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Michael Lovelock

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Call me Caitlyn: making and making over the 'authentic' transgender body in Anglo-American popular culture

Michael Lovelock 

School of Art, Media & American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

ABSTRACT

A conception of transgender identity as an 'authentic' gendered core 'trapped' within a mismatched corporeality, and made tangible through corporeal transformations, has attained unprecedented legibility in contemporary Anglo-American media. Whilst pop-cultural articulations of this discourse have received some scholarly attention, the question of why this 'wrong body' paradigm has solidified as the normative explanation for gender transition within the popular media remains underexplored. This paper argues that this discourse has attained cultural pre-eminence through its convergence with a broader media and commercial zeitgeist, in which corporeal alteration and maintenance are perceived as means of accessing one's 'authentic' self. I analyse the media representations of two transgender celebrities: Caitlyn Jenner and Nadia Almada, alongside the reality TV show *TRANSform Me*, exploring how these women's gender transitions have been discursively aligned with a cultural imperative for all women, cisgender or trans, to display their authentic femininity through bodily work. This demonstrates how established tropes of authenticity-via-bodily transformation, have enabled transgender to become culturally legible through the wrong body trope. Problematically, I argue, this process has worked to demarcate ideals of 'acceptable' transgender subjectivity: self-sufficient, normatively feminine, and eager to embrace the possibilities for happiness and social integration provided by the commercial domain.

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Introduction

In May 2015, the Olympic athlete and reality television star formerly known as Bruce Jenner appeared in a long-awaited TV interview with the television journalist Diane Sawyer. Following months of tabloid speculation, in the interview, Jenner officially confirmed that she identified as a transgender woman. Weeks later, Jenner, now adopting the forename Caitlyn, introduced her 'authentic' female identity to the public in a glamorous cover-shoot and fashion spread in *Vanity Fair* magazine. On the cover, the curves of Jenner's body were accentuated in a white, corset-style garment, she wore delicate, 'natural' make-up, and perfectly coiffed hair, showcasing the results of recent breast implant and facial feminisation surgeries. Positioned over her hips, thus further emphasising Jenner's 'womanly' hourglass silhouette, the headline 'Call me Caitlyn', worked to discursively consolidate Jenner's aesthetic and surgical transformations as visible, tangible and embodied claims to an essential and intuited female ontology, one which she had purportedly 'felt' throughout her life (Bissinger, 2015).

CONTACT Michael Lovelock  m.lovelock@uea.ac.uk

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The public reception to Jenner's re-emergence as Caitlyn, on news websites, blogs and social media, was almost unanimously positive, with praise for her physical beauty occupying a particularly central position in this commentary. Indeed, Jenner's visual adherence to traditional signifiers of female beauty – slender, voluptuous, and impeccably groomed – appeared to be a central strategy through which the magazine piece sought to ratify Jenner's claim to an innate female subjectivity. Yet, whilst the case of Caitlyn Jenner is notable for the vast amount of debate to which she has been subjected, there is little in the media representations of Jenner's transgender identity which is inherently new. In both TV and magazine interviews, Jenner articulated what has become a highly recognisable script of transgender subjectivity within contemporary popular culture: the notion that transgender people¹ possess an authentic gendered core, which is located within an initially mismatched corporeality. This discourse posits transgender subjectivity as characterised by a feeling of being in the 'wrong body', a dysphoria which is made 'right' through corporeal alterations to physically resemble one's 'true' and intuited gender (Barker-Plummer, 2013).

Moreover, Jenner's depiction on the pages of *Vanity Fair* contained the blueprint of a long established framework for representing transgender women within celebrity culture. Jenner is far from the first transfemale celebrity in whom transgender subjectivity has become legible as a process of constructing a normatively feminine appearance in order to release or actualising an internal and innate female self. Paradigmatic in this regard is the British reality television star Nadia Almada, the winner of *Big Brother* UK in 2004. On *Big Brother*, Almada's transgender femininity was constructed as anarchic and imperfect. After her win, however, Almada was the subject of a series of fashion makeovers and dieting regimes, which were publicised in fashion magazines such as *heat* and *OK!*. The purpose of these corporeal transformations, or so these publications claimed, was to realise Almada's lifelong dream of achieving a glamorous and beautiful physicality to mirror her intuited female selfhood.

The structuring discourse of both Almada and Jenner's mediations: that the appropriate application of fashion and beauty can make tangible one's authentic self, has commercial currency far beyond the specific context of transgender narratives. Such discourses of authenticity via bodily transformation span a spectrum of media texts defined by Alice Marwick (2010, p. 22) as 'body culture media': advertising, cosmetic surgery discourses, makeover TV shows, and fashion magazines. The circulation of such discourses through popular culture in America, Britain, and elsewhere, has worked to consolidate a contemporary cultural norm of *cisgender* (non-transgender) female subjectivity, whereby work on the body has become positioned as 'a morally correct solution to personal problems [and the] means to achieving an authentic self' (Marwick, 2010, p. 22).

Jenner therefore stands as a recent flashpoint in an (at least) decade-long history in which the transgender identities of transfemale celebrities have become legible through the optic of this broader norm of female subjectivity. The reality TV show *TRANSform Me*, broadcast on VH1 in 2010, is exemplary of this process. In this series, a trio of transgender women facilitate fashion, beauty and lifestyle makeovers for hapless cisgender women. In so doing, the trans women are constructed as experts in the labour of female beautification due to the complex journeys they have undertaken to transform their mismatched, male-coded birth bodies into 'visions of feminine beauty', which match their 'true' female selves.

