

Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media

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This article investigates the way that transgender women of color are represented in media. Using textual analysis and close reading, I delineate the ways in which Cox and Mock produce a definition of transnormativity through their appeal to respectability politics and how the perpetuation of such politics factor into the media's focus on them at the exclusion of other transgender women of color whose narratives are significantly different. Further, I use porn star, entrepreneur, and musician TS Madison to illustrate how transgender women of color use social media to create space to present alternative representations and narratives of womanhood that do not rely on the compulsory appeal to transnormative respectability politics.

Keywords: mass media, realness, representation, respectability politics, social media, transgender, transgender women of color, transnormativity

In September 2013, legendary hip-hop producer and DJ Mister Cee found himself in the midst of a controversy following his arrest after he solicited sexual favors from an undercover police officer posing as a sex worker.¹ Cee's arrest prompted a myriad of responses, including many that highlighted his alleged past sexual encounters with transgender women.² Following his arrest, Cee vehemently denied any same sex attraction, going so far as to announce that he was "absolutely not gay" on air during his radio broadcast.³ Professor and media personality Marc Lamont Hill addressed the controversy during a panel discussion on *Huffington Post Live*. Hill invited two transgender women of color, Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, to discuss the cultural implications of the Mister Cee scandal.

During this discussion both Mock and Cox voiced their concerns about the way in which the public responded to Mister Cee, suggesting that many people simply erased the possibility that Cee could be attracted to black transgender women.⁴ They highlighted that among the homophobic and transphobic remarks, even those who suggested that Cee “come out” and begin dating men did so in a manner that erased transgender women from the conversation entirely.⁵ At one point during the discussion Mock asserted, “We (transgender women) are not supposed to be here. Men are not supposed to love us because we are not supposed to be here.”⁶ Additionally, Mock said, “Men are attracted to women,” while Cox nodded in agreement and reiterated this assertion in a subsequent portion of the conversation.⁷ Throughout the discussion, Mock and Cox repeatedly asserted that transgender women were attracted to men and should be included within the heteronormative notion of sexual and romantic attraction.⁸ Both of these women dressed, spoke, and employed an ultra feminine performance of gender that included a demure way of speaking, wearing dresses with high heels and even a blonde wig in Cox’s case. This particular performance of gender underscores their argument that transgender women should be included into dominant heteronormativity, especially with regard to their sexual and romantic attractions by suggesting that their identities as women are not substantially different from those of cisgender women.

As transgender women of color, Mock and Cox’s views and identity claims during this particular panel discussion are significant because both women have come to represent transwomen of color communities on a national level. Laverne Cox plays a major role in the television series *Orange is the New Black*, was on the cover of *Time* magazine,⁹ has spoken at numerous national and professional conferences, traveled to various universities, and presented a documentary on the lives of transgender people in the United States.¹⁰ Mock continues to speak across the nation about her book, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More*, in addition to doing advocacy work and hosting her own pop culture show on MSNBC. Both women appear frequently on nationally syndicated television shows and continue to promote public education about transgender identities. Further, their presence in the media is important because of the media’s tendency to use Mock and Cox as not only representative of black transwomen, but of *all* transwomen of color. Such representation politics are problematic in that they do not allow space for nuanced representations of the particular experiences that Asian and Latina transwomen face on a daily basis, in addition to assuming that all black transgender women have similar experiences. It is also important to acknowledge the significance of what Mock and Cox’s regular presence in mass media signifies in a nation where racist and transphobic violence continue to be a common occurrence. Thinking back to the early 2000s (and earlier), I could not imagine that mass media would provide transgender women—let alone transgender women of color—with an opportunity to share their stories, talents, and contributions in a manner that was not always already motivated by a desire to further stigmatize or exploit those within the community. In fact, Joshua Gamson’s study of several popular talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s reveals a historical precedence as to the various ways that producers

introduced the public to transgender people by emphasizing their gender nonconformity through framing tactics that ultimately produced increased visibility while also exploitatively perpetuating the notion that transgender people are “freaks.”¹¹

While it is important that the public encounters and understands transgender identities and the various experiences with discrimination that transgender women of color face on a regular basis, it is also important to understand that not all transwomen have the same experience or relationship to their transgender identity. Thus, this article investigates the ways in which media coproduces narratives of transgender women of color that situate them as either respectable or subhuman through a close reading of numerous magazine/television interviews, stories, and social media videos written about or by transgender women of color. Specifically, I argue that the mass media—working collaboratively with Laverne Cox and Janet Mock—creates narratives of transgender women of color (TWOC), that employ a compulsory appeal to respectability politics in order to situate them as individuals worthy of incorporation into heteronormative society. Further, Mock and Cox’s engagement with media also produces a definition of transnormativity, a process shaped by adherence to respectability politics, heteronormative standards and class privilege. At the same time, the media also situates transwomen of color who do not appeal to transnormative respectability politics as subhuman and thus unworthy of incorporation into the American social fabric.

