



# “She is as feminine as my mother, as my sister, as my biologically female friends”: On the promise and limits of transgender visibility in fashion media

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## Abstract

As transgender media representation continues to gain traction, trans scholars and activists have contended with the double-edged sword of visibility: while trans visibility has the potential to familiarize cisgender audience with trans experiences, it also risks reinforcing normative ideas about gender expression. Taking fashion media as a case study, I look at trans representation between 2013 and 2020 in the print editions of U.S.-based fashion publications *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Women's Wear Daily*. I argue that trans representation in fashion magazines produces competing discourses about trans identity as simultaneously conforming to gender norms and subverting the gender binary. Further, fashion magazines employ a neoliberal logic of visibility and self-empowerment, positioning trans individuals—particularly trans women of color—as exceptional figures and role models. Finally, I find a recent shift towards a social justice framework as trans activists of color are given greater voice in the pages of fashion magazines.

**Keywords:** fashion, fashion media, transgender representation, transgender identity, diversity and inclusion

## Introduction

In June 2020, Jari Jones, a Black, trans, plus-sized model, was featured in a Calvin Klein advertisement on a billboard in New York City. Located at the corner of Houston and Lafayette Streets in the Soho neighborhood in Manhattan, the billboard has been called iconic and “quite possibly the most important physical advertisement space on earth” (Wolf, 2021). Fashion journalists lauded Jones’s inclusion in the ad as a triumph of diversity and a sign of progress in the industry, contextualizing it within a larger racial reckoning in the United States. Earlier that year in May, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed extrajudicially by Minneapolis police officers, launching nationwide—and even global—protests over anti-Blackness and police brutality. A few weeks later, a group of queer and trans activists of color, including West Dakota, Fran Tirado, and Raquel Willis, organized a rally in Brooklyn to speak out against the murders of Black and Brown trans women. In this context, culture writer Bianca Betancourt (2020) wrote: “[Jones’s ad] shouldn’t be a revelation in the year 2020, but if the last few weeks in America and beyond have proven anything, oftentimes simply being a Black woman daring to exist is a revolutionary act itself.” Jones herself was quoted in the online magazine *Bustle*: “The fact that somebody like me—a trans woman, a Black woman, a plus-sized woman—is being celebrated at such a high caliber, it brings me back to the people who fought for me to get there” (Rivas, 2020).

These discourses around Jones’s advertisement are deeply imbricated with larger questions about diversity and inclusion in the fashion industry, an institution that has long been

highly gendered, raced, and classed (Craig, 2002; Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992; Ford, 2015). According to fashion journalists, trans inclusion represents a fundamental shift in how the industry is structured, one that challenges the very idea of a gender binary. At the same time, however, fashion media perform a normalizing function, disseminating images of the ideal fashionable woman who conforms to proper female beauty norms: white, thin, beautiful. Trans representation in fashion media, thus, presents a double-edged sword, signaling a growing acceptance of non-normative gender identities while hinging on trans people’s ability to conform to normative gender expression.

In this article, I analyze representations of trans subjects, focusing on trans women, in the fashion publications *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Women's Wear Daily* (WWD) between 2013 and 2020. I argue that fashion media produce competing discourses about trans identity, legitimizing (white) trans women’s identities based on how well they conform to normative femininity while simultaneously characterizing trans identity as an inherent threat to the gender binary. Trans inclusion, then, works to signal a narrative of progress in the fashion industry, producing visibility as the primary avenue through which trans equality is achieved. As trans women of color have become increasingly prominent in media, fashion media have begun to position them as exceptional figures, employing a neoliberal logic of individuality and self-empowerment while depoliticizing their advocacy work. Finally, I find a shift towards the end of the decade as fashion magazines begin to turn to a social justice framework, focusing more explicitly on Black trans activism, while continuing to center visibility.