Whilst a small body of academic work has sought to outline the discursive contours of the 'wrong body' trope, as it has come to circulate throughout the popular media (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Keegan, 2013; Richardson, 2010), I would argue that the question of *why* and *how* this paradigm has come to stand as the normative epistemology on transgender subjectivity in the contemporary moment, and why it possesses such rhetorical force, remains underexplored within existing scholarship. In this essay, I argue that transgender, as a form of identity, has become culturally legible, and consumable, through the wrong body discourse in part because conception of trans subjectivity *makes sense* in the context of a broader cultural terrain, in which the construction and maintenance of a beautiful feminine appearance has been positioned as the conduit to actualising one's 'authentic', inner female self (Weber, 2009).

Placing the example of Jenner alongside the empirical precursors of Nadia Almada and *TRANSform Me*, I explore how in these texts, transgender women's journeys to actualise their purportedly authentic female selves have been positioned on a continuum with the practises of bodily work which are

perceived to constitute the day-to-day imperative for all women, cisgender or trans. I argue that these examples make literal a discursive process whereby the wrong body trope has become consolidated as the normative understanding of transgender identity in the popular imaginary of the global West due to its compatibility with broader cultural ideals of corporeal work and subjective authenticity.

My analysis here also works to illuminate how the production of trans subjectivities through the discursive optics of authenticity, self-realisation and bodily work delineate certain normative ideals of 'acceptable' transgender identity. This is a highly contradictory cultural moment, characterised by an increasing pop-cultural visibility and civic integration of transgender subjects, alongside a neoliberal, recessionary, austerity-driven dismantling of support networks for transgender people within the public sphere, tied, somewhat contradictorily, to the discursive consolidation of transgender people as (potentially) productive and 'integrated' members of the social body (Irving, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2013). My analysis therefore enables an understanding of how transgender images in popular culture speak to this social context, and how these representations work to construct the self-sufficient, self-managing, hegemonically-feminine transgender person as the 'ideal' trans subject, capable of overcoming dysphoria through individualised and atomised means, thus further marginalising those outside of this regulatory frame.

That said, the cultural visibility of transgender people has long been, and remains, a site of discursive and conceptual struggle. Prosser (1998, p. 17) has argued that the wrong body paradigm has become the dominant script of trans subjectivity because it most adequately speaks to the ways in which transgender people experience their own identities, through very real feelings of, or 'belief in an immanent gender'. In contrast, other writers in feminism, queer theory and transgender studies, such as Stone (1992), Bornstein (1994), Wilchins (1997), Butler (2004) and Stryker (2006), have conceptualised transgender people as occupying a potentially resistant, disruptive or subversive position in relation to essentialised categories of binary gender. Bornstein (1994), for example, has argued that, as a transgender woman, she embodies a 'third space' outside the dimorphism of male and female. Bornstein claims that trans people thus make legible alternative modalities of gender, defined by plurality, fluidity and unfixity, and therefore potentially exposing binary gender as an arbitrary, discursive construct.

The media representations which I interrogate here are therefore particularly visible nodes within a matrix of complex, competing and contradictory discourses through which transgender has become legible as a deeply unstable 'social, cultural and psychological zone' (Garber, 1992, p. 106). Indeed, as Barker-Plummer (2013) has noted, the cultural normativity of the wrong body trope belies the polyvalence of gendered expression found in contemporary queer politics and subcultures. My analysis here thus seeks to probe how and why it is almost exclusively through the narrow parameters of the wrong body paradigm that transgender identity has been made legible within media products marketed towards cisgender-identified consumers. Relatedly, it is important to emphasise that I focus specifically upon media constructions of transgender *women* (those who were assigned male at birth, but who identify as female). This is because transmale identities have remained largely unrepresented in popular culture, in comparison to the relatively wide visibility of transgender females. This is partly because representations of transmen are not readily commodifiable through the thematic tropes of body culture media which, as I argue throughout this essay, have been instrumental in the consolidation of the wrong body discourse as the normative understanding of trans subjectivity in the twenty-first century global West.

Making transgender legible in popular culture

Caitlyn Jenner's highly public transition came at a cultural moment in which the visibility of transgender people (or transgender women, at least) within the mainstream media had been steadily increasing for over ten years. During this period, not only had representations of transwomen augmented in number, but the tone of this mediation had also dramatically shifted. Since the mid-2000s, the Anglo-American media's treatment of transgender women has largely transformed from a rhetoric of deviance, perversion and pathology (see Richardson, 2010), to one of understanding, and even celebration. Gender

transition is now represented as a means of realising one's authenticity; a conduit to affective harmony and mental stability (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Ekins & King, 2006; Keegan, 2013).

