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Abstract

This thesis looks at the TV-show *I Am Cait* to explore Caitlyn Jenner’s transition and to discuss some important implications raised from particular scenes in the show. The thesis argues that the TV-show is made for a cis audience and discusses the plausible beneficial and detrimental functions of this choice. Another important discussion is Caitlyn Jenner’s political viewpoints – if she wants to be the Trans community’s spokesperson, why is she so eager to defend the Republicans? I tie this discussion into a larger argument on privilege (cis privilege and white privilege) and on the narrow and limiting tropes of this and other trans narratives. Should we praise *I Am Cait* for making the Trans cause more visible, or are the ideas and privileged journeys depicted in the show – often accompanied by many glasses of wine and cheese plates – too unachievable and too shallow to serve the Trans cause any good?
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The transgender movement has definitely gained some fierce momentum during the previous year(s). In April 2015, Bruce Jenner – a former gold medalist Olympian – told Diane Sawyer that he in fact was a woman, and declared later in Vanity Fair that one should “Call me Caitlyn”\(^1\).

In whatever philosophy, country or period one researches one will find people who disregard the conventional gender boundaries. The topic of gender, it seems fair to state, has for a long time been subject to varying degrees of awareness and academic approach. The many different manifestations of gender, as well as the many definitions of the related concepts, therefore seem to split, frustrate and confuse many in 2016. With the exception of the traditional and obvious biological sex differential of male and female, the definitions of what gender, sex and identity are differ greatly. For instance, what does it really mean to be feminine or masculine? Is it not likely that these terms are invested with different meanings that are relative to one’s own culture and understanding? Who decides what attributes these labels carry? How has society handled the inflexibility of such structuralism-binaries? With these problems as a basis, this thesis has tried to explore a recent and what looks like an ever increasing topic in the media, namely Trans people.

The research question materialized out of a strong desire to analyze media representations of gender-variant people and it reads; This thesis seeks to explore the role of Caitlyn Jenner in “I Am Cait”\(^2\) and the functions of the obvious cis focus of the narrative. Is Caitlyn Jenner an unsolicited spokesperson for the trans community?

With the apparent explosion of transgender portrayals in the U.S. media (as well as in the worldwide media) it seems more than interesting and significant to explore various

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Disclaimer: All quotes and situations from the show that are referred to in this text are from Season 1 and Season 2 (produced 2015-present). In lack of an established Chicago-style way of citing episodes underway, I hereby confirm that all examples are retrieved from the general quote, which is to be found above and in the Bibliography section.
aspects of how this phenomenon of gender reassignment is treated and received in the U.S. media. What happens to our definitions and understandings of the issue when we read or watch certain representations? Societal change is continuously confusing to the present circumstances and life, but the recent developments – in which it seems that gender is more fluid than ever before – may seem even more puzzling and difficult to comprehend.

This thesis aims, as explained, to focus on a specific show for analysis. In “I Am Cait”, for instance, Caitlyn Jenner shares her experience (and idea) of what it means to be a transgendered person and what it means – to her – to be feminine. What does this particular show do to our own definitions and understanding of terms such as transgender? Is being transgendered about more than just the dresses and looking feminine? Furthermore, this thesis seeks to explore the significance of Caitlyn Jenner’s story - the “Call me Caitlyn”-story – and to interrogate the major appraisal of it. With the birth of a vibrant transgender studies scholarship in the early 90s, why is it that Caitlyn’s story seems to have such an impact? And, what does the show really manage to look past the simplistic binary of "man" and "woman"? Is the show truly representative?

1.2 Historiography: Transgender studies, the civil rights movement of our time

Apparently, there is a parallel between the state of gender freedoms and gender studies. The world has changed technologically, industrially and politically during the last century. When it comes to freedoms dependent on or related to sex (or gender), whether it concerns the right to vote or to marry someone with the same sex, colossal leaps have been made the last century. Despite the changes in the older and traditional male-female structures, intellectuals have historically disagreed whether gender studies are relevant, important or necessary at all. Although frequently contested, the field(s) of gender studies is nowadays considered exceptional and uniquely imperative.

Truly, many issues and debates with regards to gender has become part of our current intellectual baggage. The perception that humankind has evolved through a sequence of primeval stages of consciousness on its path from past to present, has become inseparable from the modern understanding of people. Indeed, in the foreword to the book *The Transgender Reader*, Stephen Wittle upholds that “Trans identities were one of the most
written about subjects of the late twentieth century”³. With the technological developments of the 20ᵗʰ and 21ˢᵗ centuries, new arenas for Trans identities blossomed. A new academic discipline grew: A discipline which could now focus on communication and the production of transgender communities, instead of just focusing on the medical aspects. The transgender movement began – and still does today – to challenge politics, government and law through a junction of all these old and new aspects, approaches and resources.⁴

It seems more than fair to state that transgender studies today has become a valid tactic to investigate the fascinating junctures of sex and gender as connected to media/cultural representations, lived and survived experiences and political engagement and activism. The discipline has grown and changed vigorously, and today it covers many aspects of the transgender experience.

The discipline has been labeled “Queer Theory’s Evil Twin”⁵ by transgender academic Susan Stryker. The field, as one knows it today, originated in the early 1990s and developed, despite “scant institutional support”⁶, into an “established discipline”.⁷ As maintained in numerous works on transgenderism, the years just before 1990 mark a clear shift in both the scholarship and in the actual definition and application of the term transgender. The term transgenderist was initially coined in the 1970s by Virginia Prince to describe “heterosexual cross-dressers from transsexuals and homosexuals”.⁸

The birth of the new field was characterized by, and was dependent on, the honest narratives and initiatives of transgendered people themselves. “Self-representational work by trans subjects”⁹ was imperative to gain access to various areas of debate and to contribute to related discourses. The early focus of the field was related to identity; there was a need to debate the definitions of transgender identity in relation to terms such as ‘gay’, ‘queer’ and ‘transsexual’, to mention a few. Identity politics was thus important in this early stage of the scholarship, to define the field not only as something different than queer theory, but also to establish the nature and character of the field. Stryker uses several articles to emphasize that transgender studies was born “in the shadow”¹⁰ of queer studies. The obvious linkage and

⁴ Stryker & Whittle, “Transgender Studies Reader”, 2
⁶ Stryker, Susan and Stephen Whittle. The Transgender Studies Reader, 6
⁷ Ibid.
¹⁰ Stryker, «Queer Theory’s Evil Twin», 214
similarity to queer theory proved both beneficial and detrimental; it seems to have been useful for the discipline to flourish together with queer theory to observe strengths and weaknesses of the field, and to build on those implications:

The field of transgender studies has taken shape over the past decade in the shadow of queer theory. Sometimes it has claimed its place in the queer family and offered an in-house critique, and sometimes it has angrily spurned its lineage and set out to make a home of its own. Either way, transgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed.\(^{11}\)

Certainly, these ‘meta-ponderings’ will arise whenever a new discipline is created. What Stryker suggested in the quote above, it seems, corresponds with what Karl Bryant, a professor of sociology, suggests; namely that transgender studies is unique because of the approach of positioning the trans body epistemologically.\(^{12}\) The sexual aspect of gender thus becomes less important, and identity becomes more significant. The underlying trend in the transgender sphere dealt with the question of where one truly belonged, not sexually, but personally as “oneself”.

This substantial difference is apparent in the central works of Sandy Stone and Leslie Feinberg. The latter’s perspective and use of the term *transgender* illustrates how transgender studies changed rapidly and methodologically around 1990. Feinberg begins his famous pamphlet by stating that gender equates to “self-expression, not anatomy”.\(^{13}\) Moreover, in 1987 Sandy Stone wrote “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” in which she strongly requests stories – written by and about transsexual people – that offer new perspectives of the trans experience. Tired of the ‘medical’ undertone of most narratives, it seems as if Stone was convinced that genuine and accurate stories would transfer the discipline (if one could call it just that at the time) from the clinics and out on the street to a more typical audience:

All these authors replicate the stereotypical male account of the constitution of woman:, makeup, and delicate fainting at the sight of blood. Each of these adventurers passes directly from one pole of sexual experience to the other. If there is any intervening space in the continuum of sexuality, it is invisible.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{11}\) Stryker, «Queer Theory’s Evil Twin», 214


\(^{14}\) Stone, Sandy. *The empire strikes back*. 1994, 293
It is noticeable that both Stone and Feinberg’s works confront the inflexibility\textsuperscript{15} of the gender and sexuality terminology of their time. Clearly, the discipline was focused on problematizing what many seem to believe and taught in and since childhood: namely to think of sex and gender as two synonymous words or concepts. In other words, what does it entail to gaze away from a basic binary of "man" and "woman"? With delineations of sex and gender as a starting point, the scholarship from this point onwards blurred these disputed categories, and complicated them with additional concepts such as sexuality, race, class, nationality, skill, the past, and geography. As Feinberg phrases it, “simplistic and rigid gender terms are neither eternal nor natural. They are changing social concepts”\textsuperscript{16}. In his pamphlet, he challenges the modern way of using such terms or any of its immediate connotations by emphasizing that the color blue was, in fact, a girl’s color in the early 1900s. While it seems as if none of the contributors (that I have read) in the field believe that there is something wrong with a woman or man whose self-expression correlates with “feminine” or “masculine” behavior, they want to address the issues that arise for those people who “don’t fit narrow social constraints”\textsuperscript{17}. Indeed, in a later work, Feinberg offers an extended clarification for this chain of thought:

The pink-blue dogma assumes biology steers our social destiny. We have been taught that being born female or male will determine how we dress and walk, whether we will prefer our hair shortly cropped or long and flowing, whether we will be emotionally nurturing or repressed... But those of us who transgress those gender assumptions also shatter their inflexibility.\textsuperscript{18}

In many ways, the liberation Feinberg talked about was dependent on “breaking the silence”; discrimination, violence and hatred occurred because some people defied the accustomed binary system of gender when expressing their true selves. Evidently, several works of the time challenged the intellectual frameworks applied not only in fields related to gender and sex, but also in broader contexts such as the entire society itself. A noteworthy and much cited work of the early 1990s is Judith Butler’s book on “bodies” and “gender trouble”. Her very dense and concise text is impossible to overlook and equally difficult to describe eloquently. Nevertheless, her work is an interesting and well-argued view on how sexuality affects how one considers oneself and others. In Gender Trouble, initially published in 1990, Butler argues that gender is constituted from one’s

\textsuperscript{16} Feinberg, «Transgender Liberation», 5
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Feinberg, «We are all works in progress», 9
actions – that is, from one’s ‘performances’ – and not from one’s biological sex. She does not mean perform in the sense of taking on a role, but in the sense that gender is performative and continues to ‘perform’ or produce gender. In the preface Butler wonders: Does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” Butler’s philosophy challenges the traditional intellectual framework. Butler reasons that a world without gender still makes sexuality something largely disjointed, while at the same time it remains just as clear that gender cannot provide a stable basis on which to theorize sexuality.

