

The Transgender Flipping Point: How Trans Instagrammers Flip the Script on Identity

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ABSTRACT

Since *Time* magazine's now iconic 2014 cover story featuring trans actress Laverne Cox proclaimed the contemporary moment 'The Transgender Tipping Point', there has been much debate about the recent proliferation of trans representations across all media sectors. Trans scholars, culture producers, artists, and activists have argued that this is not only a misconception, but it occludes the corpus of trans visual culture made by and for trans culture producers reflecting a wider diversity of trans experiences that do not readily reflect dominant cultural paradigms. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via social media platforms, the selfie has facilitated self-imaging becoming a ubiquitous part of globally networked contemporary life. Beyond this, selfies have facilitated a diversity of image-making practices and enabled otherwise representationally marginalized constituencies to insert self-representations into visual culture. A close look at the prolific selfie practice of Black British, gender-non-conforming, trans-femme performance artist Travis Alabanza reveals their use of Instagram to be a critical intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre produces new visual exemplars that defy stereotypes and erasures produced by dominant culture while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of identity and self-portraiture. Alabanza's work decolonizes the relationship between the subject and the portrait, encouraging viewers to consider the complex dialectical relationship between images, aesthetics, and communication about identity, performativity, gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

Keywords: media, queer, performance, selfies, trans

INTRODUCTION

Since *Time* magazine's now iconic 2014 cover story featuring trans actress Laverne Cox proclaimed the contemporary moment 'The Transgender Tipping Point', there has been much debate about the recent proliferation of trans representations (**Figure 1**). Trans scholars, culture producers, artists, and activists have argued that the notion of a 'Tipping Point' is not only a reductive and problematic misconception, but it occludes diverse forms of trans visual culture made by trans culture producers whose experiences do not readily reflect dominant cultural paradigms. It also presents a narrow and essentialist understanding of transness. Against the backdrop of dominant cultural representations of trans folks (particularly in the US and UK) this article focuses on the discourses informing this moment, and the Instagram interventions of non-binary Black British trans femme multi-disciplinary artist Travis Alabanza. Alabanza serves as a critical exemplar of a trans creative using self-representation (particularly on Instagram), to counter the problematic narratives of trans folks in mainstream media, reworking discourses of photography, identity and representation (**Figures 4 and 5**).



Figure 1. Lavern Cox, screenshot from Laverne Cox’s Twitter feed, @LaverneCox, May 29, 2014.

THE DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF REPRESENTATION IN LOCATIONS DESCENDED FROM THE COLONIAL PROJECT

The deployment of trans icons in mainstream visual culture is bound up with the construction and maintenance of trans stereotypes, established through the conceptualization of photography in Western art historical traditions. The discursive framing of portrait photographs, descended from the colonial project, assumes an ontological belief in the image’s ability to transmit ‘truth’ about its subject (Sekula, 1986; Berger, 1990; Solomon-Godeau, 1994; Tagg, 1993; Sontag, 2001; Berger and Dyer, 2013). This belief facilitated photography’s deployment as an apparatus of cultural ideology (Solomon-Godeau, 1994; Batchen, 1999).

Since its inception, photography has been framed discursively as an objective recorder of the world. Early photo theorist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) argued photographs are ‘effects of the radiations from the object’ (Sekula, 1986: 55). He argued that because photographs are made mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001:16). However, as John Tagg and other scholars have noted, photography is highly subjective. Tagg observed, photographs record the many choices that go into making an image—including the sequential choices of the image-maker (Tagg, 1993: 188-189). Photography’s discursive framing sets up an ontology that perpetuates what can be referred to as the photograph’s ‘regime of truth’ (ibid). This ideologically driven framing of photography in the Western context has attached notions of evidence, and authenticity to pictures, and in so doing eclipsed their fabricated nature, and the fact that they are bound up with power differentials, and the creation and transmission of stereotypes (Dyer, 2002).

Representations are constituent of how expectations are set up regarding what corporealities are valued by a given culture at a specific point in time. Representations of trans femmes of colour today in the Western context correspond with the erasure of, and violence perpetrated against, trans femmes of colour in daily life. As Richard Dyer has insightfully argued, the psychological significance of stereotypes is that they outline the parameters of life for various groups at a given point in time, in a particular location (Dyer, 2002). What trans femme stereotypes translate into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans, demonstrate which trans subjectivities are impermissible, and side-line the majority of actual trans embodiments and experiences (For more on this see: Espineira and Bourcier, 2016; Faye, 2018; Lehner, 2019; 2020; 2021; Serano, 2013). As Homi k. Bhabha (1994) observes, via anxious repetition of fixed representations of a given constituency we begin to culturally understand a group of people as all being a certain way. Regardless of its facticity, due to its continuous circulation, the stereotype becomes believed. This is achieved due to the fixity of the image and the consistent assumptions attached to it (Bhabha, 1994), in turn, forming a cultural belief and expectation about a given group of people. Trans stereotypes are often the only examples of trans subjects that most people encounter.

The conceptual flattening of the space between image and subject is crucial to the upholding of stereotypes and by extension colonial ideologies. Photographs at their inception in the mid-1800s were deeply tangled with that period's dominant world-views, including a variety of binary oppositions that positioned Caucasian masculinities as the pinnacle of humanity (Batchen, 1999; Berger, 2005). Halberstam (2018: 6-7) has observed that in the colonial project binary oppositions were established precisely to facilitate the demarcation of others as knowable and visible in order to degrade and dehumanize them.

Considering the interconnection between photography and gender, it is instructive to consider the work of trans studies scholar Paul B. Preciado who observed the discursive framing of photography as indexical, and beliefs about photography's 'technical production' being falsely related to objectivity, endowed it with 'the merit of visual realism', which in turn has tied photography to a significant stage in the production of a gender via the belief in visual truth (Preciado, 2013: 111). Preciado writes, "the truth of sex takes on the nature of visual discourse, a process in which photography participates like an ontological catalyst, making explicit a reality that would not be able to emerge any other way" (Preciado, 2013: 112). Photographs of people not only prompt a reading of the picture for clues about the person, but they also inform the normative structures by which we live.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1994: 257), exploring the function of photographs in relation to gender formations, writes, 'photography, a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender'. In failing to view photographs as highly fabricated and ideologically instructive, one is wont to mischaracterise what is contained in the frame as a given rather than view it as a suggestion of one possible reality. To view the portrait photographs circulating in mainstream culture as a given, reinforces established ideologies and aesthetic standards.