The wrong body discourse of transgender selfhood has been central to this, seemingly far more positive, rhetorical spectrum. As I outlined briefly above, in this model, the essential 'truth' of gender is located not in or on the body, but within the more intangible regions of the psyche or the soul. The transgender person *feels* as though they are a woman or a man, and has felt this way throughout their life. Yet, their bodily materiality (genitals, chromosomal makeup, and so on) signify the opposite gender. Any processes undertaken by the trans individual to alter their physical body, from clothing and hair-styling to hormonal and/or surgical interventions, are therefore configured not as *changing* anything about the self in any fundamental way, but as bringing their mismatched corporeality into alignment with an already-present, eternal and essential self (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Prosser, 1998).

Nonetheless, this altered framework for understanding trans subjectivity has enabled the *continuation* of a historical fixation in media representations with the ways in which transgender women construct their feminine appearances. Writing about late-twentieth century media texts, Serano (2007, pp. 36–41) has noted that transgender women were almost invariably depicted in the act of getting dressed in feminine garb, or applying makeup and wigs. For Serano, this worked to disavow the authenticity of the trans woman's claim to an essential female subjectivity, constructing their femininities as 'an artificial mask or a costume', whereby their maleness 'becomes the real identity'. As I explore below, the celebrity personae of Caitlyn Jenner and Nadia Almada, and the texts of *TRANSform Me* are in some ways congruent with this representational history, pouring over the means by which transfemininity is aesthetically and corporeally produced. Where these examples *differ* from those discussed by Serano, however, is in their binding of these practises to discourses of authenticity and ontological truth.

It is important to note that the wrong body discourse is also the received understanding of transgender identity in medical and legal discourses. Various scholars have critiqued how medical recognition as transgender, and thus access to hormones and surgery, is contingent upon the recapitulation of established scripts of being 'trapped in the wrong body' (Butler, 2004; McQueen, 2015; Prosser, 1998). In a similar manner to Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover, in the doctor's office this entrapment of an essential female self must often be evidenced through the display of highly normative gender attributes: 'Boys playing with Barbie, wrapping their heads in cloths to simulate long hair', as Prosser (1998, p. 104) has argued.

In striking consonance with this argument, Jenner, Almada and the experts of *TRANSform Me* have each staked their claims to authentic femaleness in lifelong fixations with the paraphernalia of feminine beatification. In a 2004 interview, Almada discussed experimenting with nail polish as a five-year-old boy (Cave, 2004a), whilst over a decade later, in the article accompanying her *Vanity Fair* photoshoot, Jenner told how, 'when Bruce was around 10, he would sneak into his mother's closet [...] put on a dress and maybe wrap a scarf around his head' (Bissinger, 2015, p. 62). To an extent, the consolidation of the wrong body trope as the normative discourse on transgender identity in the media marks a travelling of medical conceptions of transgender into popular culture. These transgender celebrities' access to the hormonal and surgical means of female embodiment will likely have been enabled by their articulation of this discourse in medical contexts.

I would argue, however, that the visibility of wrong body narratives within popular culture cannot be conceptualised *only*, or indeed primarily, as mediated echoes of medicalised autobiographies. Far from simply a platform for the representation of discourses and debates generated in other domains, media texts are dynamic sites at which cultural identities are produced through the internal logics and conventions of these particular media forms. Within body culture media, gender transition has become legible as a process of working upon the body to release the authentic self because this conceptualisation is highly reconcilable with an established commercial repertoire in which the transformation of the physical body is construed as a means of releasing or affirming one's essential subjectivity.

Indeed, the striking resonances between the wrong body paradigm and broader discourses of female self-actualisation have been noted by scholars such as Heyes (2003) and Weber (2009) in their work on post-feminist makeover culture. Heyes, for example, has pointed towards the similarities between the wrong body discourse and the rhetoric used in advertisements for beauty products, where potential

consumers are encouraged 'to think of themselves as young people trapped in an older person's body – an uncanny echo of transsexual discourse'. Heyes uses this example to emphasise how both (cisgender) female *and* transgender identities are shaped by discourses of inside/outside in relation to the body and self. However, her description of this discursive convergence as an 'uncanny echo' implies only a strangely tangential, perhaps even coincidental, relationship between these discourses, which she does not subject to further interrogation.

Building upon Heyes' observation, I contend that the ubiquity of self-realisation-via-bodily-alteration rhetoric within the commercial media has in fact *enabled* the consolidation of the wrong body trope as the dominant understanding of transgender subjectivity in the twenty-first century global West. Hennessey (2000, p. 146) has argued that incarnations of transgender identity found within mainstream cultural texts are sculpted by 'historical conditions of possibility by which the visible comes to be see-able', which in turn produce certain recognisable forms of subjectivity. Transgender identities attain coherency in representational form through the extent to which groups of established and recognisable, historically and culturally specific images, discourses and epistemologies feed into one another within the text, in order to produce 'transgender' as a legible subject position that *makes sense* within a particular social and historical context.

Adopting this conceptual framework, the emergence of the wrong body discourse as a common-sense explanation for gender transition, can be explained, at least in part, by the vast cultural recognisability and commercial appeal of media narratives in which, often costly, lengthy and painful, transformations to the external body, through cosmetic surgery, dieting/exercise and fashion/beauty makeovers, are valorised as means of 'working on the self that enable greater authenticity' (Heyes, 2007). As I explore below, the narratives of transfemale celebrities have slotted almost seamlessly into this representational framework, a framework which has itself been instrumental in the 'making' of transgender subjectivity as it has come to be popularly understood.

