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Medical Curiosity and Tabloid Freakery: Contrasting Media Representations of Trans Children and Adults

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I’d like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Anita. I wish you could have been here to read this. I hope I have made you proud.
Abstract:

In 2014, the US edition of *TIME* magazine ran a cover story featuring Laverne Cox entitled ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’ that declared a new frontier for civil rights in North America. The article both refers to and demonstrates an increased attention towards trans people in mainstream media. Cox’s rise to fame, and the discussions emerging out of her media presence, is just one example of this increased attention. In order to explore this emergence, my thesis examines the differential treatment of trans children and adults in television and print media. It uses textual and visual analysis to examine news broadcasts, talk shows, television documentaries, magazines, and newspaper articles. My conceptual framework draws from trans and queer theory, feminist theory, critical disability scholarship, and sociological analyses of childhood.

This thesis demonstrates that increased visibility does not necessarily equate to trans-positive or constructive forms of representation. This is pertinent to both sensationalised and outrightly transphobic representations of adults, and to what at first glance appear as more positive or sensitive portrayals of children. Through a comparative analysis of the media’s treatment of trans children and adults, the complex nature of such representations becomes clear.
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Introduction

In 2014, TIME magazine in The United States (US) ran a cover story, featuring trans woman of colour Laverne Cox, entitled ‘The Transgender Tipping Point: America’s New Civil Rights Frontier’ (Steinmetz, 2014). For many advocates and journalists 2015 and the years leading up to it represent a ‘tipping point’ in the social perceptions of trans identities. While trans people have always been at the front line of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) social and human right movements, the progress for trans people (both in and outside of representation) has substantially lagged behind that of lesbians and gay men. The last few years have signalled an increased investment in trans people’s rights, and as a result, the ways in which trans people are represented. To explore this increase, my thesis compares the representations of trans children and trans adults in mainstream media. A thesis on such representation at this time is not only relevant but important, as the media forms in which trans people are being represented are expanding.

My analysis demonstrates that, while there has been an increase in the representations of trans people, this visibility does not necessarily mean than trans people are being represented in an empowering or constructive light. This is relevant to both sensationalised and transphobic representations of adults, and to those which appear as

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1 The term ‘transgender’ is often used to describe a range of gender identifications which do not conform to or exceed binaristic understandings of sex and gender (Teich, 2012, p. 2). While the term ‘transsexual’ has lost some ground in recent times to the term transgender, there continue to be many people who identify as transsexual. Transsexual and transgender are not necessarily interchangeable terms, the former with historical links to identity politics and the ‘wrong body’ narrative, and the latter more closely aligned to queer politics that is often in uneasy relation to a politics of identity. Because of the varying identifications of the people who feature in my primary data sources, I use the umbrella term ‘trans’ to refer to the range of gender variant identifications.

2 I use the shortened acronym LGBT in this thesis as it is the one used within the academic literature I engage with which discusses primarily Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people.

3 Transphobic entails that which displays intense dislike or prejudice of trans people.
more accepting portrayals of children. Using visual and textual discourse analysis⁴, my thesis examines the differences between mainstream media representations of trans children and adults in order to reveal the complex nature of such representations as beyond positive or negative.

While there has been considerable literature on representations of trans people, many of these have focused on fictional media. By contrast, there has been limited discussion regarding non-fictional representations of trans people. In order to attend to this gap, my thesis focuses on non-fictional representation in mainstream media. For the purpose of this thesis I refer to mainstream media as, but not limited to, news broadcasts, talk shows, newspapers, and magazine articles.

This thesis demonstrates that while there has been an increase in the representation of trans people, this does not necessarily translate to any meaningful reduction in discrimination. As a historically marginalised population, trans people’s representation in mainstream media is extremely pertinent to how trans people are treated, socially, legally, and medically. While I strongly argue that visibility is not the be all and end all, it is important to be critical of that which is visible. By comparing the media representations of trans children and adults, I aim to highlight the need to be critical of all media representations, even those that on the surface may seem harmless or even positive.

Within literature that does exist on trans representation, very little has been written about children. The absence of children from these analyses risks universalising trans identities as adult. This not only silences the particular experiences of trans children, but

⁴ Rather than simply analysing the texts alone, it is important to situate representations within broader social discourses since media representations not only reflect broader social discourses, they also shape them.
also generalises and oversimplifies the complex ways in which trans people are represented in media. As there is yet no coherent body of literature on the representation of trans people - especially gender variant children - in mainstream media, my thesis takes a multidisciplinary approach. Fields of literature I draw upon include trans and queer theory, feminist theory, sociological analyses of childhood, and critical disability scholarship.

Before I begin my analysis of trans representation, I locate these representations in the cultural context in which they have emerged. Doing so is vital in understanding the direction these representations have taken in the last few years. Trans surgeries emerged in the Australian and North American public discourse at the same time that television became commercially available in the mass market\(^5\). The affordability and improved variability of which increased the number of television sets in homes, making it the main form of mass media in which news and political perspectives were broadcast (Diggs-Brown, 2011, p. 53). The increased influence of television is essential to how trans identities became embedded in public discourse, as it was through mass media - as opposed to medical literature - that the general public in countries, like the US and Australia, learnt about the existence of trans people (Skidmore, 2011, p. 272).

It was within this period of increased medical attention towards trans people in the mid-20th century, and accessibility to the spread of information through television, that Christine Jorgenson became one of the first openly and most famous trans people in the US. Jorgenson entered the public eye in December 1952 when the New York Daily News ran a

\(^5\) Examples used within this thesis are taken primarily from Australia and The United States. I have used these examples in particular because they exemplify issues around trans representation. As my thesis examines mainstream media, I have selected sources that are widely accessible to Australian public audiences and readers, and therefore hold the capacity to contribute to shaping Australian public opinion.
front-page headline titled “Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth” (Figure 1). The publicity surrounding Jorgenson’s medical treatments generated mass media hysteria worldwide (Meyerowitz, 2006, p. 16). Jorgenson’s publicity was not isolated; her story and others signalled the beginning of what would be an increased interest in the shifting of binaristic understandings of gender.

![Figure 1. Daily News front page (“Ex-Gi”, 1952)](image1)

![Figure 2. Jorgenson (Mayhem, 2014)](image2)

Whilst not without criticism, Jorgenson’s public image was surprisingly positive given the social and political conservatism of the 1950s. Emily Skidmore (2011, p. 277) suggests that the acceptance of Jorgenson as a public figure is directly related to her (undiscussed) whiteness, and the focus of her image as a ‘respectable woman’. Jorgenson exuded glamour, beauty, grace, education, and class. She adhered to particular norms of femininity, actively separating herself from those deemed deviant, such as cross-dressers,
homosexuals, and sex workers. Jorgensen and other transwomen, who most closely represented the ideals of white middle-class womanhood, gained the most visibility in mainstream press, and so came to define the boundaries of trans identities (adult, white, middle-class, and heterosexual) (Skidmore, 2011, p. 271). In comparison to Jorgenson’s appearance in numerous mainstream news magazines, African American transwoman Delisa Newton only appeared in African American press and tabloid newspapers (Skidmore, 2011, p. 270). Skidmore (2011, p. 270) notes that this disparity reveals that “narratives of transsexuality are not simply about gender but also about race, class, and sexuality”. This stratification is still of relevance today, and is heavily influenced by intersections of race and socio-economic status. In my third chapter I will examine these intersections in regard to television talk shows.

Although the focus of my thesis is mainstream media representations, it is also important to acknowledge the work that fictional representations of trans people do. Neither mainstream media nor fictional media exist in a vacuum, and therefore the wider context of the production of trans representation is important. GLAAD noted that there were no trans characters in 2012 theatre releases, and only two in 2013, “one was a transwoman very briefly depicted in a jail cell, while the other was an outright defamatory depiction” used for humour (GLAAD, 2014, p. 11). Furthermore, a marked decrease of anti-

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6 Jorgenson gave numerous public interviews in which she criticised homosexuality and diminished the experiences of sex workers.

7 This draws similarities with the recent public approval of Caitlyn Jenner following her Vanity Fair (“Introducing Caitlyn”, 2015) magazine cover. Like Jorgenson, Caitlyn’s cover embodied adult, white, upper class, and conventionally attractive femininity. The outpouring of public approval following her cover greatly contrasted to those dominant before she came out as trans, when, as ‘Bruce’, her gender identity was scrutinised. Now that she physically embodies the ‘correct’ type of femininity, she is publicly accepted and celebrated.

8 GLAAD is a non-governmental US media monitoring organisation that collects data on the representation of LGBT people in Hollywood movies.
gay slurs in film sits at odds with the high prevalence of transphobic slurs (GLAAD, 2014, p. 11). In the years following, there has been an increased interest in fictional representations of trans people, however these are predominately located in television rather than film⁹.

The increase in trans representation on television has not been limited to fictional forms. American broadcasters HBO, AOL, and ABC have all commissioned new series centered on trans stories, and Caitlyn Jenner’s 20/20 interview with Diane Sawyer brought in 16.9 million viewers when it first aired in 2015 (Stanhope, 2015). There has also been an increase in representations of trans children. In 2015, well-known documentary series maker Louis Theroux aired an episode on BBC around trans children that sparked the hashtag ‘Transgender Kids’ to trend on various social media sites.

This thesis is motivated by the unsettled and disturbed reaction I have had to representations of trans people. As a consumer of such representations, I am implicated in their production. Furthermore, as a non-trans identifying person I am the target audience for majority of mainstream media representations of trans people. Matt Kane, associate director of entertainment media at GLAAD, suggests representation in media is the next best way, in absence of knowing someone that is LGBT, to foster understanding and empathy (Sneed, 2014). Therefore, representation is key in the exposure of trans issues to non-trans people. The wide range of issues at stake signals that these representations are not only concerned with trans people, but also with non-trans people’s relationship to them, and with gender itself.

⁹ In 2014 online streaming company Amazon premiered their original series Transparent, loosely based on the coming out story of director Jill Soloway’s father as a transwoman. The show not only features trans actors but also trans writers, heralding a change in the centrality of trans people as cast and importantly, as producers of their own stories. The show won a Golden Globe in 2015. In the same year Fox’s Glee, targeted at a younger audience, featured two central trans characters and an episode which featured a choir of 200 trans singers.
I begin my analysis with a review of the scholarly literature relevant to trans representation. As my project is inherently multidisciplinary, I draw upon a range of scholarship to address the themes that are woven throughout the thesis. This chapter lays the foundation for the analysis of the following two chapters, which focus on the various ways that trans people (children and adults) are represented within mainstream media.

Chapter two begins with an engagement with sociological concepts of childhood. This enables the examination of how the image of the trans child complicates traditional representation of children in mainstream media. The chapter concludes through a discussion of the ways trans teenagers are represented, in terms of sexuality and their bodies, as a way in which the ‘twilight category’ of adolescence disrupts the differential representations of trans children and trans adults.

