

Loyola Marymount University

**HYPER (IN)VISIBILITY:
TRANS-ING THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY**

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This project responds to an ongoing demand by the LGBTQ+ activist community to center the “on-the-ground” work of queer artists and activists of color in academic theoretical and political work. More specifically, I respond to this call by considering how the work of Black and brown trans-femmes Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza interrogates and contests mainstream visibility-based political praxis alongside canonical works of Black feminist thought, postcolonial theory, queer theory and critical race theory. I compile and analyze three archives of data in taking on this project: academic work on the politics of visibility since the 1970s, public documents - such as online web pages, social media posts, and press releases - reflecting the political thought and praxis of mainstream progressive organizations since 2009, then works of Black and brown trans-femme artists and activists Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza. By examining the relationships between these archives, I articulate in a historically and theoretically rigorous way the challenge posed by trans-femmes of the dominant political paradigm of visibility-as-justice, finding additionally how this challenge stands in relation to the recent history of institutionalized academic work on visibility.

Key Words: Transgender Studies, Feminist Political Theory, Critical Race Theory, Visibility, Representation, Respectability Politics, Cisnormativity, Violence, Normalizing Gaze, Bodies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, discussions of LGBTQ+ rights and representation are more present in today's social, cultural, and political spheres than ever before. This influx of attention toward LGBTQ+ issues must be matched by an influx of critical attention toward the needs of this marginal community and the impacts of mainstream political and cultural treatment of these needs. Since the early days of the Gay Liberation Movement, this kind of critical attention has fought back against the normalizing tendencies of mainstream progressive politics and social attitudes. My project participates in this overarching critical reflectivity of LGBTQ+ collective political and social consciousness by examining the overlaps and gaps between conversations going on in queer studies, trans studies, and political theory in academia with those in activist and artistic work of trans-femme and genderqueer people of color. I take on this bridge-work in order to (re)consider the mainstream progressive political praxis and rhetorics concerning the transgender community.

More narrowly stated, my research will consider the efficacy of mainstream progressive political praxis and rhetorics insofar as they organized around visibility and representation as primary means of achieving justice. In recent years, leftist politics has taken up visibility and representation as primary frameworks for assessing the success of progressive change; increasing levels of representation in media have thereby been touted as signs of progress toward a more just society. Think, for example, of the *Time* magazine cover from May 2014 featuring Laverne Cox and the seductive title, "The Transgender Tipping Point".¹ Though achieving visibility and representation may be an important step toward achieving justice, the sensationalization of visibility as a primary metric for assessing the success of progressive politics effaces the increasing levels of violence that queer folks, particularly non-white and gender nonconforming queer folks, continue to face.²

¹ Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time*, May 28, 2014, <http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/> (accessed December 01, 2017).

² Beth Sherouse, "Addressing Anti-Transgender Violence: Exploring Realities, Challenges and Solutions for Policymakers and Community Advocates" (Human Rights Campaign & Trans People of Color Coalition, 2015); Emily Waters, Nicole Devito, and Austin Puca, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2016" (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2017); Human Rights Campaign, "Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2016," Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2016/> (accessed December 09, 2017); Human Rights Campaign, "Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2017," Human Rights Campaign,

This project is focused on reading critically the mainstream politics of visibility through an interdisciplinary and historical lens, taking root in the artistic and activist work of Black and brown trans-femme folx and examining how their work interrogates and contests mainstream visibility-based political praxis alongside more canonical works of Black feminist thought, postcolonial theory, queer theory and critical race theory. I conduct this project in response to an ongoing lack of critical dialogue between trans-femme activism and art and institutional (academic and otherwise) studies on the efficacy of leftist and anti-violence politics.

II. BACKGROUND

This project derives its analytic frame from both academic and nonacademic sources of critical political thought. My engagement with these bodies of work can be understood more narrowly in three categories: first, with a range of canonical works of 20th and 21st century critical theory regarding dominant conceptions of visibility in the United States. These works are taken from a variety of critical fields, and explore how (marginal) bodies are surveilled and made (hyper)/(in)visible.³ Then, I review works of political theory and Black feminist theory regarding anti-violence politics and coalitional political praxis.⁴

<http://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017/> (accessed December 09, 2017); This pattern of political change - increasing levels of visibility matched by increasing levels of violence and a lack of substantive change in institutionalized oppressive power dynamics - has been identified by Urvashi Vaid, a lesbian political activist, in the case of the early Gay Liberation Movement; Vaid calls this phenomenon “virtual equality”. Vaid’s language has been taken up by Black and brown trans-femme activists in assessing the situation of the transgender person during the era of the transgender tipping point. See, for example: Alok Vaid-Menon, “When Representation Isn’t Enough: Why All of Us Aren’t Proud,” Alok Vaid-Menon, June 4, 2014, <https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2014/6/4/when-representation-isnt-enough-why-all-of-us-arent-proud> (accessed December 09, 2017).