Constructing femininity, releasing authenticity

The impetus to 'be yourself', to 'know' or 'discover' *who you are*, is a central imperative for the contemporary subject. Central to this discourse is the concept of authenticity: the notion that each individual possesses a psychological 'inner life', a unique and essential character, which forms the core of her very being. Sociologists have claimed that in a cultural climate in which human life has become increasingly disembedded from traditional, collective anchors of identity (religion, social class, familial lineage), locating and actualising this 'authentic' self has become construed as the route to happiness, self-acceptance and ontological security (Rose, 1998).

Dominant understandings of personhood thus posit the self as a reflexive project, in which both the responsibility and the potential for success (howsoever defined) and emotional contentment is located within individual narratives of self-discovery and self-actualisation. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, the corporeal body occupies a place of paramount importance within such existential narratives (Shilling, 2003), and body culture media is situated squarely within the zeitgeist of ontological uncertainty. Vast swathes of the media and commercial industries are predicated upon the reassuring promise that the authentic self can be accessed and released via the effective application of appropriate, body-oriented consumption practises. In an intensely visual consumer culture, the external body has become one of the primary signifiers through which we are encouraged to 'read' the affective and psychological well-being (or lack thereof) of others and ourselves. Transforming or improving the look of the body is construed as means of improving the more intangible self encased within this corporeal materiality (Franco, 2008).

This discursive collapsing of body and self in the imperative of self-improvement is, of course, deeply gendered, speaking primarily to a female consumer. Despite the increasing consolidation of male consumers as a target demographic for fashion and grooming products since the late 1990s, it has traditionally been, and remains, women who are disproportionately called upon to demonstrate and assess their happiness, authenticity and self-worth through the extent to which their physical appearances

match up to hegemonic ideals of physical beauty. This asymmetry has been the subject of much feminist critique. Skeggs (2001, p. 297), for example, has explored how commercial culture's address towards female consumers has historically mobilised an implicit distinction between being a *woman* and being *feminine*. Whilst, in this consumer discourse, woman is considered an essential and biological category, femininity is a 'process' through which women 'become specific sorts of women', measured largely upon how well (or how poorly) they are able to utilise the tools of corporeal beautification provided by the commercial industries. Skeggs argues that femininity was therefore largely inaccessible to women who lacked the economic means to engage in the consumer practises through which femininity was forged. Since at least the late nineteenth century, the social and cultural denigration of women from marginalised groups, such as working class women and women of colour, has centred upon their perceived failure to appropriately embody middle-class norms of feminine beauty.

The valorisation within popular commentary of Caitlyn Jenner's utilisation of her physical beauty as a means of showcasing her authentic female self, emphasises how far transgender women have also been pulled into these historical scripts of 'good' and 'bad' femininity. Jenner's narrative is the product of a cultural moment in which the recognition and legitimacy purportedly now afforded to transgender identities in Anglo-American societies, a legitimacy seemingly emblematised by the public celebration of Jenner herself, is conferred within very narrow parameters of corporeal normativity. Trans women such as Jenner are accepted *as women* so long as they adhere to the visual codes of female attractiveness.

Yet, the increasing circulation of trans women within the commercial media, and the concomitant recognisability of the wrong body discourse, cannot be explained solely through recourse to the ever-more advanced surgical procedures which some, economically privileged trans women can access to 'feminise' their corporealities. Indeed, it is less the beauty of trans women such as Caitlyn Jenner and, as I explore below, Nadia Almada and the cast of *TRANSform Me*, which legitimises their mobilisation of the wrong body script ('accept me as the women I always was inside'), but the ways in which their mediations have fore-grounded the processes in which they engage to construct and maintain their feminine appearances. The visibility of these transgender celebrities within the representational spaces of body culture media, has been largely enabled by the extent to which intricate and detailed explorations of the work of sculpting the transfemale body have slotted almost seamlessly with a media marketplace which has become increasingly fixated with what McRobbie (2009) has called the 'fictive status of femininity'.

A permutation of the woman/feminine divide identified by Skeggs, here, essential femaleness is located primarily *inside* the subject, and it is openly acknowledged that the majority of the visual signifiers of femininity are the result of artificial production and consumption. This culture emphasises the that the attainment of a feminine appearance takes work: painful, pleasurable and rewarding, but ultimately mandatory in order to become socially legible as a female subject (ibid). Kadir and Tidy (2013, p. 182) have noted how, in makeover television, 'a masculine corporeal and visual self is presented as being the inevitable yet unnatural state to which [cisgender] women will return' if they do not adhere to regimes of bodily maintenance. In this context, the impetus to self-realisation which characterises contemporary models of subjectivity attains a distinctly gendered inflection. It becomes a central imperative for female subjects to make their authentic and internal femininity manifest through the appropriate mobilisation of dieting, exercise, fashion and beauty. Offering something of a commercial spin upon De Beauvoir's (1997/1949) famous contention that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', within body culture media, adopting a female subject position is a deeply embodied process, where one's femininity must be perpetually ratified through the appropriate mobilisation of consumer technologies.