The first section of this article explores historical representations of transgender women in media and illuminates the various ways in which the quintessential “good transsexual” (Christine Jorgensen) successfully achieved incorporation into heteronormative society through the compulsory appeal to respectability politics.¹² In the second section, I delineate the various ways in which Mock and Cox engage transnormative respectability politics through their adherence to heteronormative sexual scripts¹³ in their pursuit of what scholars call “sexual citizenship”¹⁴ and produce a definition of transnormativity. The third section juxtaposes Mock and Cox’s narratives with the narrative of sex worker, porn star, entrepreneur, and musician TS Madison. This juxtaposition allows me to highlight the various ways in which she uses social media to articulate her own identity, attitudes, and views without the compulsory appeal to transnormative respectability politics, thus destabilizing the collective TWOC identity coproduced by mass media using Mock and Cox. The fourth section examines the media’s alternate representation of TWOC as the embodiment of a disposable, subhuman subjectivity through an analysis of the narratives of TWOC who do not engage respectability politics used by various media outlets.

Discussing the stakes of representation in the media, cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall emphasizes representation’s critical role in the promotion of “new kinds of knowledges in the world, new kinds of subjectivities are explored, and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation.”¹⁵ Hall also reminds us that while representation allows for new knowledge, it also carries with it a binary structure.¹⁶ Such a structure can simultaneously create new knowledge about subjectivities while also diminishing the complexity that

exists among those who share a similar subjectivity.¹⁷ With regard to TWOC, the stakes of representation are high because new kinds of subjectivities, outside of ones that reinforce strict heteronormative assimilation, have the opportunity to be explored while simultaneously eliding the complexity and diversity of subjectivities that exist among transgender women of color.

Understanding the high stakes of representation and recognizing the importance of Mock and Cox's work as public educators about the plight of transgender people writ large (and TWOC specifically), we must also be critical about how their portrayals and narratives have come to represent the narratives of all transgender women of color. Mock articulates her own understanding of the stakes of representation in an interview when she states: "There's a higher stake, because often, the only time an ally or cisgender person will have interaction with a trans person in life will be through the television, will be through a magazine article, will be through an Internet clip that goes viral."¹⁸ Given these stakes, Stuart Hall's view of representation as constitutive is especially useful here:

Representation doesn't occur *after* the event; representation is *constitutive* of the event. It enters into the constitution of the object that we are talking about. It is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it. It is one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but *within* the event itself; it is constitutive of it.¹⁹

Such an understanding of representation provides the impetus behind my investigation into Mock and Cox. However, Mock and Cox are not among the first transgender women to find themselves in the media.

Establishing the "Good Transsexual": Historical Media Representations of Transgender Women

Several decades before the emergence of Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, mass media outlets reported on three white transwomen: Christine Jorgensen, Charlotte McLeod, and Tamara Rees. In her article "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press," Emily Skidmore (2011) delineates how the embodiment of norms of white womanhood—domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality—enabled Christine Jorgensen, Charlotte McLeod, and Tamara Rees to achieve a subject position that many Americans at the time could identify with and accept as normative. Skidmore asserts that the media played a pivotal role in the portrayal of each woman as it framed (to varying degrees) these women's ability to be considered acceptable. The media portrayed Christine Jorgensen in the best possible light as articles about her experiences as a transwoman focused on her "natural womanhood."²⁰ One article headline signified Jorgensen's transformation from a military man to a "blonde beauty," which aligned Jorgensen with an idealized notion of femininity that dominated the American social landscape at the time.²¹ Further, media reporting of Jorgensen's physical appearance celebrated her looks even calling her a "darn good

looking female.”²² Additionally, media reported on Jorgensen’s abhorrence of homosexuality, prostitution, cross-dressing, and other forms of deviance.²³ By distancing herself from the aforementioned deviant activities, Jorgensen was able to solidify her place in heteronormative society that dominated the American landscape in the 1950s.

While Jorgensen successfully penetrated heteronormative American society in the 1950s, other white transgender women were not able to achieve the same type of recognition. Notably, Charlotte McLeod’s inability to access middle-class decorum through her questionable morals (abandoning military duties, belligerent behavior, working at nightclubs) led media who focused on her to constantly remind the public of her lack of middle-class respectability.²⁴ Although McLeod was unable to access middle-class respectability, she remained distant and critical of gays, lesbians, and drag queens and decided to have sex reassignment surgery in an effort to reinforce her allegiance to heteronormativity.²⁵ Though McLeod’s inculcation into heteronormative society was not entirely successful, her fellow transwoman Tamara Rees was unable to achieve the kind of inclusion that Jorgensen and McLeod enjoyed. Rees’s appearance, dark hair, and large frame failed to exude the kind of idealized feminine beauty that was the standard at the time. To compensate for her shortcomings, the media portrayed Rees pouring tea, doing needlepoint, and painting her fingernails in an attempt to demonstrate her allegiance to domesticity and gender roles.²⁶ Further, Rees highlighted her engagement of and success at activities that were hyper masculine as a way to distance herself from homosexuality before she transitioned so as to keep at bay public suspicion about her sexual orientation. Skidmore argues that, in addition to Rees’s appearance, her rhetoric about masculinity rendered her unable to claim naturalized femininity that enabled both Jorgensen and McLeod to distance themselves from homosexuality, assert their heterosexuality, and thus their femininity.²⁷