In studying portrait photographs we must consider how the project of creating visibility itself reinforces and further legitimizes the cultural weight invested in looking, otherwise a practice buttressing the maintenance of current power structures. Distilling vibrant debates that have been engaged by feminist theorists regarding the politics of representation, Solomon-Godeau (1994: 258) concisely argues that the problem of engaging with binary oppositions of negative visibility countered by positive visibility is 'uncomplicated', grounded in 'unexamined essentialism', and relies on a 'positivist model that is both limiting and ultimately deceptive'. It is significant that scholars do not engage in reductive thinking about portraits being synonymous with knowledge, nor should scholarship position one type of image-making in opposition to another, but instead, methodologically it is necessary to attend to the specificity of each new visual instantiation on its terms via interdisciplinary approaches that attend most fully to the image's specificity.

TRANS FEMMES IN VISUAL CULTURE AND BRIEFLY HOW WE GOT HERE

The first and oldest weekly news magazine published in the United States, *Time* holds significant cultural weight as a medium of transmission of culture. So, when, the cover story lauded that one year after gay marriage was legalised, the USA had moved on to the next civil rights battle and Cox is quoted as saying, 'more of us are living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly. So, people can say, "Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans"' (Steinmetz, 2014: 40), the takeaway is that culturally the USA has arrived at a critical juncture on the brink of *acceptance* of trans folks. However, this type of logic relies on the inaccurate and unfounded belief that an increase in representation of trans characters and a handful of trans celebrities in mainstream culture equals political and social progress. The problematic conceptualization behind this move—forwarding the belief that visibility equates to progressive or radical social change—is not only that this is non-factual but that representations are far more complex than they may seem at first glance (For more on this see: Doyle and Jones, 2006).



Figure 2. Behind-the-scenes footage of Jenner's photoshoot with Annie Leibovitz, as aired on *I Am Cait*, for her iconic *Vanity Fair* cover story, June of 2015. Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.



Figure 3. Image of Christine Jorgenson, the world's first trans celebrity, from Susan Stryker's film *Christine in the Cutting Room*. Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

Embodying feminine aesthetics, trans femmes deploy aesthetics associated with those we have been trained to devalue and consume in the West; but in embodying femmeness beyond cis femininity, they become objects of spectacular fascination. The heightened sexualization and exploitation of trans femmes in dominant Western visual culture are aligned with cultural ideologies invested in dehumanizing trans feminine people in ways that go beyond the exploitation of cis women. The coupling of both transphobia and misogyny directed at trans femmes objectifies bodies, and demeans personhood, positioning trans femmes as objects to be perused, exploited, and discarded. In her text *Trans-Misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano (n.d.) observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict sexualized bodies in 'titillating and lurid fashion'. Transmisogyny has also led to the media's now decades-long depiction (starting with Christine Jorgenson) of 'the trans revolution in lipstick and heels' (Serano, 2016: 70) (Figure 3). Moreover, the intersection of racism and gender oppression continues to create uneven, problematic, and often dangerous intersections perpetuated in visual culture (Figure 2). As Elías Cosenza Krell (2017) has noted, albeit invaluable, Serano's formulation of transmisogyny does not address race or class and in so doing positions white middle-class transness as the demographic impacted by transmisogyny thus limiting the value of the term. Krell also notes that this is not a problem unique to Serano, but rather is one that has plagued the theorization of gender and sexuality since Foucault (ibid). In an effort to maintain the use value of the concept of transmisogyny, Krell traces the work of Moya Bailey who coined the term *Misogynoir* which describes the intersection of 'racism, antiblackness, and misogyny' (Krell, 2017: 236). Building on Bailey's

intervention, Krell goes on to suggest that term such as *transmisogynoir* and *racialized transmisogyny* (leaning on Patricia Hill Collins) are critically necessary and work to include voices and perspectives from outside the academy (Krell, 2017) (See: Bailey and Trudy, 2018). These debates are indebted to the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, specifically *Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color* (Crenshaw, 1991).

Trans femme activists Cece McDonald and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy observe that the hypervisibility of Laverne Cox has, in many ways, led to increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of colour (Griffin-Gracy, McDonald and Meronek, 2017). McDonald and Griffin-Gracy suggest that because Cox is presumably unreachable, racist transphobic would-be aggressors of Cox turn their acts of violence against those who come into their proximity (ibid). Griffin-Gracy notes that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation (Griffin-Gracy, McDonald and Meronek, 2017: 29)¹ Griffin-Gracy's observation about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetails with micha cárdenas's argument that 'the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable' (cárdenas, 2017: 170). 'Now more than ever', cárdenas writes, 'it is evident that visibility is a trap'(ibid).

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton (2017) traces the interconnections between racism and gender as regulating apparatus. Snorton sees Caitlin Jenner (see [Figure 2](#)) in an established canon of trans representations traceable to the first widely celebrated trans woman to appear in visual culture—Christine Jorgensen (see [Figure 3](#)). Snorton observes that the canonization of Jorgensen as the 'good transsexual' set up a framework in which White trans women gained an 'acceptable subject position', contingent on their Whiteness and their commitment to embodying and reflecting narrowly prescribed cultural norms associated with White womanhood (Snorton, 2107: 140-143). The same tropes are observable in the multiple visual examples we see today of Caitlyn Jenner: affluence, passivity, inviting the gaze, and being White. Snorton also suggests that, in making a narrow fraction of trans femmes acceptable via the whitewashed and rigidly bound gender category, the iconizing of Jorgensen set up a mould against which other trans femmes would be compared (Snorton, 2017). Those who did not reflect Jorgensen's precedent lay outside the bounds of acceptable trans embodiment, either due to expressing gender beyond the binary or due to racial appearance other than White².