The third chapter focuses on media representations of trans adults in order to challenge the idea that visibility equates to power. My analysis explores how talk shows can be read as a form of a modern day freak show, while at the same time providing a space for public discussions around trans people and gender itself. In reference to tabloid magazines, reality shows, and opinion articles, I examine how trans people are depicted as deceptive or inauthentic. In particular, I analyse two opinion articles which position trans identities as a threat to social stability, alongside an assertion that sex and gender are biological ‘facts’. Through an analysis of the representations of trans people over the last few years, my thesis accounts for the different emergence of representations of trans children and adults.
Chapter One: Theoretical Background

As trans studies, coming out of queer scholarship, only emerged as a field in the 1990s, there has been less time for substantial literature on representation to be produced, as there has been within feminist and queer theory on non-trans women, lesbians, and gay men. For this reason I draw upon a range of different literature from trans and queer theory, feminist theory, and sociology. My research draws from these fields, adding to discussions of media representations by examining an aspect of trans representation that has yet to feature prominently in academic literature.

‘Transsexuality’ emerged in the medical field in the 19th century (Drescher, 2010, p. 111). During this time the psychiatric literature, such as that by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, displayed a distinct lack of differentiation between homosexuality and ‘transsexuality’, which to a certain extent remains today. Magnus Hirschfield is credited with distinguishing ‘transsexualism’ - living as the other sex - from that of homosexuality (Drescher, 2010, p. 111). This paved the way for the production of a body of literature about trans people specifically.

Medical advancements in the 1950s and 1960s that made ‘sex reassignment’ surgeries possible, led to the introduction of the image of the ‘transsexual’ to public audiences (Skidmore, 2011, p. 272). While there were physicians who encouraged medical treatments for trans people at this time, there were also many physicians and psychiatrists who criticised surgery and hormone treatments to “irreversibly and, in their view, incorrectly, treat people suffering from what they perceived to be a delusional condition in need of psychotherapy and reality testing” (Drescher, 2010, p. 111).
One of the most prominent psychiatrists at this time was Robert Stoller, whose influential work on gender identities influenced medical and scholarly work on trans people. Stoller’s most prominent theory was an account of transsexualism, in which he argued that trans identities are formed through the parenting style of a child’s mother. Stoller (1968, p. 36) suggested that an “anatomically normal” male’s capacity to exhibit masculinity and identify as male, or femininity and identify female, is directly linked to family psychodynamics, parental personalities, and parenting style.

From the moment a child is born, behaviour is reinforced and discouraged in them in order to produce their prescribed gender. For Stoller (1968, p. 35), the different handling of male and female infants separates the male infant from mother, creating masculinity in boys, and a closeness creating femininity in girls (Stoller, 1968, p. 35). According to this model, the inability for the male infant to separate from mother halts the formation of a masculine gender identity, creating the trans child. An intense connection with the mother, and distance from the father, according to Stoller (1968, p. 28), distorts the boy’s identification as a male and can create a trans identity. Stoller’s work was hugely influential, not only on medical and psychological understandings of trans people, but also on broader social perceptions of gender, including feminism. These perceptions can be seen reflected in representations of trans people today, as I will demonstrate in chapter two.

While trans people became a focus of medical and psychological studies in the early 20th century, it was not until the 1990s that trans studies emerged as an academic field. Susan Stryker (2006, p. 3), co-editor of the Transgender Studies Reader (2006) and the first

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10 Stoller’s theory offers an account of trans women but cannot easily be applied to trans men. This focus is also reflected in news media representations of trans people. Trans females are much more likely to appear in media depictions than trans males.
nonmedical journal focusing on trans identities and gender-nonconformity, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, describes trans studies as:

*Anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages...between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy.*

Sandy Stone’s ‘Post-transsexual Manifesto’ is widely regarded as one of the key first works to mark the emergence of trans studies. Stone criticised particular perspectives of feminists that emerged in the 1970s, expressed most violently by writers such as Janine Raymond, who considered trans identities as a form of false consciousness and internalisation of outdated gender stereotypes (Stryker, 2006, p. 4). Stone’s manifesto, and the increase in critical literature on trans issues influenced by increased community activism, challenged the pathologisation of trans people as having a mental or medical disorder (Whittle, 2006, p. xii). This shift allowed trans people to “reclaim the reality of their bodies”, and reconfigured the ways in which not only trans identities, but gender itself, could be discussed within academia (Whittle, 2006, p. xii).

Visibility is a central issue within research on gendered representation. George Gerbner (1972, p. 43) uses the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe the extent representation of a social group signifies their social existence and value. Symbolic annihilation suggests that an absence of representation of a social group negatively affects how they are viewed socially. Pierre Bourdieu (2001, p. 119) argues that symbolic annihilation acts as a form of symbolic violence or “gentle violence” in which the legitimacy and authenticity of a personal or group identity is ignored. According to Bourdieu, traditional and digital forms
of media have symbolic power in that they “construct reality” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166). Bourdieu (1991, p. 170) describes symbolic violence as a form of power which makes people see and believe a certain perspective of the world; achieving symbolically that which could be done through physical force. Violence is not only physical; it includes actions which can limit, control, and threaten the lives of others. The de-humanisation and denial of trans people’s identities with mainstream media representations can therefore be considered as a form of symbolic violence.

An examination of representations of trans people suggests that visibility does not necessarily equate to social power. As Peggy Phelan notes, “if representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western Culture” (Phelan, 1993, p. 10). Phelan’s argument signals a key problem in identity politics; assuming that a lack of visibility simply re-produces inequality fails to consider that visibility is used to signal deviance, as well as tolerance. Therefore, visibility itself cannot be thought of as empowering in and of itself. When there is visible representation of minority groups, they are often in service of the interests and biases of those with social power who “define public agenda” (Gross, 1994, p. 143). So while representation remains powerful in shaping social and political thought, visibility alone cannot guarantee favourable representation for a minority group.

Concepts such as symbolic annihilation and symbolic violence have been used to describe both the invisibility of sexual minorities in representation, and the ways in which they are trivialized or condemned by media (Venso & Hess, 2013, p. 1539). Paul Venzo and Kristy Hess (2013, p. 1540) explore how queer people use media to increase their own visibility, investigating “the relation between media and sexuality to deconstruct how the
representation of sexual diversity is controlled and manipulated in popular culture”. Like most of the work on LGBT representation, these types of analysis focus more on lesbian and gay people rather than addressing trans subjects directly. While many trans people identify as gay or lesbian, too often there is a conflation of trans identities as a form of sexuality (most often homosexuality), rather than a form of gender identification.\(^{11}\)

There needs to be a clear distinction between how ‘fictional’ and pop culture media, social media, and news media are analysed. We need to question their different aims, functions, outcomes, and value in order to examine the different ways they produce knowledge and affect experience. Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 114) suggests that the news is a cultural product that reflects dominant assumptions regarding who and what is deemed important. This makes certain assumptions about what “social relations and arrangements are deemed normal, natural and inevitable (Gill, 2007, p. 114)”. Gill’s work raises questions around how media is produced, by whom, and how it is imbedded within structures of power. This is concerned not only with what is considered newsworthy, but also with who has the authority to determine and produce the news.

As my thesis explores representations of trans children as one of its two main focuses, it is important to situate my analysis within the conceptualisation of childhood itself. It was not until the 1980s that children began to be discussed with substance in mainstream sociological research (Shanahan, 2007, p. 408). For this reason literature on trans children has been severely lacking. The focus of the early childhood work was

\(^{11}\) As trans people have been historically understood within the LGBT acronym, and within the social rights movements of LGBT groups, it is understandable that this conflation occurs. While understandable, I believe that literature on representation needs to acknowledge that the experiences of trans people cannot be reduced to discussions of sexuality alone.
concerned with two main issues: child welfare and child delinquency (Shanahan, 2007, p. 409). In other words, the main focus of sociological research into childhood was around protection and control. These have been the prevailing social attitudes towards children, especially in the last few decades. It is not surprising then that these themes dominate the news media coverage of trans children.

Medical discourses around trans people are extremely impactful in regards to the treatment of trans children, both medically and within media representations. While psychological theories regarding trans people emerged in the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that trans identification became officially understood as a type of psychological disorder. The ‘Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’ (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, is a formal classification system for the diagnosis of psychological disorders. The fifth (and latest) edition of the DSM (2013) lists the key characteristics of ‘gender dysphoria’ in children as the “desire to be the other gender to such degree that the incompatibility causes distress in social, school, occupational, and personal domains for at least 6 months” (Nicholson & McGuiness, 2014, p. 28). The DSM also suggests that a child must express a preference for “cross-dressing” and show opposition to wearing clothing of their birth gender, as well as demonstrating desire for stereotypical play opposite of said birth gender, a strong dislike towards their sexual anatomy, and a desire for the primary

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12 Within the third edition (1980) of the DSM different criteria was applied to trans children than adolescents and adults. Trans children were diagnosed with ‘gender identity disorder of childhood’, whereas adults were diagnosed with ‘transsexualism’ (Zucker & Spitzer, 2005, p. 32) Currently, both medical and media discourses use the term ‘gender dysphoria’ rather than ‘gender identity disorder’ to describe trans as a diagnostic condition. This formal diagnosis and definition of trans children is used within media representations as an established authoritative voice, giving social value to representations of trans children. I will explore this in more detail in the second chapter.
and/or secondary sex characteristics of their preferred gender (Nicholson & McGuiness, 2014, p. 28). These psychological measures not only determine who counts as a trans child, but also what treatment is available to them.

Definitions, such as those set in the DSM, directly outline what constitutes a trans person. These medical guidelines inform legal discourses around trans children. To begin my next chapter, I contextualise the Family Court system in Australia which determines trans children’s access to medical treatment, and as an extension their validation as trans legally. My analysis demonstrates how the dominant ideas that shape legal and medical treatment of trans children are reflected more broadly in representations of trans children.
Chapter Two: Children

In the last few years there has been a growing interest in trans children within mainstream media. The ways in which trans children and trans adults are depicted in media representations varies immensely. My research revealed that, for the most part, representations of trans children were often, at first glance, more open-minded. As will become evident in this chapter, however, these representations are more complex than simply negative or positive. To give contextual background to the legal and social position of trans children in Australia, I begin with an outline of the Family Court System and its guidelines for the medical treatment of trans children. I then examine how discourses of childhood, such as protection, vulnerability, fluidity, and consent, are reflected and challenged in media representations of trans children. Building off discussions of consent, I examine the authority given to medical professionals and parents in media to validate children’s trans identity; exploring how parents are held responsible for the production of their child’s gender identity. Finally, after mapping the ways trans children are represented as deviant in mainstream media and are so rendered non-child, I will examine how the concept of adolescence complicates the distinction between representations of trans children and adults.

Scholarly literature engaging with trans media representation has tended to focus more often on trans adults rather than trans children. As with sociological studies of children in the past, this is a result of minimalizing children as social subjects, or of conceptualising them as proto-adults. By contrast, there is a growing body of media representations of trans children that reveal distinct differences in the ways trans children and trans adults are represented. These differences cannot simply be put down to the way childhood is
understood as a prelude to adulthood. Rather, it reveals the way in which children and adults are conceptualised in mainstream media is differentiated yet interrelated. This is especially the case in regard to notions of choice, expression, deviance, and authenticity.