## Transgender visibility, beauty, and race

*TIME* magazine famously declared 2014 the “transgender tipping point,” naming a period in U.S. history when media representations of trans people were becoming more prominent and more nuanced (Steinmetz, 2014). Since then, trans visibility has become a topic of growing interest to scholars and activists alike. However, as Tourmaline et al. (Gossett et al., 2017) argue, “the promise of ‘positive representation’ ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color” (p. xv).<sup>1</sup> Fischer (2019) more directly links this rise in trans visibility to a “conservative backlash” against trans communities (p. 5).

At the same time, trans representation in mass media—such as film, television, and news media—risks reproducing normative ideas about gender. Studies of trans representation in the press elucidate how trans subjectivities are discursively produced through sensationalized stories about trans people’s sexed/gendered bodies, often reifying biological essentialist ideas about gender and constructing trans bodies as scientifically anomalous (Capuzza, 2014; Meyerowitz, 1998). Trans identity is also often characterized as deceptive in news media coverage of trans murder victims, such as Gwen Araujo and Brandon Teena; in turn, trans people are portrayed as deserving of violence for transgressing normative gender roles (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Sloop, 2000; Willox, 2003).

While “passing” as cisgender presents a “double bind whereby the transgender person who passes is an insidiously successful deceiver, while the transgender person who does not pass is a monstrously unsuccessful deceiver,” it also often becomes a metric to measure the legitimacy of trans identity (Billard, 2019, p. 469). As Skidmore (2011) and Glover (2016) show, trans women in the public eye are expected to fit narrow molds of respectable (white, middle-class, heteronormative) femininity to be accepted as women. Further, beauty and passing are interconnected for trans women in the cultural industries (Zhang, 2022). As such, images of trans women who conform to normative female beauty ideals potentially communicate that trans women must look a certain way to have their identities read as legitimate.

Moreover, respectable trans womanhood cannot be disentangled from race and the politics of beauty. Snorton (2017) argues that “race and gender are inextricably linked yet irreconcilable and irreducible projects” (p. 8). The ideal trans woman has often meant the *white* trans woman (Skidmore, 2011). Meanwhile, trans women of color are frequently portrayed in media as victims of violent crime, a tendency that has been criticized by trans scholars (see, e.g., Namaste, 2009; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013). More recently, Black trans women have been burdened with the responsibility of representing the broader trans community, even while they are the most vulnerable, as actor Jen Richards notes in the documentary *Framing Agnes* (Joynt, 2022). This dichotomy—whereby white trans women are allowed to embody the fashionable ideal, while trans women of color appear as victims of discrimination or as activists—is a facile one, however, and one that shifts over the timeline of my corpus.

Because of its highly aesthetic nature, fashion presents an ideal site to understand how trans subjectivities are produced through media representations. As Mears (2011) and Craig (2002) argue, the overrepresentation of thin, young, white models in fashion media sends messages about who the

industry deems to be the ideal fashionable subject—and by extension, the ideal female subject. The inclusion of trans models in fashion media legitimizes trans women but often only insofar as they conform to ideals of beauty, thinness, youth, and whiteness. Trans visibility in fashion thus works to communicate a narrative of progress in the industry, while failing to fully contest normative gender roles.

## Women’s magazines, advertising, and diversity

Feminist theorists and activists have long criticized women’s magazines for their role in producing and communicating messages about women’s proper place in society (Friedan, [1963] 2013; Welter, 1966). As a subset of the broader genre of women’s magazines, fashion magazines produce images of the fashionable female subject as defined by her whiteness, thinness, youth, and beauty. Such images marginalize plus-sized women, women of color, and other women who do not conform to beauty standards (Craig, 2002; Millard & Grant, 2006; Peters, 2014). Crane (1999) and Roberts (2002), however, contest the absoluteness of women’s magazines in reproducing regressive ideas about women, questioning how audiences respond to the portrayals of female beauty in their pages.

