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# Framing Stigma in Trans\* Mediascapes: How does it feel to be a problem?

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## Abstract

This article concerns Anglo-American media coverage of trans lives and deaths. It investigates the discursive framing of trans people as only valuable in their death, both in the mediascape at large and repeated in the sharing of media items within trans communities. Underpinning the necropolitics of trans loss of life are a number of unsavory stigmatizing agendas that become startlingly exposed in two key transmedial moments in early 2014 by trans women of color, Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. Their interventions offer possibility models for answering the delicately, or forcefully, unasked question of “how does it feel to be a problem?” from the other world (W.E.B. Du Bois).

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Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

W.E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People”

A ‘good’ problem is one that wears its inconclusiveness like a badge of merit: a token of its problematic service of inviting and inciting. It is one that twists itself around its own loose ends to tie itself into an alluring knot, like a ribbon around a gift of process.

Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect*

“We are scaring ourselves to death,” writes Loree Cook-Daniels, the Policy and Program Director of FORGE, a Wisconsin-based national transgender organization.<sup>1</sup> She is responding to a statistic being cited routinely about “the average lifespan for trans women (or Black transwomen, depending on the source) is 35”: a damning, damaging vision. It is not only false because based on faulty data that only calculates the average age of people reported murdered on the International Transgender Day of Remembrance website, but presents a misleading

horizon for surviving and thriving.<sup>2</sup> Cook-Daniels observes that bandying about the constant threat of death can be fatally dangerous, leading to increases in suicidal feelings; indeed, people report on Facebook and elsewhere that they “feel hopeless” by reading the statistics and the endlessly repeated details of the murders of trans people each year.<sup>3</sup> In the months that I wrote this article the number of American trans women reported murdered in 2016 surpassed the total of twenty-two from 2015, and in March 2016 the Trans Murder Monitoring project announced a total of over two-thousand cases of reported killings of trans and gender-diverse people globally since monitoring began January 1, 2008.<sup>4</sup> I do not want to undercut the reality of this excessive, gross loss of life fed by widespread stigma for any gender variance perceived as non-conforming to normative male/man and female/woman identities. What I find striking is the shift in intra-community discussions: social media has been a boon for communicating the possibilities, accessibility, and results of physical transitions, but now feels dominated by online discussions centering on the excessive overkilling of trans and gender variant people. Though it is possible that finally people of color and indigenous trans\*/two-spirit leadership has managed to set the agenda according to their most immediate concerns, the traction of trans loss of life, I venture, might have come about through

other mechanisms. What justifies this transferal in focus from the living to the dead, what undergirds it?

This inaccurate statistic of “dead by 35” is based on news reporting of specifically *trans* murders, a murder already framed by a particular orientation to a problem—a murder that could be classified as a hate crime.<sup>5</sup> News channels otherwise neglect to report on the circumstances of living a trans life, bar spectacles of trans youth, anti-trans bathroom bills, or Caitlyn Jenner’s celebrity transition. Trans bodies only seem to be become valuable as a warning to others, that is, only once they are made remarkable, in danger, or taken. When community members spread the false “dead by 35” statistic, they amplify the perpetrators who “send a message” with their violent acts. The citation of this false statistic generates a constant crisis mode of fear and hopelessness, rather than addressing the underlying structural problem of social stigma. Achille Mbembe’s diagnosis of the necropolitics of contemporary social life that centers on death is thus also reflected in trans communities that commune vis-à-vis the perishing of their members.<sup>6</sup> C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn name this problem of becoming framed as valuable only in one’s afterlife as the enacting of “trans necropolitics” that causes inter- and intra-community damage by feeding a racist, neoliberal agenda of punishing crime.<sup>7</sup> This state of affairs can only be exposed, they write, by bringing into “one frame the everyday lives of trans and gender non-conforming people of color” together with “the symbiotic (and sometimes parasitic) relationships that develop after their deaths with globalized homonormative and transnormative political projects.”<sup>8</sup> The rhetorical, descriptive, and illustrative framing of the issues matters, for besides re-presenting a reality, representations are also always politically speaking on behalf of someone.<sup>9</sup> Who speaks in the name of the under threat or perished trans woman of color?