The Family Court System: Trans Children’s Rights in Australia

Up until 2013, children in Australia who wanted to go through hormone treatment would have to get approval by the Family Court. This is due to Australia’s federal government system which has constitutional responsibility towards parental rights and the guardianship of children (Strickland, 2014, p. 3). It is generally part of the parent’s responsibility to consent to medical treatment on behalf of their children. Particular medical procedures, however, can fall beyond this responsibility and “require determination by the court, as part of the court’s parens patriae or welfare jurisdiction” (Strickland, 2014, p. 6).

Whilst the first stage of treatment (hormone blockers which supress puberty) is fully reversible, the second stage of cross-hormone treatment does have some irreversible effects and risks. Prior to 2013, both stages were authorised by the Family Court.

These legal restrictions changed in 2013 after the case of Re: Jaime. In 2011 it became urgent for trans teenager Jaime and her family that she begin hormone treatment, as she was about to enter male puberty. The family faced difficulty, however, when they

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13 Hormone therapy entails two stages, the first being hormone blockers which suspend or block the development of sex specific hormones and puberty e.g. in trans boys this would mean halting the development of female breasts and menstruation, for trans girls this includes halting the development of a lower voice register and increased body hair growth. The second stage of hormone treatment is hormone replacement which involves the insertion of cross-sex hormones e.g. testosterone for male identifying patients.

14 Parens Patriae: “a doctrine that grants the inherent power and authority of the state to protect persons who are legally unable to act on their own behalf” (“Parens Patriae”, 2008).

15 The development of a different puberty can also increase the risk of liver damage, ovarian cancer, and thromboembolism (Strickland, 2014, p. 5).

16 Jamie is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the trans teenager
realised that in order to get court approval for hormone blockers, they would have to pay around $30,000. In 2013, Jamie and her family appealed the Family Court’s system of treatment approval. The court ruled that as the treatment was therapeutic, reversible, and exhibited no negative impacts, trans children would no longer need to get court approval for hormone blockers. Cross hormone therapy, however, still requires court approval, as its effects are considered partially irreversible.

Protectionist Discourses of Childhood: The Child as Vulnerable

Australia’s Family Court system is founded on widely understood and accepted assumptions about childhood. Throughout this chapter I examine how sociological conceptions of childhood are reproduced and challenged in media representations of trans children. Dependency and vulnerability are reflected in sociological work as defining qualities of contemporary understandings of childhood (Shanahan, 2007, p. 414). James and Jenks (1996, p. 318) suggest that childhood is predominantly a “protectionist experience”; children need to be protected by adults from others, sometimes even from themselves. This protectionist viewpoint makes the assumption that childhood is a period distinct from adulthood; adults alone have the capacity to protect, whereas children, in their vulnerability, do not. Discourses of protection dominate media discussions of trans children.

Protectionist discourses, however, are not only concerned with the protection of trans children, but also protection from them. This is evident in media coverage of a Californian bill, passed in July 2013, that allowed trans children to use the bathroom and choose sports.

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17 Australian program Four Corner’s ran an episode in 2014 titled ‘Being Me’ featuring a discussion with Jamie, and her mother, about their involvement in the changes to the Family Court system (Cohen, 2014). To respect the privacy of Jamie and her family, Four Corners used facial prosthetics and digitally altered voices to disguise their identities. The extent to which the program went to make sure this family felt comfortable and safe reveals a clear demonstration of respect and care towards Jaime and her story.
based on their gender identity. The bill’s passing generated backlash on numerous media outlets. *Fox and Friends* is a weekday morning news show aired by the notoriously conservative *Fox News* umbrella, a channel no stranger to airing transphobic content. The *Fox and Friends* (Maklin, 2013) discussion of the bill displays strong concern for non-trans identifying students, not only through the actual interactions of students in these gendered spaces, but also through the supposed threat the trans subject poses to traditional understandings of gender.\(^\text{18}\)

Perplexed at the proposed changes, *Fox News* contributor Michelle Maklin remarked: “students are going to feel from the minute they start school that this is an invasion of their privacy”. The exclusion of trans students from this definition both dismisses their existence, whilst also removing the capacity for a student to be both trans and a child worth protecting. The concern over privacy directly places trans students as a danger to the students around them, and as a direct threat to other children’s safety - both trans and non-trans. The language which this concern is expressed draws parallels to a prominent feature of 20th century political discourses around sexuality, the fear that different forms of sexuality (in this case gender identity) are transmissible or contagious (Plummer & McCann, 2007, p. 43). The language by which this fear is expressed implies that sexual difference, like a form of infection, spreads in an all-consuming dangerous way (Plummer & McCann, 2007, p. 43). One *Fox and Friends* host remarks: “children are now, I dunno, exposed to what is trans gender, ‘hey Mommy what is transgender, am I transgender?’ It’s very scary, slippery slope”. This explicitly frames trans children as contagious, to be feared, and most importantly to be controlled. This oversimplified logic is not uncommon to media coverage

\(^{18}\) At the time of Fox and Friend’s segment on the Californian bill, the show was pulling in an average of over a million viewers in the early morning 6am-9am time slot. This is substantially more than similar shows at this time (Kenneally, 2013).
of children. It suggests that children are so susceptible to media influence, that anything they are exposed to will be incorporated as part of their identity. This delegitimises and reduces trans identities to a phase, or alternatively a type of rebellion. The reference to a “slippery slope” not only implies that children are more likely to identity as trans based on gendered expressions of peers, but also that trans is something to be feared beyond childhood and bathrooms.

Trans children act as a threat to normative gender: to themselves, other children, and importantly to gender itself. Trans children reveal that gender is not necessarily stable nor reflective of binary understanding of sex. As a result, the trans child disrupts an easy reading of children’s bodies as gendered (Castaneda, 2014, p. 60). How we determine a body as sexed and gendered is contingent upon how we read bodies visually. On an everyday basis we make the assumption that every person we interact with is either male or female, whose genitals align with his or her gender (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 1). Clear in Fox’s criticism, yet not explicitly stated, is that adults will not know what biological sex a child is when they use a bathroom or locker room. Framed under a guise of concern for other students, the main fear is an inability to categorise the students as one gender or the other. The Fox presenters are concerned that if they can’t make sense of trans children in this way, they will not know how to treat them as gendered subjects.

The Formation of Gender in Childhood: Fluidity, Phases, and Consent

There is a contradiction in the way children are understood in mainstream media. While the Fox example would suggest that children are subjects who have an inherent need to be protected and controlled, they are also often understood as having more freedom and flexibility in their identification. A key difference in representations of trans children and
trans adults is the way in which identity and gender is conceptualised as fluid or fixed. Castaneda (2014, p. 59) suggests that the child’s body is constituted through a process of constant becoming. Similarly, Holloway and Valentine (2000, p. 5) suggest that children are seen as “human becomings” rather than human beings. The child is an unfinished product who is always changing and therefore always open to influence. This is partly due to the conceptualisation of children in direct relation to adulthood. Since children are not conceptualised as social subjects in their own right, their subjectivity is restricted and shaped in relation to, and by, adult authority. This acts as an unequal hierarchy in which children’s wants, needs, and rights are determined and controlled by adults.

While contemporary sociological debates accord children with agency, others insist that adults still monopolise power, “children may have a voice, but adults control the conversation” (Shanahan, 2007, p. 415). This refusal of active agency is tied to the extent in which children are perceived as being able to make consensual decisions. The concern that children lack such capacity is central to media panics around trans children. The overprotection of children acts a way of controlling and limiting the ability of children to exercise agency:

*The problematic conceptualization of the child as an autonomous individual is further highlighted by the philosophy of ‘best interests of the child,’ which serves as the centrepiece of international legislation for children. In many ways, a ‘best interests’ principle is a form of protective exclusion justified by the immaturity and incompetence of children (Haydon & Scraton, as cited in Shanahan, 2007, p. 417).*
Many theorists have suggested that protectionism reflects the domination of children, and extends beyond the protection of children to include the protection of society from the problems of children themselves (Shanahan, 2007, p. 417). This domination is achieved, in part, by reducing the subjectivity and expression of a child’s identity to a ‘phase’.

The child’s body, in its presumed state of malleability, can be put back onto the ‘normal’ course of development when it deviates in a way that the adult body cannot (Castaneda, 2014, p. 60). Castaneda (2014, p. 61) concludes that due to children’s broader social subordination, the malleable sight of the child’s body is more likely to be a site of “bodily subjection to normalizing gender regimes than a site of greater freedom”. While the fluidity of childhood allows for greater freedom of gender expression, there is continued restriction of children’s ability to define their own identity. This signals that the concept of fluidity cannot solely account for the higher proportion of ‘positive’ representations of trans children compared to those of trans adults. The idea that children are open to influence is represented alongside the idea that children do not have the agency to make informed decisions. The child has freedom of expression that the adult lacks, yet is denied the ability to act upon such expressions.

The *Fox and Friends* news panel regarding bathrooms, discussed earlier, conveys a distinct mistrust of children who identify as trans, regarding both their possible actions and the legitimacy of their identity. One host questions whether “if this is children who consider themselves as transgender and have not gone through some sort of surgery, is it a child questioning their sexuality and chooses one day to use a boy’s bathroom as opposed to a girls”. This reflects a conflation of gender identity with sexuality, specifically homosexuality. Both are depicted as unstable and deviant choices taken on by the child at will. The
culturally perceived abnormality of trans children is highlighted through the assertion that children do not yet have the capacity to determine their own identity. In the words of Castaneda (2014, p. 59), “the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender”. The idea that children are not able to make rational decisions is of course not one limited to trans children, however it plays a distinctive role in the way that trans children are represented.

The perceived ability for children to determine their own gender identity is inexplicably tied to understandings of consent. Definitions of consent are variable and contextual. Measures of consent are made legally and medically, as well as socially. Jenkins (1998, p. 1) suggests that consent involves competence as well as a degree of socialisation:

*The capacity to ‘consent’ in any given circumstance can be understood as a particular kind of ‘competence’, which may be defined as ‘the capacity or potential for adequate functioning-in-context as a socialised human’.*

Therefore, it can be said that the capacity to consent is not a quality that we inherently have, but one that is learnt. Matthew Waites (2005, p. 12) suggests that socialisation theories, although attributing significance to social forces, continue to discuss childhood as a stage towards becoming an adult, which is a complete and fully rational state (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 6). The distribution of rights and freedoms in numerous social contexts is hierarchically structured; this includes the perceived ability to give consent. Social groups that have been perceived as being without reason, such as women, people of colour, and disabled people, are among those who, like children, have been denied the ability to give consent on the basis that they do not possess the competency to do so (Waites, 2005, p.
These groups have been historically viewed as being ruled by their bodies, rather than their minds, and are therefore often deemed as “incapable of exercising moral agency over their bodies” (Shildrick, 1997, p. 81).

Structures of Authority: Medicalisation and Diagnosis of Trans Children

Consent is a key way in which trans children are medicalised in mainstream media. The assumed inability to consent frames how children are governed by medical, legal, and parental structures of authority. As children are read as unable to consent to decisions regarding their own bodies, the responsibility of determining medical treatment is targeted towards adults. This is reflected within mainstream media representations when medical professionals are used to authenticate the identification of trans children. Growing specialised clinics and tests, which focus on the ‘condition’ of trans children, are referenced in documentaries, news segments, and talk shows to validate the experiences of trans children. The presence of a ‘medical expert’ signifies a presence of authoritative knowledge and (reliable) expert truth.