In addition to their normalizing function, women’s magazines are also characterized by their commercial focus. As Duffy (2013) notes, magazine executives conceptualize women as central to consumerism; moreover, “the function of magazines is not only to sell particular commodities, but also to create and perpetuate a larger consumer ethos” (p. 33). *Vogue*, for example, is infamous for the number of pages it devotes to advertisements—its annual September issue often boasts record-breaking numbers of advertising pages. Fashion advertisers use a variety of techniques to produce not just the ideal fashionable subject, but the ideal consumerist subject. For example, Dove’s Real Beauty campaign, which purportedly seeks to celebrate women’s “real” beauty, has been criticized by feminist media scholars for its postfeminist branding of authenticity, promoting consumer activism as an avenue for social change (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Murray, 2013). Portrayals of beauty in fashion magazines further drive consumer culture, whether by convincing readers that using luxury cosmetics will afford them access to beauty or by commodifying their desire to eschew normative beauty standards.

Advertisers also frequently appeal to who they imagine to be their target customer base. Advertising firms produce segmented populations of consumers based on perceived demographic differences, such as race or sexual orientation, whom they target in their ads. However, as Sender (2004) and Shankar (2015) warn, such so-called “diverse” or “multicultural” advertising often fails to fully engage with the politics of race and queer identity. Instead, they risk essentializing racially marginalized and queer communities, relying on reductive visual signifiers to advance a consumerist project: to compel people of color and queer and trans people to purchase a product.

The inclusion of trans women in fashion media, then, calls into question how fashion utilizes trans visibility to signal progressive commitments even while ads commodify so-called diverse bodies. The Jari Jones billboard exemplifies this consumer activist project. By casting Jones as the face of Calvin

Klein, the ad interpellates trans women, women of color, and plus-sized women as fashionable subjects—and more importantly, as consumerist subjects. While it is undoubtedly meaningful for trans women to see themselves as fashionable, such representations risk reducing trans identity to a market segment for fashion retailers to advertise to.

## Methods

I selected the fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* for this study because they are two of the oldest and most widely read U.S.-based fashion publications. Both magazines were first published in the 19th century and were pivotal in establishing the US (particularly New York) as a fashion center by glamorizing the lives of the American elite (Matthews David, 2006). I chose *Women's Wear Daily* as a complementary case; whereas *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* are monthly magazines that target a general interest readership, *WWD* is a weekly (formerly daily) trade journal that primarily targets readers who work in the fashion industry. As such, *WWD* not only publishes more frequently, making up the bulk of my corpus, but also reports more regularly on industry and business-related news, such as events and product launches. *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, meanwhile, typically feature more advertisements, general-interest stories, and editorials, or photoshoots that both express an artistic vision and act as additional advertising. For the purposes of this article, I only included the print editions; additional research is required to examine how each publication's digital editions and social media accounts represent trans identity.<sup>2</sup>

I used the ProQuest databases of each publication to collect data. ProQuest provides fully digitized archives of these three publications, including full-page scans that allow me to view not just the text, but photographs and other imagery as well. I searched each database using terms such as “trans,” “transgender,” “trans(s)exual,” “genderqueer,” and “non(-)binary,” as well as names of prominent transgender people in fashion and media (see Table 1 for a full list of search terms), collecting an initial corpus of 172 articles. Because these publications rarely referenced trans people before 2013, I narrowed my date range to January 1, 2013–December 31, 2020. I further removed articles in which the term “trans(gender)” only appeared in the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer), as well as stories that only mentioned trans people in passing (e.g., noting that a trans person attended an event but otherwise not discussing them). I further removed stories wherein trans identities were discussed in the abstract, such as in numerous stories that discussed a growing trend in fashion towards “gender-neutral” or “unisex” clothing, although this category was ambiguous. For example, one article about the gender-neutral trend was excluded because it did not substantively address trans consumers, models, or designers (Diderich, 2018). Another about the same topic was included because it discussed gender-neutral fashion directly in relation to trans consumers and highlighted the work of trans and nonbinary fashion designers Harry Reed, Pierre Davis of No Sesso, and Eden Loweth of Art School (Cohn, 2020). My final corpus consisted of 93 articles.