In a discussion of *framing* as a concept, Mieke Bal argues that different than providing ‘context’ to an experience under analysis, framing is an accounting of an interpretation from a particular point of view that leads to the event of “the agent of framing [to be] framed in turn.”<sup>10</sup> However, as quoted in the epigraph, W.E.B. du Bois points out the difficulty faced by the (white) world of

“rightly framing” the question, “how does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>11</sup> Framing then risks becoming stigmatizing in itself. Being framed wrongly occurs when someone becomes framed as a spoiled identity: disqualified, deviant, discredited, dead on arrival. In the midst of what I suggest be called the “trans mediascape” after Arjun Appadurai, I examine recent and unprecedented moments of rupture in which the act of framing trans lives in a stigmatizing mode is called to attention as an event. The effect is a shift from framing the event to framing the framer, which effectively shifts the question of being the problem to the situation of discrimination and off the trans subject’s very being. Trans and non-binary stigma is often activated and less often redressed in the format of the interview, the moment when how it feels to be a problem goes unasked, particularly on the media platforms of talk shows and news programs. When the trans-identified person (or body) refuses to be the problem in the interview, the problem of being trans grows into being even more of the misplaced problem. This may sound inverted and knotty, but as Sara Ahmed shows us, “When you point out the damage you become the cause of damage.”<sup>12</sup> This results in kind of boomerang between cause and effect—when you throw out being seen as different is a problem, it comes back as you being the problem.

The highly mediatized moment of a so-called transgender tipping point could be pinpointed to the space of a few months in early 2014 when two ruptures took place on major television channels initiated by trans women of color Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, which then replayed on YouTube, shared across Facebook, Twitter and other platforms. The transmedial event of calling attention to how stigma typically frames trans lives, and to two high level news presenters caught in the act, opened the possibility for the framer to become accountable, to self-reflect, and to feel the burdening weight of the frame. Laverne Cox, “shut down” a line of questioning from Katie Couric, whereas Janet Mock “flips the script” on her interview with Piers Morgan. In divergent manners, each perform the affective trope that T.L. Cowan recognizes as “the transfeminist kill/joy,” expressed as the rage that comes into being through living the violent effects of transphobia and transmisogyny and the practice of transformational love as a struggle for existence.<sup>13</sup>

## FRAMING STIGMA IN TRANS\* MEDIASCAPES

Where Cowan focuses on cultural productions set in the context of killing logics and responding with hope-filling transfeminist aesthetics, I am instead particularly interested in moments when the flow of mainstream representation legitimates, however fleetingly, how it feels to be a problem. In this article I will show how calling attention to the framing initiates ripple effects, but nevertheless the outcomes are inconclusive, and the problematic framing of being a media problem partially remains. These inconclusive results, I argue, are symptomatic for the visibility problem faced by trans folks living amongst a saturated trans mediascape dominated by necropolitical features that feed on visibility—the better to know and find your target. The epigraph from Brian Massumi proposes that “a ‘good’ problem is one that wears its inconclusiveness like a badge of merit” in that it invites us to follow an open-ended process.<sup>14</sup> It is only in this sense that stigma can be called a good problem. As a designated problem, it incites me to follow the binding ribbon of transgender and gender non-conformity stigma to see how it can be not only “managed” in Goffmanian terms of negotiating disclosure, but also contested in a protracted struggle.<sup>15</sup>

The struggle over trans media representation is morphing and growing in size and scale seemingly daily. Commenting on the explosion of television media representation resulting in “the new trans landscape” Susan Stryker jokes, “In a previous geological era (about six months ago), Amazon’s binge-worthy streaming media comedy-drama *Transparent* was enjoying its proverbial 15 minutes of fame, ... [it] helped push the public conversation on transgender issues in the United States to then-unprecedented heights. Ah, those were simpler times.”<sup>16</sup> Though written before the Internet was publicly launched, Arjun Appadurai’s 1990 essay “Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” offers grounding points to analyze the shifts in a trans mediascape towards the digital, which increasingly appears to cohere around a trans necropolitical imaginary: some may live and others must die. Examining the convergence of image, the imagined, and the imaginary in globalization, Appadurai proposes that “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices” that involve both a form of work and a form of negotiation between sites of agency in individuals and “fields

of possibility.”<sup>17</sup> The framework he suggests for studying these disjunctures breakdown into five “-scapes,” referencing the irregularity of landscapes and their deeply perspectival constructs.<sup>18</sup> The most important for my analysis are the *mediascapes* and *ideoscapes* that provide the image and idea building blocks for “imagined worlds.” The mediascape refracts the disjunctures between -scapes by distributing not only information, but also “large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world” that blur the realistic and fictional.<sup>19</sup> The imagined worlds become “chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects” when, or especially when they are strips of reality that follow scripts with elements (characters, plots, and textual forms) that contain complex sets of metaphors by which people live.<sup>20</sup> Ideoscapes are often more directly political images that manifest “ideologies of states and counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it” by referencing key words of the Enlightenment, such as *self-determination* in trans movements.<sup>21</sup> These are the global conditions that determine how possibility models might be (re)produced in social and cultural imagination practices.