Australian program Four Corners ran a special titled ‘Being Me’ in 2014 highlighting the stories of three trans people, focusing mainly on 11-year-old trans girl, Isabelle (Cohen, 2014). The program’s format alternates between interviews of Isabelle, her parents, and medical professionals. Isabelle’s own account of her identity requires validation from both a paediatrician and a child psychiatrist in order for her gender identity to be considered legitimate. The medicalization of the child’s identity is sanctioned by the Family Court, and managed by the family. The use of medical experts in representations of trans children reinforce the idea that a child’s opinion cannot be taken on its own.

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19 The episode pulled in a rating of 1.243 million (Dyer, 2014).
Whilst it may be said that medical discourses around trans children open up a discussion around trans identities, it is an oversimplification to suggest that these medicalised representations will lead to more social acceptance in regards to gender expression. According to Casteneda (2014, pp. 60-61):

Transgender childhood constitutes a pathological instance of childhood and gender simultaneously—there is “something wrong” with the child through its gender, but early medical interventions can make that gender normal without a trace of its past pathology.

This is made possible because the child’s body and subjectivity are conceptualised as unfinished and fluid. There is an assumed normative bodily and social progression that children are expected to traverse, the end point of which is adulthood (Castaneda, 2014, p. 59). Representations, such as that in ‘Being Me’, which focus on the diagnosis of trans children make a pathology of trans identities. If early medical intervention can reduce the visibility of the pathology of trans itself (before the development of secondary sex characteristics), then the trans child poses a reduced threat to binary gender, unlike the trans adult, who may exist as a more visible representation of trans subjectivity. This, in part, accounts for the stronger investment in medicalisation of trans children in media than trans adults. Therefore, a distinction can be made between the medicalization of trans people in general, and the medicalization of trans children in particular.

The medicalised focus of ‘Being Me’ limits the extent to which it can open up a discussion around and challenge traditional understandings of gender. Like numerous other media depictions of trans children, many of the program’s questions to trans children centre on toys and clothing. In her first interview segment, Isabelle is shown dressing up a baby doll
and holding it throughout. The first image shown of Isabelle is in her room, sitting on her butterfly bed cover, surrounded by posters of pop-stars. Isabelle’s interview is shot entirely in this room. Isabelle is shown changing her toy doll’s diaper while a narration plays over, that of Isabelle’s mother describing how Isabelle explained her gender identification, “I feel like I’m a girl.”

Preference for ‘girly’ toys is presented as evidence of Isabelle’s trans status. Presenter Janine Cohen asks Isabelle, “did you ever like boy’s things”, to which she replies, “Never. My entire life I’ve used traditional girl’s toys”. Isabelle’s like of ‘girly’ things makes her identification as a girl more palpable, and at the same time less threatening. The idea that her identification is just a phase is discouraged by the assertion that she has always enjoyed dressing up and playing with dolls. This representation affirms a normative understanding of gender as oppositional with radically different markers and characteristics. According to ‘Being Me’, Isabelle is a girl not because gender is a large complex spectrum, but because she likes girl’s things. This is also reflected later in the episode when Jamie, the trans teenager mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is filmed with her mother out shopping for clothes. The legal restrictions by which Jaime can receive medical treatment are continuously punctuated with the image of shopping, connoted with femininity. This positioning encourages the audience to sympathise with Jaime as she is restricted by the Family Court. The image of Jaime effortlessly shopping for feminine clothing is contrasted with the narration which explains that the court system would determine whether Jaime was enough of a girl. This combination suggests that Jaime’s interest in clothing is a clear indication of her
identification as female. What this assumption does, whilst attributing agency to Jaime, is reinforce gendered norms associated with being female.

The existence of trans people has the potential to disrupt conventional ideas about sex and gender, and their biological roots. Because trans people pose a threat to these supposedly stable categories, however, representations of trans people are often presented in a way that maintains gender stereotypes, rather than challenging them (Serano, 2013, p. 227). The assertion that Isabelle and Jaime like ‘girly’ things, and are therefore girls, acts as an entry point in which non-trans people can understand trans children. Representations such as this are both vital to and inhibit social change. While they do not challenge fundamental understandings of gender, the introduction of new ideas to audiences that may not be educated on trans issues is crucial in making an impact on the social perception of trans children.

Nevertheless, while gender expression through toys and clothing may be an important part of how the trans child demonstrates the authenticity of their trans identity, it is not the only part of being trans or of having a gender. While the children in

Figure 3. Isabelle in ‘Being Me’ (Cohen, 2014)
'Being Me’ are asked about their taste for ‘girly’ things, larger discussions about their legal rights, their access to medical treatments, their future, and any potential discrimination are framed as adult concerns. When these questions are directed towards parents and medical professionals rather than to the child, do representations such as this reproduce and reinforce models of authority which exclude the child’s voice? While ‘Being Me’ did not necessarily silence Isabelle’s voice, it was certainly being controlled. It is not that Isabelle’s response to topics that were directed towards her parents was silenced, but that they were not considered questions that she could answer herself. Limiting Isabelle’s own account of her identity, both through medicalisation and a focus on her parents, can be read as a form of symbolic violence. The representation of Isabelle’s trans identity is controlled more by her parents, medical professionals, and the host Cohen, than Isabelle herself.

**Who’s to Blame: Representations of Parents**

Whilst the medical profession is used to validate the existence of the trans child, the parent is called upon to provide the cause. Colin Heywood’s influential ‘A History of Childhood’ (2001) outlines four conceptual dichotomies that have prevailed in discussions of childhood. One of such dichotomies is that of nature and nurture. This dichotomy raises several key questions. Primality, is childhood the result of innate biological human qualities, or a socially constructed concept (Shanahan, 2007, p. 413)? The problem with both answers to this question is that they do not allow for an explanation of self-identification. The option that children’s identities are pre-determined by nature and the option that social forces determine identity do not consider the impact of the self. This is especially the case for trans children, whose own ability to self-identify, separate from biological qualities or social influences, is often dismissed.
Heywood’s dichotomy allows us to question what roles parents play in the formation of their child’s gender. Firstly, at what point are parents blamed for ‘corrupting’ their child’s gender? Secondly, what authority do they have in disciplining said gender? Finally, how do we conceptualise children’s identities if parents determine their child’s gender expression? These questions and more are used to influence audiences and readers to believe that parental style shapes a child’s identification as trans. In this way, the role of the parents is just as important to the discussion of trans childhood as the children themselves.

When actress Angelina Jolie and her husband Brad Pitt announced that their child, previously known as Shiloh, would furthermore like to be called John\(^{20}\), a substantial amount of media backlash occurred\(^{21}\). Most criticisms were directed towards Jolie and her mothering style rather than Pitt’s fathering. US magazine *Life & Style* ran one cover story titled “Why is Angelina turning Shiloh into a boy? A boy’s haircut and clothes, calls her ‘John’, no girlie things. Is it harming the 3 year old” (Figure 4). The magazine also ran another issue titled “Shiloh manipulated by her mom: new evidence that Angelina is forcing Shiloh’s obsession with being a boy. Is she harming her daughter” (Figure 5)?

The idea that a child’s trans identity is rooted in the parenting style of the mother is largely informed by the work of Robert Stoller. For Stoller (1968, p. 20), close intimacy between mother and son can lead to “disturbance(s) in the development of masculinity”, so much so that an excess of such intimacy can lead to the formation of “extreme femininity” in boys. While Stoller focuses mainly on the relationship between mother and son as the

\(^{20}\) As John has not publically identified as trans or requested to be referred to as ‘he’, I refer to the child here with gender neutral pronouns. While John may not identify as trans, I believe it is still an important example, as magazines such as *Life & Style* assume that John is.

\(^{21}\) It should be noted that there was also a lot of praise from what would be described as ‘progressive’ media outlets towards Jolie and Pitt for accepting John’s identity.
cause of female trans identities, his general perspective is also reflected in the media representations of Jolie and John. Stoller (1968, p. 35) positions the mother as influential to a child’s gender, rather than a father, due to the presumed intimacy a mother has with a child from birth, and continued into childhood. While the social norms around parenting have changed since Stoller produced this work, with fathers generally more involved in the upbringing of children, the assumption that mothers are the nurturers of children is still dominant. Therefore, while John does not fit into the direct theorisation of the trans child that Stoller discusses, Jolie as a mother is still rooted as the cause of John’s identification. If it is a mother’s job to correctly raise a child, and gender variance represents deviancy, then she as failed in her role.

Not only do these articles point to Jolie as the cause of John’s gender identity, free of Pitt’s influence as a father, but they also remove any agency from the child to self-identify. Jolie’s manipulation here is being defined as giving into, or feeding, a child’s ‘obsession’ or

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22 This makes the assumption that a mother gives births to, is biologically related to, or mothers her child from infancy.
23 This of course assumes a heteronormative nuclear family.
24 Some articles went as far as displaying sympathy for him, “Brad fears for Shiloh” (2012).
phase, of which I’ve discussed earlier in this chapter. In doing so, John’s gender is positioned, not as an expression of their own identity, but as a reflection of Jolie’s inability to successfully mother. The assumption made by these magazine covers is that, if it was not for Jolie’s mothering style John would still be referred to as ‘Shiloh’. Therefore the mother determines a child’s gender identity, not the child themselves.

A more extreme example of parental blame can be seen in a *Fox News* article by Perry Chiaramonte (2011), in which allowing a child to be trans is positioned as a form of child abuse. The article itself is an aggressive form of hysteria towards trans subjects, focusing primarily on the medical, specifically hormonal, treatment of trans children. The piece centres on an 11-year-old trans girl and her lesbian parents. Referring to the issue of consent, the article questions the capacity of a child to make “life-altering decisions about changing their gender”. Chiaramonte refers to an interview with Dr. Paul McHugh, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, in which he equates the medical treatment of trans children to child abuse. He suggests that hormonal treatment for trans children is equivalent to performing liposuction on a child with anorexia. Another *Fox News* contributor and psychiatrist Keith Ablow is quoted in the article suggesting that the parents are deviant, and deviant parents breed deviant children:

*Obviously, when two females adopt a male child, then assert that the child is not actually male, but is, instead, actually a female -- like both of them.*

*Everyone in the family should be psychologically evaluated in a comprehensive way before a step like gender reassignment is considered.*

This quote is used to conclude the *Fox* article and therefore acts as summarising statement, the take away message for readers. It is indicated that the child’s parents, as two women,
are a contributing factor towards the child’s disordered status because their family are made doubly deviant – both in terms of gender identity and sexuality. The ideas represented in Ablow’s quote reflect some of the key assumptions made about trans children that I’ve discussed in this chapter so far. Ablow’s article questions the intentions and psychological stability of the child’s parents, placing the causality of the child’s trans identity solely onto parental influence, rather than the child’s own expression of identity.