Historically, the discursive and ideological framing of transness has been overdetermined by cultural ideologies about visibility and the medical industry so strongly that trans people have embodied transness in line with these ideologies. Historically, to procure services to transition, trans folks needed to convince care providers and the medical industry that one was 'trapped in the wrong body' and was seeking to align one's internal sense of self with an external physical anatomy that matched. Within the framing of dominant binary gender structures, this left room only to appear to others as either a man or a woman but feel as the 'opposite'. The logic of this schema is rooted in an essentialist conflation of gender identity and external physical aesthetics. In other words, as gender is repeatedly tied to how people appear and, more precisely, how others interpret this appearance, then we will all always need to embody gender in ways that comply with, and replicate, what is dictated by dominant visual culture to be treated in line with our gender identities (Salamon, 2010: 123). Yet, genders are much more complex as we will see presently with a discussion of the work of Travis Alabanza³.

As Gayle Salamon (2010: 114) writes, the process of transitioning has been described as 'a process of transforming the body so that its visible signifiers of gender come into accord with the internal invisible sense of gender' and the predominance of visual embodiment being tied to identity has regulated trans experiences to be tightly bound to achieving physical interventions so that one's embodiment reflects dominant binary gender paradigms. These logics are the same logics that undergird the various systems of oppression in locations ideologically informed by enduring legacies of colonialist ideologies.

Colonial evolutionists postulated that it was via the binary opposition of Caucasian men and women marked by visually discernible binary oppositions that white supremacy was visually recognizable and maintained (Russett, 1989; Somerville, 2000; Najmabadi, 2005; Carter, 2007; Peiss, 2011; Herzig, 2016). The linking of systems of oppressions to visual classifications of difference and hierarchies has continued to be entrenched in locations descended from this colonialist ideology. Thus, the ongoing work of racism, sexism, queer and transphobia, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, classism and more continues to be part of the same enduring oppressive systems and

¹ McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on CeCe McDonald: Erdely, 2014; Lockett, 2016; Qian, 2017; Barnard Centre for Research on Women, 2018.

² Jorgensen herself was already repeating entrenched raced and gendered tropes of femininity. One needs only to look back at the history of portraiture and visual culture in the West and view the lineage of White women imaged within this narrow aesthetic. Feminist art historians have hashed this out. See the works of Cindy Sherman, Reenee Cox, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneeman, scholarship of bell hooks, Laura Mulvey and others. On the topic of decolonizing gender and its racist implications, see Somerville, 2000.

³ For discussion of gender as a matrix, and as performative see Judith Butler's extensive oeuvre.

are carried out via the conceptual framing that via looking one can ascribe identity to another and by extension determine how to treat them.

The recent increase in racist, queerphobic and transphobic violence is part of this enduring legacy of colonialist violence. Failing to draw the connection between these interconnected systems, and perhaps most importantly their contingency on an ideological belief in the ability to ascribe meaning (and by extension value) to people based on appearance, is a critically profound issue. Trans of colour culture, lives and social movements had a massive impact on LGBTQ liberation beginning in the 1960s. Yet trans of colour representations, narratives and identities and experiences of interlocking oppression continue to be overshadowed by the narratives of white trans movements and communities (Chen, 2019: 7). Thus, the mainstream visual manifestation of trans identities and movement by and large reflect white supremacist ideologies and embodiments. A cursory historical look at the establishment of gender as a category reveals that the articulation of gender by the 1950s was bound with gender assimilation as upheld by the biochemical treatment and forced gender assignments surgeries by the psych-medical industries. These were based on and informed by 'histories and systems of genocide, captivity, colonization and imperialism' as integral to and informed by the regulation of binary gender regimes (Chen, 2019: 4-5). Recall for a moment if you will the above discussion of the sanitised incorporation of Jorgensen as first trans celebrity.

In the contemporary moment mainstream visual culture reflects the trope of the incorporateable trans subjects in the form of a token handful of trans celebrities including Laverne Cox, Janet Mock and Caitlyn Jenner while simultaneously deploying messages about trans folks who exist outside of sanctioned parameters of gender manifestations. With this in mind *Micha Cárdenas* would have us remember that:

The act of violent backlash against trans and queer Latinx people underscores the fact that we have begun to open queer and Latinx futures as a possible reality, and those futures make some people very afraid. Queer Latinx futures point to queerness as horizon, as described by José Esteban Muñoz, and as possibility. Trans Latinx futures gesture toward worlds free of colonial borders of gender, sexuality and nationality (*Cárdenas*, 2022: 168).

Counter to the public imaginary, when it comes to trans femmes of colour and those who are not gender conformists, let us recall Latinx trans femme, *Sylvia Rivera*, one of the founders of queer liberation as an example of queer futurity, rather than as mainstream culture would have us believe, as abject victim destined for demise. For after all it was *Rivera* who said, 'nothing can stop us—now or any time in the future' (*Cárdenas*, 2022: 168).

TRANS DISRUPTION IN THE VISUAL FIELD

The tenuous relationship between trans people and visibility is a crucial tenet of why practices of trans self-representations are crucial, proposing interventions that disrupt assumptions about identity, visual culture, and representation. Trans scholar *C. Riley Snorton* (2017: 140) has insightfully noted that 'reality is sutured to the privileging of sight'. Trans as an identity and as a methodology undoes this ideologically constructed pseudologic, or belief, in the privileging of sight, while offering a way out of thinking via binaries and essentialisms. Studying trans visual culture interventions via interdisciplinary methodology co-informs the object of study and building on trans and visual studies methods offers a powerful new prism through which to rethink many aspects of visual culture and in this case identity and representation.

Trans as an identity constituency is made up of people who self-define in complex dialectical opposition to that which one has been told they are. Trans people reject the identity assigned to us at birth and that was imposed upon us based on our aesthetics. Trans is comprised of diverse gender identifications, all of whom have unique and discrete relations to geographic location, historical time periods, subcultural identification, class, and ethnicity (as well as other identifications). Trans identities highlight gender identities in ways that avoid the fixed, the linear, and the bordered, promoting genders that can change and fluctuate over the course of a lifetime, or even over the course of a day. Gender identity can even change depending on whom we are interacting with, where we are, and how we feel. Trans is often deployed by subjects as a means of articulating a lack of interest in existing and performing within the binary gender structure. It is also often used as a way of refusing to transition into a binary gender presentation. Trans can also be understood as creating a third gendered space that is diverse and maintaining a place of stasis and/or ongoing potentiality⁴.