Skidmore’s article²⁸ also highlights media coverage of Delisa Newton, a black transgender woman, in *Sepia* magazine. As the publication was known to privilege the stories of black women who had nondomestic careers or were entertainers, the decision to publish Newton’s story is significant. Yet, Newton also appealed heteronormative standards assigned to women at the time (emphasis on domesticity) understanding that her appeal to respectability—while simultaneously critiquing white supremacy—would improve the chances that her reader would be sympathetic of her path to womanhood.²⁹ Skidmore suggests, “the stakes for her [Newton] appearing respectable were much higher than with biological African American women.”³⁰ Skidmore then points out that Newton’s appeal to respectability should not be read as simply her attempt to access white standards of respectability, but rather bourgeois respectability.³¹ Notably, a drastically different aspect of Newton’s story was emphasized outside of the black media. This portrayal reinforced the idea that black female womanhood was in direct opposition to that of white womanhood as Newton was portrayed as sexually deviant, unable to chasten herself and pursue monogamy exclusively within a heterosexual relationship.³² Additionally, this portrayal of Newton served as a stark reminder of the disavowal of the black subject

in the media. Even among media portrayals of transgender women in the 1950s, race served as a point of division within this community.

Representation and Respectability: Laverne Cox and Janet Mock in Mass Media

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "politics of respectability" provides a powerful theorization that explains the problematic nature of the media's overreliance on the narratives and images of Janet Mock and Laverne Cox. Higginbotham asserts that a key aspect of respectability politics is its relationship to structural racial reform through strategic discourse that implored the individual to adopt certain behaviors and attitudes.³³ Further, Higginbotham argues that an emphasis on morals and manners were informed by dominant structures that perpetuate hegemonic values of white America and thus truncated the potential for radical structural reform.³⁴ Analyzing Mock and Cox's attitudes, behaviors, rhetoric and beliefs in relation to respectability exposes the tactics that they employ in order to situate their identities in relation to cisgender women. Such tactics ultimately reify heteronormative beauty ideals/standards and understandings of sexual orientation in relation to gender identity (men are attracted to women, women are attracted to men), while simultaneously challenging heteronormative understandings of the (perceived) fixity of gender identity. Acknowledging that Mock and Cox are not the first TWOC in the media to engage in the politics of respectability reminds us of Delisa Newton who embodied respectability situating her gender as non-deviant while simultaneously critiquing white supremacy.³⁵ Mock and Cox follow in her footsteps by similarly critiquing various systems of oppression—white supremacy, transphobia, racism, sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny—while simultaneously asserting that they are not gender deviants. In an interview, Mock critiqued patriarchy's stifling effect on men saying, "We, as a society, have not created a space for men to openly express their desire to be with transwomen. Instead, we shame men who have this desire ... this pervasive ideology says that trans women are shameful, that transwomen are not worthy of being seen, and that trans women must remain a secret—invisible and disposable."³⁶ What is an interesting occurrence between Newton, Cox, and Mock is that they consistently launch powerful critiques rooted in antiracist politics; yet they also rely heavily on transnormativity to do so.

Similarly to Jorgensen and McLeod, Cox and Mock ardently strive to situate, naturalize, and make their femininity legible to dominant heteronormative society. During the panel discussion with Marc Lamont Hill, Mock said, "I refuse to take on any man's issues about my identity, about who I am. I am a woman. I happen to have been born a boy, and that's just what it is."³⁷ Cox responded with an affirmative "Amen!" By refusing to debate their identity as women, Mock and Cox set the boundaries for conversation about their identities in a way that naturalizes their womanhood as something that need not be questioned or debated. This is an especially important assertion in that by claiming ownership of their identity (as women) and journey to womanhood, they forcefully challenge heteronormative

conceptions of the category of “woman,” the ontological underpinnings upon which it operates, and ultimately the exclusion of TWOC from the category of women. Both women also underscored their heterosexuality during the discussion. Mock and Cox’s assertions that “Men are attracted to women” and “Men are going to be attracted to me,” erase the fact that not all men are attracted to women among several other omissions.³⁸ Their rhetoric distances them from the idea that their identity as transwomen provides the impetus for them to have a sexual orientation that falls outside of heterosexuality. Mock and Cox’s ability to distance themselves from the idea that their gender identity—understood to be deviant in the eyes of dominant society—also impacts their sexual orientation is essential to the establishment of their heteronormative identity as many people continue to conflate gender identity and sexual orientation.³⁹ Public discourse about DJ Cee illustrates the public’s continued struggle with distinguishing between sex and gender despite Gayle Rubin’s groundbreaking essay originally published in 1984.