**Deviancy: The Trans Child as Non-Child**

Another of Heywood’s conceptual dichotomies of childhood can be observed in the representation of trans children: that of depravity and innocence. In this dichotomy childhood is constructed as simultaneously a moment of purity and immorality (Shanahan, 2007, p. 412). Since the Enlightenment, the image of childhood as innocence has dominated public discourse. As a result, when a child acts against this idyllic image - such as when they commit atrocities - they are treated as though they are outside the category of child (James & Jenks, 1996, p. 322). Whilst James and Jenks refer to murder and sexual assault, being trans is considered atrocious by some, and thus trans children are treated as non-children. Alison Young’s (1995) research on the Bulger Case discusses how the child, acting outside the normality of childhood, is cast as the non-child. Non-children are an “approximation of what a child might be... (they) appear to be children but are not: they are like evil adults or monsters in disguise” (Young, 1995, p. 115). The trans child is treated neither as a child nor an adult, and thus becomes the non-child. If childhood is determined as the period in which a person cannot determine their own identity, then the very act of trans children self-identifying casts them outside this category of child.

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25 Bulger Case refers to the murder of 2-year-old James Bulger by a couple of 10-year-old boys in 1993 in Bootle, near Liverpool, UK.
The dichotomy of innocence and depravity is reflected in the media backlash towards Californian legal changes in trans students’ access to school bathrooms. In 2014, a Minnesota group, *Child Protection League Action*, ran a series of newspaper advertisements around the supposed threat that trans children posed, specifically to female student privacy (eliminating the existence of trans boys), in using their preferred bathroom. In one, an image of shower is used with the text: “a male wants to shower beside your 14 year old daughter. Are YOU okay with that” (Figure 6)?

![Image of advertisement](image.png)

*Figure 6. Child Protection League Action (2014)*

The use of the word “male” in reference to trans students not only misgenders the female trans student, but also renders that student as non-child. While the use of the term “boy” would equally misgender the female trans student, the deliberate choice of the term “male” aims to render the trans child as outside the category of child, alluding to adulthood.

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26 This concern for safety is similarly reflected in an Australian *60 Minutes* (Stefanovic, 2013) segment on a trans child Emma. Journalist Karl Stefanovic reveals to Emma’s mother that, as a parent, he might have an issue with “a girl who used to be a boy” using the same bathroom as his daughter.
By removing the trans student from the status of child, the advertisement is able to position the student as a threat, rather than children in need of protection (as the group’s title suggests).

Rather than being a student like the targeted audience’s daughter, the trans girl is positioned as the perverted male adult, wishing to shower with the innocent female student. The framing of the word “wants” here suggests desire; to shower “beside” the other girls directly implies some form of sexual predation. It also reflects a heteronormative perspective of childhood in which there is no concern that non-trans female students will be sexual threats to other students but trans girls, read in this context as male, will. This reflects age old ideas about male sexuality as active, and female sexuality as passive. The trans child is not only rendered as non-child, but also as sexual predator. The image of the sexual predator referenced through language in this advertisement is one of maleness and masculinity. As the advertisement refers to trans girls, the assumption made is that trans boys do not pose this masculine threat. The ominous dark shower tiles enhance the uneasy and unsafe feeling that the advertisement attempts to invoke. It contrasts the innocence of the daughter with the perverse and predatory trans child.

Challenging the Child/Adult Dichotomy: Trans Adolescence

The positioning of trans children as non-children within media representations signals to a complication of the distinct categories of child and adult. While my next chapter will examine the trends in representations of trans adults, and how they differ to those of children, it is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Take for example, the perceived transitionary period of adolescence. The concept of adolescence as a social category was first introduced in a psychological context by G. Stanley Hall in 1904
Gabrielle Owen (2014, p. 22) suggests that Hall’s work, which argued that adolescence was a key part of the advancement of civilisation, can be thought of as a mechanism of Michel Foucault’s biopower. Adolescence acts as a “technology of (the) self put into the service of the nation-state” (Owen, 2014, p. 22). The importance of adolescence became the subject of intense anxiety and discipline. Owen (2014, p. 22) suggests that biopower regulates and disciplines trans people by “locating them in the presumably pliable stage of adolescence, where state intervention appears to be developmentally natural and necessary”. While there may be leniency towards gender experimentation in childhood, adolescence generates panic in which the need to make an intervention becomes paramount; from both the perspective of anti-trans advocates, and those facilitating a transition through medical treatment, such as hormone therapy.

The simultaneous function of both childhood and adulthood in adolescence can be observed in the representation of trans teenager Riley, who features in Australian program *Insight*. Owen (2014, p. 22) suggests that “adolescence functions simultaneously as a site of discovery and disavowal, sustaining assumptions about what childhood was and what adulthood should be”. In 2013, *Insight* ran an episode titled ‘Transgender’ focusing on the stories of a range of different trans people from childhood to adulthood27 (Brockie, 2013). Guests included 7-year-old Maddie, 16-year-old Riley, and numerous trans adults from the studio audience. Riley is featured as the only guest who is in-between the two categories of child and adult. She is asked the same questions that are directed towards Maddie, relating

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27 I would argue that *Insight*, while contrasting to the tone of programs such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, acts as a form of talk show. The show is structured in a similar way, invited guests who are interviewed on stage and a live studio audience which is encouraged to interact with the program’s host and guests. This format draws a fine line between distributing information and acting as a form of entertainment – the format of the talk show itself will always be haunted by the phenomenon of the spectacle to a certain degree. I will discuss the function of talk shows and trans representation in more detail in the next chapter.
to toys and clothing, while also those in regard to her body - questions more often directed towards trans adults. The program’s host Jenny Brockie asks Riley, in front of the live audience, “how do you feel about your body since you’ve been taking them (female hormones)”? This question reflects a shift that occurs in between representations of trans children and adults.

While taste in clothing and hobbies become less of a focus, interest in bodies and sexuality increases in representations of trans adolescents. Adolescence is:

Characterized by dramatic developmental changes entailing not only the physical changes of puberty but also the cognitive capacities that enable young people to understand and analyze interpersonal relations and social institutions, including cultural meanings of sexuality (Russell, Campen, & Muraco, 2012, p. 70).

Adolescence therefore becomes a period in which trans teenagers may face intense fascination directed towards their sexuality. In regard to the question of personal relationships and dating, Brockie asks Riley, “What does the future look like for you”? Before Riley can answer, her mother calls out from the audience: “Riley has a boyfriend”. Riley, as positioned outside the category of child, is read as an appropriate age to discuss her personal relationships and sexuality, yet is also denied the full autonomy of adulthood; her mother still speaks on her behalf.

Riley, ignoring the interjection of her mother, answers: “something to look forward to because I know I’m going to become someone so special and have a great future”. In response, Brockie brings Riley back to the discussion of relationships with: “and you have a
boyfriend”. In part, this acts as another badge of passing or authenticity. As with interest in certain clothes or hobbies, Riley’s ability to have a boyfriend is positioned as successfully living as a teenage girl. The invested focus on Riley’s personal relationship, rather than her “great future”, however, also locates the interest in trans subjects to their bodies and sexuality. This is a common theme of representations of trans adults, one that I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Laverne Cox’s television special *The T Word* is an example of potential spaces in which trans teenagers can speak for and about themselves - on their own terms. In 2014 Cox executively produced and hosted an hour long documentary, aired on *MTV*, following the lives of seven transgender youths across the US (Cox, 2014). Cox, an openly trans person, provided a platform for the teens to tell their own stories, and talk about a range of topics of importance to them including school, family, depression, dating, surgery, bullying, and violence. Rather than being targeted towards an adult audience, as *Insight and Four Corners* are, *The T Word* was targeted towards teenagers themselves. This is important as it hold the potential to influence people who trans teenagers come into contact with daily, their peers.

At first glance, representations of trans children are more accepting, open-minded, and positive than that of trans adults. In this chapter, I have complicated this simple reading of representations of trans children. Traditional sociological conceptions of childhood, such as protection, fluidity, and consent, are reflected in media representations of trans children, but are also contradicted. Similarly, the assertion that trans children are just like any other child, as reinforced through media focus on toys and clothes, is undermined by the medicalisation which constructs a pathology around trans children. The framing of the trans child as non-child, and the twilight period of adolescence, also complicates how
representations of trans children can be read as completely distinct from that of trans adults. While I have examined several examples within this chapter that are explicitly anti-trans, I will explore in the next chapter, that transphobia, or at the least discomfort towards trans people, is much more dominant and explicit in representations of trans adults.
Chapter Three: Adults

While there is more media visibility of trans adults, this does not necessarily mean that they are trans-positive or constructive forms of representation. I begin this chapter with a theoretical discussion of tabloid talks shows, and analyse intersections of gender, class, and race that play out in such contexts. I explore how mainstream media representation of trans adults constitute a form of modern day freakshow, in which trans people are objectified and sensationalised for the amusement of audiences and readers. Whilst noting the negative effects of such representations, I also examine how talk shows and tabloids can be thought of as productive in generating and introducing discussions around trans issues to non-trans audiences. After a discussion of the depiction of trans people as ‘deceivers’ in tabloid magazines, I conclude with an analysis of two articles with position trans identities as oppositional to the ‘truth’ of sex and gender.

Visibility Does Not Equal Empowerment: Trans People on Talk Shows

The presence of trans people on talk shows is no recent phenomenon. While representations of trans children often occur in talk show contexts, they contrast vastly with those of trans adults. Tabloid talk shows are quantifiably ahead in terms of representation of trans people when compared to other mainstream media. As Peggy Phelan (1993, p. 10) notes, however, not all visibility is positive or equals power. The representation of trans adults in talk shows and magazines exemplifies the need to apply a critical eye to the content of media representations, their implications, and their impact.

Talk shows are intriguing due to their disproportionately high presence of LGBT people in comparison to other media forms, and in relation to the amount of agency that
LGBT people have within this genre (Gamson, 1998, p. 12). Prior to the introduction of “ordinary people” by talk shows, television was made up of celebrities, politicians, and experts who were called upon for their knowledgeable opinions (Gill 2007, p. 155). Tabloid media incorporate voices, such as those of minority groups, often excluded from mainstream media. However, this inclusion is not always in the best interest of the minority being represented.

Joshua Gamson’s (1998) analysis of the representation of lesbians and gay men is useful in conceptualising the functions of tabloid talk shows. Like Phelan, Gamson challenges the idea that visibility necessarily leads to positive social change. Tabloid talk shows use trans people as entertainment, often in the form of mockery. In regard to the question of whether visibility equals power, Larry Gross (1994, p. 143) suggests that:

*When groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define public agenda. And those elites are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle- and upper-middle class, and (at least in public) entirely heterosexual.*

While Gamson (1998, p. 13) suggests that talk shows allow lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and trans people to actively speak in their own name rather than through stereotypes, Gross’ point is valid in that representation cannot be separated from those who “define public agenda”. Talk shows which include trans people often use them as props for

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28 It should be noted, however, that there is still a lack of ordinary people on late night talk shows. Day time talk shows often address everyday issues and the average person’s personal stories. They range from discussion panels, audience participation, and the advice of medical ‘experts’. In contrast, late night talk shows are still more likely to feature celebrity guests, politicians, and public figures over ‘regular’ people.
entertainment, while reinforcing negative stereotypes. While trans people are able to represent themselves, at least physically, the terms in which they are represented are often controlled and manipulated by others.