While Appadurai’s framework of -scapes insist on the labor that conditions experiences of an imagined world, it does not comment on how these worlds *feel* given said morphing structuring conditions. I find in Brian Massumi’s *Politics of Affect* a helpful clarification that affect does not pertain to raw experience, but to the weighted and structuring affective framing that shapes one’s sense of the present. Like Appadurai, for Massumi experience is informed by conditions of prior and potential -scapes, what he calls “prior takings-form,” a prime mechanism for capture that “texture the landscape of potential in which a coming event comes about lined with competing tendencies and alternative paths.”<sup>22</sup> Experience is not set out in advance, but nor is it cut out in the raw. One’s sense of the present is in-formed, educated, trained through histories of gestures and repertoires of technique, and with Appadurai also with repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes of discretely identified peoples. From this perspective within the landscape of potential we can feel the affective framing that weighs on Appadurai’s statement: “One man’s

imagined community is another man's political prison."<sup>23</sup> The mediascape is not only confining in terms of a restricted set of images, but it also informs the landscape of potential that excludes some while others reach new heights of shared visibility. What are the implications for those trans people who cannot safely become thrust into the limelight, much less feel celebrated by this newfound visibility?

Commenting on what strides have occurred since Stonewall, trans rights activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy articulates how "Black trans people have been struggling for acceptance for 50 years. And we're not even close to getting it," citing an increase in violence against trans folks, people of color and sex workers linked to an increase in visibility on media platforms.<sup>24</sup>

The way I see it, the government sanctioned those murders. Their silence was approval. They've been killing us girls for years. Is it anything new? No. Is the rate they're killing any different? Since our visibility happened, there's been even more brutality, harassment, mistreatment happening on a regular basis. *People can't get to Laverne Cox or Janet Mock, so instead, they go after a girl walking in a street in her neighborhood at night, just trying to make money to survive.* And when the police come, the murderer goes home free of charge, while this trans woman nobody cares about lies dead in the street.<sup>25</sup>

As Executive Director for the Transgender GenderVariant Intersex Justice Project, which aims to assist transgender persons who are considered to be disproportionately incarcerated under the prison-industrial-complex, Miss Major has an acute sense of how experiences of state violence carve out a trans necropolitical imaginary. She also points to how visibility of some exceptional trans women of color, can precipitate violence towards others. Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, however, hardly experience visibility without harm. Since coming of media age in 2013–2014, both advocates have struggled in mainstream media outlets to interrupt the smooth process of their capture by the framing of gender norms and realness.

"Laverne Cox flawlessly shuts down Katie Couric's invasive questions about transgender people," flashes a Salon.com headline, emphasizing both the grace of Cox and how televisual programs assume a cisgender perspective.<sup>26</sup> A former newscaster for all three major United States

broadcasters (ABC, CBS and NBC), Couric signed a record-breaking deal to host her own daytime talk show "Katie" (2012–2014). On January 6, 2014 for the show "Transgender Trailblazers," Couric brought in the breakout star of *Orange is the New Black* series Laverne Cox and transgender model Carmen Carrera to discuss their careers. Nonetheless, during the interview Couric honed into their genital status, repeating questions that on a previous segment Carrera had already deflected as being too personal in nature. When Cox was also pressed, she used Couric's claim to want to "educate" her viewers to dish up a lesson:

The preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people. And then we don't get to really deal with the real lived experiences. The reality of trans people's lives is that so often we are targets of violence. We experience discrimination disproportionately to the rest of the community. Our unemployment rate is twice the national average; if you are a trans person of color, that rate is four times the national average. The homicide rate is highest among trans women. If we focus on transition, we don't actually get to talk about those things.

Cox effectively seizes on the framing of trans experience through surgery and individual transition and describes in detail how through that interpretative perspective another narrative about the process of stigmatization becomes excluded ("lived realities of that oppression and discrimination"), and in fact becomes perpetuated by this script. Sidestepping the "delicacy" of asking how it *feels* to be (made) a problem, Couric makes trans *bodies* the problem.