Mock and Cox’s appeal to heteronormativity is also important in that their rhetoric and beliefs regarding their womanhood and attraction to men redefine heteronormativity to include subjectivities that were previously excluded. Further, Mock and Cox’s redefinition productively creates space within a heteronormative framework for transgender women to express and receive attraction to men in addition to creating space for men to be attracted to transwomen and express their desire without relinquishing their heterosexuality. At the same time, Mock and Cox’s appeal produces a definition of transnormativity in which transgender people are led to believe that they too can achieve successful inculcation into dominant society by situating their gender embodiment, grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) alongside heteronormative standards and respectable behaviors. Transnormativity also produces particular class-related implications, as a significant amount of material resources and capital are often required in order to achieve an appearance that enables transgender people to achieve gender congruity in the eyes of dominant society. While transnormativity itself can be understood as the strategic negotiation with various systems of oppression in order to ascertain a life with which a transgender person can be content, it also situates those who refuse to engage in transnormative politics to be deviant or abnormal, thus reproducing a kind of exclusionary politics in which transgender people were always already excluded. Further, transnormativity creates even greater difficulty for those who are gender nonconforming, genderqueer, bigender, or agender—and often subsumed under the term “transgender”—in that transnormativity does little to dismantle existing gender binaries and thus cannot sufficiently address the particular challenges that gender nonconforming, genderqueer, bigender, or agender people face on a daily basis.

Mock and Cox use various media outlets to situate their femininity and womanhood alongside cisgender women. An article published by *The Telegraph* highlights Mock’s work and transition story and enables her to highlight that society imposed upon her a gender with which she did not identify. “You’re born a baby” she says, “you are classed as a girl or boy and then you grow up to become a man or a

woman.”⁴⁰ Mock situates her womanhood alongside that of other women by placing every person in the category of human from birth, then reminding the audience that everyone is assigned a gender through the process of socialization. By doing so, Mock refutes that gender is fixed or inherent, enabling her to identify with the gender of her choice. Additionally, Mock’s assertion underscores the importance of Simone De Beauvoir’s claim, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁴¹ Meanwhile, Cox—borrowing from Sojourner Truth—embarked on a nationwide college campus lecture series entitled, “Ain’t I a Woman? My Journey to Womanhood,” during which she speaks about how the intersections of race, class, and gender uniquely affect the lives of TWOC. With the intent of affirming her womanhood, Cox’s allusion to Sojourner Truth’s speech situates her struggles alongside those of other black women in the United States in a way that demonstrates both the similarities and differences between their struggles against systemic oppression.

Mock and Cox’s physical appearances are also significant in the creation of their narratives. Often, mass media specifically focused on Mock’s physical beauty. *Marie Claire* magazine described Mock as having an “enviable career, a supportive man, and a fabulous head of hair,” where the *Telegraph* acknowledged her “undoubtedly good looks” and “glamorous background.”⁴² In her book and during several interviews, Mock has spoken openly about her gender reassignment at the age of 18. Similarly to Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, Mock’s gender reassignment underscores her physical beauty and contributes to her ability to naturalize her womanhood. Undoubtedly, Janet’s physical transition enhanced her ability to naturalize her femininity differently than Cox. When asked about what she is insecure about, Cox expressed her insecurity with her physical appearance saying that she was insecure about “everything.”⁴³

Cox’s critical approach to her physical appearance explains her insecurity. She demonstrated her understanding of the implications associated with her physical presentation during a discussion at the New School for Social Research with scholar-in-residence bell hooks. hooks invited Cox to participate in the discussion after hearing that Cox was a huge fan of her work. During this conversation, Cox questioned her own participation in the reinforcement of patriarchy, asking, “Am I feeding into the patriarchal gaze with my blonde wigs?”⁴⁴ Without missing a beat, hooks responded, “yes,” to which the audience and Cox laughed, as they appeared to be surprised at hooks’s quick, unbridled honesty. hooks also reminded Cox that her designer high heel shoes also signify Cox’s perpetuation of the patriarchal gaze.⁴⁵ Cox is not the only recipient of hooks’s blistering critiques with regard to aesthetic choices and one critique prompted Janet Mock herself to publically defend the aesthetic choices of black femme feminists including Laverne.⁴⁶ Cox immediately defended her actions saying:

It’s one of those things where I’m sort of like, here I am. If I’m embracing a patriarchal gaze with this presentation, it’s the way that I’ve found something that feels empowering. And I think the really honest answer is that I’ve sort of constructed myself in a way so that I don’t want to disappear. ... I’ve never been interested in being invisible and erased. So a lot of how I’m negotiating these

systems of oppression and trying not to be erased is perhaps by buying into and playing into some of the patriarchal gaze and white supremacy.⁴⁷

By wearing blonde wigs and high heels, Cox gains the attention of the media in a way that is similar to other famous black women (e.g., Beyoncé, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj) and familiar to the public. As Cox understands that her relationship to womanhood is often contested, she consciously employs symbols of respectability in a way that would lead many women to identify with her, even if they approach her with some hesitation. In doing so, Cox's nuanced and complicated negotiation with patriarchy and white supremacy lessens the likelihood that her narrative, identity, presence, and contributions will be erased or forgotten by the public while simultaneously critiquing systems of oppression in the United States. Further, this negotiation illustrates the way in which Cox and media outlets coproduce her respectable narrative. Engaging a narrative that employs respectability politics allows Cox (and Mock) to evade the subhuman representation of TWOC in media.