People who are labelled as ‘bizarre’ and deviant are central to the tabloid talk show genre (Kevin Glynn, 2000, p. 17). Tabloid media “thrives on the grotesque, the scandalous, and the ‘abnormal’” (Glynn, 2000, p. 17). The highlighting of the ‘bizarre’ for entertainment of course draws connections to the carnival freak shows of the 19th century. Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 156) notes that the key elements of the freak show are deliberately recreated in contemporary talk shows, such as sensational promotional strategies and the counterpointing of experts and ‘freaks’. Feeding into a desire for the ‘bizarre’, talk shows use the differences, and often misfortunes, of others as entertainment for the audience, who, comforted in their own normality, experience a thrill in observing those who are marked deviant.

The carnival freak show in the early 19th century was a place of refuge “where the normative restrictions of the society were relaxed” and people were allowed to “act out themselves with much less inner and outer restraint than prevailed in society” (Levine, 1988, p. 68). Arguably, they still are. While talk shows may hold the possibility to relieve people from the restrictions of normative behaviour, they mainly serve in the interests of viewers rather than the guests themselves. Talk shows “encourage viewers to separate ‘bad’ gays from ‘good’ ones, and to link the appearance of sexual nonconformists to inappropriate uses of public space” (Gamson, 1998, p. 14). The encouragement for audiences to make moral judgements around gay people also applies to talk show representations of trans people. The relaxing of outer restraint not only applies to those
represented on talk shows, but also to their audiences, who are invited to suspend social norms and publically judge the personal lives of others.

A Jerry Springer episode titled “Guess What...I’m a Man” featured audience members laughing and cheering as a male guest attempted to hit a trans woman, following her ‘reveal’ as trans (Springer, 2010). Violence is not uncommon on Springer’s show, and is often encouraged by both the program and the studio audience. Violence encouraged on the show is most often acted out by female guests to other women and men, or by male guests to other men. Violence by men towards women is rarely encouraged; the exception of which is that towards trans women. This violence is positioned as acceptable in Springer’s show, not only because trans women are positioned as essentially men, but also because they are dehumanised. Trans people are quite literally ‘freaks’ or ‘monsters’ on tabloid talk shows, framed as neither completely male or female, their humiliation and subjection to violence becomes acceptable.

These shows open up the private sphere to public judgement. Audiences are invited to form an opinion (vocally in the case of a studio audience) on trans people’s lives and experiences. Talk shows’ focus on personal stories challenge the boundaries of public and private, and what is appropriate behaviour in both. The inclusion of trans stories, particularly that of trans people of colour and those of lower socio economic status, reflect an awkward tension between sensationalisation and opening up conversations around social status.

In many ways, the talk show format facilitates the engagement of working-class people. Prior to the advent of day time talk shows, people from working class environments were not, on the whole, considered interesting enough to be on television. Day time talk
shows, and the saturation of reality shows, have changed this by featuring working class people as guests and audiences. Yet they tread a fine line between class empowerment and voyeurism. It is not uncommon for these programs to use working class people as a form of entertainment. As Gamson (1998, p. 16) suggests, “nearly anyone can feel superior watching people whose speech, dress, bodies, relationships and accents mark them as ‘trash’”.

Modern Day Freak Show: Sensationalisation and Objectification of Trans Adults

This tension can be found in the sensationalisation of trans people as ‘freaks’ for media amusement. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work on the history and meaning of freak shows in the US offers insight into the ways trans people are constructed as ‘freaks’ in mainstream media. In ‘Freakery’ (1996), Garland-Thomson outlines how bodies are constructed as deviant for both the entertainment and validation of others. She defines ‘freaks’ as those who “defy the ordinary and mock the predictable, exciting both anxiety and speculation among our more banal brethren” (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 1). The extraordinary body requires explanation and propels regulation, while also extending the boundaries of how the human subject is understood (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 1). The representation of trans people in tabloid media positions the viewer as not-trans, clearly positioning the trans subject as Other.

Trans people, often referred to as ‘the transgender problem’, act as signifiers for social concerns around changing definitions of gender. For Garland-Thomson (1996, p. 2), ‘freak’ bodies “function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment”. Gender is constructed not only as an attribute of someone
else, but also as something for our own benefit. The exceptional body, or the “monstrous body”, is never simply itself (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 3):

*The word monster...derives from the Latin monstra, meaning to warn, show, or sign, and which has given us the modern verb demonstrate...Whether generating awe, delight, terror, or knowledge, the monstrous emerges from culture-bound expectations even as it violates them.*

The ‘monstrous body’, in revealing itself, acts to dismantle what is read as ‘natural’. In representations of trans people this is used either to scare viewers and readers into a moral panic around the ‘trans issue’, or to act as a form of entertainment. Therefore, the representation of trans bodies in news media is not only concerned with the regulation of trans bodies and subjects, but with gendered bodies in general.

A key way trans people are sensationalised in a ‘freak show’ style is through an intense focus on trans bodies as a site of fascination and disgust. This focus on bodies, rather than subjectivities, effectively objectifies trans people. This is signalled most often in tabloid media through intensive focus on genitals. For example, when trans man Mark Angelo appeared on talk show Maury, the first question was “so what’s below the belt”, to which the audience laughs (Povich, 2006). Both the trans body, and the embarrassment following the question, is framed as entertainment for the audience. The trans body, in its monstrosity, acts as a huge inside joke. Angelo eludes to the ridiculous and invasive quality of this question when he replies, “I could ask you what’s going on below your belt”. This reveals a double standard in which trans bodies are signalled and treated as distinctively different from non-trans bodies.

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29 This is made with the assumption that genitals define a person’s sex, which determines their gender.
Invasive questions are not limited to tabloid or medical focused talk shows. Katie Couric focused an episode of her talk show on the lives of trans women. Couric (2014a) interviewed two prominent trans women of colour, model Carmen Carrera and actress Laverne Cox. While Couric’s aim was not to use these women as a form of entertainment, positioning her approach as a willingness to learn and listen, she came under fire for focusing on the transition aspects of their stories. Couric the spent majority of Carrera’s interview discussing the transition process, asking Carrera whether it was painful, commenting on the drugs she must have taken, and finally prompting her: “your private parts are different aren’t they” (Couric, 2014a)? It is at this stage that Carrera verbally shushes Couric and replies: “I don’t want to talk about that, it’s really personal. I’d rather talk about my modelling stuff…there’s more to trans people than that”.

When Couric comments on Carrera’s discomfort in her interview, Cox remarks that a focus on trans women’s anatomy objectifies and restricts trans people to their bodies, ignoring their lived experience, and the real threats they face daily. The objectification of trans people, whether it is through fascination or disgust, fixes them to the ‘monstrous body’. Indeed, by focusing on Carrera’s body, Couric treats her like Frankenstein’s monster - a collection of parts put together through the wonders of science. Garland-Thomson (1996, p. 2) suggests that “like the bodies of females and slaves, the monstrous body exists in societies to be exploited for someone else’s purposes”. Limiting trans people to their bodies serves in the interest of a non-trans audience, rather than trans people themselves, feeding into a desire for the ‘bizarre’. Following this initial interview, Couric (2014b) invited Cox back on her show to talk more in depth about trans issues. This provided both a space for Cox to speak on her own behalf about her experiences, as well as positioning Couric in a
redeemable light. Therefore, it is important to note that representations, such as Carrera and Cox’s initial interview, while reinforcing of damaging ideas around trans people, also hold the potential to initiate new discussions around gender. I will explore this concept in more depth later in this chapter.

This almost obsessive focus on trans people’s bodies also extends to representations in print media. Following the murder of Mayang Prasetyo, an Indonesian trans woman living in Brisbane, by her husband Marcus Volke, the newspaper *The Courier Mail* ran an cover story that received a vast amount of public and media criticism. Their cover page read “Monster Chef and the She Male” (Figure 7) and their inside story also featured the headline “Ladyboy and the butcher”, with the crude online banner “Killed and cooked trans woman was high-class sex worker” (Figure 8).

A strong focus of the coverage of Prasetyo’s death was her status as a trans woman and as a sex worker. The first reference to Prasetyo in *The Courier Mail’s* online article is: “a
trans woman murdered and cooked by her husband in their swank Brisbane apartment was a ‘high-class’ prostitute using profits from sex work to support her family in Indonesia” (Brennan et al., 2014). A direct link is made in these headlines between murder, trans identities, and sex work. The structuring of this sentence suggests that Prasetyo’s status as a trans woman and sex worker is something that has been ‘revealed’. The only images the online article features of Prasetyo, other than one of her with Volke, are those acquired off her Facebook page in revealing swimsuits. This marks Prasetyo’s body, and trans bodies in general, as the central object of fascination.

These aspects were not limited to The Courier Mail’s coverage of the murder. In an article for The Guardian, Amanda Meade (2014) critiqued the media coverage of the case:

*Daily Mail Australia delved into her profession, reporting she had advertised herself as a high-class, transsexual escort in the UK and Australia and was charging “$200 for half an hour to $500 an hour for her ‘top high class international’ services as a ‘shemale’ escort”. Ninemsn’s headline was “Butchered woman was high-class ‘shemale’ escort” and Ten’s The Project chose to use a photo of the victim in a bikini rather than one in which she was fully clothed.*

The linguistic framing of these articles is important to their reproduction of meaning. As Kim Powell (2014) notes, journalists occupy a powerful position in society, one that controls what news we hear about, and how we hear about them. Powell (2014) notes that in media reporting of domestic violence, the focus too often falls on the victim and the role of the (most often) male perpetrator is reduced. This focus means that domestic violence and sexual assault often become issues solely about women, and the role of men is not
implicated as part of their discussion (Powell, 2014). This is reflected in newspaper headlines following Volke’s murder of Prasetyo, such as “Butchered woman was high-class ‘shemale’ escort” (as cited in Meade, 2014) in which Prasetyo becomes the focus of the headlines, rather than the crime itself.

The language of these articles simultaneously position being trans as a contributor or cause for murder, while failing to acknowledge Prasetyo’s murder as a form of domestic violence. Prasetyo’s trans identity was clearly marked as the main element of this case. Some reports, such as that made by the ABC (Ford & Riga, 2014), refer to Prasetyo as an Indonesian woman in their headline and not until later mention, rather than ‘reveal’, that she is trans. However, most reports featured her trans identity in either the headline or the first sentence of the article. In many ways these articles refer to Prasetyo’s identification as a trans woman of colour and a sex worker as a cause for her murder, rather than as a reflection of trans women’s experiences. Several newspaper articles positioned Volke as a victim of mental illness, citing sources who confirm that he was always a ‘nice guy’, and including suicide hotlines at the end of their articles (“Mayang Prasetyo’s body”, 2014). These framings of this crime position Volke as being as much of a victim as Prasetyo. While a suicide hotline was referenced, domestic violence help was not. What is missing overall in these depictions is a clear acknowledgement that Prasetyo was a victim of domestic violence, and of the high violence rates faced by trans women, both domestically and out of the home.