While Couric is shown listening hot-faced in a reaction shot, Cox continues to tell the story of Islan Nettles, a twenty-two year old trans woman of color talking with friends in the heat of August 2013, on the street in Harlem, New York. They are catcalled, then yelled at with homophobic and transphobic slurs by a group of young men walking by. The men then determine that Nettles is trans and brutally attack her, leaving her to die in the street. Cox's voice speaks full of emotion, words tumble out; there is no room for her to be interrupted. And she stays on message: if we only talk about individual bodies then we aren't talking about the collective lived reality of violence. She also successfully invokes a measure of

## FRAMING STIGMA IN TRANS\* MEDIASCAPES

violence as bodily harm to counter the violent act of someone violating her bodily privacy, on camera no less. We feel not just the weighted affective frame of Cox's reality, but a larger landscape of potential in which competing tendencies for desire and violence erupt around the body of trans women. Rather than Cox simply "shutting down" Couric, she shunts the conversation into another imagined world that appreciates the gravity of being a target of violence, and to structural discrimination.

Imagined worlds might be approached by how, for Erving Goffman, such "frames" organize experience into mental orientations.<sup>27</sup> His structuralist method for studying how situations are defined according to subjective experience aids understanding Cox's participation in the discussion as a kill/joy, raging against transmisogyny and racism while also providing a new affective frame for fomenting a social movement. Thomas Scheff develops frame analysis for studying social movements to show how frame alignment, bridging, amplification, extension and transformation activities are a necessary condition for participation.<sup>28</sup> That frames are interactional and an ongoing accomplishment shows how their construction forms a chain that links discourse to the institutional level; one can trace a micro-macro pathway from gesture to word to social structure. Following the frame assembly around "lived reality" occurring in this interaction, Couric comes to acknowledge that in their discussion "a teachable moment" erupts when Cox shifts from genital surgeries into a new frame of gender justice.<sup>29</sup> Media spin or not, the expressions "*educating* my viewers" and "*teaching* those who are not familiar with transgenders [*sic*]" take on new meanings when the frame of gender justice shifts into view: we zoom out from learning about what is between Cox's legs to what it means to walk down the street on those legs. In her "Friday Follow-up" show, Couric acknowledges the "teachable moment" that interrogating someone's surgical status is objectifying and distracting from the real issues at hand. Couric also seems to grasp the lesson that white cisgender gender norms reduce identity to genitals and skin color. She received kudos from online commentators for her follow-up June 2014 segment with Cox talking about *Free CeCe*, the documentary about CeCe McDonald that she

produced, and with GLAAD senior media strategist Tiq Milan and ACLU lawyer Chase Strangio, both trans men, who Couric brought into discussion about trans rights and media representation.<sup>30</sup>

Media spin and framing can be co-extensive; not knowing how to rightly frame an issue is often an excuse for framing wrongly. For example, Rachel Percelay's article on the website *Mediamatter.org* presents a study of Fox news coverage of transgender people, which effectively turns them into villains even as they report on trans violence. Her lead reads: "America's transgender community experiences some of the highest rates of discrimination, violence, and poverty in the country. So how has Fox News managed to portray this marginalized and vulnerable community as threatening, greedy, and deserving of mistreatment?"<sup>31</sup> Not only particular to Fox news, Percelay outlines five steps that frame trans people effectively as the problem: use scare tactics to distract from real discrimination; ignore experts, invent your own; exclude transgender people from coverage; show that "they deserve to be mistreated"; normalize mocking transgender people.<sup>32</sup> Also common is the misgendering and deadnaming of trans victims of violence, which journalist Zach Stafford shows skews accurate counting of their deaths as trans people, but also makes it hard for their loved ones to even find out what happened to them if a report does not reflect the person they knew.<sup>33</sup> Despite their clearly marked gender presentation at the crime scene, law enforcement often refuse to recognize someone for who they are, even in the moment that they have died because of who they are. The pervasiveness of the five framings that wrongly portray trans lives, that is to say in a highly stigmatizing manner, is also present in news coverage that professes to be friendly, as Janet Mock quickly found out.

The February 2014 interview with Janet Mock by Piers Morgan, former talk show host on CNN, is a case in point of how even under the banner of "being an ally" Morgan's framing of trans exceptionalism, passable realness, and attractiveness can feel like a death sentence. Like Couric, Morgan brought Mock onto the show to discuss her latest career event that was a bestselling memoir *Redefining Realness: A Trans Girl's Coming of Age Memoir* (2014), but then sought to capitalize foremost on the sensationalism of surgical transition. After a