Transgender women in many ways stand as the ultimate exemplars of this model of female subjectivity. As their femaleness has no biological basis, it must be produced and reproduced in its entirety, through hormonal and surgical interventions and the styling of fashion, makeup and hair. Indeed, the *Vanity Fair* photo-shoot of Caitlyn Jenner adopted a highly self-referential aesthetic, emphasising both the constructed nature of Jenner's feminine appearance, as well as the process of capturing her female identity as an image to be circulated. The images were set in various 'behind-the-scenes' locations:

Jenner's personal, private villa, her dressing room and bathroom, where the materials for constructing her feminine corporeality: dresses, wigs, make-up, hair curlers, hair products, and perfumes, littered the shots. These images evoked a long history of celebrity and star photography in which, since the mid-twentieth century, photo-shoots published in fashion, gossip and fan magazines have purported to offer 'behind the scenes' glimpses of the fashion and beauty regimes of celebrities and stars, purporting to capture the subject's authentic self residing the artificial veneer of their public persona (Dyer, 1998). In the context of a *transgender* celebrity such as Caitlyn Jenner, this historical trope does cultural work in shaping and circulating particular epistemologies of trans subjectivity. The exposure of the tools of female bodily work, somewhat paradoxically, becomes the very means through which the authentic female self of the transgender star becomes manifest. Jenner's female identity is rendered authentic *because* it is artificially produced.

In one image occupying a double page spread, Jenner poses before a backdrop of large mirrors, rendering her face visible from three different angles. Each facial angle appears completely free from shadow, offering a seemingly unobstructed view of her striking cheekbones, delicate jaw line and small, feminine nose, all recently 'feminised' through surgical reconstruction. To the side of the three depictions of Jenner, the photographer, Annie Leibowitz, camera in hand, and the tripod spotlights illuminating Jenner's face are seen reflected in the mirrors. The triple replication of Jenner's visage works to signify a sense of completeness and wholeness of self. At the same time, the photograph's centralisation of the process of constructing the photographic image, emphasises the almost contradictory role of *construction* – both of Jenner's corporeality as well as her celebrity image – in enabling this completeness; in bringing forth and making tangible her purportedly authentic and essential female self. Within the images, a visual and discursive repertoire of authenticity via bodily transformation, well established in the representational spaces of body culture media such as *Vanity Fair*, is the frame through which Jenner's gender transition becomes legible. The constructedness of the transgender body works to ratify the apparent authenticity of the transgender self.

As I stated above, these representations of Jenner are highly resonant of previous media constructions of transgender female celebrities, whose identities have similarly been made legible and consumable for cisgendered publics through the lens of established ideals around the power of bodily transformation to affect self-actualisation. In the UK, for example, from 2004 to 2010, Nadia Almada was arguably the most widely-circulated embodiment of transgender identity in the popular media. During her time on *Big Brother*, whilst the public were aware of Almada's transgender identity, she chose not to reveal this to the rest of the show's participants. Cut off from the outside world within the sealed studio complex, to the other participants she was perceived to be a cisgender woman. That said, much of Almada's initial mediation centralised the comedy value pertaining to the fraught and anarchic state of her femininity, as well as constructing her imperfect knowledge of the techniques of embodying 'desirable' femininity as a potentially dramatic source of exposure of her trans identity. She was described by a fellow *Big Brother* participant as resembling the heavyweight boxer 'Mike Tyson with a boob job', and her 'muscular' masculine physique sat in jarring dissonance to her large, voluptuous, surgically-constructed breasts, which were frequently displayed, spilling out of low-cut tops as she stomped around in pairs of delicate high heels. Almada thus embodied a messy collision of masculine and feminine signifiers, a failing, misappropriation of the normative praxes of femininity through an overt sexuality and excessive corporeality, rendered grotesque through the juxtaposition of the synthetic-ness of her breasts and the bodily-ness of her thick arms and corpulent thighs.

Almada's initial media construction thus centralised her irreconcilability with the normative categories of man and woman, an implacability which was mobilised as a source of both comedy and dramatic tension. As I noted above, scholars in queer and transgender studies have argued that the visibility of bodies which are resistant to binary gendered categorisation bare a disruptive, and possibly radical, potential. These binary-confusing bodies, it has been claimed, can unsettle some of the most basic understandings of what constitutes a human life. 'Transgender lives', Butler (2004, p. 28) has asserted, 'have a potential and actual impact on political life at its most fundamental level, that is, who counts as a human and what norms govern the appearance of 'real' humanness'. If normative epistemologies

demarcate 'male' and 'female' as the only recognisable gendered subject positions from which human life is possible, then transgender subjectivity 'places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship' to this binary (Stryker, 2006, p. 248). In this framework, the visibility of the not male, yet not quite female transgender figure, such as Nadia Almada, can work to denaturalise these discursive norms, by exposing them as insufficient to make sense of human life in its lived complexity and actuality, potentially opening up new ways of conceiving personhood and identity.

However, I would argue that the ascent of wrong body discourse as the normative explanation for transgender embodiment and subjectivity throughout the twenty-first century, has worked to mitigate the kind of resistant, queer potential of the transgender figure conceptualised by scholars such as those I have cited above. The wrong body discourse is deeply invested in the concept of an ontological and essential gendered core, yet one which is located *within* rather than *on* the body. As I have argued, the wrong body paradigm attains its rhetorical force through the ways in which it speaks to a broader consumer culture in which the external bodies of all women must be worked upon in order to actualise or release an authentic, internal female self. In this context, transgender, as a subject position, becomes legible within the wrong body framework only as a bridge, or part-way stage which will lead to the transgender person's eventual inhabitation in both body and soul, of a stable and traditional binary gendered subject position to which they felt they belonged all along.