³ Some examples of these work include the following: Leti Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist,” *Immigration and Nationality Law Review* 23 (2002): 561–98; Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–23; Iris Marion Young, “The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity,” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 2011 edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011), 122–55; Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (Verso, 2014).

⁴ See, for example: Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1, 1997): 437–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437>; Angela Y. Davis, *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism*, 1st edition (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table/Women of Color, 1988).

a. *Critical Perspectives on Visibility: Seeing and Knowing the Body in the 21st Century*

Two canonical works of recent critical/political theory that inform my project are Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (2011), each of which influenced significantly, in different ways, how visibility has come to be understood within academic discourse. In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault develops an analysis of modern disciplinary forms in the penal system.⁵ Foucault takes up this historical project as part of a larger project in understanding how changing power relations have affected punishment with the emergence of a modern form of disciplinary power constituted by hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and examination.⁶ Observation ("the gaze") is a key instrument of this power. Thus, Foucault's work marks a dramatic shift in contemporary understandings of the relationship between power, the "gaze"/surveillance, and visibility.⁷ That is, visibility and surveillance came to be understood as structuring factors in the distribution, organization and movements of power in the contemporary era.

Iris Marion Young's work in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, especially in her chapter "The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity, also offers theoretical engagements with visibility that inform fundamentally my project. In "The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity", Young discusses how rationalist culture acts as a logic which simultaneously hierarchizes and denigrates all bodies.⁸ More specifically, Young describes society's "normative gaze" which constructs some kinds of bodies as ugly, disgusting, or degenerate along lines of race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability.⁹ Young argues that society's anxious, aversive rendering of bodies contributes importantly to oppression and violence.¹⁰ This productive theoretical explication of the relationship between a normative social recognition of bodies and violence is useful for thinking critically about the politics of visibility, and the difference between a mere call for "visibility" and a demand for restructuring how *and* who we see.

⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 73-134.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125-55.

Together, these two works set the stage for concomitant explorations I undertake of the scene of visibility in contemporary critical theory.

b. Anti-Violence and Coalitional Politics

Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer POlitics?" and Angela Davis's *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism* are two powerfully influential works in the fields of political theory, critical race theory, and gender studies, offering important critical frameworks and assessments for thinking through intersectional, coalition-based anti-violence politics. These two works help frame this project's consideration of the relationship between visibility and violence (and between the politics of visibility and anti-violence political praxis/action), and are the primary point of reference regarding the praxis and theory of Black and brown trans-femme activists.

In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", Cathy Cohen outlines the history of queer theory and politics, describing its radical roots and the limitations that have arisen in practice.¹¹ Cohen argues that the notion of the queer gets lost in the queer politics of the 1990s and early 2000s, when activist work against heteronormativity relied on single-oppression frameworks which assumed sexuality as their only relevant organizing factor.¹² Cohen also argues that the queer politics of this time inaccurately conflated heteronormativity with heterosexuality by endorsing the queer/hetero binary which describes all queer folks as wholly oppressed and all heterosexual people as wholly oppressor.¹³ After describing these limitations, Cohen argues for the destabilization of identitarian queer politics, advocating instead for the development of a radical coalitional queer politics which focuses on shared marginal relations to dominant power structures, fulfilling the potential of the early work of queer theory and politics.¹⁴

Angela Davis' work in *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism* also poses challenges to the extant political practice of its time, articulating a new schematic for understanding the nature of violence and the manner in which it must be challenged politically.¹⁵

¹¹ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", 438.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 440.

¹⁴ Ibid., 449.

¹⁵ Davis, *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism*, 3.

Central to this project is Davis' claim that sexual violence against women is deeply connected to broader social and political contexts.¹⁶ More specifically, Davis claims that sexual violence is a product of societal structures which foster systemic racist and imperialist violence on national and global scales.¹⁷ Though her argument is largely focused on violence against women in the form of rape and sexual assault, Davis includes many forms of violence in her argument. In doing so, Davis gestures to the broader theory of violence which underpins her argument: that all violence which exploits, dominates, or marginalizes is connected through the systems of power that structure society.¹⁸ Thinking Davis and Cohen together pushes one to consider how addressing systemic violence and building coalition-based politics might generativity pair. This project looks specifically at how the work of Black and brown trans-femmes, and their theory, converges at the intersection of Davis' and Cohen's work, particularly regarding their activist work on the politics of visibility.