cursory hello, Morgan gushes, “This is the amazing thing about you, had I not known your story, I would have had not a clue that you had ever been a boy, a male.” Thinking he is offering a compliment, instead his remark reduces Mock to her appearance (the only “amazing thing”) and concludes that she is not a cisgender woman despite his “peter meter” going off on her feminine attractiveness. Alongside awkward flirting, Morgan cannot let go of the desire to deadname her, recalling in the ten-minute segment her name assigned at birth more than five times. To the question, “Take me back to when you were [x], the name you were given,” Mock responds, “I always knew I was just me.” To, “Did you ever feel like I can’t deal with this, I’m going to have to go back to being a boy, [x]?” Mock explains it was a series of tiny steps that led her to affirm who she is. Throughout the interview the banner read, “Exclusive/ Janet Mock/ Was a boy until age 18.” The framing normalizes his shock mocking of her embodiment, but she is also further silenced by the format. Morgan’s questions are longer than her answers, which he often cuts off, literally breaking her assertion of a framing of herself that affirms who she was, “always.” The constant invalidation of her identity combines uneasily with his vociferous approval of her appearance, her bravery, and courageous, gutsy journey.<sup>34</sup> Though Morgan does not touch her, she flinches, breathes in sharply, while hearing the litany of humiliating comments that justify transphobic violence.<sup>35</sup>

The interview and the Twitter feud thereafter that led to a second, more eruptive and combative interview present competing forms of violence to the bodily brutality and loss of life that I described at the start of the article. In discussing anthropological ethics and his own field work on the category of transgender in New York City, David Valentine parses how violence is a complex and shifting term obvious on the one hand, and on the other hand, depending on its definition and narration by its victims to be real *as* violence.<sup>36</sup> Hence, violence is not limited to bodily harm; “for violence to be comprehensive, for such acts to be conceived of as constituting a social problem, the production of a discourse about violence is required” in which subjects experiencing that event can articulate its meaning.<sup>37</sup> What counts as violence is thus a highly fraught and political question of narratological

framing. Morgan cannot accept responsibility for the violence he commits against Mock, because to do so would be to account for the framing of her gender as illusory, and perhaps even its appeal as such to him.

The first mainstream and then widely transmedia discussion gave many trans pundits a chance to weigh in on what passes for “transgender news” in mainstream outlets. For example, transgender advocate Kat Haché explained in an interview with Amy Stretton what was wrong with Morgan’s first interview and subsequent denial of wrongdoing: “If an entire community of marginalized people is saying that there’s something wrong with the way you’re talking about something, then there’s probably a good reason for it. So, if you’d take a step back from your initial reaction to that criticism, putting aside your initial emotional response and be willing to listen to the people who have been affected by what you’ve done, then maybe you could learn something and conduct yourself better.”<sup>38</sup> Morgan refused to step back, that is, to see himself as the responsible and motivated framer, or to examine the problem with his framing of trans issues through sensationalizing genital surgery (“the operation”). Instead he fell back on claiming “but I’m an ally!” and tweeting a victim-blaming statement: “To all the ignorant, bigoted transgender community members continuing to abuse me re @janetmock - I’m bored of you now, go away. Thanks.” This tweet seeks to justify the mistreatment of trans people by seeking to frame them as the bigoted bully, the ignorant abuser—a gaslighting technique that inverts reality and tries to make up into down.

In a strikingly similar manner, in the media presence of transgender-excluding radical feminists (TERFs), they try take the victim position in relation to the people they are victimizing; in short claiming, “You are oppressing us!” when challenged on their oppressive attitudes. Sara Ahmed writes movingly about the importance of recognizing how these stigmatizing imaginations can be unlearned:

Challenging TERFS is about challenging a position not an identity. TERF describes a position. The term is not a slur: it is a pretty fair and mild description of some feminists who aim to exclude trans people from feminism. There are many radical feminists, both now and in the past, who would understand trans inclusion as a radical

## FRAMING STIGMA IN TRANS\* MEDIASCAPES

and necessary feminist practice. Any TERF can thus unbecome one. This unbecoming would be a feminist becoming! Please I extend this to you as an invitation! I do think we might as feminists be aiming to eliminate the positions that aim to eliminate people. Challenging TERFS is not the same kind of speech act as misgendering a transwoman [sic] by addressing her as him, an act I would describe as an intentional act of elimination.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing a line between misgendering and acts of elimination may seem incongruent, but at the heart of both activities is a willful denial of another's imagined world. The significance of struggling over limited and harmful repertoires of weighted, stigmatizing affects in the mediascape is to actually change the horizon of social practices. Trans people are being (wrongly) framed by Fox news, CNN and TERFs alike: being blamed for what someone else did, being set-up as a target, like so many minorities often deemed as "as causing the violence directed against them," Ahmed reminds us. What seems needed is a jarring reversal of the victim-blaming reversal, a strategy of *détournement* that Mock seizes on to critique the limited ideoscapes that line the trans mediascape.