Not only do Mock and Cox's behaviors and attitudes reflect their engagement with transnormativity and respectability politics, but they also reflect the perpetuation of sexual scripts, the coercive nature of sexual fields,⁴⁸ and the importance of erotic capital.⁴⁹ Mock and Cox's emphasis on situating their own gender and femininity vis à vis hegemonic society reflects the pervasive influence that sexual scripts have on the individual. Laverne's relationship to sexual scripts is especially intriguing in that she explicitly acknowledges the reason why she employs certain hegemonic sexual scripts (grooming practices, clothing choices, and emphasis on heterosexuality) while simultaneously perpetuating such scripts. Cox's case also demonstrates the ways in which certain self-presentations are privileged within dominant sexual fields, which directly impact erotic capital.⁵⁰

New Weave, New Possibilities: The Case of TS Madison

While Mock and Cox's narratives in mass media educate the public about the plight of TWOC, the media's near exclusive use of these women is problematic in that it does not account for other transgender women who engage in transnormativity and respectability politics to a far lesser extent. Thus, highlighting the ways that other TWOC engage media to articulate their own identities, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors becomes critically important. Social media is unique from other media forms in that it enables users to narrate one's own experiences without the assistance of media professionals. Such access enabled TWOC, TS Madison, to present the public with an alternative narrative about the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of TWOC to that of Cox and Mock. My initial introduction to TS Madison came by way of Vine—a social media platform which encourages users to capture moments in a 6 second video. One of the videos that catapulted Madison to viral sensation status began with her expressing excitement about getting a new weave. Throughout the video, Madison says "New weave! New weave! 22 inches! Yaaaaa!" and celebrates her new weave by twerking naked on a chair and then turns around to expose both her breasts

and penis. Before Vine banned nudity, Madison's video had thousands of hits, shares, and reposts. She also posted several other videos exposing her genitalia in a way that demonstrated acceptance of her gender, regardless of how transgressive other people might perceive it to be. One video shows Madison addressing those who derogatorily comment about her penis, to which she responds saying, "Yes muthafucka, a dick, a dick!" while swinging her penis from side to side.

TS Madison's continued participation in sexual economies and her failure to adopt dominant realness standards among transgender women are the primary ways that TS Madison disrupts transnormative respectability. TS Madison's refusal to disavow or dispossess her penis—and thus a different relationship to transnormativity and respectability than Mock or Cox—is evident through her participation in numerous pornographic films. Madison is not exclusively the receptive partner when on set with cisgender men as is the case for women in many normative pornographic films; she often directs films and tells the other performer(s) how to pleasure her in addition to being the penetrator. She also enjoys sexual acts such as receiving fellatio and ejaculating on the other performers' faces. In doing so, Madison disrupts and transgresses dominant sexual scripts assigned to women—including TWOC—under heteronormativity.⁵¹ Further, Madison's threat to transnormative respectability presents a reason why she—and other transgender women of color who have similar narratives and experiences—are not represented to a similar extent as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. Madison's employment in pornography places her among transgender people who are different from Cox and Mock as society continues to pathologize employment in sexual economies. Dan Irving writes about how the collusion between sex/gender and exploitative capitalist regimes produces a compulsion to present the transgender body and identity as economically productive. Irving posits that the type of labor transgender individuals engaged in became a significant determining factor in terms of whether or not the individual was able to have gender reassignment surgery.⁵² Historically, transgender people who engaged in more marginalizing forms of labor—sex work and pornography in this case—were seldom able to access reassignment surgery as this form of labor was not viewed as productive.⁵³ Irving also emphasizes that the decision to allow the public to decide who among the transgender community deserved access to reassignment was ill-informed given that many transgender people are still unable to access housing and employment, which could cause transgender people to engage in sex work or/and pornography as a means of survival.⁵⁴