The field of transgender studies was made possible not only through Trans persons’ desires for such a field, but also because the bigger intellectual framework opened for it. As the world circumstances changed – and evolved – perspectives broadened. When one started to explore these new frames of thinking one gained not only new understanding, but also new power and momentum to work with these new intellectual frames. It was now time to question the established, hegemonic constructs in society; binaries such as Man/woman and east/west (as in relation to the West being dominant in politics, being the “masculine”) are examples of such socially constructed categories. Susan Stryker argues that as the world grew smaller with migration and “transnational flows” it was natural to challenge conventional intellectual frames. Stryker’s point seems logical; around the millennium the ways of this world changed significantly with the war on terror, vast numbers of refugees and intense struggles for power between the East and the West. The world was transforming, and transgender studies seemed to have been born out of the actual end of the preceding era. New times represented new circumstances – and new challenges – to encounter, question and resolve. The transforming nature of the new century created opportunities to redefine humanity. Stryker’s wording “transnational flows” seems to be very effective and hitting the nail on its head; in a transitioning world the ultimate intellectual task is to understand how understandings of gender, sex and identity not only work in one society, but also how these concepts translate across cultures, languages and countries.

Transgender studies, it seems fair to state, emerged at the outset out of a need for a liberation as the field stepped into a societal rupture and chaos. In the following paragraphs I will discuss how the field developed topically after its ‘birth’, and try to explore and elaborate

20 Stryker, «Queen’s Theory Evil Twin», 212
21 Stryker & Whittle, Transgender Studies Reader, 6
on why the relatively short history of the discipline makes an interesting background for exploring the “Call me Cait”-story further. How does Caitlyn’s story fit the mission of the transgender field? How does the celebrated celebrity fit in to the key questions that have developed in the field of transgender studies?

The scholarship developed compatibly to the abovementioned globalization. The field seems to have transformed from a field fighting for its existence into a recognized and continuing expanding and ‘alive’ field. Trying to map the genealogy of the transgender studies after its ‘baby stage’ proves difficult as the field has developed exponentially. However, while it is challenging to summarize the transgender studies field of the 2000s entirely, it is definitely possible to articulate some of the main directions the discipline seems to have taken. Within a new and wider context, characterized by new and ever-developing technology in communication, biology and medicine, the topics that stand out are linked to (1) scientific sexology discussions, (2) feminist and queer theory (and their investments to the new transgender studies field) and (3) poststructuralist theory. The research concentrates on both medical and social aspects of the transgender experience. Undeniably, the field grew diverse and varied and has tried to attack the many questions and subsequent implications that time has unmasked.

The interrogation of the structuralism-based idea of binary oppositions has proved important in the established transgender studies discipline. The deconstruction of these constructs was motivated by a desire to illuminate the variables between the polarized binaries. It seems fair to state the field sought not only to criticize these power structures to gain political leverage, but also to address the issue of such binary power structures which often involve one dominant figure. In the meantime, a number of works also show that the question has developed in terms of historiography. The field concentrated mainly on sex, gender and science; more specifically, the imperative of sex, sexual behavior and the role of gender through a science perspective.

The variability of the works alone symbolizes the significance of the field’s creation. There was much to explore and many questions to ask and pursue. As I try to capture and present the multifaceted nature of the field it all together becomes clear how important a role the field plays. The question has definitely evolved, but the field has never lost its initial and true motive. Today, transgender studies is more than just an academic field; the field is a collection of materials that has fostered a conversation on how the term ‘transgender’ constitutes a threat to the familiar gender binaries, on how the term transgender is warm and
socially inclusive, and how it works as a category to comprehend gender inconsistency through changing history and cultures. Most importantly, nonetheless, the transgender studies have enabled trans persons to turn oppressing rhetoric up-side down, and place the “other” in the problematized situation. And that has been the main aim of a discipline that has grown rapidly, but with few disputing voices.

1.2.1 Not only a field of study, but also an activist movement

Transgender studies have proved to be a fruitful fundament for new methodologies to cultural studies and analysis. However, it is evident that the scholarship is more than just that, it is also an activist movement fighting for its voice to be heard and for the objectification of the transgender experience. The field develops with society and is both an “explorative and activist process”. It seems fair to label the field “polemical”.

The transgender studies field has undeniably made a lot of new things possible for trans people. Especially with the help of technological advancements –which ultimately resulted in an explosive, cultural creation of communities in which to meet peers– it is now ‘easier’ or more accessible than before to share one’s genuine story, claim one’s transsexualism and deny gender attribution. However, the exponential growth of the field also presents a problem that connects to what has been the field’s key question all along; for others to listen and understand trans stories one must recognize the limitations of terms (and constructs) as sex and gender to successfully realize the “new world” – a new dimension – in which all identities can be “imagined, performed, and named”.

In our world today it is no longer women (or men) who become pregnant. Humans do.

1.3 Justification of the method used

This section explains the fundamental principles for the research done in this thesis. The following arguments are thus meant to provide a justification for the work done in the thesis.

Why a form of gender studies? It was important for the author of this thesis to analyze “I Am Cait” to discuss the potential beneficial or detrimental accomplishments of this particular narrative, but also to underscore a strong belief that gender studies grow

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22 Stryker & Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 6
23 Stryker & Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, xvi
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
increasingly important to fight gender inequality. Such discussions seem to be equally important in terms of moral and law.

“I am Cait” forms the basis for the research for several reasons. Firstly, it was the initial source that triggered an interest – in fact, a desire – to explore the matter further. Secondly, and finally, a quick search on ‘Trans’ in any online engine generates a clear and disproportionate result; the majority of hits on Google were directly linked to the recent transition experience and spectacle that is Caitlyn Jenner. In turn, it ultimately indicates the cultural importance that particular story has claimed.

A particularly important and inspirational evaluation of gender studies (for this thesis) – and American studies as a whole – was made by American Studies professor Robert F. Berkhofer. He maintains that:

The exemplary works have moved from stressing the basic homogeneity of the American mind and uniformity of the American character to noting the diversity of the American population and divisiveness of the American experience.’ As a result, the idea of society as a system of structured inequality receives priority over the concept of culture as the basis for understanding American life.  

Furthermore, Berkhofer explains that the shift from the myth and symbol-school of the earlier American Studies indicated that terms like “paradox” and “ambiguity”, to mention a few, were replaced with terms as “domination” and “hegemony” as cultural studies that were related to race, class and gender increased tremendously. Today, transgender studies form a field that drifts between other fields – for instance between fields directly related to medical, cultural and social work – and the young and interdisciplinary nature of the field makes it a field “without a home”. For the same reason, no specific sets of methodology are available; Trans scholar Joelle R. Ryan explains that:

There is no core “theory” for trans studies, nor is there a universal methodology associated with the field. Because it is a relatively new field and because transgenderism is still so heavily stigmatized, it is likely that a researcher will be the only person doing trans studies at their respective institutions.

It was not easy to decide on how to do this thesis. After all, in a book that surveys the methodology used in cultural studies, authors Mimi White and James Scwhoch explain:

27 Berkhofer, «A new Context for a New American Studies?», 388
29 Ryan, «Reel gender: Examining the politics of trans images in film and media», 19
Many scholars celebrate and endorse the free-wheeling and extremely open nature of this area of intellectual pursuit, while others point to this openness as a sign of the relative intellectual weakness of cultural studies.  

However, in collaboration with the supervisor, it was decided that this thesis will use particular scenes in the show as the basis for further critical analysis. Also, as Reel maintains, there is no “universal “this is how you do cultural studies” template for students and researchers.”

How, then, can the use of a reality TV-show be justified? What potential of academic progression does this form of research carry? This thesis utilizes qualitative methods for its research and analysis. The philosophical underpinnings for this particular research method include (examples follow, but are not limited to): (1) the tradition in social science for documentary observations; (2) the standardized method of utilizing already established theories and scholarly work to build a context and fundament on which to analyze further, and (3) that documentary or reality TV-shows can reveal great things about the current social context and is therefore continuously relevant for contemporary social scientists. Still, methodological justification is rarely straightforward. This thesis uses secondary sources in the forms of articles, surveys and other written material as a prism in which to analyze the primary source, which is the reality show “I am Cait”.

One of the obvious strengths surely must be the exceptional and ‘exclusive’ glimpses into real people’s lives. Ratings prove that these types of TV-shows are very popular, but what quality is it that intrigues the viewers and how – if at all - is this transferable and applicable to qualitative research? It seems obvious that the endless fascination and strive to understand humans constitute the primary factor. The interest in various aspects of the human condition is mutual to all qualitative researchers.

Thus, many reality TV-shows provide just that, an insight into people and their inspirations, drives and traits.