On April 19, 2014 a role-playing scene between journalist Ana Menendez, and Mock herself, playing the interviewer, debuted on Fusion TV's *AM Tonight* to much acclaim, such as this headline on the Advocate.com: "Activist Janet Mock Flips the Script on Cisgender Reporter."<sup>40</sup> Mock creatively funneled her anger into developing a script based loosely on how Morgan interviewed her, effectively "flipping the script" in which the trans woman interrogates the cisgender woman's genital status, gender and sexual identity. The hierarchal power relations between interviewer and interviewee and cisgender and transgender are inverted to expose the discursive violence wrought through the affective framing of what is newsworthy. Like in the interview with Morgan, the creative and career successes of the interviewee is dismissed in the place of their body's status. It starts with a close-up of Mock pronouncing the judgment: "What's so amazing is if I were to look at you, I would have never not known that you weren't trans." This is quickly followed by, "So who did you first tell that you were cis?" She then rattles off a series of increasingly personal questions about the

interviewee's anatomy and about how her gender identity affects her perception of self and the world. Menendez tries to take control by interjecting, "I thought we were going to talk about my show," to which Mock insists, "these are just preliminary questions we need to go through," like how so many interview trans women by first establishing their genital and identity status. The question "Did you feel like a girl?" sends Menendez into a spinning quandary, "I don't even know what that would feel like, because I was told that was what I was ...". Once we hear the "cut," Menendez shrinks down into the sofa and says, "that was like so so awful ... and invasive." To be put on the spot is to be made a newsworthy problem by others who look at you. Clearly she felt the violence of this patterned interrogation of a person who is a problem to be unraveled that works to undermine a sense of privacy, expertise, and being taken seriously.

In reframing the questions and who delivers them to whom, Mock delivers a powerful rhetorical punch about how being stigmatized is a process involving being caught in the frame of having someone think they know something about you. When Goffman discusses the management of stigma, he boils it down to an epistemological quandary of information management in which the problem is a secret to be uncovered and aired.<sup>41</sup> The interview is expressly a format that sets up the game of badgering someone into revealing new levels of information, often peppered by personal revelations that the interviewer had dug up and shares without warning. For a trans subject this produces a personal dynamic of coming under scrutiny, a replication of the interview process with a judging medical gatekeeper whose approval is necessary to access transition treatments. At once stigmatizing and deemed necessary, the forced narrativization of one's story to fall easily on judging ears means that rarely is one's story fully told. Like Du Bois explains, "To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word."<sup>42</sup> Du Bois writes his *Atlantic Monthly* article as an address to other Black Americans; in the context of this imagined community/world, he relates that being a problem feels strange: "shut out from their world by a vast veil" but gifted with a second sight.<sup>43</sup> A stigmatized person cannot see himself or herself directly; they always look at themselves through the

eyes of others, resulting in a double-consciousness. “Two unreconciled strivings” is how Du Bois experiences being a black man and an American, as a state of conflict. Thus discussing “how it feels to be a problem” amongst ourselves and publically to the problem-framer is a crucial affective mode to challenge the feel-good neo-liberal visibility politics that ignores the irreconcilable strivings of a double identity: not one of you, one of us.

Nat Raha encapsulates the rhetoric of trans liberalism as the argument that “transgender rights are *the solution* to the problems facing trans people, and will enable our participation in (Western) capitalist society; that, alongside rights, positive media representation is the best method to win over the cisgender world and improve the standing of trans subjects within the multicultural diversity of an apparently equal society.”<sup>44</sup> She warns against becoming this kind of newsworthy problem, particularly since “State violence and injustice against people of colour – trans women of colour in particular – reveal the insufficiency of trans liberalism that mirrors the politics of queer liberalism.”<sup>45</sup> In other words being visible is not enough to alleviate structural stigmatization, and it trades a false sense of social inclusion that occurs with and through the disenfranchisement of the poor. Like Du Bois, Raha’s statement on trans inclusion calls for an intracommunity conversation about how to practice “radical transfeminism” involving a politics oriented to “immediate survival, mutual support, caring labour, and a politics of intersectional feminism, anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism and prison abolition.”<sup>46</sup> The “world-making practice” that Raha calls for in the form of radical transfeminism seeks to develop a consciousness beyond the narrow mediascape and ideoscape of trans liberalism that presents trans subjects trapped in the “wrong body”; instead Raha sees art, poetry, film and performance that expresses the diversity of trans experiences that are trapped in the structural inequalities of the “wrong society,” and seeks to envision an imagined world in which trans lives flourish.