In a well-known online rant, Madison situates her employment in the adult entertainment industry alongside the reason why many other humans work in a manner that enables her to access several basic human physiological and safety needs.⁵⁵ Further, emphasizing survival also allows Madison to reject the moral and social stigma that is attached to those who work in the adult entertainment industry. Historian Mireille Miller-Young's conception of "illicit eroticism" helps to illuminate one way that sex work allows black women like Madison to engage in self-care through its flexibility and high income.⁵⁶ Miller-Young asserts that illicit eroticism allows black women to intervene in the pornography industry writ large in order

to secure their person material survival.⁵⁷ Madison readily acknowledges that sex work enabled her to be an entrepreneur as she is the founder and owner of her own pornography production company which is exceptionally uncommon for an individual in pornography and especially a black transgender woman. Madison's entrepreneurship also coincides with Miller-Young's illicit eroticism as Madison used porn to not only secure her immediate material survival, but to make sure that she could receive residual income from the sale and distribution of the videos produced by Raw Dawgg Entertainment. In a world where the average transgender woman of color—especially black transgender women—lives on incomes of \$10,000 or less per year,⁵⁸ Madison's indisputable success is nothing short of remarkable and a testament to her business acumen. Her business acumen enabled Madison to provide extraordinary material resources for herself including several cars, a recording studio, investments with a brokerage, the ability to hire a team to assist in the management of her business, and a sprawling house that she calls "the chateau" located in the bourgeois suburbs of Atlanta.⁵⁹

Madison's indisputable economic success in pornography suggests that transnormative respectability is not the only means for achieving economic privilege in the contemporary economy. However, the continued devaluation of sexual economies thwarts Madison's ability to achieve transnormative respectability, whereas Mock maintains distance from sexual labor in an effort to maintain her respectable public persona.⁶⁰ Mock's distancing herself from sexual labor is not to be understood as a wholesale disavowal or disapproval of those who engage in sexual labor. In fact, Mock invited Madison on her talk show to discuss Madison's success and expressed her admiration of Madison's business acumen while Madison credited Mock with being the inspiration for her autobiography.⁶¹ The acknowledgment of their individual successes and expression of admiration for one another underscores that fact that transnormativity—while pervasive in media—is a process of individual strategic negotiation with systemic oppression; is not the only means through which TWOC can achieve economic security; does not require TWOC to be antagonistic towards one another despite different choices related to adherence to transnormativity. Still, the accumulation of material resources and capital that both of these women possess also reminds us of transnormativity's reliance on classist connotations of "success" and disavowal of the lack of capital that TWOC who are not Mock, Cox, or Madison often experience as reality.

Gender theorist Marlon Bailey discusses the concept of realness and defines it as "a theory of quotidian performance [that] offers a way to understand how all gender and sexual identities are performed."⁶² Later, Bailey precisely asserts, "to be 'real' is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in heteronormative society."⁶³ For many TWOC—including Laverne Cox and Janet Mock—realness is not simply a concept or an ideal but a necessary skill that enables them to avoid harassment, discrimination and violence. Bailey's definition of realness suggests that TS Madison is less "real" than other TWOC due to her noncompliance with heteronormative gender and sexual norms. Although the public may not immediately assume that she is a transgender woman by

heteronormative standards, Madison makes few strategic attempts to deemphasize or eliminate discontinuity between her gender identity and sex assigned at birth. In an episode of a web series in which she stars, Madison recalls a time when she startled Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employees who were shocked to see the discontinuity between her identification (ID) documents and her physical appearance. Madison responds nonchalantly to TSA officials, posing the question: “Well honey, what in the hell are you looking at? You ain’t never seen a bitch named Timothy?”⁶⁴ Madison’s question illustrates the extent to which she is not concerned with neatly aligning herself with gender norms and expectations associated with dominant heteronormative society. Recent policy changes in some states now allow transgender people to change the gender marker on certain ID documents—chiefly passports, social security cards, birth certificates, and driver’s licenses. In an effort to have their ID documents match their gender identity and eliminate official records of gender incongruity, many transgender people choose to align their identification documents with their gender identity. The aforementioned example suggests that TS Madison is not concerned about incongruity between her gender identity, sex assigned at birth, and the disruption of gender norms in a manner which truncates her ability to be “real” and thus, distinguishes her from TWOC like Janet Mock and Laverne Cox.

Although my analysis of realness positions Madison at its margins, I do not suggest that Madison herself disavows all heteronormative ideology. In fact, a video from her YouTube channel suggests that she is not only concerned with her physical appearance, but also articulates a standard by which she judges the physical appearance of other women. In this video, Madison shows off her body and her modified feminine physique through plastic surgery.⁶⁵ She uses slang that is prevalent among queer communities of color such as “painted for the gods” and “lightly dusted and battered” as she describes her appearance. Madison acknowledges her flaws saying, “Yes I do have imperfections, yes I do, but they are mine and you are looking. The men love me, plus I can suck a dick up until I hiccup.”⁶⁶ Madison’s confidence regarding her body reveals that her physical appearance is important to her. In the same video, Madison talks about her wig and informs the audience that it is 24 inches long and then asserts “If it ain’t 22 inches or better, you basically bald headed.”⁶⁷ Madison’s emphasis on aesthetics complicates her relationship to realness because it does not appear to prioritize safety, as is the case for many TWOC who employ realness as a means through which they access safety and evade transphobic harassment, violence, and discrimination. Madison’s assertion highlights one characteristic that exposes her definition of realness, thus reminding us that she, too—in her productive disruption of the representation of TWOC—is not exempt from the perpetuation of heteronormative ideology.