c. *Significance*

The above works summarize, in brief, some of the main theoretical developments in academia regarding leftist politics since the late 20th century; my project seeks to examine how the prescriptions, implicit and explicit, of these theoretical works (which were often framed as challenges to extant political understand and praxis) might have been failed, met, exceeded, or challenged by considering contemporary trans-femme political praxis and theory. At some points, the gap that this will address is clear; Young's discussion of the scaling of bodies in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, for instance, fails to address the unique material and discursive violences against the trans body whose logic is still rooted in scientifically grounded bigotry and cissexism.¹⁹ Foucault's work, too, has not been thought rigorously in relation to the contemporary conditions of transgender folks under the mainstream politics of visibility. The coming release of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* in December of 2017, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton, will begin to address this lack, as it will be informed largely by the critical frameworks of Foucault and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁸ Ibid., .

¹⁹ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 127.

thereby meets the critical need for more attention to trans politics in academia.²⁰ This project participates in addressing this same need, focusing on the particular politics and art of Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza in conversation with the aforementioned works of political and critical theory.

III. METHODS

This project will occur in multiple stages, employing qualitative research methodologies to gain a better understanding of the political rhetorics and logics that constitute various stances on the politics of visibility. These stages will correspond roughly to the various archives of data with which my project takes interest: works of critical theory on visibility and violence, documents regarding mainstream politics of visibility, and works of trans-femme artists and activists Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza.

First, a range of critical theoretical works across fields of political theory, feminist theory, queer studies, transgender studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies will be surveyed for academic treatments of the politics of visibility. This survey will involve an in-depth literature review across these fields, and will conclude in a paper summarizing a variety of assessments of the mainstream politics of visibility since the late 20th century and responsive prescriptions. There will be no particular methodology employed for either data collection nor analysis during this stage of research.

The next stage of this project will shift attention to documents regarding the mainstream politics of visibility. Documents will be collected from a variety of online sources, pulling primarily from the official websites, press releases and social media posts of major political organizations (such as, for instance, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Human Rights Campaign). The time-frame for these documents will be from 1970 to present day, but will focus

²⁰ Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017).

on documents and posts released since 2009 (the year of the first Transgender Day of Visibility).

²¹ Past web-pages will be accessed via web archives.

A similar set of data collection methods will be deployed in the next stage, which will focus on the work of trans-femme artists and activists Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza. The sources from which I will pull in examining this work will be a mix of online and physical poetry chapbooks, zines, and informal posts on social media and online blogs, and magazine articles covering trans-femme activist and artistic work. The time frame that will be covered in this portion of my project will be from 2009 to present, surveying the political response of Black and brown trans-femmes to mainstream politics of visibility since, again, the first Transgender Day of Visibility.

The analytic methodology deployed in these stages will be discourse analysis, a qualitative research methodology popularly deployed in social scientific research. In *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*, Kevin Dunn and Iver Neumann describe discourse analysis as “an examination of how and why things appear the way they do, and how certain actions become possible” through the close study of language and its use.²² This methodology is founded on an array of poststructuralist linguistic epistemologies that view language and discourse as sets of signs and relational dialogues that “[do] not explain the world as much as [produce] it.”²³ Thus, by attending to continuities, changes, and ruptures within and across specific discourses, discourse analysis tracks how discourse might dynamically “[construct] the reality of its subjects and [maintain] a certain degree of regularity in a set of social relations.”²⁴ This project employs discourse analysis to track the treatment of visibility in political discourses, considering rigorously the relationship between the political rhetorics of both mainstream progressive politics and of trans-femme activists.

This project will culminate, again, in a 25-30 page literature review on the politics of visibility since 1970 in a variety of critical fields, focusing particularly on shifts in the treatment

²¹ Jessica Carreras, “Transgender Day of Visibility Plans Erupt Locally, Nationwide,” March 27, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130327152446/http://www.pridesource.com/article.html?article=34351> (accessed December 09, 2017).

²² Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.7106945>, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

of visibility over time and around moments of intense politics and social unrest. Additionally, I will produce a 3000 word conference paper to be submitted for presentation at a variety of graduate-level student research conferences (such as, for instance, UCLA's Thinking Gender conference).

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TIMELINE

This project will occur over the course of approximately 10 weeks. The first 5 weeks will be devoted to conducting the aforementioned in-depth literature review; the latter 5 weeks will be spent collecting and analyzing contemporary documents on the mainstream politics of visibility and on the work of Alok Vaid-Menon and Travis Alabanza, then writing a conference paper. This project will require funding for literature costs and a stipend for the time required to conduct this research.

BUDGET

Literature costs... \$300

Research stipend... \$1500

Total... \$1800