This process is evident in the narrative of Nadia Almada where, in something of a transgender inflection of the Pygmalion paradigm, Almada's physical appearance become the site of an intervention by various celebrity gossip magazines, such as *heat* and *OK!*. These publications set out to 'train' her in the techniques of 'appropriate' feminine self-presentation, disciplining Almada's unruly transgender body through a series of highly publicised fashion makeovers, photo-shoots, diets and exercise regimes. These articles centralised Almada's cultivation of a 'classy', 'stylish' and 'natural' look: *heat* featured a classic Hollywood style photo-shoot in which Almada was styled reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe in the 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' sequence from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Cave, 2004a); *OK!* 'treated' her to a shopping trip in the designer fashion boutiques of Milan (Gould, 2004), and later photographed her in extravagant designer gowns by Bellville Sassoon and Jenny Packham in London department store Harrods (Anon, 2004b).

For Stryker (2006, p. 247), writing in the early 1990s, even this would render Almada a threatening, disruptive and subversive figure. Stryker states that transgender women 'often cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment', yet 'this citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy'. This declaration of 'unnaturalness', Stryker claims, can work to expose the 'seams and sutures' which hold together even cisgendered embodiment; that all identity is 'unnaturally' forged through the artificiality of discourse. Yet, over twenty years after Stryker's article was first published, the inherent instability of *all* women's claims to femininity has come to circulate prolifically as a key commercial force in the fashion and beauty industries (McRobbie, 2009), and the seemingly resistant identities of transgender women have been pulled firmly into these broader scripts.

The narratives of the celebrities I analyse here emblematised how far transgender identity has become cognisable through such established ideals around the ultimate instability of femininity. Now acknowledged within the commercial domain as primary forged through consumption, femininity can never be fully, totally or completely embodied. McRobbie suggests that it is this dilemma upon which the commercial logic of the fashion and beauty industries are structured, intervening to offer new and ever-more advanced methods of self-perfectability in the never-realised quest to ameliorate what she describes as 'the fraught state of non-identity which we all inhabit' (2009, p. 62). McRobbie describes how consumer culture 'produces a specific kind of female subject in the realm of its address', a subject in deficit or negation, striving to embody an ideal of beauty, slenderness and style which is always, somehow, found lacking. The transfemale celebrity stands in many ways as the figure par excellence of this culture, as the entirety of her embodied femaleness is produced through make-up, clothing, hormonal supplements, and surgical interventions, which must be constantly and perpetually maintained. As the representations of Nadia Almada and Caitlyn Jenner exemplify, within the popular imaginary,

transgender women have come to literalise the ultimate impossibility of the quest for female bodily perfection, and I would argue that this is one of the reasons why their narratives have attained such cultural purchase. Within contemporary popular culture, transwomen become legible as negated subjects, constantly working to *become* women: a characterisation which speaks to, and is easily reconcilable with, the subject positions produced by fashion and beauty culture.

Affective transformations and neoliberal subjectivities

Within cultural texts, transgender women have been frequently attributed an intimate, sage-like knowledge of the work of 'doing' femininity. This knowledge is represented to have been garnered through these women's own long, and often painful, journeys to embody their authentic female identities, and they are thus constructed as figures of identification and emulation for non-transgender consumers. For example, in the summer of 2004, Nadia Almada was employed to endorse the widely publicised *You Are What You Eat* diet programme by the British celebrity dietician Dr. Gillian McKeith. In a series of promotional articles published in *heat* magazine, it was suggested that Nadia's determination to become a woman, in a far more profound biographical arc of bodily transformation, had equipped her with the determination to succeed in her diet and fitness regimes (Anon, 2004a; Cave, 2004b). Furthermore, in 2005 she was discussed by *heat* as the ultimate exemplar of the power of cosmetic surgery to increase women's confidence and happiness:

If anyone can truly champion the positive effects that plastic surgery can have on a person's life, it's Nadia Almada. In the past she's talked candidly about the experience of going under the surgeon's knife. And seeing how much she loves her curves and revels in the attention they get her, you can't help thinking, 'Good on her!' (Ward, 2005, p. 25).

Whilst it is Nadia's 'curves' which are foregrounded in this article, her surgically constructed genitals are implicitly evoked in the reference to her 'candid' discussions of going under the knife. These texts assert an inherent affinity between Nadia and the normatively gendered, female consumer, and her gender transition is aligned with the practices of bodily modification which constitute the day-to-day imperative for all women in contemporary consumer culture. The transgender woman is constructed as both the ultimate subject of bodily makeovers in her own right, and the possessor of valuable knowledge of this process, which can be commodified and imparted to cisgender women.