⁴ In this usage trans represents a gender that is open, unfixed, transgressive, transversing, continually becoming, and disruptive of static norms. It is not about authenticity but reveals how bodily feeling and desire are constituted socially and spatially. Political, affective and social register produce trans bodies. See *Prosser* (2013), *Hayward* (2017) and *Stryker* (2008; 2018).

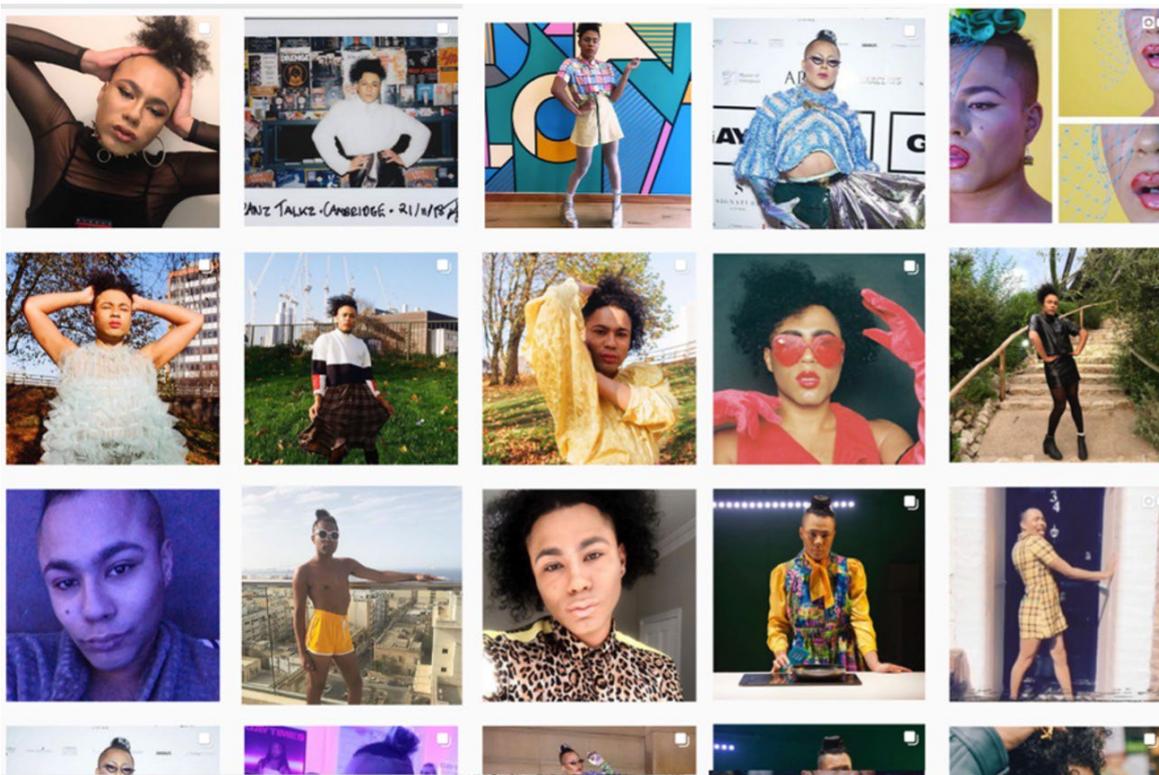


Figure 4. Selection of Alabanza's self-images on their Instagram feed. Image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza.

ALABANZA'S INSTA INTERVENTION

Predominantly known for their work in performance, Black British, non-binary, trans femme artist Travis Alabanza grew up in working-class Bristol, England, and is currently based in London, active in the performance and theatre scenes there⁵. In 2017, Alabanza became the youngest recipient of the artist in residence at the Tate workshop program. They've performed in venues such as the ICA, the Roundhouse, and Barbican. Alabanza has toured throughout Europe and the United States in hundreds of venues (Alabanza, 2022a; Minamore, 2019; Beresford, 2018; Faye, 2018; Rulli, 2017). Using the platform Instagram, Alabanza inserts radical aesthetics into the visual field, critically engaging in discourses of trans identity formations, and discourses of representation. Challenging distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, the use of Instagram by image-makers like Alabanza mobilizes the platform as an ever-evolving, self-curated solo exhibition of self-portraiture. This not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define portraiture and photographic practice, but also confounds the way in which stereotypes are established. Rather than creating static and reductive representations that narrowly demonstrate essentialized ways of being an acceptable trans subject, Alabanza's self-representations present a diversity of potential ways of being non-binary and black, while the self-publishing and self-curatorial aesthetics of Instagram also facilitate that they speak for themselves.

Trans, as a rejection of assigned sex/gender, is a rejection of what was attached to us based on our physical attributes, or assumptions based on corporeal aesthetics. Trans subjects reject a gender that has been ascribed to us based on interpretation of our physical surface, in favour of living our lives based on our internal feeling—something not visible, but rather often expressed visually. Gender is communicated in part by playing with the aesthetics and expectations of gendered performances and embodiments. Trans, as an analytic, offers a method to view representations not only as distinct and distant from the subject rendered, but in tension with it. A trans self-imaging praxis like that of Alabanza's provides a method that prompts a rethinking of surfaces necessarily relating to essence, identity, and authenticity, unfixing the surface from the subject (Figures 4 and 5).

⁵ Black British refers to British citizens of either Indigenous African Descent or of Black Afro-Caribbean (or Afro-Caribbean) background and includes people with mixed ancestry. This is a term by which Travis Alabanza self-identifies. Non-binary, another way that Travis Alabanza identifies, refers to someone who does not identify with the gender binary. Trans femme is used here to differentiate from trans woman. While trans woman as an identity category reinforces the conflation of gender and biology and is rooted in a rigidly bound category with a history of tensions, trans femme as deployed here is about aesthetics and gestures; it recognizes gender as a free signifier not reductively attached to biological sex.