I then conducted a critical thematic analysis to code the articles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lawless & Chen, 2019),

**Table 1.** List of search terms

Search term	Occupation
Nonbinary	—
Non-binary	—
Trans	—
Transsexual	—
Transgender	—
Transmisogynoir	—
Transmisogyny	—
Transphobia	—
Transphobic	—
Transsexual	—
Andreja Pejic	Model
Bruce Jenner <sup>3</sup>	Former athlete, media personality
Caitlyn Jenner	Former athlete, media personality
Carmen Carrera	Drag performer, model
Geena Rocero	Model
Hari Nef	Model, actor
Hunter Schafer	Model, actor
Ines Rau	Model
Janet Mock	Writer, media personality
Jari Jones	Model
Juliana Huxtable	Musician
Laverne Cox	Actor
Lea T	Model
Leyna Bloom	Model, actor
Maxim Magnus	Model
Munroe Bergdorf	Model
Pierre Davis	Fashion designer
No Sesso	Fashion brand
Teddy Quinlivan	Model
Valentijn de Hingh	Model
Valentina Sampaio	Model

using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo to facilitate coding. I performed initial coding to identify textual references to subjects' physical appearance as well as particularly gendered terms such as “feminine,” “beautiful,” “masculine,” and “handsome.” I also coded photographs and images, taking note of how trans people were styled (including hair, makeup, and clothing) and posed. I conducted additional rounds of coding to identify recurring themes, contextualizing these emergent themes within broader sociocultural discourses about trans identity.

Based on this analysis, I identified several broad recurring themes. First, I find paradoxical representations of trans women that legitimize their identities based on how well they conform to normative femininity, while simultaneously characterizing trans identity as an inherent challenge to the gender binary. These discourses, I argue, essentialize trans identity in ways that are easily legible to cisgender audiences, allowing fashion media to acknowledge trans people without delving into topics that might be controversial to readers unfamiliar with trans politics, such as ongoing legal battles over trans youths' access to gender-affirming medical care. Second, trans representation in the fashion industry is presented primarily as an issue of diversity and inclusion. In this paradigm, visibility functions as an underlying principle, upholding a neoliberal logic whereby trans women of color are presented as exceptional figures based on their individual career successes. Finally, by the end of the decade, fashion writers increasingly confront trans politics head-on by giving greater voice to Black trans women, although these stories continue to center the politics of visibility.



## The paradox of trans identity

Billard (2016) argues that journalists frequently legitimize trans people’s identities based on aesthetic evaluations of their physical appearance. Fashion media produce similar evaluations, emphasizing how well trans subjects conform aesthetically to normative gender presentations. A clear example of this legitimizing discourse can be seen in an interview with model Andreja Pejić, who began her career as an androgynous “male” model, being booked for both menswear and womenswear jobs, before publicly coming out as a transgender woman in 2014. In the interview, journalist Alice Gregory (2015) writes:

There is nothing masculine about her. Dressed in a Prada turtleneck and a Philip Lim pencil skirt, Pejić [*sic*] is as feminine as my sister, as my mother, as my biologically female friends. This is, of course, the product of extreme effort: an adolescence spent on synthetic, puberty-suppressing hormones (taken secretly at first, then with her mother’s support and blessing), and a surgical procedure that took her two months to recover from—not to mention a measure of phenotypic luck. She engages—and dismantles—all one’s visceral perceptions of gender. (p. 224)

Alongside a photograph of Pejić that shows her styled and posed in feminine ways, with long hair and a hint of cleavage, this passage discursively positions Pejić not only as the proper woman, who is “as feminine as my biologically female friends,” but also as the ideal fashionable subject: thin, white, beautiful, and dressed in designer fashions. However, Gregory goes on to assert that Pejić “engages—and dismantles—all one’s visceral perceptions of gender,” seemingly contradicting the idea that Pejić conforms to gender norms and producing a paradoxical reading of trans identity as simultaneously normative and subversive.