Moving forward to 2010, the reality television programme *TRANSform Me* was predicated entirely upon this dialectic. Like the majority of media products based on corporeal makeovers, *TRANSform Me* set out to transform the appearances of cisgender women who were perceived to be failing in the cultural mandate to live an authentic life, through their related failure to cite the norms of legible femininity (Weber, 2009). In the show, these transformations were facilitated by a trio of transgender 'experts' – Jamie Clayton, Nina Poon and Laverne Cox – who offered advice on fashion and cosmetics, as well as more intangible, therapeutic coaching on bringing forth one's true self. The programme positioned Laverne, Jamie and Nina's transgender identities as the means through which they could lay claim to their expert knowledge of female bodily work, in the ultimate service of realising one's authentic self. As Laverne tells one of the makeover subjects, 'We're all transgender women, and because of that journey that we have gone on to bring out the woman that we've always felt that we were inside, we are uniquely qualified to help you do the same thing'. In this way, *TRANSform Me* exemplifies, in highly literal fashion, how far the wrong body paradigm of trans subjectivity is in part the product of a broader discursive context, in which the achievement of authenticity is contingent upon adherence to regimes of bodily maintenance.

The show's opening sequence began with a voice-over from Laverne, introducing the three makeover gurus. As each name was spoken, an image of said expert flashed upon the screen. Laverne's voiceover continued, asking rhetorically, 'Pretty sexy, huh? Though we haven't always been these gorgeous visions of feminine beauty'. As she spoke this line, the images of Nina, Jamie and herself swept downwards, leaving the screen, replaced by sepia-tinted photographs of three young boys: the trans women as children. The transgender identities of the three experts are introduced here through the clichéd 'before

and after' trope of makeover media, whereby the results of a corporeal transformation are emphasised through visual comparison to the makeover subject's, apparently deficient or problematic, former state of embodiment. The temporal movement evoked here, not only towards a physical ideal, but *across gender towards a physical ideal*, clearly positions gender transition within a recognisable framework of normative, female bodily transformation and maintenance. Much like in the representations of Nadia Almada, within the texts of *TRANSform Me*, gender transition is made legible as a kind of grand makeover narrative.

These representations do not, however, wholly conflate trans and cisgender femininities. They do suggest that the femininities of transgender women are inherently more unstable, and subject to increased contestation, than their cisgendered counterparts'. As the cultural codification of gender extends to scientific truth claims around intangible, organic matter such as chromosomes and gonads, transgender women can never fully or completely embody what is culturally demarcated as the biological materiality of femaleness. Transgender identity therefore always carries with it the possibility of being de-legitimated, or delineated as inauthentic (Booth, 2011; Ekins & King, 2006).

In *TRANSform Me*, the contested nature of transgender subjectivity is acknowledged in a moment of, always fleeting, narrative tension. The opening scenes of each episode emphasise that the cisgender makeover subject is unaware that Laverne, Nina and Jamie are transgender. The success of the makeover is thus established as contingent upon the cisgender women accepting the trans experts *as women*. In 'Episode Four: Marlece', as Laverne tells Marlece (the makeover subject) 'We're all transgender women', the hitherto lively and galvanising soundtrack is punctuated by a heavy 'zapping' sound, warping into a quieter monotone note of apprehension and unease. This jolting sonic movement is paralleled by the sequence's visual composition: cutting from a mid-shot of Laverne, Nina and Jamie (where they are visible from the waist upwards) to an extreme close-up of Marlece's face. The contrasting spatial length of these juxtaposed shots produces a jarring sensation, as Marlece looks to the floor and slowly nods her head in an ambiguous gesture connoting discomfort, or even shock, at Laverne's revelation.

This possible narrative disruption gestures to the difficulties which transgender people can often face in attaining social recognition of their intuited identities. Booth (2011, p. 200) has argued that transgender people must constantly 'fight [...] for consonance between personal identification and social interpellation', against legal and medical structures, categories and bureaucracies, and the transphobic views of other members of society, which often seek to ground trans people's 'real' identities in their birth-assigned genders.

The spectral possibility that Marlece may reject the experts' claims to femininity is, however, quickly dispelled. Marlece states that whilst she has 'never hung out with a transgender person before', she admires the 'fabulous' appearances of the transgender experts, and is excited for the makeover to commence. In its drive to construct transgender identity which is marketable for cisgender-assumed consumers, this show, and indeed all the examples I discuss in this essay, are invested in the apparent *affinities* between transgender and cisgender women, and the continuities in the ways in which they experience and perform their femininities. This sameness is coded through a shared interpellation to make manifest one's authentic femininity through bodily work. In *TRANSform Me*, the transgender biographies of the three experts are positioned as longer, more painful, and more costly versions of the journeys to authentic self-realisation, via bodily transformation, in which they guide the show's cisgender subjects.

At the same time, in the kernel of the programme's emphasis upon the sameness of transgender and cisgender women's investments in normative femininity, lies their *differential* exposure to the possibility of transphobic de-legitimation. In 'Episode 8: Phaea', when teaching cisgender Phaea how to walk in high heels, Nina comments that Phaea is walking 'like a dude'. She states, 'What dude looks sexy in heels? Except ...'; and gestures towards herself, continuing, 'Well, I wouldn't call myself a dude, but ...'. Nina's statement evokes the complex division between femaleness and femininity which is at the heart of body culture media. Whilst she asserts that she is more *feminine* than Phaea, as a transgender woman, Nina's *femaleness* can be culturally contested in a way that Phaea's cannot. Unsaid, yet implied, in this line is that some people *would* consider Nina a 'dude'. Transfemale identity becomes implicitly

characterised by a greater urgency to visually adhere to cultural ideals of femininity as a means of 'fighting' (to borrow Booth's (2011, p. 200) term) the potential social and cultural location of their 'real' selves in their former, male identities.