1.4 Outline of the chapters

As mentioned above, this thesis will use topics from Caitlyn Jenner’s TV show and expand them and analyze them further. In other words, examples from “I AM CAIT” will be used to explore the new-found womanhood of Jenner and address some of the sub questions, debates.

30 White, Mimi, and James Schwoch, eds. Questions of method in cultural studies. John Wiley & Sons, 2008, 1
31 Ryan, «Reel gender: Examining the politics of trans images in film and media», 46
and implications these examples ultimately raise.

Chapter 2, “I AM CAIT: A CIS NARRATIVE”, discusses the contending yet interesting but entangled aspects of last year’s “Jenner-movement”. The chapter will initially describe how the many impressions and insinuations in the show make the narrative cis-friendly, and how this is probably a strategy. Then, the chapter will look at how the show conveys Jenner’s sense of womanhood – and how the lack of portrayed softness in that respect – is a weakness in the show, and then criticize the commercial and limiting function of that aspect. Finally, through the example of a much relevant debate on bathroom rights, the thesis will argue how visibility can be a positive effect of the cis gaze. Opposing to most similar reality documentaries, will this show meet the expense of Jenner’s moral awareness and manage to intertwine its personal subject matter into the greater questions?

Chapter 3, “JENNER WAS A WHITE MAN, AND STILL IS” discusses how Jenner in “I Am Cait” is portrayed as a conservative figure, in great contrast to her friends on the show and to the Trans community as a whole. It elaborates on the discussion of narrow narratives in chapter 2, through a discussion on media coverage and marginalized groups, but the chapter also explains how Jenner’s courage in itself represents pure strength.
2 “I AM CAIT”: A CIS NARRATIVE

2.1 A show intended for cisgender men and women: the perplexing and contending first impressions

Right from the beginning of “I Am Cait”’s first season and the first episode, a clash of several strong, different impressions instantaneously blurs and confuses. Indeed, the very beginning of the first episode seems to trigger a sensational wondering in the viewer; it is not hard to imagine that many who watched the series’ premiere might have said something in the nature of “What is this that am about to see, really?”

The combination of very expensive dresses, a brand new multi-million dollar home and the recently ‘born’ Caitlyn Jenner is rich in contrast. The various ingredients of the first episode suggest that there is a potential of tension between the narrative of non-normative bodies and sexualities and the more reality TV-feel of all the dress and make-up talk. These disparate clues, both in the form of Jenner’s vague words and in form of the immense visual impressions one gets from the expensive house and dresses, ultimately suggest that the show tries to capture viewers who come from and relates to a type of “normal” , something “healthy”. However, remembering who the namesake of the show is, and that the namesake has changed names from Bruce to Caitlyn, it is somehow quickly and mechanically signified that there is also an unspoken and embedded framework present in the narrative to come. One easily gets the sense that the show, by the first episode’s ‘directed feel’ sanctions the many viewers’ privilege and position (in relation to trans people) pass unnoticed, while at the same time the trans people at the center – and mostly Caitlyn Jenner – bid the viewers’ curios gazes in for new insights. This view forms the premise for this chapter.

The show seems to be deliberately and by design aiming at a cisgender audience. Being cisgender means that one’s gender identity aligns with their biological sex. Furthermore, the term cisgenderism refers to all general and cultural ideologies that methodically reject “self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community.”32 Caitlyn Jenner makes it perfectly clear already in the show’s first episode: the transition is about more than just being able to wear dresses publicly; it is also a call for societal change. Transitions such as that of Caitlyn Jenner do not only challenge the above-mentioned binaries – these polarized mental

yardsticks of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, or ‘hetero’ or ‘straight’ – but also the language and law. That is, when Jenner states that her transition (and the show itself) is about getting things right, it is also about challenging the existence of the gender binary, in other words of the actual terms and concepts utilized today. For instance, the term sexism only encompasses oppression of binaries such as man and woman. The fight on getting “true to oneself” is thus bigger than it initially seems, the fight is really on how to make room for more people out there and to expand the entire gender horizon and discourse.

In the first two episodes Jenner reflects over her own transition, constantly worrying – (even agonizing, apparently) - about finding the right way. The show addresses important political realities almost immediately, and consequently gives the viewers hope that the show will pursue a notion of depth; indeed, that the show not single-mindedly will be emphasizing on all the glamour that has been part of Jenner’s previous life, but instead on the important trans cause at hand. This seems to be quite an achievement in itself, since the show is produced by the same company which produces “Keeping Up With the Kardashians”; even the introductory subtitles reveal similarities to the sibling show by not only stating the same producers and staff, but also through the similar layout and fonts themselves. However, the slightly superficial matter of wealth and privilege is immediately – but not effectively – addressed and then discarded as a topic. However, after vivid and lengthy shots of her new-built residence, Jenner’s comment “You also have to realize that it’s not this way for everyone”\(^3\) provides an added sense of confusion with regards to the show’s intentions. While Jenner’s comment probably is nothing but utterly and unreservedly serious and heartfelt, and at some level aimed for activism and support, it all seems a bit untrustworthy when depicted and delivered together as a “package” The question still remains whether how this show, then, could offer something more to the media phenomenon Jenner had become, something more than simply being crafted for spectacle itself and for the curiosity of non-Trans viewers.

There are clear attempts to add dimension and substance to the show. The show’s palpable intention is to create an arena in which Caitlyn and others – that is therapists, Trans friends or family members – can dissect and discuss various transition experiences and difficulties. A mixture of disparate guests is cast to portray all the allure and charm that fascinates and catches the eye and immediate attention of the viewer, while at the same time tend to more substantial issues. “People are dying over this issue”, Jenner says early on in the

\(^3\) I Am Cait, Episode 1: “Meeting Cait”
first episode, referring to the high suicide rate within the trans community. Recent studies show that adolescents and children with gender dysphoria (or Gender Identity Disorder (GID)) – which is a psychological sense of discomfort or dissatisfaction with the biological sex – are more likely to develop detrimentally than others.\(^3^4\) Out of 97 patients consulted in the same pediatrics study, aged 14, 8 years on average, 25 of them had a history of medically diagnosed depression. Also, 20 of them had a history of self-mutilation whereas 9 out of 97 had attempted suicide.\(^3^5\) The dreadful statistics referred to both here, and in the TV show are equally horrifying, and do unquestionably invite to a serious and thorough treatment of the matter.

The strength of aiming specifically at cis people is clearly visible in one of the first scenes of the show. In a sentimental and brutally honest conversation Esther, Jenner’s mother, gives voice to cisgender viewers and other sceptics. The quandary and wavering emotions Esther apparently struggles with seem to represent that of the bigger audience. As Jenner tells her mom that she is “optimistic” about what it still ahead, it really seems to be a piece of message that communicates on several levels simultaneously. Jenner’s sense of the entire situation cannot be misunderstood – the oppositional conversation with her mother is meant as a confrontation with the bigger audience, too – and as Esther tackles her tormenting, disagreeing emotions it is almost projected through the TV screen and out upon the viewer. Jenner insists that she is dragging her mother with her on her new journey, implying that she intends to confront and transform not only her alone, but as many sceptics as possible. This scene from the first episode works as an efficient description of what agenda Jenner seeks to pursue; Esther, Jenner’s mothers, functions as a symbol of all values and ethics that used to be and still is America, and so the entire scene as a whole becomes a powerful metaphor for a larger debate filled with tormenting political, moral and religious aspects.

Additionally, the cis focused narrative of the show proves to be a strength about «I am Cait» because it forces viewers to think about genders and the two sex model as conceptions that are constructed – reflections cis people never really need to do. Cis people usually live in situations that confirm their genders and consequently strengthen a gender dualism that aligns to their life experiences, with all the freedoms such situations involve. By exposing her face on national television, Jenner challenges not only the gender notions of her audience(s), but


\(^{3^5}\) Ibid.
also their familiarity with trans issues. In relation to this particular issue, “I Am Cait” highlights that cis people too must do an effort to question their own conceptions of gender, as well as to develop determination and resilience to look at these questions more widely. A well-known face as that of Caitlyn Jenner can contribute to such a transformation. Indeed, with the apparent explosion of transgender representations in the last year, Jenner’s face which reaches households nationwide seems to have awakened a cross-examination of cis-normative views. It is different to deal with issues within the family, than the issues of those one passes on the street. Perhaps “I Am Cait” represents a new and more “familiar” and safe channel to the issue in that respect, as it is easier to confront something unfamiliar in the familiarity and safety of a TV-set and a living room.

Another strength provided by the show’s cis approach is its dealing with community representatives or spokespersons. Esther’s comments are revealing; She believes that Caitlyn is something “new” and “different”, and thus her appearance on the show illuminates an imperative problem all minority groups face. Despite the very shallow and arranged feel this particular scene brings, it nevertheless constitutes – perhaps unknowingly, that is – an argument as to why it is dangerous to judge all coming out-experiences too quickly before mechanically placing the person into a “community box” just because the person now is different compared to cis normality. The obligation many might feel when they meet trans people – or gay people – to ask general (and offensive) questions. A too common presupposition that every trans is a trans representative seems to be existent. However, as the community grows – that is, in practice the number of outing trans people seemingly increases – the group grows more diverse correspondingly. Because cis people experience their lives as aligned to their birth sex, as something “normal”, they are just people. It seems then, as if Esther believes that her son (she still thinks of Caitlyn as Bruce) now has become a deviance, something different. In turn, the assumed normality of the cis experience therefore causes cis people to believe that they themselves perceive deviations objectively, when that in reality is very dangerous. Just as many gay people has experienced to be defined and observed entirely based on their gay label alone, trans people stand in a clear danger of being robbed of their right to be perceived as all others, as humans with great complexity. Neither ‘gay’ nor ‘trans’ are labels that alone constitute a main or extraordinary feature of any human being. In the same way, being cis does not necessarily trigger a theoretical curiosity or knowledge of the matter.