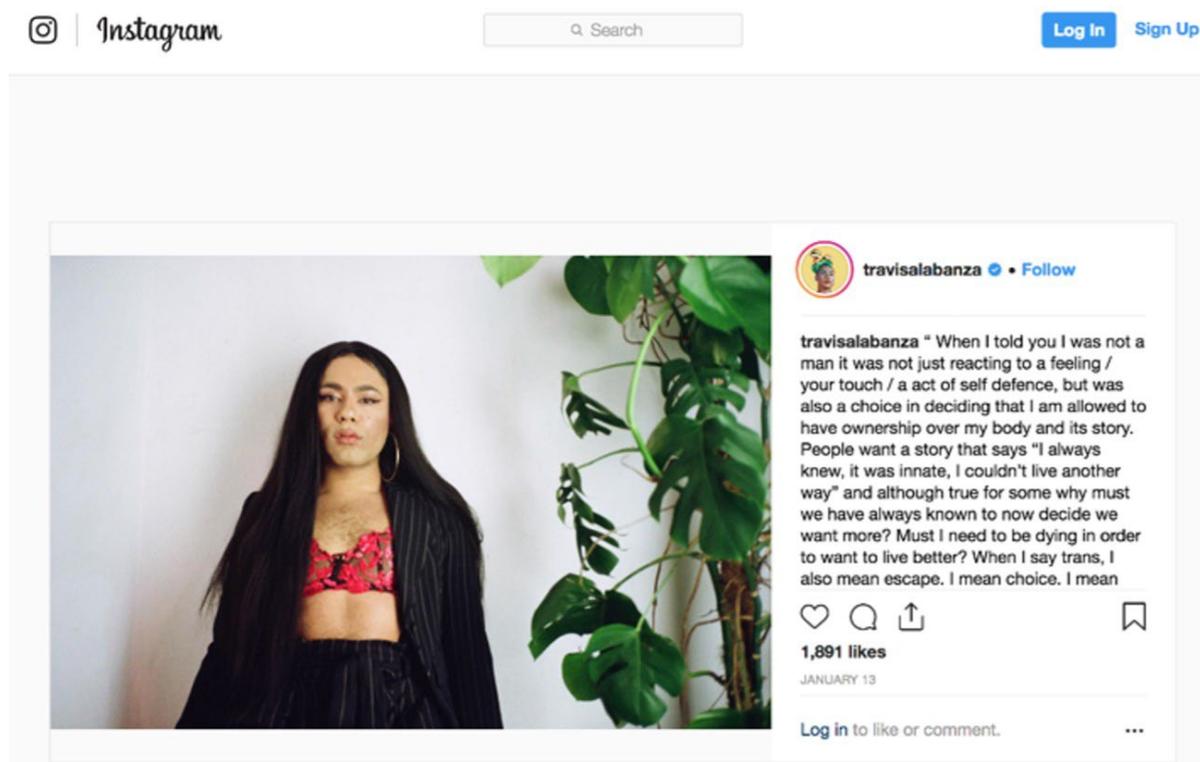


Figure 5. Self-image of Travis Alabanza on their Instagram feed posted 13 January 2020. Screen grab image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza.

Travis Alabanza's trans self-imaging practice intervenes in methods of photography, representation and complex relationship between seeing and knowledge, and notions of lens-based imaging as related to unmediated 'truth', revealing that the indexicality that we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we in the West are taught to assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification. Current discourse around identity is shifting via trans cultural production and we are seeing a move away from the idea that one can categorize others based on interpretation of aesthetics. Thus, we are now witnessing a shift wherein we learn to respect people's self-identifications, regardless of what identities and values viewers may want to suture to them based on visual assessment (for example, identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, and values such as worthiness of being treated as a person).

In their prolific self-imaging, using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of a continually evolving self, Alabanza's work visually problematises our cultural belief in the photograph's correlation with authenticity and truth. Beyond mobilising Instagram as an intervention into discourses of representation, Alabanza's ever-shifting representation acts as radical manoeuvres in reworking the conceptual ontology of photography. Alabanza performs iterations of self that deploy various displays of their complex identity and expansive gender expression. Part of the ontology of transness as an identity is well-suited to challenging the Western conception of photography. For, as trans identities often unmoor notions of corporeal aesthetics equating to some notion of authentic self or truth, they undo the equation that visually interpreting a surface can lead to the procurement of knowledge, or precisely how photographs have been framed ideologically in the Western context. Thus, when Alabanza makes a self-image, they intentionally play with the idea that they are in control of how their gender appears; they are performing a picture while intimately aware that a surface is never necessarily correlative to any notion of interiority, authenticity or truth. This conceptually opens up and troubles the relationship between the image and the subject and intervenes in this space. There can be no flattening of one image and one version of Alabanza; one must continually consult Alabanza's feed to view the gender that they perform at any given point in time, in any given location.

Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via social media platforms, the selfie has facilitated self-imaging becoming a ubiquitous part of globally networked contemporary life. Beyond this, selfies have facilitated a diversity of image-making practices and enabled otherwise representationally marginalised identities to insert self-representations into visual culture (For more on this see: Lehner, 2021; Murray, 2022; Giroux, 2015; Gorichanaz, 2019). A close look at the prolific selfie practice of Travis Alabanza reveals their use of Instagram to be a critical intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre produces new visual exemplars that defy stereotypes and erasures produced by dominant culture while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of identity and

self-portraiture. Alabanza's work decolonises the relationship between the subject and the portrait, encouraging viewers to consider the complex dialectical relationship between images, aesthetics, identity, performativity, gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

Art critic Jerry Saltz (2014) captures the art world's resistance to selfies in his piece 'Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie', published in *New York Magazine*, wherein he writes, "Unlike traditional portraiture, selfies don't make pretentious claims. They go in the other direction—or no direction at all". This derision of selfies seems unfounded and political when we consider photo scholar Charlotte Cotton's (2020) assertion regarding photography. She claims, 'rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as "masters" of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship [...] It took in a distinctly "non-art", "deskilled", and "unauthored" look and emphasized that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance' (2020: 21). In other words, conceptual art and conceptual photography purposefully try to look deskilled to emphasize what or who is imaged, rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. This is precisely what selfies do. They are not invested in the aesthetics or technologies of art world hierarchies; they derive their meaning from that which is pictured, whilst engaging emerging aesthetic practices.