The timeline of articles in my corpus seemed to reflect changing understandings of trans identity in the years since the supposed transgender tipping point. The interview with Pejić, published in 2015, shortly followed the *TIME* article; as such, I suspect that it was intended to render Pejić’s trans identity legible to a majority-cis audience, even while it relied on othering tropes about trans bodies. Similarly, a 2014 ad campaign for the department store Barney’s portrays trans people in heteronormative ways (Bosworth, 2014). Shot by Bruce Weber, the campaign shows trans people in various relationships: with parents, lovers, and found family. In one photo, Katie Hill and Arin Andrews, a transgender couple who made headlines in 2013 when they appeared in an episode of *20/20*, are posed together (Bolles, 2014). Hill is dressed in feminine attire while Andrews sits on the railing next to her, shirtless and holding a football. His masculinity is emphasized by his facial hair, body hair, and post-surgical chest, while the football foregrounds his boy-next-door image. Moreover, by sitting on the railing, Andrews appears to be taller than Hill (in reality, the two are similar in height), reproducing gendered stereotypes about height differences.

Hill and Andrews’ identities are legitimized here not only through the gender-conforming styling and posing choices, but also through their seemingly heteronormative partnership. As Skidmore (2011) notes, mid-century trans celebrity Christine Jorgensen’s adherence to heteronormativity and her disgust towards homosexuality helped to legitimize her

womanhood in the public eye. Hill and Andrews are both trans, however, combatting the common assumption that trans people necessarily seek cisgender partners. In fact, their relationship became a media spectacle precisely because of its t4t (trans-for-trans) nature. In the introduction to their special issue of *TSQ* about t4t as an analytic, Awkward-Rich and Malatino (2022) write: “T4t sex, desire, erotics, and social practices are nothing if not fraught, animated by tension and contradiction” (p. 3). With these contradictions in mind, I juxtapose the photo of Hill and Andrews with another ad campaign featuring model couple Finn Buchanan and Maxim Magnus for the UK fashion brand House of Holland (Ma & Angzhijie, 2019) (Figure 1).

While both photographs feature heterosexual, t4t couples, they vary significantly in how these couples are portrayed. Buchanan and Magnus are both dressed in satin pantsuits, mixing signifiers of masculinity (the silhouette) and femininity (the textile). Both are styled with shaved heads and bold makeup, blurring the distinctions between their gendered appearances; rather, they appear androgynous. Further, Buchanan is dressed in pink and Magnus in blue, reversing the colors typically associated with boys and girls. Even so, gendered markers are still visible, most notably in the posing: Buchanan sits with his legs wide open, while Magnus lies next to him, resting her head against his side. Buchanan’s suit features broader shoulders, highlighting his masculinity, and he is wearing a white dress shirt; Magnus’s suit has more slender shoulders, and she is not wearing a shirt underneath. Finally, Magnus’s makeup is more traditionally feminine, featuring strong blush and bold red lipstick, while Buchanan’s is less conventional. While the two models may have had some agency behind their posing, the styling decisions were almost certainly made by creative directors behind the scenes, intentionally presenting the two in more androgynous, gender-fluid ways.



**Figure 1.** (Left to right) Finn Buchanan and Maxim Magnus (photographed by Louie Banks, 2019). <https://us-houseofholland.glopalstore.com/collections/suits/products/pink-satin-tailored-flared-trouser?variant=28728637292623>

The differences in these two photographs powerfully demonstrate the paradoxical ways in which trans identities are understood and represented in fashion media, an historical shift that seems to indicate changing perceptions of trans people. Earlier stories in my corpus, broadly speaking, seemed to rely more on normative tropes about trans identity to make trans people more legible to cis audiences while simultaneously othering them. By the year 2020, trans representation had shifted significantly, producing more fluid and complicated representations of gender-nonconformity and giving more attention to trans of color communities. This shift is demonstrated in my corpus as articles moved from normalizing trans identities towards a diversity and inclusion framework that centers trans visibility.