Therefore, in terms of social change, the first impressions of the show seems
promising; Jenner’s face and actions in “I Am Cait” can challenge the frameworks utilized by cis people to help them gain more understanding of trans experiences. As becomes clear throughout the show, Jenner’s need to learn from her girlfriends, her need to herself climb a steep learning curve, illustrates an important point; despite the fact that many trans people experience discrimination and prejudice, their basis is not necessarily enabling them to evaluate trans issues in a universal and total way. Instead, one leans to more “edible” collections of stories, words and views that suits a cis conversation partner better. Jenner’s on-screen appearance is, despite it often being shallow and very occupied with champagne and glamour, contributes to make any cis viewer more familiar with the trans experience. And through watching Jenner’s familiar face, many more cis people must oppose their own questions, prejudices or hatred as another and highly publicized transgender experience (and others) manifests itself on the TV-screen in front of them. Through expanding the TV-franchise of “Keeping Up With The Kardashians” with “I Am Cait”, the producers prove the very nature of the transgender movement; even though the real power to end discrimination lies in the hands of cis people, the airing of a trans show, with a very famed protagonist, nationwide can challenge the structures already in place. “I Am Cait”’s power is, in this respect of trans visibility, enormous, apparently borderless and undeniable. But being visible is not nearly enough. Certain clear weaknesses stand out.

In “I am Cait” and other TV shows that address the trans issue – fictional or real alike – a certain mental framework seems to follow and consequently color the narrative and the audience. Both in “I Am Cait” and in “Keeping up with the Kardashians”, the issue of Bruce/Caitlyn’s transition consists of two weighty parts: the anxious and apprehensive family on one side, and the disordered and deviant transgender on the other. Many such accounts follow the same path; the transgender issue itself becomes less important as the true spectacle that the show(s) revolves around are the surroundings coping – arguing, compromising and ultimately approving or disapproving – with the transition at hand. Clearly, the stories are shaped this way to reach a cisgendered audience. However, a problem arises as the cis framework that follows the intended audience honors the heteronormative and neutral notion of a family. In addition, such portrayals become part of a much broader series of heteronormative suppositions and conventions about what it is that establishes success for the transgendered.

Truly, this thought pinpoints what seems to be a clear tendency in the wide-ranging community. As one encounters a trans (or any other ‘disturbance’ to the heteronormative) one
inclines to turn it into something more bizarre than it in fact is, while at the same time – and automatically – place it into a very extensive category of non-conforming concepts. The parameters utilized to measure transgender success thus become increasingly important. The framework in “I Am Cait”, therefore, seems to cater to the less important agendas; the surfaces of important issues are scratched, but the driving force of season 1 remains to be questions that correspond with cisgender standards. Sadly, transgender narratives of triumph and accomplishment only seem to count when they imitate the superficial questions; more vital questions of justice – that is questions of murders, HIV/AIDS, job opportunities etc., – are often set aside and thus ignores that many within the trans community often must seek validation in a separate, outer framework.

When analyzing “I Am Cait”, then, it appears not strange but to a certain extent understandable, that the show aims for a cisgender audience. However, it is problematic. In general, the many, varied expressions of popular culture available carry with them a scheme of the present (and conventional, prevailing) culture and norms. The meaning one mechanically invests into a concept or idea, for instance as a viewer of a TV show, gains one not only understanding of the matters at hand, but also powers to rethink and liberate oneself as a more critical consumer of culture. If the narrative is in fact too narrow, it could easily turn in to a show of amusement, and less into a show to contribute to change. The support many viewers potentially feel could – even if it is genuine and heartfelt – be born of a too narrow outset. Often, a sign of solidarity does not equal a true understanding of the bigger issue. As Judith Jack Halberstam, a professor of English and a gender and queer theorist, puts it:

Any heterosexual celebrity who wants to be seen as an ally to LGBT communities will stick the gay-marriage feather in his or her cap as a sign of solidarity.36

Jenner seems to be confused, and the confusion is projected upon the viewer; she did claim (as mentioned) that she wanted to get it right; Nonetheless, the cisgender approach of “I Am Cait” is potentially detrimental for the viewers’ understanding of the cause. As mentioned, she states that her way “isn’t for everyone”. That comment pinpoints a dangerous aspect with transgender narratives aimed at a cisgender audience; since the storytelling is habitually focused on conveying a certain expectation – a cisgender expectation, that is – it eliminates and rejects other and perhaps equally important needs and possibilities. Even if Jenner clearly

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states that her journey is exceptional, the TV show’s portrayal of her success complicates the perception of the transgender experience – which surely is different to everyone.

What if Jenner had transitioned and still looked a lot like Bruce? Jenner says early on:

“I’ve lived a great life. And I realize, in this transition, that I have that privileged status. But I hope that I’m in a position to turn around... Yay! ... And help this community. Hi, everybody. I want to spotlight those organizations that are out there doing some really good things.”

Furthermore, the following dialogue and other, similar dialogues are frequent throughout the series, and quite telling, like this one from Jenner’s sister, Pam:

**Pam:** “You're gorgeous. Gorgeous!”

**Caitlyn:** “Well, thank you. Thank you.”

**Pam:** “I was quite apprehensive. I knew she would be d... different looking. Uh, and I was hoping that she would have the same personality, uh, as Bruce. And she does. And she's so relaxed and so happy. That makes me very happy. I thought you were gonna look more like me.”

Despite recognizing her obvious privileges, Jenner never directly defines her new appearance as one of them. Possibly, that is hurtful to the cause, because it unintentionally fails to identify the core of discrimination and judgment against Trans people, which is ultimately rooted in how conformist (or not conformist) their new appearance is. The financial impossibility of medical surgery – for instance facial surgery in order to look more feminine – that many trans people face, impedes their chances of achieving a conforming beauty.

A 2005 report on health benefits for the transgendered exemplifies the costs of various sex reassignment surgeries available. It states that a medical surgery from male to female almost always include: (1) removal of the testicles; (2) removal of the tissue inside the penis; (3) the creation of a vagina; and (4) formation of the labia. Similarly, cosmetic surgery may include: (1) breast implants; (2) removal of the Adam’s apple; (3) reshaping of facial bones and hairline. The list of possible procedures is long and thus suggests that the transition process is costly. The report measured that already in 2001 surgeries could cost $75,000 per person and was now denied the already insured because it was “too expensive”, despite the fact that the average cost was very low due to the high number of insured. The fact that beauty is referred to so frequently in the show, but never directly addressed as a privilege, is therefore problematic. Especially since cis viewers themselves live with appearances that

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38 Horton & Goza, «The cost of transgender health benefits», 2
align to their birth sex.

“I am Cait” is truly a dialogue between the “cis atmospheres” of Caitlyn’s famous family and entourage, and the intended cis audience. In other words, the show – or Jenner – proves to have some kind of a disconnection to many other parts of not only the Trans community, but also other audiences and the society as a whole. There is no doubt that Jenner’s story is inspiring too many, but nevertheless is it evident that other and different accounts from across the societal layers need to be included in the show. Many young viewers, will not identify with any aspect in the show, expect for the transness itself. Instead, there seems to be a clear danger in the limited scope of “I Am Cait” because it communicates a very limited set of success: wealth, resources, voice and dresses. With such a big platform available, it is remains strange and incomprehensible that “I Am Cait” does not focus even more on issues that the trans people. It is a great danger and paradox that young Trans people seek support and consent from “above”; cis approval (which is every so often the same as approval from the parents) is undeniably colored by the values of its generation. Young Trans people are the future, but are still affected by the perceptions of the past. The representations of transgenders in the media should leave Trans children and adolescents – and others too, of course – with the belief that they themselves can conclude on what the true, genuine and triumphal realization of their own gender is and signifies. In a world where the boundaries between nations, communities and cultures are more flexible, today’s trans people should concern themselves with pressure from underneath and from the side, like the violence and harassment on the street, and not from the generations above.

A 2013 document released by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs lists four forceful facts about hate violence against Trans people:

- “The majority of the victims of hate violence trans homicides (72%) were transgender women
- Transgender people of color were more likely to experience police violence
- Transgender women were more likely to experience sexual violence
- Transgender people were more likely to experience police violence and physical violence from law enforcement”\(^{39}\)

Additionally, a different report from 2015 indicates that there is a dimension of gender discrimination involved when it comes to judicial prosecutions. A report by the Human Rights Campaign, found that none of 53 transgender homicides reported between 2013 and 2015 were prosecuted. The sheer extent of such statistics implies that one should rethink the relationship between cis privilege and the current approaches to the transgender homicide rates, which are historically high. Thus, the narrow depictions of trans women contribute to the fact that most of trans women are demoted to the backdrops of the trans stage; their off-stage presence only transforms into an on-stage limelight presence when the story is about a murder or other hate crime. Consequently, when such stories appear, the true drive behind them is the fact that they are trans women, not just women. According to Julia R. Johnson cisgender privilege “is given to persons whose morphology aligns with socially-sanctioned gender categories”.40 The show-business mode of “I am Cait” therefore hurts the trans cause by manifesting gender dominance. In this particular matter, “I Am Cait” seems to be trans femininity at its worst.

Clearly, “I am Cait” contributes to these narrow storylines, but probably not because it wants to, but because it must. In the episode called “The Road Trip part 1”, privilege is explored in two particular ways: (1) cisgender privilege/cis privilege and (2) privilege in terms of social and economic matters. Some examples of cis privilege include:

- Not being fired from one’s work because of gender identity-related issues
- Not constantly being challenged and asked about one’s ‘true’ gender/sex
- Not having to fear to be imprisoned in a facility that does not align with one’s gender
- The continuous interrogation from others wanting to know one’s ‘actual’ name

The show pursues the question of privilege, but it again seems to be of the wrong – and superficial – reasons; in a couple of very telling segments the privilege question is a source of driving conflict:

**Jenny:** What you should expect people to say is, "Caitlyn is a sweet, smart, good soul who wants to do good in the world, but has every advantage, every privilege in the world." And that the world is full of people that no one wants to take their picture.