Trans self-image makers like Alabanza are invested in challenging how we have come to view and conceptualize representation in locations informed by the enduring cultural ideologies of colonialist thinking. Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view corporeal aesthetics as communicating identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

In recent decades, artists have been increasingly interested in photography, and photographers have turned to portraiture for its sophisticated ability to rework the concepts behind representation, to engage in different types of power dynamics, and to explore self and identity, both critically and intimately (Bright, 2011; Cotton, 2020). Conceptual art photography purposefully tries to look de-skilled, emphasizing what or who is imaged rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. Such works often call attention to the very ontological contradictions of pictures and highlight the interconnection between photographs, performativity, and indexicality (Cotton, 2020). Photography scholar Charlotte Cotton observes that 'the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject' (2020: 137).

A mashup of the words Instant Camera and telegram, Instagram is a free photography and video-sharing social media platform launched in 2010. Designed to be used on smartphones and consisting of scrollable feeds of images, Instagram enables users to create endless streams of images to be shared instantaneously. Connecting on Instagram is primarily based on liking other people's images, and communication is facilitated by the ability to comment on images as well as 'heart' them. Key features include the user's ability to post images to their feed, scroll images posted by others, and search for images by their hashtags, such as #trans #selfie or #blacklivesmatter, to bring up images tagged with the hashtag.

Considering the complex history of photographic portraiture, it should come as no surprise that, as photography scholar Susan Bright (2011: 211) has observed, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions." Following Bright's (2011) thinking, we can view Travis Alabanza's praxis as engaging in a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming 'truth value' of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects, while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

The aesthetics of Instagram as a platform present users with the options of viewing one image after another, in a linear top-down feed, or of perusing a set of images in three-square pictures across and a variable number down (depending on the size of one's device). The frame of the viewing device almost always contains another partial image (or images) and text. Even on the few occasions that the device frames a solo image, the understanding of the feeds' function and interactivity as continually scrollable suggests ever more images to peruse. By its very design, Instagram lends itself to the production of multiple versions of oneself, a constantly shifting representation of the image-maker.

The construction of the stereotype in visual culture is contingent on flattening ideas about a person or an identity constituency to a fixed, essentialized icon of said group. Thus, when trans femmes of colour are repeatedly imaged as tragic and comedic tropes, and White femmes are spectacularised, we are bearing witness to the continued suturing of specific ideas to particular identities via the perpetuation of stereotypes (Tagg, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Sontag, 2001). We should remain wary of the complicated relationship between the icon and what it represents; we should also view the lens-based image as always ideologically saturated. Moreover, one ought to always consider any portrait as fabrication with significant political motives, whether

consciously intended by the image-maker or not. When photography is framed as indexical, ‘truthful’, or ‘objective’, it behoves us to understand that this is rooted in a colonial project, set up to make visual distinctions between oppressor and oppressed (Bhabha, 1994; Weheliye, 2014; Halberstam, 2018). To make a critical intervention into problematic issues in representation, it is necessary to begin to challenge the very discursive framing of the ontology of lens-based images.

Alabanza’s selfies showcase their intersectional identity as continually shifting and ever augmenting. Their self-imaging on Instagram reflects no investment in the technologies of art world hierarchies. Instead, Alabanza deploys a vernacular aesthetic, while contemplating the space that photographs occupy between index and performativity. The resulting images are highly complex and distinctly contemporary in the service of the conceptual underpinning of the work, and the nuanced process of the negotiation of identity. Their self-images challenge established modes of production (with no elaborate or expensive equipment expected in art world scenarios), they elide established art world forms of circulation by using social media networking; they also reach potentially massive audiences instantaneously and are readily and easily consumed. Art historian and visual studies scholar, Jennifer A. González has observed that increasingly, contemporary forms of activist art utilise the Internet and mass media while also interrogating ‘the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze’ (Flanagan et al., 2007: 5). Enacting González’s observation, trans self-images like those of Alabanza intervene in the politics of representation, corporeality, and the gaze. Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and non-binary self-images utilize social media platforms like Instagram precisely for the reasons mentioned above.

Scrolling through Alabanza’s feed, we can see how their gender shifts from high femme donning full makeup and pouting lips to wearing short shorts, and no top with a hairy chest (see [Figure 4](#) bottom left and one in from bottom left). Alabanza presents themselves as a hip fashion visionary, wearing fashion forward, retro looks full of colour and attitude (see bottom row right), not only countering stereotypic representations but providing a plethora of non-binary and Black British corporealities that push open the trans visual field. That is to say, in forwarding countless images of themselves as discrete iterations, Alabanza is mobilizing an infinite oeuvre of Black British trans femme ways of being.

Alabanza’s Instagram feed consists almost entirely of self-images. From one image to the next, they always appear as a new example of gender non-conforming femininity (see [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Their Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation. Alabanza mobilises their Instagram feed in a way that suggests that even with a seemingly endless flow of self-representations, there will never be enough images to depict Alabanza in their entirety, and that identity and gender are continually morphable. This suggests that with one image or a thousand images, one will never be adequately capable of articulating a singular visual ‘truth’ about Travis Alabanza. It also highlights the inaccuracy and essentialism implicit in the cultural belief that one image can provide accurate information about a subject.

In contradistinction to the singular isolated iconic portrait photograph, Alabanza’s Instagram feed is made up of countless images, always augmenting and showcasing the subject as nuanced, malleable, and continually reinventing themselves. Non-binary trans femme self-representations like theirs directly challenge how we have defined portraiture in Europe and North America since the Renaissance. Amelia Jones has observed that in the West, we have a cultural tendency—especially in portraiture—to collapse the representation for the thing itself (Jones, 2006, 2012). For the purpose of understanding how Alabanza’s work is an intervention in so-called Western discourse, it is useful to think through Jones’s (2006) articulation of the complex space between the surface of the image and the subject imaged. Jones’s ‘gap’ is temporal, spatial and conceptual. The flattening of time, physicality and ideas is precisely how images have been confused with evidence, truth and fact, and when we bear in mind that the image is always removed via this multidimensional gap from the subject, then we are infinitely more capable of viewing the image just as a surface rendering and not confuse it for the subject in the photograph.

Alabanza mobilises the aesthetics and possibilities of Instagram to image themselves as an intervention into visual culture. With over 77 thousand followers around the globe, at the time of writing, Alabanza’s praxis on Instagram constitutes a compelling intervention into discourses of representation in conversation with contemporary photography discourse and the utilization of self-portraits to interrogate identity formations (see [Figure 4](#)). Alabanza’s self-imaging praxis is not an isolated occurrence; it is part of a larger movement of trans folks’ self-imaging as intervention, a movement building on a long lineage of feminist, and queer photographic interventions.⁶ I take up these concerns further in my current book project, *Trans Self-Representations: Non-binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* (working title).