In Cook-Daniels’ “Scaring Ourselves to Death” blog post that I opened with, she concludes that, “Most of us will live a long time, and we need to have the hope to heal our past traumas, invest in our future, and have enough energy to help each other through the rough spots.”<sup>47</sup> This certainly sounds

like a sincere plea for ways that trans lives should flourish through mutual support and caring labor. However, I want to pause on the assertion that there is a reliable “most of us” by giving space to the narrative Tela La-Raine Love offers in her essay, “The Invisible Risk: How I survived New Orleans prison as a sex worker.”

My story is horrible, but what makes it worse is that countless other young trans women have stories that are just as bad. I have personally witnessed the innocence, vibrancy, and youth snatched from numerous trans women of color—in particular those who were released into the streets no longer HIV negative. They had to participate in sex work outside as a means to survive, just as they’d had to do in jail. Many of them are not alive today. At least eight of my friends who were in and out of jail, who probably got infected in jail, are not here in the land of the living today. None of them made it to the age of 35. I live daily with this traumatic piece of truth—it was why I had to tell my story.<sup>48</sup>

The repetition of death by the age of 35 caught my attention, because even if the statistic is not true in terms of being calculated incorrectly there is anecdotal evidence of gross loss of life that risks being dismissed in the firm dismissal of such a statistic. It does not matter whether the statistic is true or not, because it encapsulates the affective truth of the mediascape. It quantifies the stigmatizing framing of trans lives that are made a problem, amplified across media platforms, but never about how it feels to be a problem. Perhaps this is why the “fact” has circulated so far and wide even when acknowledged as false and even potentially harmful. A stated life expectancy is an average given, not a death sentence; it is a quantification of the qualitative experiences of violence bodily and otherwise. The affective resonance of truth rings clearly enough in its hollow, shallow number. The affective framing of one’s potential life course has a weight, if not a good measure, so even a false measure will do.

If one problem, death, is in the frame, what is excluded? The solution to the banality of media coverage of trans deaths is not simply to focus on the social ills faced by trans communities, like poverty, and human rights violations. What I’ve learned from the practices of transnecropolitics is that murder is just as susceptible as surgeries to being sold as sensational news. One bright light

## FRAMING STIGMA IN TRANS\* MEDIASCAPES

shining through the crack in this framing is the experiment organized by the On Road enterprise in the UK: their “All About Trans” project brought together 200 volunteers in order to reach 160 media organizations and try to change how transgender people are portrayed.<sup>49</sup> To shift perception in the mediascape they targeted ideoscapes and affective weighting through hosting “trans interactions” in which key media decision-makers were invited to meet and build emotional connections to actual, diverse trans folks.<sup>50</sup> The real target, however, was the mental organization of cisgender assumptions that were devoid of affective histories that could give structure to empathy and rightly framing how it feels to be a problem. From the experiment came

new situational comedies wherein being trans is not the butt of the joke, acting academies, and script competitions. Perhaps even more importantly, projects like these locate stigma in the construction of a point of view and not in a person per se, exposing the affective operations at work that render some lives viable and others not survivable. Drawing together the ribbons of the inconclusive problem of trans stigma, Mock and Cox’s interventions in the trans mediascape teach us all that the world-making practice of radical transfeminism must include aiming to eliminate the positions that aim to eliminate people, that is, smashing through the framing of trans lives as perishable wherever and whenever.