**Starring and Trans Representation: Opening up Public Discourses around Gender**

While television talk shows can be observed as a form of modern freak show, Garland-Thomson’s analysis in ‘Staring’ (2009) opens up the possibility for this model – both
in talk shows and tabloid media in general - to be read as productive. Staring is positioned as something we are not supposed to do as “people just simply don’t like to be stared at”; therefore staring is a guilty pleasure that can be inappropriate and embarrassing, for both the starter and the staree (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 5). There is also an inherent contradiction within the action of staring. There are bodies that we are more embarrassed to be staring at, be that they are physically different and evoke a stare that pities for example. Yet we understand why we stare at them, precisely because there is something to be stared at. The reasons for staring greatly affect the shame of staring; we are more likely to be embarrassed when staring at someone’s face or some ‘abnormality’ about their bodies. Therefore it can be said that an amount of shame is attached to staring, as well as a value imposed onto that at which we stare.

Gender is the primary quality by which we read and categorise people. Gender then is extremely important to how we stare and who we stare at, whether out of attraction and interest, or fear and disgust. If the amount of shame attached to staring is determined by the value given to the thing at which we share, then surely staring at someone because of their gender, or more specifically the inability to read their gender, creates discomfort. Discomfort however does not mean we will stop staring, or that we will want to. Discomfort can lead to increased interest, precisely because it arises out of something we are so invested in; in this case, gender.

Some people warrant more stares than others, and can lead to more shame. For Garland-Thomson (2009, p. 6), the stare signifies another sort of contradiction, one which reveals the productive nature of the stare:
Contradiction between the desire to stare and the social prohibitions against it fills staring encounters with angst that can be productive, leading starers to new insights. Triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds. Because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviours, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations.

For this reason, staring cannot be thought of as simply a negative action or a form of restrictive surveillance. For Garland-Thomson, staring is a visual exchange that cannot be thought of as simply looking. Neither can it be thought of as like the gaze, often defined as an oppressive act of discipline in which the subject being gazed upon is subordinated (such as the male gaze). Garland-Thomson’s conceptualisation of staring can be utilised to explore the function of talk shows as a form of freak show.

Audience’s ‘staring’ at trans people in media can be thought of as producing new forms of meaning and communication, rather than simply condemning bodies through ‘freak’ discourse. As a visual interaction, staring reveals and defines things about not only the staree, but also the starer.

_In line at the supermarket, a freak on the tabloid cover or the sensational photo of a murder victim lures our hapless eyes, trumpeting harsh evidence of the randomness of human embodiment and our own mortality. We may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us_ (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 13)
This suggests that the self, as well as the Other, is defined through the act of staring. Using this theorisation of the stare, the freak show discourse, perpetuated through tabloid talk shows, can be complicated as beyond more than simply negative.

Knowledge can be gained from staring; when we stare at something or someone “who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not” (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 6). The productive quality of the stare can be observed in the mainstream media’s response to ex-Olympian and former Kardashian consort Caitlyn Jenner’s gender identity.\(^{30}\) Over the last year tabloid magazines and online news sites have been speculating on Jenner’s gender identity, with magazines such as US Weekly focussing on her wearing of (feminine) jewellery, painted nails, and long hair (McRady, 2014). US magazine *InTouch* photo shopped an image of Jenner with make-up and women’s clothing on their front cover (Figure 9). At the time Jenner had not yet come out as trans, and still publically identified as male. Unsurprisingly, the magazine faced backlash both from trans advocates as well as general pop-culture media sites. Yet the image symbolised what majority of tabloid magazines were doing to Jenner: projecting assumptions about the truth of her gender: what it ‘really’ was or should be.

Jenner’s gender has been taken up as a part of public property in that it has been depicted as the public’s right to know. Being able to read a person’s gender not only affects how another person interacts with them, but also the meaning such an interaction has (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. vii). Not being able to clearly read Jenner’s gender created

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\(^{30}\) As of June 1, 2015, as announced in a Vanity Fair magazine cover (“Introducing Caitlyn”, 2015), Jenner, formally known as ‘Bruce’, publically identifies as Caitlyn and by ‘she’ and ‘her’. While I refer to Jenner accordingly, most of the media representations I refer to in this thesis were produced prior to this identification, and are therefore reflective of Jenner’s identification at the time, rather than a rejection of her identity.
anxiety as it directly interfered with the ability for people to categorise her as one gender or another. It can’t be denied that these magazines also feed into a social appetite for spectacle. Tabloid newspaper *Daily News* even went as far as posting paparazzi photos of Jenner in a dress through the windows of a private residence (Figure 10)\(^31\). The need to know Jenner’s gender apparently justified the invasion of her most private space to capture the truth of her gender.

These magazines also highlight the demand of feminisation placed on trans women, and those perceived to be trans women; “the possibility that trans women are even capable of making a distinction between identifying as female and wanting to cultivate a hyperfeminine image is never raised” (Serano, 2013, p. 229). With a more feminised appearance Jenner was assumed to be female-identified, even when she publically identified as male. This locates gender as simply an outward expression rather than an internal

\(^31\) In California it is illegal to take photos into private residences with a telephoto lens without consent.
identity. Serano (2013, p. 230) suggests that the media’s “fascination with the feminization of trans women is a by-product of their sexualisation of all women”. The emphasis on feminisation indicates that trans women’s acceptance as female is predicated on adhering to strict normative standards of what a woman should look and act like.

The media frenzy around Jenner signals to a growing - albeit still sensationalised - demystification of trans identities. Whilst these magazines were making numerous speculations about Jenner’s life for shock value, they were at the same time acknowledging the existence of trans identities, something not previously prevalent in tabloid media without an accompanying cheating or sex scandal. When it was announced that Jenner would participate in a two hour interview special with host Diane Sawyer on program 20/20, it was largely assumed that she would address the rumours of her gender identity (Sawyer 2015). There was an enormous amount of anticipation towards, and interest in, Jenner’s interview.

The Daily News, the same publication which published unauthorised photos of Jenner in her own home, proclaimed “Viewing parties for Bruce Jenner’s 20/20 interview with Diane Sawyer will be the event of the season” (Pesce, 2015). Although these parties on the whole reflect a sense of celebration, as the article describes “festive viewing parties to celebrate his journey”, it is hard to deny the sensationalisation of Jenner’s life. While more personalised than the freak show qualities of tabloid talk shows, the sensationalisation of

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32 For example a People article asserting that Jenner is “Transitioning into a Woman” had the following statement at the bottom of their online piece: “For more information about transgender issues visit the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, and PFLAG”, thus promoting trans advocacy and support services (Nahas, 2015).

33 Prior to the interview’s airing, Jenner publically identified as ‘Bruce’ and as male. In the program itself Jenner asked for the name ‘Bruce’ and pronoun’s ‘he’ and ‘him’ to be used until Jenner was ready to present as female.
trans stories for entertainment remains. Instead of the local carnival, viewing parties for Jenner’s ‘outing’ place the enjoyment of ‘freakery’ within the comfort of home. While 20/20’s interview with Jenner on the whole is supportive, engaging in discussion of broader trans issues, the marketing of the interview encouraged the continued sensationalisation of Jenner’s identity. Advertised as “Bruce Jenner the Interview: the journey, the decisions, the future”, the interview’s promotion did not directly state that it would be concerned with Jenner’s gender identity, but rather alludes to it (Entertainment Weekly, 2015). In this way, audiences were primed to tune in.

The Vilification of Trans as Deception

Media depictions of trans women, fictional and non-fictional, often take the form of two archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or the “pathetic transsexual” (Serano, 2013, p.277). For the purposes of my research, the archetype of deception looms large in the methods by which images of trans people intersect with discourses of truth within mainstream media. While ‘deceivers’ successfully ‘pass’ as being women, their function on talk shows is not to challenge ideas about gender,

On the contrary, they are positioned as ‘fake’ women, and their ‘secret’ trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of ‘truth’. At this moment, the ‘deceiver’’s appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes the real identity (Serano, 2013, p. 277).

A reoccurring feature of The Jerry Springer Show is the explicit invitation to audience members to laugh and clap at the guests’ - mostly men - disgust and anger over finding out their partners are trans. Episodes such as “Big Tranny Surprise”, “My boyfriend is a girl”, “If
it looks like a woman”, “Transsexual Secrets”, “Trannies Tell All”, “‘She’ is a He”, and “Explosive Transsexual Affairs” all include the ‘reveal’ of guests as trans (Springer, 2010). The very act of the ‘reveal’ of trans people suggests that a trans identity is a deception covering up the subject’s ‘true’ gender. Positioned alongside sexual affairs on talk shows and in tabloid magazines, trans is read as a perverse secret – one that audiences are invited to find humour in.

Equally important to these representations is the idea of duplicity; the trans person is two things at once (both woman and man). Trans subjects are not only depicted as deceptive, but as living a double life, both of which are inauthentic. The trans woman is not a ‘real’ woman, yet her manhood has also been compromised by her femininity. Setting up trans people in this way makes it easier for media to position non-trans people as victims, and trans people as the villains. This can be observed in relation to the British reality television show, There’s Something About Miriam (Vincent, 2003). The show featured a group of heterosexual men seeking the romantic attention of a woman, who was ‘revealed’ to be trans. The show’s airing was delayed because the male contestants sued the show for being deceived into becoming intimate with the trans woman, who was in their opinion a man (Deans, 2003).

Similarly, performer Casper Smart also came under attack in 2014 for texting a transwoman while dating pop-star Jennifer Lopez. Trans women are often used as pawns in mainstream media to provoke homophobia through the emphasis of their ‘true’ maleness (Serano, 2013, p. 277). Tabloid papers from several countries claimed Smart’s communication with a transwoman proved his homosexuality. This effectively denied the womanhood of the transwoman by conflating trans identities with homosexuality,
positioning trans women as equivalent to gay men. Website *Radar Online* quoted a ‘friend’ of Smart who blamed Smart’s infidelity on the deception of the transwoman he texted: “if a woman looks overdeveloped in more ways than one, you gotta watch out for that sketchy shit” (Morgan, 2014). This not only suggests that being trans is something to be ashamed of - a dirty secret - but also that trans women are to blame if men are attracted to them. The trans woman is blamed for tricking the heterosexual male, not only into believing she is female, but also for making him experience desire. Inherent in this depiction is the assumption that if a man is involved with a trans woman, he must be unaware of her identity as trans. This reinforces the idea than a trans identity is a lie, and also that trans women should not be desired.