TRANSform Me's insistence upon transgender women's *heightened* investment in feminine consumption as a means of staking claim to a contested identity is incorporated into the show's construction of trans women as experts in the art of fashion, beauty and lifestyle makeovers. It is the very precariousness of transgender subjectivity which enables this expert status. For the show's trans experts, negotiating their own marginalisation becomes a form commercial labour, which helps cisgender women connect with and make tangible their own 'authentic' femininities. Irving (2008) has critiqued the emergence within popular representations of the 'good' trans subject, who remains economically productive in spite of, or indeed *because of*, their affectively turbulent gender transition journey. Nadia Almada and the experts of *TRANSform Me* are exemplary of this archetype. They have each mobilised their transgender biographies towards self-branding as tutors in the arts of releasing authenticity through corporeal modification, and accrued capital in the commercial domain for doing so.

In this way, the production of the wrong body paradigm through the tropes of body culture media has circulated an 'ideal' or socially 'useful' transgender subject. Central to this construction is the assertion that the transformations undertaken by these transgender women are as much *affective* as they are corporeal. The narratives of Nadia Almada, *TRANSform Me*, and Caitlyn Jenner each envisage a transgender subject who has overcome feelings of dysphoria and ontological fracture, and who has used the technologies of self-improvement provided by the commercial industries to embody their authentic self. In the article accompanying her *Vanity Fair* photoshoot, Jenner likened the affective contours of her public emergence as Caitlyn to the euphoria she felt in winning a gold medal at the Olympic Games in 1976 in her former life as Bruce. The article states:

After the last picture was taken, Jenner thanked all those who were there. She had been primped and pampered to look gorgeous, and the reaction had been equally gratifying. The gold medal for winning the decathlon [...] was on the table in front of her. 'That was a good day', she said as she touched the medal. Then her eyes rimmed red and her voice grew soft. 'But the last couple of days were better'. (Bissinger, 2015, p. 106)

This passage clearly locates the potential for authenticity in Jenner's 'primped and pampered', 'gorgeous' physical appearance, a beauty emphasised within the accompanying photoshoot as the result of complex and intricate construction (as I discussed above). In positioning the maintenance of a normatively feminine physicality as the route to authenticity for the trans subject, the wrong body paradigm, as refracted through the lens of body culture media, positions the imperative for mental and emotional security firmly upon transgender people themselves. This discourse of self-managing, self-sufficient transgender identity belies the ways in which inherently social norms of gender and the self contribute to the continuing marginalisation of transgender people in social and political life. Whilst the first and second decades of the twenty-first century have seen a relative burgeoning of public awareness of transgender lives, throughout this period, transgender people have continued to suffer from elevated levels of depression and other mental health problems (Sharek, 2015), unemployment (Irving, 2008), homelessness (Yu, 2010) suicide attempts (Clements-Noella, Marx, & Katz, 2006), and physical attacks (Doan, 2007). In a conjecture of economic recession and austerity, in which welfare provisions, health services and support systems for transgender people provided by public sector are increasingly under threat, this narrative of trans subjectivity appears to offer a highly individualised 'solution' to these problems. In this context, the circulation of transgender celebrities such as those I have interrogated here, works to delineate an 'ideal' trans subject, one who is eager to embrace the solutions to overcoming feelings of dysphoria and depression through making use of the technologies of self-improvement offered by the by the commercial domain.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to explore one of the possible reasons why the wrong body paradigm: a conception of transgender subjectivity as an authentic gendered core, trapped within an initially

mismatched corporeality, has taken hold as the normative discourse on transgender identity within the popular media. I have argued that the wrong body trope has attained such prolific cultural recognisability, in part, through its resonances with broader ideals of self-realisation through bodily alteration which characterise large portions of the contemporary media and commercial landscapes. The media representations I have analysed here literalise how far the wrong body discourse has been sculpted and produced by this broader context, in which the power of corporeal transformation to bring forth one's authentic self has come to possess vast cultural currency.

In constructing the maintenance of a suitably feminine appearance as the route to authenticity, happiness and ontological security, the wrong body discourse, as it is produced through the scripts of body culture media, has worked to mitigate the potential for trans visibility within the popular domain to disrupt common-sense understandings of personhood as contingent upon identification as discreetly male or female. The consolidation of the wrong body tropes emphasises the elasticity of normative epistemologies of sex and gender, re-inscribing a man/woman binary logic as the sole means of making sense of gender and the self, whilst simultaneously enabling a limited spectrum of, seemingly progressive, transgender visibility. In this framework, transgender people become legible as women-in-the-making, negated subjects situated within never-fully-realised journeys to occupy a normative pole of gender, a characterisation which resonates profoundly with the subject positions offered to all women in much of the media and commercial domains.

Note

1. As note on terminology, whilst 'transgender' is often used to refer to diverse spectra of gender non-conforming persons, here I am using the term to refer to a very specific conception transitional gendered subjectivity, as articulated via the wrong body discourse.

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Notes on contributor

Michael Lovelock is a PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia. His doctoral thesis interrogates representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identity in British reality television. His research has been published in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

ORCID

Michael Lovelock  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4192-6793>

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