**Jen:** We can support an individual trans person and celebrate their authenticity and their... their place for dignity and what they do with their privilege while still calling into question a system that makes this particular story the one that we finally listen to while we've been

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ignoring the stories of black and Latina trans women, poor trans women. Cait’s experience of coming out is singular. I... I don't think in history anyone has ever been so publicly welcomed. For most of us, coming out is a really kind of terrifying, horrifying experience. And it's a little discomf

Candis: You know, the trans community was invisible ten years ago.

Clearly the show and its trans cast try to address the issue. However, while there is a palpable sense of both enthusiasm and sincerity towards the privilege perspective, it seems to be never truly dissected or thoroughly attended to. It immediately appears as if it is too soon for the show – and for Jenner herself – to address issues of this nature. Despite the fact that the show must ignite enthusiastic conversations in numerous homes, even Jenny Boylan herself seems to (“meta”-) comment on the prematurity and incompleteness of Jenner’s journey in “I am Cait”:

Jenny: I invited a diverse group of transgender women for Cait to meet and get a sense of our community. However, Caitlyn is a person of tremendous privilege and power. I'm a little afraid about what's going to happen when she meets a lot of transgender people who... who don't have the privilege that... that she has had.

Surely, the parallel to its sister show (if such a label is justified) illuminates some of the essence here. Instead of clearly separate out the elements of “I am Cait” that bears obvious resemblance to “Keeping Up With the Kardashians”, the show seems rather dependent on following the same path. There is no doubt that both shows are produced and aired in a participatory culture. And that fact affects the product that “I Am Cait” has become, and the role it plays.

2.2 “I AM CAIT” and Jenner’s Transition:
Produced in, and meant for, a commercial context

Contending dynamics color both shows. “Corporate synergy” competes with the actual cause itself because ratings and income generate each other, it is all a synergy. Deviating too much from the comfortable cis normalcy might scare viewers away. But if Jenner (or the show, for that matter) wants to claim a spokesperson role, or be role model, the depths of the

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cause must be investigated. The combined effect of transmedia storytelling, reality television and commercial interests is clearly visible in “I Am CAit” and in what Leigh Edwards label a “Kardashian World”\(^\text{42}\). And at the center of a collision between privilege gaps, cisgender audiences and the constant hunt for high ratings, “I Am CAit” becomes a cherished learning lesson. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder why this choice is made, and what the function of it is.

One thing is clear: the popularity of show has been unstable. Ratings undeniably indicate certain truths about a TV show and when it comes to “I Am CAit”, the plummeted ratings invite to an exploration of several interesting implications. Ratings from the TV show averaged more than 1 million in its first season, but with fewer viewers for each episode aired.\(^\text{43}\) The second season averaged far beneath the 1 million mark. Jenner’s activities on the show seem to be directly linked to the success of the TV show; it is clear that the new trope in transgender portrayals is trans people surrounded by their cisgendered network of colleagues, friends or family. Apparently, it is increasingly unclear whether this is beneficial or detrimental for the community and its cause.

The financial synergy between Jenner’s transition and her show is dependent on disdaining creative storylines, taking advantage of fan practices and most importantly, it seems, the focusing on “media saturation and product placement supported by loosely scripted stock plotlines”\(^\text{44}\). Since the controlling of the show’s content is necessary to feed the (cis-) viewers (and the many fans among them) hunger for gossipy food, both shows simply must shape its characters and other features into stereotypical ones. Like already mentioned above, the tight narratives that transition stories often follow do not seem to benefit from the portrayals in the reality television genre; the classic narratives are in fact inverted, turning real people into characters by utilizing foreseeable and monotonous storylines\(^\text{45}\).

It is not easy, however, to see that any of the choices made while producing the series are noteworthy successful. The low ratings could imply that the intended audience find the show too concerned with creating a social impact, without actually succeeding to do so. At the same time the low ratings could very well imply that the show tries to both cause a social

\(^{42}\) Edwards, "Transmedia storytelling…", 3

\(^{44}\) Ibid, 3
\(^{45}\) Ibid
influence AND enjoy influential ratings simultaneously, and that the viewers have noted that and found the show confusing. It is not the drive nor the ambition of “I am Cait” that seem to constitute the problem; it is in fact the abundance of it. The rapid shifts between the many glasses of wine, the frequent cameos from Jenner’s kin, and the continuous superficial dialogues over her renaissance and new life, ultimately cause Jenner’s singular experience and show to give the impression of trying to do too much, too hard, too soon. In many ways, it often appears as if “Keeping up with the Kardashians” meets “Oprah”. Dissimilar to the former show, “I Am Cait” conveys a clear message: it seems generally determined to achieve antidiscrimination against trans people. Since “I Am Cait” is produced by the same company and producers as the show of Jenner’s kin, “Keeping up with the Kardashians”, a well-known sense is triggered, as is the case with many spin-offs – namely the sense of procedure. The formula comprises the characters’ clear desire for publicity combined with strong interests from and for public relations. Ultimately, the formula turns the show into a “blatant vehicle for simple promotion of that agency’s clients and products”. In this case, just as in the Kardashian franchise, “the flacks are turned into reality stars themselves”\textsuperscript{46}.

In many ways, “I Am Cait” appears to be too much to ask of the audience. If Jenner herself struggles so much to come to terms with the new reality – that is, to really \textit{fathom} it all and find her place – it seems almost naïve to expect the viewers (cisgender or not) to disentangle the very complex net of commercial, social, political and personal interests that the show represents. Sometimes, the fact that one belongs to a marginalized group does not necessarily mean that one is suitable to fill the leading role of the story. Jenner’s on-air existence seems more natural in “Keeping Up With The Kardashians”, because there is nothing sparkling about Bruce Jenner. Being exceptionally calm, infinitely collected and always amusing, Bruce functions as a necessary foil to all of his girls. Caitlyn Jenner, in the same way, does not seem to embody enough entertaining traits to drive the show alone.

In addition to the familiar plotlines, “I Am Cait” takes on a meta-role with which it observes and interprets the nature of immense fame.\textsuperscript{47} The relatability of the show’s tropes is worth discussing; the show’s narrow plotlines trigger a questioning of whether Jenner’s transition is the primary focus of the show or purely an excuse for making it in the first place. Since the show apparently avoids the greatest depths of the most significant trans questions, ultimately pursuing the spectacles instead of the stories of the most marginalized within the

\textsuperscript{46} Edwards, «Transmedia storytelling», 5
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
community, it becomes even clearer that filming has been done for cis viewers’ entertainment in mind. The sentimental segments of the show are few and secondary.

2.3 The lack of portrayed flaws and softness

With the intention of reaching a cis audience, Caitlyn Jenner’s story is proving troublesome to fit to the reality (namely, the ‘average’ transition experience) for other reasons, too. Jenner’s journey towards womanhood seems to represent too many successes and lack too many imperfections to be perceived as average. What is behind the perfect make-up and expensive design dresses? Is the depth of the issues raised in the show enough to compensate for the ocean of difference between Jenner’s privileged life style and distance to most (Trans) people?

There is a sense of predictableness (at least in the TV show) about Jenner’s transition that suggests that her ability to talk for other women is absent. Before moving on to further discussion and analysis, the following research done in Florida is surprisingly interesting (and illuminating!): A 2015 poll done by Quinnipac University on 1,335 Florida residents, shows that there is a clear discrepancy between the reception and recognition of Caitlyn Jenner, and of Trans people in general.48 The results give a mixed impression of acceptance and appraisal for Jenner as they show that 29% of the inquired believed that Jenner would improve the general acceptance for transgendered people, however, when questioned whether or not Jenner’s story had changed their opinion personally, only 17% replied that it had actually done so. It ultimately suggests that Jenner – at least so far – has only transformed the public’s opinion on the matter to a certain extent. Is there too much of a gap – in terms of resources and life style - between Jenner and the audience?

It seems as if these mixed ratings (feelings) about Jenner and her activism are natural due to the “expectedness” of not only scenes in the TV show, but also due to the “directed” feel of the entire transition experience in the media. The probable outcomes and developments occur, the unpredictable is absent. A notion of caution, suspicion and alertness is visible in many of the scenes of the show, but there are some exceptions, for instance:

“I would invite her over and this and that, she would never come. Khloe hasn’t been here. Kourtney hasn’t been here, hasn’t met Caitlyn. Um… Rob.”

This is obviously an important scene as it also comments on a societal issue – many oppressed minorities feel the immense gap between theoretical (e.g., internet’s many commentary sections) and actual support and care. This particular comment from the first episode is certainly genuine and important, but there is not an adequate amount of these realizations. It is hard to imagine that perplexed and unsettled viewers, with one foot in the ‘old’ world and one in the ‘new’, would perceive this show as a source of clarity. When it comes to providing thought-provoking insights and fundamental truths about Jenner’s challenging fight, the show does not unveil thoughts on her surgical choices or on the public criticism against Vanity Fair. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler describes how she wants to “counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity”. The TV show as well as the Vanity Fair article’s disinclination to examine these matters further becomes a contrast – or maybe even a symbol – of the transition experience. Since Jenner’s face probably have veiled much agony throughout for a long time, both mentally and physically (after surgery), the refusal to pursue weightier approaches to these matters specifically, condemns the audience’s chance of challenging their prejudices and limitations of these matters. A more thorough portrayal of the more privileged aspects of the Trans experience (and thus, also the use of her means), would probably also uncover the more emotional and vulnerable traits of Jenner’s person.