The Subhuman Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media

Transgender women of color are disproportionately represented as victims of hate crimes. Sadly, TWOC comprised 67% of anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) homicide victims in 2013 alone despite making up only 13% of the total

number of hate violence reports.⁶⁸ One well-known case involved 17-year-old TWOC Gwen Araujo who was bound, bludgeoned, and strangled to death by three men with whom she was sexually involved after someone informed them that Araujo was biologically male.⁶⁹ During the trial, the defense team deployed a “trans panic defense” strategy, which justifies Araujo’s murderers’ actions by claiming that the discovery of Araujo’s male anatomy caused them to become temporarily insane.⁷⁰ The implicit assumptions that underpin this defense strategy assert that not only does the “discovery” of an individual’s genitals violently challenge another person’s sexual orientation, but it also understands transgender people to be predatory sexual monsters whose intentions are to trick and sexually manipulate cisgender people. These troubling assumptions place transgender people, especially TWOC, on the margins of society and cast them as sexual scapegoats based on essentialist conceptions of sexuality and gender. In *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*, Gilbert Herdt discusses sexual scapegoats and that sexual panics “dehumanize the alleged perpetrators ... stripping them of rights and destroying their lives” before providing an explanation of the media’s portrayal of TWOC as scapegoats asserting that no other aspect of society is more prone to moral panics than in the reproduction of sexual and gender differences.⁷¹

Several recent media stories about murdered TWOC support my argument about their disposable subhuman construction of sexuality. One case in Gaithersburg, Maryland made headlines when Zella Ziona was murdered due to her male friend’s embarrassment about the details of their relationship becoming public.⁷² Witnesses say that Ziona’s friend became enraged by her “flamboyant” behavior towards him while among his friends, so he shot her in the head and groin.⁷³ Ziona’s “flamboyance” as a TWOC—especially in public—was enough to justify her murder. In Florida, Yaz’min Shancez was shot and burned to death by a man whom Shancez called her “baby daddy” after he became fearful that she would “out” him to the public.⁷⁴ This case demonstrates how TWOCs’ disposability creates a justification for individuals to employ extreme measures to eliminate TWOC by any means necessary.

It is also important to acknowledge that the subhuman construction of sexuality is not exclusively reserved for TWOC who are murdered. Jade, a 21-year-old sex worker in Philadelphia, articulated her understanding of her (perceived) subhuman status, saying, “A lack of options pushed me into this. I’m a human being; I’m someone, too. I shouldn’t have to feel like I’m below human.”⁷⁵ Jade’s clients remind her of her subhuman status when belittling and telling her that she “needs their money.”⁷⁶ Lakyra Dawson echoed Jade’s sentiments: “People are kinda ruthless now more than ever, you know—the killers, the murderers. The violence is getting more [sic] wild and more crazy. I feel like we are being targeted. People say we’re not normal, we’re freaks or something. They just feel like they can dispose of us, because we really don’t matter to them.”⁷⁷ In Iowa, Megan Taylor found herself in jail after checking into a hotel en route to a funeral due to hotel management calling the police claiming that Taylor and her friend (another TWOC) were engaging in prostitution despite police finding no evidence of the women’s engagement in sex work at all.⁷⁸ This case illustrates how the mere presence of a TWOC in a public

space elicits panic and justifies their removal, reinforcing the notion that TWOC are disposable, subhuman, and unworthy of existence. The aforementioned cases suggest that TWOC are continuously denied their humanity due to their racialized gender identity and symbolic threat to public “safety” and demonstrate the relationship between TWOC and moral sexual panics as they evoke irrational fears which often result in their unjust demises.

These cases illustrate the harsh reality that many TWOC without access to mass media, careers as actresses, entertainers, writers, or media personalities must grapple with every day. For many, the combination of a lack of access to media and other material resources—chiefly reliable employment, healthcare, housing, and income—render them exceptionally vulnerable to being assaulted, raped, or murdered. Yet, transnormative representations of TWOC in mass media suggest that those within this community currently enjoy unprecedented levels of success, access, and inclusion in a manner that elides the often-bleak reality of quotidian life for TWOC. As research suggests that transgender people experience extremely high levels of discrimination and harassment while attempting to access employment, housing, healthcare, public accommodations, and education, the narratives of Janet Mock and Laverne Cox present notable exceptions to the plight of many TWOC.⁷⁹ Even within carceral settings, research highlights the continued harassment, discrimination, and violence that transgender people endure in a manner that makes the treatment of Sophia Bursett, Cox’s character on *Orange Is the New Black*, appear to be substantially less violent than scholars suggest.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Not only do Mock and Cox’s behaviors and attitudes reflect their role in the production of a definition of transnormativity that relies on respectability politics and appeals to heteronormativity, they also reflect the perpetuation of sexual scripts, the coercive nature of sexual fields,⁸¹ and the importance of erotic capital as well.⁸² Mock and Cox’s emphasis on situating their own gender and femininity in line with hegemonic society reflects the pervasive influence that sexual scripts have on the individual. Laverne’s relationship to sexual scripts is especially intriguing in that her reasoning for appealing to specific hegemonic sexual scripts (grooming practices, clothing choices, and heterosexuality) while simultaneously acknowledging her role in their perpetuation also underscores how certain self-presentations are privileged within dominant sexual fields and directly impact erotic capital.⁸³

