representations and visibility politics impact and reflect the everyday experiences of transgender people. Similarly, studying the field sites of CeCe McDonald’s neighborhood in Minneapolis in 2014, conducting interviews with local activists and McDonald’s legal team, as well as news reporters covering her case, combined with close textual and visual analyses of social and news media content allowed me to gather data and insights about her story that would have otherwise been foreclosed to me. I was able to trace how McDonald’s Support Committee effectively used social media as a power-building tool to challenge traditional media gatekeepers and state institutions by actively producing alternative epistemologies about the value of trans women of colors’ lives (see Fischer 2016b). While interactions with human subjects certainly introduce some unpre-
dictable and at times frustrating variables into the research process—from negotiating the Institutional Review Board process to gaining access to field sites—personally engaging with and listening to the communities that are the subjects of our research usually results in more informed, concise, and rigorous scholarship.

The Ethics of Knowledge Production and Community Accountability

Applying an intersectional theoretical framework and engaging a queer methodology also raises important questions about the ethics of knowledge production and community accountability. Although critiques of hegemonic knowledge production have become commonplace in feminist writing, especially in reflections on ethnographic methodologies, within communication and media studies such critiques remain scarce and are often dismissed as unsophisticated, not theoretical enough, or too “blinded” by political activism. However, María Lugones and Elizabet Spelman’s (1983) foundational questions about the ethics of knowledge production should function as a powerful reminder when considering our own subject positionalities as researchers:

When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable? Are the concerns we have in being accountable to ‘the profession’ at odds with the concerns we have in being accountable to those about whom we theorize? Do commitments to ‘the profession’, method, getting something published, getting tenure, lead us to talk and act in ways at odds with what we ourselves (let alone others) would regard as ordinary, decent behavior? (579–580).

When CeCe McDonald went to trial in 2012 year, I personally paused for the first time to ponder what material consequences actually derive from increased LGBT visibility. I began to scrutinize my own privileged, cis, white, queer positionality more closely as I initially had not followed what had happened to a poor trans woman of color walking down a street in a neighborhood not very far from my own. While I had no intention of exceptionalizing McDonald’s story, writing about her case has certainly been a personal matter and sharpened my sensibilities toward the blurred lines between researcher and informant as well as scholarship and activism. I came to realize that “the ground” quite literally is “both our particular field site—the communities
within which we study and about which we write—and also the epistemological ground on which we stake our claims” (Weiss 2011, 650).

Academia historically privileges those doing the theorizing over those who are theorized about. As I spent well over two years closely connected to McDonald’s case and the activism surrounding her, I knew that “sourcing” my interlocutors for knowledge and writing about communities that I myself am not a part of would help me to publish journal articles, finish my PhD, and apply for tenure-track jobs. Questions of community accountability, therefore, constitute an important aspect of my scholarly work. The people I engage with in my research are not merely “informants,” but they actively contribute and shape my research in its final form and content. Part of what our work as critical scholars requires, especially in this current political moment, is to follow a feminist commitment to move beyond the ivory tower and engage directly with the communities surrounding the walls of academia. Doing so can help to not only fend off an increasing anti-intellectualism that frequently decries especially the humanities as too impractical and aloof, and instead puts our scholarship into praxis and concrete action.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize, how despite the ability to critically reflect on one’s own subject positionality, the dangers of replicating a voyeuristic and/or patronizing gaze of marginalized communities that one is not a part of persists. The “reflexive turn” in ethnography, that is, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity, situatedness, and partiality of all knowledge production, still functions as a double-edged sword as it strategically deploys this admission to justify its truth claims (Weiss 2011). In other words, all ethnographic work and research is inherently contingent, messy, and incomplete.

CONCLUSION

Despite the much proclaimed “transgender tipping point” of 2014, we are currently witnessing an unprecedented socio-cultural and legal assault on trans people—from trans women of color getting murdered at unprecedented rates, President Trump’s proposed ban on trans military service members, to the surge in discriminatory bathroom bills seeking to regulate trans people’s access to public restrooms (see National Center for Transgender Equality 2018). The increase of transgender visibility in media and national discourse alone, therefore, has not improved the living conditions for a vast majority of trans people. Instead, true care for and value of transgender lives, particularly those of trans women of color, requires an intersectional approach to scholarship and social justice activism that moves beyond visibility politics and ruthlessly deconstructs oppressive systems and our own complicity within them—whether that is the criminalization of immigrants by media institutions, the racial inequalities at the heart of mass incarceration, or capitalism’s dependency on and perpetuation of virulent forms of white supremacy. With the systemic racism, (cis)sexism, and classism at the core of this conservative backlash against various marginalized communities, neither academic nor feminist and queer activist spaces can afford to exclude transgender voices from formulating strategies for resistance. Especially, the voices of trans women should be at the front and center of cross-coalitional movement building not because they are ‘just like’ cis women, but because of their own unique experiences as women (see Fischer 2017). Similarly, it is especially on us within the academy to utilize a critical pedagogy in the classroom and to ensure that critical queer and trans scholarship does not only accrue “diversity” capital for neoliberal universities but actually benefits the communities from which it emanates.

NOTES

1. On the other hand, “cisgender” refers to those whose gender identity matches their biological sex. Biologist Dana Leland Defosse is widely credited as the first person to use the neologism “cisgender” into public circulation in the mid-1990s. Many find the introduction of the term “cisgender” useful because it consciously marks gender identities that usually go unnoticed and are considered normal, i.e., the unstated assumption of non-transgender status contained in the words “man” or “woman.”

2. Not coincidentally, queer (in its contemporary iterations) and transgender both emerged in 1990s activist and academic contexts. Moreover, transgender and queer are both products of Western theorizing that tend to leave unacknowledged and/or override other non-Western and non-binary understandings of gender and sexual desire and practice. As Tom Boelstorff (2006) notes, the tendency to project Euro-American theoretical frameworks of race, gender, and sexuality onto other non-Western contexts presents persistent barriers to theorizing queer/ness, particularly in a global context.

3. Brandon Teena identified as a trans man who was brutally raped and then killed by two of his girlfriend’s acquaintances in Humboldt, Nebraska, in 1993.
4. Dead-naming describes the practice of referring to trans people by their birth names and not chosen names.

5. See for example, Roderick Ferguson (2004), who defines queer of color analysis as an "interrogation[ion] of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique" (149 n.1).


7. As Lugones and Spelman (1983) aptly point out feminist and queer scholars should not only be concerned about the male monopoly over accounts of women’s lives but also the hierarchical privileging of some women's voices over others, particularly as white middle-class women in the United States “have in the main developed ‘feminist theory’” (575).

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