Naturally, such an absence of true depth could affect the general impression of Jenner’s character and womanhood. Nonetheless, having recently become the most extraordinary trans icon that pop culture probably have seen, Jenner simultaneously embodies – to many Americans, it seem fair to believe – the whole transgender community. With the unstableness of the TV show it appears as if that circumstance is not entirely beneficial, and perhaps even detrimental, for the community. Certainly, a not-to-be overlooked factor in that regard is Jenner’s power, which is constituted both by fame and resources, and beyond all measures compared to her forerunners. As mentioned, Jenner recognizes her advantaged position:

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49 *I Am Cait*, Episode 1: «Meeting Cait»
50 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, preface
“…The tremendous amount of support that I’ve gotten has been overwhelming, but you also have to realize that it’s not this way for everybody. There are so many people that have struggled with family, who struggle with friends, who struggle with ridicule, who are not having financial resources… I feel a tremendous responsibility here.”

On the other hand, the ‘transition standard’ she demonstrates might trigger unhealthy repercussions; a vast majority of Trans women will undeniably be incapable of transitioning entirely because of the costs. It seems to be clear that Jenner spreads a result that is unachievable for most trans women, whether she is ignorant of it or not. Apart from insisting that she has struggled for many years herself, for instance when she relates to the high suicide rate saying “I’ve had some very dark moments in my life, I have been in my house with a gun and said, ‘Let’s just end it right here”51, the very few examples of portrayed vulnerabilities and genuine and intimate exposures becomes even more unfortunate against all the glamour. Jenner’s everyday life seems truly extraordinary in contrast to the mundane world that many Trans people face.

Thus, a key word appears to stand out: vanity. Discussing new clothing and accessories with Kim Kardashian, Jenner states that this is “all vanity”52. The same seems to be the case for the show as well. Even though the show lacks a systematic questioning of Jenner’s exact intensions and desires, it might be because it did not turn out to be TV-material in terms of composition and dramaturgy. The already mentioned lack of in-depth questioning and strain risks the authenticity of its storylines. There are many scenes that seem heartfelt and sincere, but there is hardly any reporter to interrogate the various subjects and their comments. On the way to visit the mom of a trans son Kyler Prescott, who killed himself, Jenner hides in the car and reflects on the fact that photos of her is worth $250,000. She talks with Prescott’s mom and then releases balloons to honor his memory. While no one standing on the outside could ever really know the truth, it is not difficult to leap to the conclusion that since every sign of inquiring – all external pressure – is absent from the situations, some of the meetings and encounters in the show could be perceived as taking advantage of the issue at hand. It would be interesting to know if similar visits and activities were planned for the future or not. Or if any other contribution was planned. The quick shifts between scenes, and the general hasty feel of such TV programs, leave the impression of an attentiveness of Trans issues that has grown out of superficial clichés and commonplaces instead of the real intricacies.

51 I Am Cait, Episode 1: «Meeting Cait»
52 Ibid.
Therefore, in order to succeed with her mission, to be a voice for the community, it seems as if Jenner must risk more. The price to pay to achieve something – to triumph a bet - is the realization that the bet can in fact fail. The vanity of the show – and of Jenner herself – causes any limitations and failures to come to life. Regardless of any intentions and genuine wishes from either Jenner or the show’s producers, it seems worthwhile to think about these issues once more. It could turn out more useful as well as more exciting for the Trans community as well as the more general audience.

2.4 The Bathroom issue – using a universal human need to reach the wide (cis) audience

Despite the lack of softness displayed from Jenner, the show invites the viewers to take part in a discussion of somethings that every human has knowledge of. All people use the bathroom to attend to bodily functions, which means that if laws are implemented to allow trans people to choose the toilet that suits their spirit, instead of their birth sex, one simultaneously includes cisgender voices to the discussion. The season 2 finale of “I Am Cait” does display one of the greatest examples of vulnerability in regards to the trans experience, to be found in entire series. Such media demonstrations seems important to articulate a real, every-day issue for the eyes of the (cis) audience; through depicting a profoundly different gendered prospect, it might help cis eyes to see the issue in a different way.

In almost every public restroom, the socially created segregations are obvious; In her dissertation, transgender activist and scholar Joelle R. Ryan writes that:

> Through the iconography of the “man” (in pants) and the “woman” (in a dress), individuals passing through the doors of the bathroom are continually created and re-created as properly gendered subjects.

Jenner’s involvement with the issue on the show therefore relates to everyone who uses a public restroom. It relates to those who struggle to fit into either of the categories and to those who feel uncomfortable about meeting non-conforming people inside the bathroom. The bathroom issue is systematically investigated in a Master’s thesis on social work by Cynthia Clark, which found that:

> Bathroom challenges or being told, “You’re in the wrong bathroom,” and “You don’t belong in here,” happened to all of the study participants when they were using either of the gendered

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public bathrooms. The gender binary codes assigned at birth in Western societies are the cause of this distress for transgender persons, who are just trying to negotiate going to the bathroom.  

Jenner and her friends visit toilets around Houston, and by including cis viewers to moments where the women who deal with issues directly linked to their transness – and to the cisness of the audience – the show opens for both a broader public discourse of the issue, and for a wider and more truthful audience treatment. In this particular respect, “I Am Cait”, represents an important trans narrative, especially when Jenner tells a reverend that his comments are highly offensive to both Jenner herself and to other trans. In terms of serving the most marginalized parts of the community, the shallow nature of the majority of the show’s scenes seems to have no effect. Nevertheless, in realizing that visibility itself is important, the show’s occupation with reaching cis viewers is not only due to financial reasons – or self-interest - but also a way of speaking and elevating trans issues through universal languages and problems.

Trans comedian Jordan Wieleba describes such an experience in a recent blog post:

Audiences, usually largely cisgender, would come up to me after a set and tell me about their family member or coworker who was transgender and how “brave” it was of me to stand in front of an audience of strangers night after night and talk about it. Others would tell me how they didn’t know anything about the subject and they had learned a lot. It felt good to know I was reaching people in way through a universal language-laughter-people warmed up to trans awareness.

Wieleba says that comedy challenges comfort zones and that it can have a “profound effect on someone”. Together with the laughter comes another sense, whether it is joy, frustration, empathy or fright. Perhaps that exact philosophy is the reason why “I Am Cait” seems to make a good cause out of politicizing the bathroom issue. Since the bodily functions that occur in bathrooms are taboo, but at the same time a source of amusement to many, it becomes a seemingly trivial issue that automatically relates to trans people and all others alike. Furthermore, the bathroom issue attacks the every-day reinforcement of gender segregation; since cisgenders do not need to make a decision on which bathroom to use, the segregation and oppression that goes beyond the bathrooms, including locker rooms, for

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56 Ibid.
instance, are key examples of cisgender privilege. Ryan even refers to this segregation as a form of “apartheid”\textsuperscript{57} since the rigidly gendered parts of our society take it for granted that all people adhere to a two category system. Instead of portraying the transgender lives of the cast on the show as lives weighed down by dreadful circumstances, the setting of having them visit numerous bathrooms proudly and unintimidated underscores the importance – and growth – of Trans activism.

“I Am Cait”’s treatment of the bathroom issue seems to be a glimpse of success as the illustration of the issue both approaches and takes advantage of the cis gaze. It appears to be an efficient way of accusing and reducing the gender binaries.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{57} Ryan, "Reel gender: Examining the politics of trans images in film and media.", 264}
3 JENNER WAS A WHITE MAN, AND STILL IS

3.1 White hegemony and white supremacy

Looking at Caitlyn Jenner’s fast rise within the popular media as well as in the trans community, it becomes clear that she has transitioned from being a wealthy, white man into a wealthy, white woman. In other words, she has transitioned from one of society’s most privileged groups to a different community that is more vulnerable in every possible way; trans people are more prone to suffer from poverty, be discriminated against or attacked violently than any other member of the US society. Even though it is probably too much to ask of Jenner to transition between demographic groups flawlessly, it surely is equally surprising to observe the self-confidence with which Jenner has aimed for the throne of a community it is hard to imagine she knows the true struggles of. This is one of the outright disadvantages of the show.

What becomes clear throughout “I Am Cait” is that so many features of Jenner’s identity are contradicting. As has become increasingly clear throughout her career, Jenner is a devoted Republican. That, together with her former life, obstructs her from aligning completely with her new community’s fight for social movement. Her ways seems to have been clearly shaped by – or just carried on from– the character of Bruce Jenner. Bruce’s decathlon Gold medal in the 1976\textsuperscript{58} Olympics made him an A-list celebrity who was “as celebrated in that era as Michael Phelps or Lance Armstrong at their peak”\textsuperscript{59}. Winning that gold medal in decathlon, a multifaceted discipline which requires the athlete to be skilled at several types of sports, apparently turned Jenner into a phenomenon as he beat the silver and bronze medalists, representing Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively. By all measures, Jenner was an epitome of The American Dream with his sheer strength and energy as well as his likability. Perhaps even more so since his feat was a fact during the coldest period of the


Cold War. Before transitioning to Caitlyn at 66 years old, then, Bruce Jenner experienced life as a cisgender, heavily privileged white man. A member of the world’s elite, it undeniably must have shaped Jenner’s politics.

3.2 Political impasse? Acting like a trans woman, thinking like an anti-trans man?

One particular scene from the second season premiere of “I Am Cait” – which premiered in March 2016, in the tense midst of the primary elections for the White House seat – is especially revealing:

**Jenny**: You're telling me Republicans support rights for transgender people.

**Caitlyn**: Every conservative guy out there believes in everybody's rights.

**Jenny**: That is a lie.

**Caitlyn**: I have to keep an open mind politically, socially, on trans issues, on womanhood. I have to learn from my girls, learn from society. I don't want to hurt anybody.

