

# The radical act of invisibility on Trans Day of Visibility

As an openly trans person, I know the simultaneous importance of visibility and the imminent danger of it

By Erique Zhang

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Celebrating Trans Day of Visibility is about contending with contradictions. As a trans femme person of color, I know all too well the simultaneous importance of visibility and the imminent danger of it.

The first time I met someone who I knew was trans was in my freshman year of college, a Filipina woman whom I regarded with curiosity. Perhaps I felt some kinship with her, as a fellow queer Asian person, that I did not yet fully understand. I often wonder what my life would have been like if I had met her earlier in my life or if I had seen images of trans people as normal and banal, rather than oddities to be gawked at. Would I have understood my own trans identity and sought gender-affirming care at a younger age?

Now, as an openly trans person, I have become hypervigilant to combat my hypervisibility. When I go outside, I am keenly aware of every passing gaze. I'm constantly anticipating being recognized as trans. I try to draw as little attention to myself as possible when I'm in public because I know that the more people look at me, the higher my risk of being attacked.

These are the experiences I contend with daily, forcing me to consider what it means to be truly visible. It's something others are interrogating, too.

Earlier this year, a friend invited me to watch the film “Framing Agnes” with them. The film is the result of years of collaborative research between director Chase Joynt and sociologist Kristen Schilt. Together, they discovered a collection of transcripts of interviews conducted by researcher Harold Garfinkel with transgender participants in the 1950s and ’60s. Garfinkel would later publish an article about Agnes, one of his participants who presented herself as intersex to access gender reassignment surgery — a procedure that was commonly forced upon intersex people but denied to transgender people — cementing her place in trans history.

The film, as the title might suggest, reframes these interviews as a talk show to explore how we understand trans visibility, asking why it is that knowledge about trans people is produced and disseminated chiefly through ethnographic studies or through sensationalist media representations. To drive this point home, historian Jules Gill-Peterson, who provides contextual information about the film’s subjects, questions why Agnes has become a trans icon while other participants have not — especially Georgia, a Black trans woman from the South and apparently the only person of color in the study.

As the film’s participants note, Black trans women have become the face of the trans rights movement: Public figures like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock and Angelica Ross are some of the most recognizable trans women in the media today speaking out against anti-trans violence. At the same time, Black trans women are also the most at risk in the community. Every year, organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign compile lists of reported trans murder victims; every year, the list features staggering numbers of Black trans women.

In the introduction to their edited anthology “Trap Door,” Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton describe this paradox as the “trap of the visual.” For years, activists have protested negative media representations of queer and trans communities, calling for more positive and accurate portrayals. The core belief behind this form of media activism is that positive representation will bring about more public awareness and thus acceptance of trans people. Shows like “Pose” and “Veneno” have been praised for telling more complex and nuanced stories about trans life as well as giving trans actors larger platforms to advocate for their communities.

At the same time, we’re seeing unprecedented levels of violence, both physical and political, directed at trans communities. In addition to violent crime, there have been ongoing attempts across the country to roll back trans rights. Just this year, officials in several states, including Texas, Florida and Oklahoma, have approved policies or legislation that would place further limitations on trans rights, including declaring gender-affirming medical care to be child abuse, prohibiting schools from teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity, and forbidding trans girls from participating in women’s sports.

Toward the end of “Framing Agnes,” Gill-Peterson asks, “What is the right to be invisible?” Like visibility, invisibility is a complicated topic for queer and trans communities. Anti-trans bills bring with them the threat of invisibility, erasing trans people from public life. But our safety has also historically relied on our staying invisible during times when being visibly queer was grounds for persecution.

It’s becoming more and more evident that visibility has not brought about the protection that we once thought it would. As a writer and an academic, my career relies on maintaining my own visibility, and yet my public profile has opened me up to anonymous attacks from people who disagree with me.

What might it mean, then, to reject the politics of visibility and instead embrace radical invisibility as an act of resistance?

I don't mean to suggest that we accept political erasure as inevitable. Rather, I wonder how we might imagine a mode of trans activism that approaches invisibility differently. To choose to be invisible, I would argue, is to refuse to be sensationalized in the media or subjected to anti-trans state surveillance — the Texas governor's order directing the state Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate parents of trans youths is a prime example.

Hil Malatino writes about trans care as a way that trans people form networks to care for each other when medical and political institutions fail to care for us. I think of invisibility, too, as a form of trans care.

How might invisibility allow us to focus our attention on caring for ourselves and living life on our own terms rather than constantly seeking mainstream, cisgender approval?

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