### The depoliticization of trans visibility

As trans people have gained more prominence in mainstream media, the fashion industry has increasingly adopted a diversity work approach to address trans representation. Ahmed (2007, 2012) argues that institutionalized diversity often takes the form of what she calls the “business model,” wherein institutions project certain values, such as racial equality, in order to rehabilitate their own image. “Through marketing,” Ahmed writes, institutions “attribute themselves with some qualities (and not others), as being a certain kind of organization” (2007, p. 243). Many of the stories in my corpus similarly signal a narrative of progress in the fashion industry, turning trans people into symbols of institutional diversity. The focus on diversity, inclusion, and visibility propels individual trans people, most notably women of color, into exceptional positions, casting them as role models of the trans community. However, this role model narrative often risks depoliticizing trans activism, focusing instead on stories of individual success as exemplary of social change. In this way, fashion media uphold visibility over politics.

Shankar (2015) argues that so-called diverse advertising risks “decoupl[ing]” racial—as well as gender and sexual—difference “from inequality and prejudice” (p. 5). Similarly, fashion media often decouple trans and racial identity from politics when profiling trans women of color. An interview with actor Laverne Cox as she shops for a dress to wear to the Emmys makes clear how the emphasis on visibility depoliticizes social justice work (Feitelberg, 2014). The story’s title, “Laverne Cox: With Fame, Comes Responsibility,” suggests that Cox’s visibility makes her “responsible” for leading the fight against anti-trans and anti-Black violence. To this end, Cox begins to discuss her activist work and the extrajudicial killing of Michael Brown in 2014, which sparked civil unrest in Ferguson, MO, before cutting herself short: “This makes me really sad—let’s talk about dresses” (Feitelberg, 2014). The abrupt subject change here undermines Cox’s activist work. Instead, her inclusion in fashion relies on the depoliticization of her public image, constructing her as a fashionable subject who cares more about shopping than activism.

This role model strategy is further exemplified in an interview with trans Afro-Filipina model Leyna Bloom (Ell, 2019). In April 2018, Bloom tweeted: “Trying to be the 1st Trans model of color [to] walk a #VictoriaSecret [sic] Fashion show. #transisbeautiful #LeynaBloom ❤️” (Bloom, 2018). Although the tweet went viral, her dreams were dashed later that year when Ed Razek, the chief marketing officer of Victoria’s Secret’s parent company, stated that the brand does not cast transgender or plus-sized models in its annual

runway show because they do not embody the “fantasy” that Victoria’s Secret represents (Munzenrieder, 2018). At the end of the interview, Bloom states: “I just want people to know that everything they need to be successful is inside of them” (Ell, 2019). The sentiment that women need only look inside themselves to find the confidence to be successful furthers a neoliberal, postfeminist logic that prioritizes women’s empowerment through individual success over the political struggle for gender equality (Gill, 2007; Gill & Orgad, 2017). Bloom’s quote constructs trans women of color as the arbiters of their own success, rather than acknowledging how the intersecting structures of racism and transmisogyny—or the devaluation of and hostility towards trans femininity (Serano, [2007] 2016)—not only gatekeep trans women of color from the fashion industry, but also have larger social and material impacts on their lives.