**Candis**: Don't you really mean you don't want to get hurt yourself?

**Caitlyn**: Hey!

**Candis**: Hey!

It is interesting to note how a transgender woman, who has claimed her position as a community representative so rapidly, and so openly, places herself against her fellow cast members. While it may seem too simple to diminish Jenner’s journey on the show down into a discussion of party politics, it nonetheless seems justifiable to consider such a visible figure’s standpoints when they clearly differentiate from the ‘norm’. In “I Am Cait”, the inflexibility – or even obstinacy – of Bruce’s, noticeably trumps Caitlyn’s willingness to learn.

There are several recent examples with which to elaborate on the political undertone of the transition. For instance, in January 2016, Indiana Senator Travis Holdman filed Senate Bill 344 in January 2016, which reads:
“Civil rights. Prohibits discriminatory practices in acquisition or sale of real estate, housing, education, public accommodations, employment, the extending of credit, and public contracts based on military active duty status, or sexual orientation...”

The bill simply never mentions gender identity (only sexual orientation) to the equation and thus excludes transgendered persons from the question entirely. Holdman later elaborated on this:

“Some folks went off the deep end on the whole bathroom issue,” said State Senator Travis Holdman, the Republican author of the bill. “It just became so toxic — I realized I couldn’t get it done with the ‘T’ there in our caucus.”

In a recent interview, Jenner stated that she would like to support Holdman’s colleague, Ted Cruz., and perhaps even become an ambassador for him. In the show, Jenner’s closest trans friends do not understand her support of most conservative wing in terms of social issues:

Caitlyn: And if we're unfortunate enough to get Hillary as our next president, we need her on our side.

Chandi: Right.

Caitlyn: Although she won't be.

Jenny: Which Republican would?

Caitlyn: She could not care less about women. She cares about herself.

Jenny: Which... which Republican candidate do you think would be most supportive of transgendered people?

Caitlyn: Um... all of them. (Chandi laughs) Yeah. They don't... The Republi... "Oh, I hate trans people" or "I hate gays." And you don't... nothing of that. They do more, "I want every... I want a thriving economy so every trans person has a job."

Candis: (sighs) Caitlyn, what am I gonna do? I... I don't understand why she thinks that. That doesn't make sense to me. Democrats are more open to transgendered views. And, in general,

Republicans are more conservative about that and they don't want to give LGBT rights to our community.

However, in a time where it seems natural to expect an increased rate of trans people “coming out”, it seems demographically impossible to ask every transgender to agree on politics. As the number of trans people grow in numbers, so must the diversity. With that notion as a basis, Caitlyn Jenner represents an early introduction to important trans issues to come. Such issues might be grounded in dissimilar sets of thinking, while some might think politics in terms of civil rights alone, others could think in terms of economy or foreign policy. Jenner’s portrayed politics are related to economy, which could be problematic for many trans viewers. Indeed, there is undeniably a connection between a stable, thriving economy and the number of jobs available. However, that does not necessarily mean that those jobs are within reach for Trans people. As the community grows disparate, it seems important to remember that the oppression many trans people face is tied to questions of civil rights, not to questions of taxation and economy directly.

Professor Dean Spade looks at Trans Law and politics in a neoliberal landscape. He asserts that one must look beyond the question of formal legality; one must also look at the history of the central institutions of governance. Talking about white hegemony, and colonialism, Spade upholds that “America fantasizes that those things are in the past…”63 His point is that in order to obtain real change, the demands must call for a transformation of the systems themselves, and not just for lawsuits to change “regulatory norms”64. Thus, Jenner’s position within all of this seems a bit confusing; her endorsement of conservative candidates might be justified on a fiscal basis, yet the most important demands of the trans community regards prison placement issues, the right to choose any bathroom alternative, housing and employment issues, and anti-discriminating insurance options. Such demands can obviously not be met with fiscal policies; they “require deep transformation of oppressive systems”65.

In “I Am Cait”, the following séance, especially, accentuates Jenner’s conservative stance:

**Jenny:** So, news broke that something really disturbing had happened in Houston. An act called "The Hero Act," which guaranteed, um, equality, not just for LGBT people, but for all people, was, in fact, repealed. There was a campaign for the repeal that was run by a group of ministers and conservative Republicans. The tactic that was used against our community to

64 Spade, «Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape», 373
65 Ibid.
have this equality act repealed was the threat that there would be sick men in dresses preying upon our children in restrooms. It scared people. Um, it was a lie, and it happened to work. While we were enjoying each other’s company, something rather discouraging happened. Yesterday in Houston, an ordinance protecting LGBT people was repealed. The lead slogan was, "No men in women's bathrooms."

Caitlyn: Well, I'm all for that, too. It's how you define men and women.

Chandi: Right.

Caitlyn: That's all we're arguing over here.

Jenny: Well, what the people behind this repeal managed to convince people was that people like you and you and you and you and you and me are men in the ladies room.

Caitlyn: They just passed this ordinance in Santa Fe. It'd be very interesting to talk to the mayor... who's all for this... um, you know, some of the obstacles that he had to go through to get this through.

Jenny: If I understand correctly, the thing in Santa Fe was the mayor just did it. Whereas in Houston, it was a popular referendum.

Caitlyn: Right.

There is nothing in the show that can veil or change the fact that it, together with its main protagonist Jenner, has forcefully increased attention to the Trans community. However, with regards to utilizing her status to add a dimension of truth to the political scene, it seems as if a chance has been neglected.

Jenner is evidently a splitting character. Between a polarized discrepancy of her community’s concerns and her own conservative philosophy, it seems as if Jenner struggles to be an activist and a promoter at the same time without revisiting and revising her former standpoints.

3.3 Disproportional media coverage: relegating the margins

The aspects of a cisgender audience, white man hegemony/white privilege and fashion are all tied together. The transition experience is an individual thing, but recent numbers indicate a clear trend that white trans people need to recognize; out of the 17 trans women who were killed in the U.S. by the middle of August 2015, 15 of them were black. Such numbers

suggest that while every trans person might struggle with the similar cultural barriers, black trans also face regular racism. With all the media momentum that Jenner’s transition has caused, the challenge seems to be how one can avoid the whole discussion to turn into a cisgender and white transgender party.

*Disproportion* is a keyword here. The present interest in the aftermath of Jenner’s transition within the non-trans public turns a serious matter into an enchanted white, prosperous and very American fairy tale. As the immense amount of public relations regarding Jenner seem to continuously increase, it consequently generates a disproportionate and lopsided collection of transgender portrayals. Under no circumstance is it probable that there is only one kind of transition experience. Trans people are – like everyone else – unique. Thus, many of the trans journeys taken will never be written or heard about. It remains of vital importance to be conscious of the perspectives with which one explores all notions of primacy and privilege. If not, a unipolar condition might arise (if it in fact has not done so by this time) within the community, in which white and privileged trans people stand unmistakably “above” the rest of the community. In the instant stir after Jenner’s *Vanity Fair*-interview, it is probable that people intuitively have felt that the “transgender discourse” transformed from one with two poles in it; “us” and “them” have become a fight between the different privileged groups of trans people who are above the rest. Now, there is a focused rivalry both within and outside of the community.

Indeed, the Latina transgender activist Alexa Vasquez, and black transgender activist Katrina Goodlett suggest that what developed to be even more significant was less the nonappearance of civil rights and publicity for the trans issue in general, than the persistence of a number of issues and inequalities within the community that they would not be able to dispose of by themselves. Vazquez maintains that the “… way Jenner is choosing to “come out” and make a circus announcement is so dishonest to our community”67. Her point, of course, is that the public’s outlook on the trans issue is significantly – and again, disproportionally – colored by the impressions that Jenner’s experience gives. Jenner’s advantaged life situation and her wardrobe, for instance, has precious little to offer the empowerment of the marginalized communities most difficult questions like racial discrimination and violence statistics. Jenner’s highly publicized glamour life thus reveals not only a remarkable degree of vulnerability within the community, but could also give the impression of contempt. It is hard to establish the media’s true agenda

67 Barrett, "What Trans People of Color…"
from the outside, which can only be done by the media itself, but it is clear that the capitalism-driven focus based on privilege and white supremacy is what the press seeks to maintain. Again, it could seem as if the narrow approaches from law makers, advocates and the media are used deliberately so that persons facing several “vectors of marginalization would inevitably experience more flaws in the distribution of life chances than are addressed by the discrimination principle”68.

One more interesting aspect of this topic that Spade raises is the “preservation-through-transformation”-principle69. Spade refers to this concept as being a multi-field discussion of law, transgender studies and other social sciences, and as a concept that identifies that law changes done at the request of the oppressed, actually do not eradicate the oppression itself. Instead, Spade maintains, these law regulations “changes the system just enough to justify and preserve the status quo”70.

3.4 Media disproportion exemplified: Angelica Ross

At the end of the episode “The Road Trip: Part One” and the beginning of the subsequent episode titled “The Road Trip: Part Two”, two telling scenes illustrate some clear issues when it comes to choosing, maintaining and exploiting certain views and agendas. Caitlyn Jenner meets other trans women at the Human Rights Center. One of them, Angelia Ross, has later criticized the show, labeling the segment in which she participated a case of curious editing and fearing for the show’s ability to approach the trans issue with nuance71. With regards to Ross’ participation, only two out of the seven comments that the producers included in the final cut had some substance to them; first, from the episode titled “…Part One”:

Angelica: I’ve been transitioning since I was 19. I still haven't been able to access what you've been able to access so quickly. When I first came out, I was fired from, like, four jobs in a row... once they found out I was trans, so I felt like I would never in my life choose to do s*x work... but after being fired after so many jobs, what other choice did I have?

And then from “…Part Two”:

68 Spade, «Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape», 362
69 Ibid.
70 Spade, «Trans Law and Politics», 363
**Angelica:** A lot of people who want to be seen as heroes and want to, like, save our community. They want these kind of direct, wrap a bow around it, now this person’s all better and they have a job.