TS Madison’s transgression of sexual scripts undoubtedly places her at the margins of dominant “structures of desire” with truncated erotic capital.⁸⁴ However, Madison consistently demonstrates her ability to succeed in developing her own subjectivity while existing at the margins of dominant structures of desire or appealing to transnormative respectability politics. Madison re-writes sexual scripts in a manner that allows her to articulate her own erotic sovereignty⁸⁵ in a world that systematically renders TWOC—especially those who reject transnormative respectability—invisible and disposable. Also important in examining Madison’s ability to

re-write these scripts is the high degree of flexibility and opportunity that scholars understand employment in the pornography industry affords black women.⁸⁶ Such opportunity enabled Madison to build an empire through the development of her entrepreneurial prowess and business acumen. Further, Madison's pornographic work challenges dominant structures of desire by questioning the fixity of "tiers of desirability" as Madison often engages in sexual activity with hypermasculine cisgender men who possess significant erotic capital.⁸⁷ Madison's pursuit of erotic sovereignty not only disrupts the narratives of Mock and Cox, but it also weakens the appeal to sexual citizenship⁸⁸ through stable, fixed identity-based sexual politics that Mock and Cox's transnormative narratives attempt to establish for TWOC.⁸⁹ TS Madison's continued involvement in sexual economies in addition to her rejection of dominant sexual scripts assigned to transgender women are the primary ways that TS Madison threatens transnormative respectability. Further, Madison's threat to transnormative respectability presents a reason why she—and other TWOC who have similar narratives and experiences—are not represented in mass media. The problematic representation of TWOC in mass media does not create room for community members to express a subjectivity that is human but *not* respectable or transnormative in a way that perpetuates their exposure to systemic oppression, social exclusion and physical, mental, and emotional violence.

Bailey's conception of realness informs how Janet Mock and Laverne Cox's operationalization of realness enables them to appeal to transnormative respectability politics. Janet Mock is especially explicit about the influence of realness on her life as she acknowledges the concept in the title of her book. With regard to sexual norms of dominant society, TS Madison's role as the penetrator while filming pornography subverts heteronormative sexual roles assigned to women and distances her from being "real." Mock and Cox appear to be much more "real" in that the narratives about their sexual practices as TWOC fit well into heteronormative society, thus preserving the heteronormative regime. Specifically, Mock's gender reassignment can be read as a symbol of her allegiance to heteronormative sexual roles in that through reassignment, she is able to fulfill the sexual role assigned to women. Further, Mock's gender reassignment provides her with the type of gender congruity that can also protect her from experiencing the type of violence that TWOC often face. At the same time, Mock's reassignment allows her to redefine realness in a manner that creates space for transgender women within heteronormativity and the category of women writ large.

Overall, the similarity between the narratives of Janet Mock and Laverne Cox add to the mass media's creation of a singular, fixed transnormative identity among TWOC in a way that reifies respectability and upholds heteronormativity. TS Madison's subjectivity and involvement in sexual economies challenges Mock and Cox in that it unfixes the media's perpetuation of a stereotype of transgender women of color that suggests that there is singular, static, and fixed identity among the community as a whole. Madison's narrative productively demonstrates that TWOC can achieve material and economic success without appealing to transnormative respectability politics. While I remain critical of Janet Mock and Laverne Cox's engagement with transnormative respectability politics, I also acknowledge that their media presence

is an important step forward in rendering transgender women of color not only visible in society but also human. Thus, I complicate the media's overemphasis on Mock and Cox and remind readers of the plight of many other TWOC who are not imbued with the same kind of basic humanity that Mock and Cox enjoy. Stuart Hall's assertion of the binary structure of representation emphasizes both its shortcomings and the need for TWOC to articulate their own subjectivities beyond the realm of representation.⁹⁰ The American social fabric should affirm, employ, protect, and include transwomen of color like Jade without forcing her to appeal to respectability or ask "It's like, what's wrong with me? Why can't I be myself?" "I'm being pushed out for being who I am."⁹¹ Such a plight is one that is all too familiar to black women across the nation who have historically struggled to maintain control over their own bodies in a society that built its status and wealth on the labor—both productive and reproductive—of black women. Thus, it is critical to understand that as the women of the Combahee River Collective said, "If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."⁹² Taking their assertion a step further, I hope that this article makes clear that everyone else can be free only when transgender women of color—especially black transgender women—are free.

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