This neoliberal focus on individual success is taken further in three stories published in *WWD* in 2019 covering cosmetics launches spearheaded by trans female social media influencers Nikita Dragun (Tietjen, 2019a) and Gigi Gorgeous (Chikhouné, 2019; Tietjen, 2019b). These stories link Dragun and Gorgeous’s entrepreneurial ventures to the lack of trans visibility in the beauty industry. Discussing her eponymous makeup collection Dragun Beauty, Dragun, who is of mixed Asian and Latina ancestry, states, “I’m creating things I’ve always wanted to see in the beauty industry,” suggesting that she was motivated by the lack of beauty products designed with trans women of color in mind (Tietjen, 2019a). Gorgeous opines, more pointedly: “The number-one thing missing in the industry right now is inclusivity” (Chikhouné, 2019) and “The main thing for me is visibility” (Tietjen, 2019b). These quotes center trans visibility as key goals for the fashion and beauty industries, perpetuating the idea that by placing trans people in highly visible positions, the fashion industry will attain equality. Moreover, by promoting the business ventures of two already-visible trans women—the authors make sure to mention Dragun and Gorgeous’s subscriber counts, suggesting that their visibility makes them noteworthy subjects—these stories embrace a postfeminist ideal of individual success and visibility standing in for political action.

These examples underscore how trans inclusion in fashion relies on a neoliberal logic of visibility, individual success, and self-empowerment. Fashion media position trans individuals—particularly trans women of color—as exceptional figures while depoliticizing their advocacy work, focusing instead on their career wins, which ostensibly signal social progress. By the year 2020, however, the articles in my corpus began to shift their attention towards a rhetoric of social justice, giving more attention to political issues and trans of color activism while continuing to center visibility as a primary measure of diversity and inclusion.

### The promise of trans futures

While many of the articles in my corpus employed a neoliberal logic of visibility, I found that later articles increasingly moved towards discourses around social justice. Articles published in 2020 in particular paid more attention to trans of color activism, likely in response to the renewed protests around racial injustice after the murder of George Floyd in May and the March for Black Trans Lives in June. As activists called for cultural industry actors to reckon with their

histories of racial exclusion, magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* began to give greater voice to Black trans women. In *Harper's Bazaar*, for example, activist Ashlee Marie Preston (2020) describes her experiences with transmisogynoir, a term that combines Serano's concept of transmisogyny with Bailey's (2013) concept of misogynoir, or “the specific ways in which Black women (cis and trans) are targeted within popular culture” (p. 26, n. 91). Notably, this article was the single instance of the term “transmisogynoir” appearing across my corpus; “transmisogyny” and “misogynoir” did not show up at all, while the broader term “transphobia” did appear in several articles.

Meanwhile in *Vogue*, Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrino (2020) discusses the importance of building activist power in trans of color communities. She expresses her admiration for organizer Raquel Willis, who is pictured alongside the op-ed speaking at the March for Black Trans Lives, and states how seeing Willis as a highly visible and openly political Black trans woman has inspired her to imagine better futures. “[T]he work Willis does,” Dolan-Sandrino (2020) writes, “allows me to think of a day that I will feel safe and confident in ways that I have not yet been allowed to feel.” The way that Willis is described as a role model here contrasts with the positioning of Leyna Bloom and Laverne Cox as role models. While Bloom and Cox were portrayed as exceptional figures because of their career successes, Willis becomes a role model because of her organizing work, acting as a model for Dolan-Sandrino to follow. Here, trans identity is characterized not as exceptional but instead as a lineage, calling back to Jones's quote in the introduction in which she recognizes “the people who fought for me to get here” (Rivas, 2020). Rather than celebrating individuals as exceptional, these stories contextualize younger activists like Dolan-Sandrino and Jones within a broader political movement, centering the work that trans women of color activists have done to ensure safer futures for Black trans communities.