⁶ Here, I position Alabanza’s intervention in a lineage of feminist and queer artists, such as Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Renee Cox, Cathy Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Tourmaline, Loren Cameron, Tammy Rae Carland, Nikki S. Lee, Kalup Linzy, TT Takemoto, Mickalene Thomas, Zanele Muholi, Amrou Al-Hadhi, Tejal Shah, and Alok Vaid-Menon, to name a few.

In an image posted on their Instagram feed, on 13 January 2020, Travis Alabanza wears a dark pinstriped blazer, open in the front over a lacey red and black bra and dark, high-waisted pinstriped suit bottoms (see [Figure 5](#)). Their hair is straight and long, a gold hoop earring catches the side light coming from what might be a nearby window; they lean back toward the bare white wall behind them in a slightly sultry pose, lips pursed, cat eyes looking directly at us through the picture plane. Alabanza is mobilizing a sophisticated and sexy version of themselves, a non-binary femme-ness unabashedly wearing a bra while having a slightly hairy chest. They take up the central location in the frame, cropped at the hips, with a small amount of negative space above their head, frontal facing in shallow pictorial space; the framing, frontality and proportion of the image reference the aesthetics of a long tradition of Western portraiture, traceable back to the sixteenth century (Lehner, 2021). However, here, the aesthetics of the image-maker/subject are a radical intervention into the visual field. Rather than a cis White man self-imaging via entrenched art historical materials, Alabanza disrupts aesthetic and media-based hierarchies and traditions of self-portraiture. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2016: 29) puts it 'at one time, self-portraits were the preserve of a highly skilled few. Now anyone with a camera phone can make one'. Nothing about Alabanza's image is inherently radical, but due to the various hierarchies of racism, classism, white supremacy, cis supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and binary gender oppression, their work is profoundly radical. As Alabanza writes in their recent book:

I believe my transness is a reactionary fact, not an innate one. I am trans because the world made me so, not because I was born different. I am trans because the systems the world operates through force me to be so, not because of genetics. I am trans because of you, not because of me. I did not always know, because I once imagined a world where I would not have to know (Alabanza, 2022b: 29).

Across their multi-disciplinary creative oeuvre, Alabanza's intervention makes space and critical dialogue around the nuances of being non-binary but beyond the reductive way that neoliberal incorporation of non-binary seems to suggest that there is yet another reductive box that exists as a third gender option and begins to resign the expansiveness of non-binary to a reductive and articulated third gender. Alabanza proposes a complexity of being that is massively expansive beyond such reductive tendencies.

Alabanza's self-images defy Western, binary gender aesthetic expectations, juxtaposing symbols assigned to the category of masculinity (a hairy chest and stubble) with aesthetics assigned to the category of femininity (red lips, floral crop top and long hair). Standing with shoulders back and eyes meeting ours through the picture plane, Alabanza presents an empowered figure who is disinterested in performing within the frameworks of normative gender. Through their mobilization of self-image and text, Alabanza invites us to reconsider how we conceive of gender and trans identities, specifically taking on the narrative of trans folks that was established when media originally spectacularized trans people and psychiatric and medical industries pathologized trans identities, and which has been perpetuated by mainstream media since. This history suggests that a trans person is trapped in the wrong one of two gender options and must medically transition as quickly as possible into the other to 'feel like themselves'. This reductive narrative reinvests in the gender binary and effectively erases all who exist outside of or between masculine and feminine. The regulating of people in this way continues to force trans people to seek legitimization from sources outside, be that governmental, medical, and otherwise. In failing to follow the prescribed narrative and in this way resisting to conform to pressures to fit themselves into binary gender categories Alabanza demonstrates that transgressing binary gender norms is a viable option.

Alabanza's oeuvre prompts questions about how we assign gender qualities to aesthetics; not offering any easy answers, they use the image caption to promote further reflection (see [Figure 5](#)):

When I told you I was not a man it was not just reacting to a feeling/your touch/an act of self-defiance, but was also a choice in deciding that I am allowed to have ownership over my body and its story. People want a story that says 'I always knew, it was innate, I could not live another way' and although true for some why must we have always known to now decide we want more? Must I need to be dying in order to want to live better? When I say trans, I mean escape.

Taken together, image and text propose that we need not belong in either one of two gender choices, that our genders may change any time in any way, and that their potential transformations are infinite. For Alabanza, trans is a way out of rigid identitarian regimes, a praxis and a life free of living within preset boundaries. Both image and statement push us to imagine other ways of being not already modelled around us. The ethos of Travis Alabanza's self-imaging praxis does not embody a desire to create positive visibility, but rather to be understood outside of current regimes of visualities. Moreover, Alabanza's self-image photographs are performed as intentional

interventions into visual culture, and are challenging the very understanding of representation, portraiture and visual encounters⁷.

DECOLONIZING GENDER, BEAUTY, AND IDENTITY

Trans femme of colour methodologies, emerging from within scholarly inquiry as well as creative praxis, like that of Alabanza, are pushing the bounds of trans discourse and understanding of identity, visualities, and representations. As micha cárdenas (2022: 31) writes, ‘trans of colour poetics are a gesture of solidarity animated by a poetic ambiguity that make them more capacious. The formation of “trans of colour” reveals the limitations of the Western medical definition of transgender and calls for solidarity beyond its bounds’, while also stressing the necessity to remain porous. Deploying the concept of trans of colour as an algorithm allows cárdenas to explore trans of colour as ‘a shifting variable, as a part of a process that exists only when it is performed, with an appearance that can change rapidly based on the needs and desires of the moment’ (cárdenas, 2022: 32). Part of the decolonial ethos for cárdenas here is a challenge to the ‘idea of transgender by questioning the Western notion of the self as unified, unchanging and separate’ (cárdenas, 2022: 33). This is a direct affront to the binary and linear formation of trans prevalent for the last decades in the West. Cárdenas (2022: 34) writes about indigenous folks and how including these identities in trans discourse pushes open understandings of transness that work to decolonize transness. For cárdenas (2022: 35) trans of colour poetics are a formulation that challenges their own definitions, bringing together forms of gender nonconformity that do not neatly fall into the category of transgender. Taking this insight as invaluable it is also informative to consider the words of Marquis Bey (2019: 110-111) who asks:

“What happens, though, when we take seriously the knowledge taking hold in trans studies that *trans* denotes less a specific gendered body and more a movement away from an originary, imposed starting point?” Transness, Bey argues, manifests, in the first instance, as an elusive capacity that cannot be discerned by making recourse to the visual or normative (2019: 111). Moving away from dominant ideologies around visibility and creating distance intellectually from any connection to a starting place that was imposed upon us without our consent or even our input becomes a critical offering of transness as a mode of existence, encounter and of scholarly inquiry. Building on Kai M Green, Bey (2019: 111) goes on to write that ‘trans is a “decolonial demand”, a move to rework gender; “a question of how, when, and where one sees and knows; a reading practice that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation.”