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### Notes

- 1 Loree Cook-Daniels, “Guest Post: Scaring Ourselves to Death” *Myhusbandbetty.com*, August 27 2015, <http://www.myhusbandbetty.com/2015/08/27/guest-author-loree-cook-daniels-scaring-ourselves-to-death/>.
- 2 See <https://tdor.info/>.
- 3 Cook-Daniels, “Scaring Ourselves” online.
- 4 Press release, *TGEU.org*, March 30 2016, <http://tgeu.org/transgender-day-of-visibility-2016-trans-murder-monitoring-update/>
- 5 Monitors of gender-based violence that target trans women and men, such as the Transgender Europe project, also acknowledge the overlap of misogyny with transphobia and whorophobia. That is transfeminine sex workers are often the victims, but there is no hate crime bill addressing stigma against sex workers. To the contrary sex work is criminalized in many countries.
- 6 Mbembe, Achilles. “Necropolitics” (trans. Libby Meintjes) *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.
- 7 Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton, “Trans Necropolitics,” A. Aizura and S. Stryker (eds) *Transgender Studies Reader Vol. II* pp. 66-76 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 66.
- 8 Haritaworn and Snorton, “Trans Necropolitics,” 67
- 9 Gayatri Spivak explains this doubleness of representing via a close reading Marx in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Kara Keeling offers a highly useful summary in *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 41-44.
- 10 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 134-136. The double self-reflection transpires when one accounts for their position and the interest one brings to bear on the object of analysis.
- 11 W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People” *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1897): 194-198. The (cisgender/white) world avoids naming the problem, because in acknowledging the framing, one becomes implicated in it. (*I make you the problem.*) To avoid this responsibility it goes unnamed.
- 12 Sara Ahmed, “A Campaign of Harassment” *FeministKilljoys.com* May 26 2015, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2015/05/26/a-campaign-of-harassment/>.
- 13 T.L. Cowan, “Transfeminist Kill/Joy” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.1 (2014): 501.
- 14 Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (London: Polity Press, 2015), 204.
- 15 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).
- 16 Susan Stryker, “The New Trans Landscape” *PublicBooks.org*, August 1 2015, <http://www.publicbooks.org/artmedia/virtual-roundtable-on-transparent>.
- 17 Arjun Appadurai, “Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” *Theory, Culture & Society* 2.2 (1990): 295.
- 18 Appadurai, “Disjunction,” 296-297. Imagined worlds is a concept that extends Benedict Anderson’s highly influential notion of imagined communities of nationalist identification developed through print capitalism.
- 19 Appadurai, “Disjunction,” 299.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 22 Massumi, *Politics*, 207.
- 23 Appadurai, “Disjunction,” 295.

- 24 Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, "What We've Gained And Lost Since Stonewall" *Medium.com*, September 10 2015, <https://medium.com/gender-2-0/what-we-ve-gained-and-lost-since-stonewall-f95f9909d9d0>.
- 25 Emphasis mine. Griffin-Gracy, "What We've Gained," online.
- 26 Katie McDonough, "Laverne Cox flawlessly shuts down Katie Couric's invasive questions about transgender people" *Salon.com*, January 7 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/01/07/laverne\\_cox\\_artfully\\_shuts\\_down\\_katie\\_courics\\_invasive\\_questions\\_about\\_transgender\\_people/](http://www.salon.com/2014/01/07/laverne_cox_artfully_shuts_down_katie_courics_invasive_questions_about_transgender_people/).
- 27 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 19886 [1974]).
- 28 Thomas Scheff, "The Structure of Context: Diciphering Frame Analysis" *Sociological Theory* 23.4 (Dec 2005): 368-370. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00259.x/abstract>
- 29 Couric states, "I learned that [questions relating to one's genitals are] very, very upsetting to the transgender community because they feel that people are too often fixated on this, and that your anatomy actually has very little to do with your gender identity."
- 30 Mey, "Laverne Cox Returns to 'Katie', Shows How to Do a 'Teachable Moment' Right" *Autostraddle.com* June 11 2014, <http://www.autostraddle.com/laverne-cox-returns-to-katie-shows-how-to-do-a-teachable-moment-right-240983/>.
- 31 Rachel Percelay, "How Fox news Turn Transgender People Into Villains" *Mediamatters.org*, September 22 2015, <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2015/09/22/how-fox-news-turns-transgender-people-into-vill/205689>
- 32 Kristen Parker, a self-identified trans woman of color and youth activist, has collated a video of news reporting and talk show appearances that outlines how trans women of color are particularly villainized: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b19-wEyAa80>.
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- 34 Rebecca Kling writes that calling trans people "courageous" and "brave" 1) lumps together and looks past the uneven life chances amongst trans people, 2) it is easier than speaking the truth that living as a trans person is dangerous and difficult, and 3) it distances the cisgender person from having to imagine a trans reality, or help trans people combat discrimination, see "Don't Call Trans People 'Brave' – We're Just Trying to Live in a Prejudiced Society" *The Guardian* October 9 2015, [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/09/dont-call-trans-people-brave-living-in-prejudiced-society?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/09/dont-call-trans-people-brave-living-in-prejudiced-society?CMP=share_btn_fb).
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- 36 David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 30.
- 37 Valentine, *Imagining*, 31.
- 38 Amy Stretton, "Three Lessons Learned from Piers Morgan's Transgender Interview Fail" *Fusion.net* June 2 2014, <http://fusion.net/story/4798/3-lessons-learned-from-piers-morgans-transgender-interview-fail/>.
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- 45 Raha, "The Limits," online.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Cook-Daniels, "Scaring Ourselves," online.
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