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Television

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Transgender histories and TV intertwine. *RuPaul's All Stars Drag Race* (2012) resurrects Thelma Harper (Vicki Lawrence) of *The Carol Burnett Show*, a series that, in its original run, included a skit set at a trans person's class reunion. In *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (2010: 10–11), Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman point to *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as shared cultural touchstones. References to TV in scholars' accounts of their self-recognition as trans signal further connections between television and trans history. Milton

Berle's drag performances, Leslie Feinberg recalls, "hit too close to home. I longed to wear the boys' clothing I saw in the Sears catalog" (1996: 4). Jamison Green's viewing of NBC's 1955 broadcast of *Peter Pan* starring Mary Martin as the title character instigated "one of those lucid moments" of early male identification. "I clearly remember thinking," he writes, "'if she can be a boy, then so can I'" (2004: 11–12).

An abundance of trans TV content makes the medium an important component of trans studies. Personal histories of gender regulation, gender nonconformity, and gender transition may develop in relation to the national and transnational star trajectories of televisual icons like Turkey's Bülent Ersoy and Kuwait's Shjoon Alhajri or through the circulation and aesthetics of series like *The Jack Benny Show*; *Soap*; *Bosom Buddies*; *Quantum Leap*; *Ask Harriet*; *Ugly Betty*; *All My Children*; *Degrassi: The Next Generation*; *Dirty, Sexy, Money*; *America's Next Top Model*; *The Glee Project*; *Work It*; and *Drop Dead Diva*. José B. Capino's study of Philippine TV's movie talk shows, a genre prominent from the mid-1980s through the present, illuminates another trans dimension of TV programming, that of production, showing how the medium has allowed drag queens, faux drag queens, and a variety of gender "outcasts" to "openly . . . party on television" in unexpected ways (2002: 273). Mary L. Gray (2009: 158) has argued that rural youth use "the portability and the 'realness'" of scientific TV specials to understand and articulate their gender identities and trans experiences.

In commercial TV systems, advertisers drive content, making decisions based on demographics and ciscentric market research strategies. Yet as Alexander Doty (1993) has shown, even within capitalism, television not only reinforces norms but also provides tools for nonconformity that people use to queer and feminist ends. The technologies of television and medical transition debuted publicly contemporaneously in the mid-twentieth century. Since then, the everyday flow of TV, like trans history, has remained highly ephemeral and egregiously undocumented. Consider a sitcom proposal I came across in the Bob Cummings Papers at Brigham Young University while deep into specialized research around genderqueer sitcom camp. As part of the backstory presented in this document—one I have yet to place chronologically but that Cummings, the star of two eponymous post–World War II series and the sitcoms *My Hero* and *My Living Doll*, appears to have penned—Christine Jorgensen shows up alongside Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner, and other "divinely endowed international female luminaries," revealing a television history complex with respect to trans culture.

While the fields of TV studies and trans studies have not as yet intersected much, they actually have a lot in common. Television studies examines the ways in which TV takes on a wide range of competing and conflicting meanings through its characteristic discourse of multiplicity. Mark Williams, in arguing for "the

significance of television” in cultural history, has encouraged scholars to emphasize the “fissures, occlusions, [and] discontinuities” of media by analyzing “borders that exist at the levels of technology/industry/mode of address, borders that appear to have inspired or enabled an attention to spatial/social/historical borders” (2009: 47). The commonality in trans studies’ and TV’s attention to borders and border crossings is evident in Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007). While television appears as an object of pro forma critique in the book’s discussion of the print comic *Hothead Paisan*, with sitcom writing offered as the barometer for instrumentalist uses of gender and sexual minorities in genre fiction, TV also assists with critique, as when Serano describes how the narrational strategies of medical makeover reality shows on non-trans-specific topics helped her understand the workings of transphobic tropes in other mediums (203, 55).

New research trajectories in TV studies offer exciting opportunities for scholars in trans studies. Exploring synesthesia and sense memory through advertising content during the 1950s, Marsha F. Cassidy (2009: 43) argues for a “telesthetic” history, bringing “the full sensorium back to critical consciousness.” TV studies’ recovery of embodiment would benefit immensely from a broader awareness of trans people as a part of history, particularly as cultural workers. With postwar public intellectuals like Marshall McLuhan theorizing television as a prosthetic extension and technology of the self, the medium surely played a more crucial role in the early psychic and somatic dimensions of trans experience than we realize. Television offers things quite helpful for many trans people: gender performance, dysphoria relief, artistic expression, and queer family.

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Temporality

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“Temporality” refers to the social patterning of experiences and understandings of time. Attending to the ways in which transgender experiences are constituted by yet exceed normative temporalities promises to do justice to the complex ways in which people inhabit gender variance. A critical focus on the temporal underpinnings of transgender as a historical category, on the other hand, may open the way toward a more transformative politics of justice.

Transsexual autobiography, which narrates the transsexual subject’s self-actualization through surgical and hormonal transformation, has been an important genre for the dissemination of transsexuals’ understandings of their own life narratives; it is also a fraught practice, since the narration of a transsexual life in conformity to the diagnostic “narratemes” of gender identity disorder (GID) has been *the* medical criterion of transsexuality and thus the determining factor in accessing hormonal and surgical treatments (Prosser 1998: 104). Jay Prosser has argued that the value of autobiography to transsexuals must be understood according to its capacity, as a genre, to construct transsexual experience in and through time. Autobiography is a diachronic narrative form that retrospectively bestows an illusion of teleological progression upon the aleatory chaos of life experience. If some transsexuals return to the genre of autobiographical narrative