The call to decolonize gender here is bound up with a need to reconsider one’s perspective and understanding of self. It involves critical modes of existing and thinking, prompting thoughtful interrogation of givens, and a strategic de-coupling of essentialisms and binaries, particularly as pertaining to identity and representation. As Bey (2022: 64) writes further, ‘black trans feminism attempts to make clear that the “supposedly obvious” phantasm the body is not a fact’. Building on the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Bey continues ‘we’ve been framed by the enduring logic of Enlightenment reason, ideologies informed by white, cis and masculine as being the valid subject. Yet for this to remain the case, identity must rest upon an “assumptive coherence, knowability, and nonporousness, all of which are regulated, normative regimes of legibility and stability” (Bey, 2022: 37). How then might we think and exist outside of such regimes in order to decolonize? I turn again to Alabanza as their critical multi-disciplinary praxis continues to elude and evolve reworking all that may have been taken for given when it comes to identity and representation.

In portraying themselves as hip, self-assured, fashionable and sexy, Alabanza unapologetically forwards expansive gender aesthetics, reflecting an iteration of non-binary, Black-British, trans femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with masculinity and femininity, visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and White supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty. Their work reflects that ‘genders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived’ (Salamon, 2010).

In **Figure 4**, the top left image, we see Alabanza in a black-studded leather choker, tight fishnet shirt over a black tank or bra; they parse their painted lips, beneath sultry eyes, and a hoop earring dangles from their left ear while their hair erupts off the top of their head, in a small dark poof just above their hands. The image is tightly cropped, and Alabanza is cut off at the elbows and chest. They stand in front of a whitish wall in shallow pictorial space. Alabanza looks at us through the picture plane embodying femme goth sultry sexiness through their clothing and expression. In the central image in the top row, Alabanza expresses a perky bright persona via their attire, and

⁷ The very idea of being able to create ‘positive visibility’ is itself a misconception; representations can never remedy social issues and injustice, but rather are always bound up with the negotiation of identity (Solomon-Godeau, 1994). Similarly, in conversation with Amelia Jones (1998), one could discuss this as a feminist practice of narcissism; a threat to patriarchal systems as she (or they) makes the male viewer irrelevant as she (or they) need no confirmation from him of their ‘desirability’.

poses in front of a bright patterned, muralled wall. In this full-body picture, Alabanza is only cropped at the glittery platformed toe and the top of their updo. Their outfit consists of bold colour-blocked, large check top and short butter-yellow skirt, a nod to playful femme fashions of the 1980s and 1990s. Alabanza's right hand is on their hip and their knees point slightly toward one another, while their left hand juts out from the elbow in a performative gesture (as if they are about to snap), one that references film-noir cinema and a femme hand holding a long cigarette. In this pose, Alabanza references tropes of feminine glamour in visual culture history, such as 'affirmation' and 'survival' (Ochoa, 2014: 89-90).

In a very different image (bottom row), Alabanza stands topless, wearing only yellow swim trunks and big white sunglasses with black lenses. Alabanza looks to be on a rooftop, their left arm extending outward along the top of a glass wall with a cityscape in the distance, while their right arm hangs down at their side. Alabanza's chest is flat above their shorts, which are worn high-waisted. While there are many other photographs in the screen grab of Alabanza's Instagram feed (Figure 4), considering just these three, a viewer will be hard pressed to delineate Alabanza's gender identity as reductively fitting neatly into any particular gender category based on binary cis-gendered stereotypes. In fact, no *one* image reflects a normative and reductive version of binary gender, and neither do all three of these showcase consistencies with any one type of binary gender or racialized expectation. From each image to the next, Alabanza's gender shifts along with the frame, location, and attitude. One might surmise that the image in the top left is a queer cis woman, the image in the middle-upper row a femme-identified retro fashion queen, and the figure in the swim trunks identifying with masculinity in some way. However, these assumptions are all about the same person and are all based on interpretation of aesthetics (clothing, pose, performance), underscoring that gender is not fixed but rather is malleable and contingent, often changing in relation to setting, mood, and companions.

CONCLUSION

The Instagram feed of Travis Alabanza, in its production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography, presents a timely and necessary intervention into Western visual culture, bringing into being complex, expansive and intersectional identities while reworking Western concepts of portraiture. Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but their Instagram feed constitutes an imperative and complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such identities produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of representation and self-portraiture.

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and White supremacist transphobic notions of beauty, Alabanza demonstrates gender as performative, but also as a malleable and mobile set of endlessly mutable and ever-deployable signifiers, based in large part on visual communication. They visually assert femme-ness as a free signifier, not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics, underscoring that biological sex has nothing to do with gender. By creating a multiplicity of non-binary, Black British, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Alabanza expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being. This work begins to create space for new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated for their multiplicity and transgressiveness. It does so while simultaneously de-suturing the notion that the surface of a representation has any essentialized and/or fixed relationship to authenticity or truth. Based on this contemporary conception of trans identities, trans methods often deploy concepts of transience, unfixity, and liminality, while also challenging pre-existing barriers and categories. Trans as a method offers scholarship new ways of theorising categories, identities, and representation. Trans methods open up ways of being and thinking that undo the belief in a correlation between apprehensions of surfaces and the assumption that they correlate to some necessary given truth. Trans as a method invests in concepts that privilege self-articulation over the visual interpretation of aesthetics.

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