**Gender as ’Fact’: Justifications of Binarism in Print Media**

Inherent in this motif of deceit is the assumption that there is a truthful expression of gender, one that can be asserted as ‘fact’. Following Laverne Cox’s appearance on *TIME* magazine, Kevin Williamson posted an article on *The National Review Online* entitled “Laverne Cox Is Not a Woman: facts are not subject to our feelings” (2014). The article was reposted by *The Chicago Sun-Times*, but removed the next day following criticism. The removal was accompanied by an apology for the “oversight” from Tom McNamee from *The Sun Times* in a statement for *Buzzfeed*: “we try to present a range of views on an issue, not only those views we may agree with, but also those we don’t agree with” (Zarrell, 2014). By suggesting that the publication does not allow political opinion to determine what types of articles they publish - implying it is without bias - *The Sun Times* diverts responsibility away from itself. The apology continues: “upon further consideration, we concluded the essay did

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34 Williamson has prior form in writing about trans issues, also penning an article titled “Bradley Manning Is Not a Woman: Pronouns and Delusions Do Not Trump Biology” (2013).
not include some key facts and its overall tone was not consistent with what we seek to publish”. Continuing to refer back to themes of truth, the apology does not address any of the key issues contained in the article itself.\(^{35}\)

Williamson’s article frames fact and feeling as dichotomous and oppositional vis à vis reason and emotion. Facts, according to Williamson, are of a higher value than subjectivities and cannot be altered. Throughout the article Williamson refers to Cox aggressively as ‘he’, acknowledging that it would be a pronoun Cox would dislike. This use of language is not simply a personal attack; it is a criticism of trans identities all together. Williamson compares trans identities to effigies such as voodoo dolls, and even equates the trans community to a cult:

\begin{quote}
If an effigy can be made sufficiently like the reality it is intended to represent, then it becomes, for the mystical purposes at hand, a reality in its own right. The infinite malleability of the postmodern idea of “gender,” as opposed to the stubborn concreteness of sex, is precisely the reason the concept was invented.
\end{quote}

Williamson follows that “Cox is not a woman, but an effigy of a woman” due to “biological reality” of bodily sex. In contrasting the malleability of gender with the concreteness of sex, Williamson reinforces a binary of sex and gender where sex is a passive (biological) entity upon which (cultural) gender does it work. Asserted here is that biological sex is ‘real’,

\(^{35}\) Following the removal of his article from The Sun Times, Williamson released the following statement in The National Review: “Tom McNamee et al. are a disgrace to a proud newspaper tradition, and an unhappy reminder that post-operative transsexuals are not the only men who have had their characteristic equipment removed” (Zarrell, 2014). During the period which I undertook my research, both Williamson’s response to The Sun Times’ removal and his original article were removed from The National Review’s website without comment. Nevertheless, Williamson’s article remains a key example of how trans people are depicted within mainstream media. Furthermore, the removal of the article reveals a shift that is occurring within representations of trans people, of what is deemed acceptable to publish, particularly in the last year or two.
whereas gender and, in particular, trans identities are not. Williamson suggests that while homosexuality is a private matter, trans identities “would impose on society at large an obligation...to treat delusion as fact”.

The argument that truth is based in a ‘biological reality’ also underpins an article from The Telegraph (UK) entitled “Conchita Wurst is a man. So why is everyone referring to him as 'she’?” by Brendan O’Neill (2014). While initially talking about drag identities, O’Neill directs his critique towards trans people more broadly:

*Does objective reality – the fact that there are biological differences between men and women...count for nothing in the face of one person’s wish to be known as something he is not?*

Both Williamson and O’Neill base their critiques of trans people on a particular understanding of what ‘objective reality’ or ‘biological fact’ is. O’Neill bemoans the present age where relativism is said to replace ‘truth’, “the most concrete categories in human history – man and woman – have quietly died at the narcissistic altar of allowing everyone to choose his/her/neither's gender identity”. O’Neill makes a problematic assumption that the dichotomous relationship between man and woman is rooted in biology - by implying that trans identities are a recent social phenomenon, they become ephemeral. His critique of trans identities as a narcissistic form of self-indulgence de-values trans identities and de-politicises the everyday social barriers, discrimination, and violence experienced by trans people on a regular basis.

Trans people are positioned, in both articles, as a threat to society as they purportedly destabilise categories such as woman and man that have been, and still are to a
large extent, seen as fixed. It is the dislocating of these perceived stable identifiers that Jay Prosser (1998, p. 3) suggests creates discomfort:

Transition represents the movement in between that threatens to dislocate our ties to identity places we conceive of as essentially (in every sense) secure.

Transition provokes discomfort, anxiety – both for the subject in transition and for the other in the encounter; it pushes up against the very feasibility of identity.

This anxiety and discomfort provokes transphobic representations which attempt to either deny the existence of trans people, or blame them for threatening the stability of binary sex and gender. Furthermore, Prosser (1998, p. 6) argues that trans identities challenge this idea of ‘truth’ by suggesting that, rather than being inauthentic, “transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity”. This complicates the binaristic idea of ‘truth’, referred to in these opinion articles, by suggesting that it can be something that is achieved or re-imagined, rather than something predetermined and fixed.

How we determine a body as sexed and gendered is contingent upon how bodies are read visually. On an everyday basis we make the assumption that every person we interact with has a gender, male or female (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 1). We read this assumption as though it is a ‘fact’. Gender attribution is something that is ‘decided’ or enacted by someone else, just as much as it is determined by the self (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 1). If gender is simply a form of identification for the individual, how to we account for the constricted and socially inscribed ways in which gender functions? As gender is relational, it is never simply about the individual alone. When Williamson refers to trans people as placing an “obligation” on society as a whole, what he is demonstrating is a panic around the de-
stabilisation of sex and gender as foundational categories of which social life is based. Therefore, media depictions of trans people as ‘troubling’ or ‘threatening’ suggest that gender is as much for those reading a body, as it is for the body itself.
Conclusion

My thesis has explored the representation of trans children and trans adults in mainstream media. Responding to the recent increase in representations of trans people, my thesis aimed to complicate the idea that visibility acts as a marker of social improvement. By comparing the different media representations of trans children and trans adults, I have not only explored what accounts for this difference, but also emphasised the complex nature of such representations as beyond simply ‘negative’ or ‘positive’.

Representations of trans children, in comparison to those of trans adults, reveal that there is a distinct difference in the way trans children are represented in mainstream media. The category of child, as conceptualised in sociological literature, is simultaneously called upon and challenged in media representations of trans children. The prominent medicalisation of trans children is one of the reasons why there has been more open minded representations of trans children than there has been of trans adults. The authority of the medical profession, as referenced in media representations, acts as a form of validity to authenticate trans identities.

Similarly, the concept that childhood is a period of intensified fluidity has meant that trans children have been treated with more leniency in their gender identification in media representations. This being said, the perceived flexibility of childhood has also lead to the dominate idea that childhood, as a state of constant becoming, represents an incomplete self. The idea that trans identities are a phase is used in media representations as evidence of the inability of children to make, or consent to, decisions regarding their gender identity. There is an overall investment, both in progressive and conservative media outlets, in maintaining a gendered status-quo. Media representations of trans children, from
conservative outlets such as Fox to reputable or perceived progressive sources such as ABC, reinforce particular norms around gender.

I have noted, in comparison to representations of trans children, representations of trans adults have been more out rightly transphobic or dismissive of trans people. In my chapter on adult representation I have explored that, while there has been more visibility in representations of trans adults, this visibility is not necessarily indicative of social progress or an increase in trans people’s rights. I have suggested that the sensationalisation of trans adults within talk shows, tabloid magazines, and newspapers, acts as a continued form of freakshow in which trans people are objectified for entertainment. That said, my analysis, drawing on the work of Garland-Thomson, also explored the ways in which trans representation, even in its sensationalised form, can introduce new audiences to and open up discussions around gender.

In reference to media representations, I have examined how the trans adult subject is depicted as deceptive in relation to discourses of ‘truth’. These representations frame trans identities as inauthentic and covering up what are perceived to be true selves. Focusing on two opinion articles, I explored how the justification of gender and sex as ‘biological facts’ are used in media representations to deny the authenticity of trans identities. I challenged this idea with the work of Jay Prosser, who suggests that trans people, rather than defying authenticity, move towards or reinvent ‘truth’ through their identification as trans.

While this project has focused on the representation of trans people in mainstream media, further work is needed in regards to how trans children and adults are represented in social media. New forms of social media are not only changing the way people
communicate with each other, but also how news and information is spread and accessed. In December 2014, 17-year-old trans girl Leelah Alcorn took her own life after posting a suicide note on her online Tumblr page. After coming out to her conservative parents in Ohio, Alcorn was placed in Christian conversion therapy. The aim of which was to convince her that she needed to live as her assigned birth gender, male. Alcorn’s death became a news story around the world, spread throughout both mainstream and social media.

Multiple online groups sought to save Alcorn’s blog posts where she openly discussed her trans identity, at the same time as her family attempted to delete them. Alcorn’s posts were taken up as a form of public property, and her parent’s attempt to erase her posts was read by many as suppressing Alcorn’s true identity. Following the news of Alcorn’s death across multiple media platforms worldwide, her parents were condemned in a whirlwind of criticism. The hashtag “Leelah Alcorn”, across online sites such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook, not only featured messages of support for trans people, but also messages critical of Leelah’s parents.

In her suicide note Alcorn criticised the actions of her parents, and also directly addressed social attitudes towards trans people, begging for her death to make a difference in the way trans people are treated: in her own words, ‘Fix Society. Please’ (Alcorn, 2014). The power of both mainstream media and social media put Alcorn’s words into action. After

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36 Research such as that done by Nielsen and Schröder (2014, p. 472) suggest that social media sites are changing how news is produced, distributed, and discussed. Similarly Chadwick (2011, p. 5) questions whether traditional ways in which the “news cycle” is understood should be replaced with ideas such as “information cycle”, as consumers of media are more and more integrated in the production of news.

37 Tumblr is an online blogging site which allows users to not only post their own content on their own ‘page’ but also reblog (share) content from other users. The user’s posts, and the posts of people they follow, appear on a user’s ‘dashboard’. Users can also search tags or keywords, like ‘trans’ or ‘Leelah Alcorn’ to find any posts tagged with these terms. Tumblr was a vital part of how Alcorn’s suicide note remained online, and circulated across both social and mainstream media.
the widespread news circulation, an online petition was created calling for a ban on conversion therapy in the US, in response to Alcorn’s experience (“Enact Leelah’s Law”, 2015). ‘Leelah’s Law’ was posted on The White House petitions website, and in April 2015 the Obama government officially called for a ban of conversion therapy (Jarrett, 2015). This is just one example of the changing nature of how mainstream media and social media interact.

Online venues such as YouTube and Tumblr are not only changing the way information or news about trans people are accessed, but are also making it possible for trans people to create their own content and speak in their own name. For trans advocate and writer Janet Mock (as cited in Sneed, 2014, p. 3), these online spaces are improving the ways trans people can “create their own portraits of self, of representation, and creating the mirrors that they want to see in media”. Social media, therefore, not only reflects mainstream media, but also influences it.

The influence of social media, in the media attention towards Alcorn’s death, signals to a shift in the way media representations of trans people are being accessed and produced. The lines between social media and mainstream media have become blurry; the ways in which news and information are accessed are changing. As I have noted, the increased visibility of trans representation has not meant that there has been an increase in the social acceptance of trans people. The increased ability for trans people to produce their own stories, and speak in their own voices, however, holds the potential to impact how trans people are represented in mainstream media. Nevertheless, the continued silence of trans people, particularly trans children, in mainstream media, indicates that there is still a long way to go.
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