This shift towards a politics of queer activism and trans futures is further encapsulated in a special section in the October 30, 2020, issue of *WWD* dedicated to LGBTQ inclusion and queer and trans activism (Socha, 2020). Titled “LGBTQ Inclusion: Where We Need to Go,” this section addresses histories of LGBTQ activism, present organizing efforts, and—as the subtitle suggests—the future. Articles published in this section include interviews with a range of queer and trans fashion designers, models, and activists. One story, titled “LGBTQ Activists on Why We're ‘A Long Way Off’ From Inclusion,” features Black trans activists Ceyenne Doroshow, founder of G.L.I.T.S. (Gays and Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society), an organization that provides housing and healthcare services for Black trans people facing homelessness; and Ianne Fields Stewart, founder of the Okra Project, a mutual aid collective that provides meals for Black trans people facing food insecurity (Shang & Mercer, 2020). The authors ask the interviewees not only about the current state of LGBTQ activism, but also about the work that still needs to be done: “How do we get there?” Stewart answers by imagining a future in which Black trans people have adequate housing, food, employment, and healthcare, and where “they are able to move through the streets without fear of verbal or physical harassment or assault” (Shang & Mercer, 2020). Moreover, the story includes photos of Doroshow and Stewart dressed fashionably—Doroshow in a glamorous green sequined kimono robe and stiletto sandals, Stewart in a

chic black and brown cocoon dress with knee-high platform boots—allowing Black trans women to take center stage as fashionable subjects.

These stories highlight the activist work that Black trans women have done and continue to do to create more equitable futures for trans of color communities. Notably, they do not relate trans activism directly to the fashion industry—other stories in my corpus typically addressed trans activism as it relates to fashion and beauty, such as reporting on trans inclusion in modelling. As such, these stories seem to signal a gradual shift towards a social justice framework in fashion journalism. However, they often do so by centering individual Black trans women and continuing to rely on trans exceptionalism, even while they bring more attention to larger movements and lineages.

## Conclusion

As I write this article, I find myself grappling with what it means to research trans representation in an era of unprecedented political and physical violence targeting trans communities, especially trans women of color. Since 2013, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has documented reported murders of trans people, reporting record numbers of murders every year since then; the HRC also counted over 130 anti-trans bills introduced in the first three months of 2022 in the US alone (Berg-Brousseau, 2022). How do I, a trans femme scholar of color, justify my academic interest in industries often considered frivolous, superficial, and inconsequential, given this constant deluge of attacks?

Looking to figures like Sylvester, Big Freedia, and Lil Nas X, Black queer scholars write about the possibilities of joy as political resistance, asserting the Black queer subject as producer of knowledge (Mitchell, 2022; Persaud & Crawley, 2022). Though I have argued here that trans inclusion in fashion often employs a neoliberal logic of individuality and self-empowerment, I must also acknowledge the joy in seeing trans women of color emerge in the pages of fashion magazines not as victims, but as powerful, fashionable, and worthy of attention. It is with this turn towards joy that I wish to conclude this article.

In a post on her Instagram, Jari Jones (2020) is shown popping a bottle of champagne in front of her Calvin Klein billboard (Figure 2). In the caption, she writes,

I present this image, myself and all that my body stands for to my community and chosen family, in hope that they see themselves more clearly than ever and further realize that they are worthy of celebration, of compassion, of love and gratitude.

Jones views this billboard not with a cynical distrust of visibility, but instead as a celebration: of who she is, of her community, of the lineage from which she descends. While conducting this research, I find myself stepping back, tempering my academic tendency to be critical of media representation, instead recognizing the joy that visibility brings, the joy of seeing oneself in the pages of *Vogue* or on a billboard in New York, larger than life, announcing to the world: We matter.





**Figure 2.** Jari Jones celebrates her billboard (@iamjarijones, June 22, 2020). <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBv8G9ODBmT/>

## Notes

1. Tourmaline previously published using the name Reina Gossett, under which this citation is listed.
2. Where possible, however, I give citations to the online versions of magazine articles.
3. While I generally avoid deadnaming trans people in this article—that is, using trans people's pre-transition names as opposed to their current ones—I included "Bruce Jenner" in my search terms in addition to Jenner's current name, Caitlyn Jenner, because she was a prominent figure under both names. As such, I suspected that articles discussing her high-profile transition may have used her deadname, a tactic journalists commonly use to delegitimize trans identities (Barker-Plummer, 2013). Indeed, I found instances of journalists deadnaming Jenner as late as October 2020—ironically, in a story about trans inclusion in fashion (Campuzano, 2020).

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