Meanwhile, Ross stated that she decided on participating in the show when she grasped the potential of sharing a positive story for the improvement of the (trans) economic landscape. She explains how she joined the show when she realized the…:

“…opportunity it would give me to talk about why I started TransTech, and the work we’re doing providing trans people with solutions and opportunities to save themselves from drowning in the debt of transition. Being trans comes at a high cost, but being black and trans can cost you your life”.

Given the significance of upholding both a strict time limit for the actual runtime of the show, as well as maintaining certain plotlines, it is understandable that some comments—and thus, some perspectives—must be subordinated to the extensive task of keeping the coalition and mixture of cis viewers, trans issues and the very disparate cast intact. In this particular scene, which brought together many well-experienced and well-stocked minds, all seem determined to discover and respond to the many vulnerabilities of the community. Ross thought that such an opportunity for international publicity could not be rejected. What role was Ross meant to constitute in the show, if not one that could address the lack of jobs and educate the rest on how she created work for many trans and non-conforming gender people. Why, then, would the production omit Ross’ story entirely? And why was the important story of Chandi Moore, who were also present and who works voluntarily with black Trans women in Los Angeles, left out of the final cut? All of this becomes increasingly unfathomable if one considers what Jen, prior to this scene, tells Caitlyn:

**Jen:** Primarily, just to hear these girls’ stories. They're survivors of... of violence because they’re trans. We don't want to reduce them to these traumas, you know? They're so much more than... than these things that they've suffered. But we also need to acknowledge what's happened...

**Caitlyn:** Yeah, right.

However, the entire conversation did just what Jen wanted to avoid; instead of depicting what must have been an enlightening and hopeful discussion between resourceful trans women, only the traumatic aspects were mentioned, efficiently reducing the women in the circle into

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72 Ross, «Call Me Caitlyn. Sincerely, Miss Ross»
traumatized victims. While this fact justly indicates important issues the community faces, especially in terms of black trans women, it simultaneously confirms to the viewers that it is difficult to balance the many stories that deserve attention. Nevertheless, Ross’ history was reduced to a depiction of a traumatized black trans woman who used to do sex work, before moving on to the next one in the circle. Ross states herself that in some newspapers’ critiques of the episode she was referred to as “one woman”, and not by name. Despite joining the show in order to spread the news about her achievements in the community, Ross was only included to share her story of oppression. It is a paradox that the editing of a show that intends to empower a fundamentally oppressed community – or so it claims, at least – is later criticized to perform a similar act, namely that of silencing the important stories from an already burdened, marginalized and strangled group.

According to an annual newsroom census only 12.4 percent of journalists at daily newspapers in the U.S. are minorities. Also, the same research found that most journalists rely heavily on official sources; one of the most telling conclusions drawn from the story was that between 80 and 85 of the quoted sources were white men. With the apparent potential of the media to contribute to better social justice and to draw those who exist on the sidelines of society back in. Just as journalists often seem to be mostly focused on the riots behind a demonstration, for instance, rather than the actual violence or message behind these uprisings, it is equally apparent that those who live the story must also tell it. “I Am Cait” would doubtlessly be a more ‘whole’ narrative if all its objects – cast, guests and fans – told the entire story without help from the producers’ editing tools. Therefore, keeping in mind that “I Am Cait” – and Jenner herself – has received criticism for its whiteness since the beginning, the very silencing of Ross insists on and sustains how “white man ways” keep deteriorating media representations in America. A hope for “I Am Cait”, then, was that it could provide space to events, ideas and stories that formerly have been discarded from the mainstream news rotation. However, the sphere of influence of “I Am Cait” is apparently too restricted. Indeed, in “I Am Cait” one instantly gets the feeling that the program downgrades this form of civilian journalism to something that must be handled with careful restraint. Consequently, the line between commercial journalism (and commercial interests) on the one side, and the real activism and authentic stories on the other side – at least in the case of “I Am Cait” –


74 Ibid
seem to be indistinctly and unfairly drawn.

This important question is well illustrated through the experiences of Sunny Hundal, a British editor of a leftwing political blog. He maintains that:

A new generation of second- and third-generation Britons are growing up with the impression that national news organizations perceive them as outsiders. Two broad accusations are made: that not enough stories are sourced from communities, and that they are covered only when there is a controversy.\(^75\)

In his essay, Hundal formulates how technological development has forced media houses to cut costs and consequently how that in turn affects priorities. Also, since technological development has changed the media landscape entirely – now consisting of blogs, podcasts, specialized TV channels, on demand TV-streaming services – the large networks cannot possibly aim for niche stories, they must aim to hit as wide as possible. According to Hundal, many mainstream media institutions have failed to recognize their own limitations and mortality. The supposition that the smaller media will die out before the bigger ones – (since the latter have greater resources behind them) – due to the wearing forces of time alone, is a dangerous and unjustified supposition to make.

It is not difficult to link these perspectives to the case of disproportional representation in “I Am Cait”. Despite the fact that the trans issue as whole is raised in the show, it remains worrying that it seems to continuously work against the diversity of the group, because those stories does not fit their strategic and limited plotlines. A core example of that is how the show is based almost exclusively on trans femininity stories; only Caitlyn and her other (male to female) friends appear, except for once.

### 3.5 Questioning the gender essentialism and polarized politics of “I Am Cait”

The cis focus of the show – as well as the contradictory features of Jenner – becomes even more visible in the show’s tackling of Jenner’s direction of transition (born male, transitioned into woman) and the implications from that. The show lacks portrayals of trans men, only one substantial conversation appears in the entire first season effectively turning “I Am Cait” into a tale about one part of an already marginalized community. With the exception of

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transfeminine Jenner and her friends, the brief appearance by Chaz Bono and the few shots of trans men from the road trips taken, and from the Trans pride, constitute the only examples of trans men (or gender-variant or intersex, for that matter) in the show. It is not that the growing representation of trans women is unimportant for the society or irrelevant to the show – it is definitely important in a society where trans women are murdered at a shockingly high rate – but one should perhaps imagine that the representation of trans men and other non-binaries were equally important. “I Am Cait” and its favoring of the now familiar “white man to woman”-narrative creates a moral concern, especially in terms of how they perceive cis- and trans men:

**Van:** There's a lot of trans on trans relationships though.

**Zackary:** There really are.

**Van:** It's becoming a lot more popular.

**Caitlyn:** Do you think it's good?

**Van:** Yes. They understand each other.

**Zackary:** When we're dating cis people, we're really aware of the fact that we're trans, and when you're with another trans person, it's a completely free space.

**Van:** The trans man doesn't come with the shame that a cis male comes with, because it's been projected upon them if they love trans women that it's gonna, like, really box them into this "homosexual" style.

**Caitlyn:** Right.

**Van:** So I think we should all just date trans men and get over it.

**Trace:** I think you're right.

**Caitlyn:** To the trans men.

Van’s comment “we should all just date trans men and get over it” clearly signals that “it” means dating cis men. Furthermore, she says that trans men “doesn’t come with the shame that a cis male comes with”, before they all salute and cheer dating other trans. The scene is decidedly upsetting because it reduces the masculinity of trans men. Despite the fact that two trans who are dating share the mutual experience of being trans, it does not automatically imply that all trans men would date trans women (they could might as well be interested in other trans men), nor does it imply that trans men are any different than other males. Among
the women discussing dating, the suggestion seems to be that trans men are to a smaller extent intimidating than cis men, because they are not actual or genuine men. The episode gives strength to the notion that it is less challenging for a trans man to date a trans woman compared to a cis man, because he would have his (homo-) sexuality contested incessantly. However, with that logic as basis for such conclusions, it cannot possibly be any less complicated for a trans man to deal with accusations of purely being a very masculine woman.

This brief and only discussion of trans men in “I Am Cait” appears unhealthy since the result is a description of trans men as something very dissimilar than cis men, and that trans men should be preferable for dating because their masculinities are poles apart from those of cis men, and therefore harmless. It is worth noting that the frame of the conversation was dating, as if only to explore the possibilities of acquiring companions to have sex with.

These truths, in addition to many others, contribute to turning “I Am Cait” into a one-way street when it comes to painting the trans community picture.

3.6 Caitlyn (or was it Bruce?) dating - what makes a woman?

In season 2 of “I Am Cait” Jenner seeks to sort out some of her concerns in regards to dating. She reveals that she does not want to date because she fears rejection. However, while some of her girlfriends introduce themselves to a group of business men at a hotel bar, Jenner stumbles clearly nervous into a conversation with a guy named Joe:

Caitlyn: Joe, it was nice meeting you. What do you do for, uh, work? What do you do?

Joe: I own, uh, a real estate office and I'm a developer.

Caitlyn: Oh, so, residential or commercial?

Joe: Little of both.

Caitlyn: Whatever.

Joe: Commercial.

Caitlyn: Wherever there's... wherever you can make a buck.

Joe: That's right.

76 I Am Cait, Episode 16: «Houston, We Have A Problem»
Jenner’s courage is nothing but admirable. When it comes to increasing trans visibility, raising the issue of dating is a worthy and natural step to take to help the cause. This particular scene is both beneficial and detrimental. It benefits Jenner, the community and the show itself by attracting viewers to witness what must be a very fearful moment in many trans peoples’ lives. However, the conversation itself reveals the surface-scratching nature of the production. While any date could go wrong for the lack of chemistry or one of the parties’ insecurities or attitudes, this particular segment seems to only play the role of creating drama to drive the show forwards. Still, the scene positively makes for one of the strongest and most important parts of the show for several other reasons.

Jenner’s public status has generated many debates and ideas to surface, and several sceptics want to steer the debate into a bioethical and medical path. One of the more prominent disputers is Dr. Paul McHugh. McHugh is a doctor and senior psychiatrist at the recognized John Hopkins Hospital and has published extensively on transgender issues for more than 40 years. He upholds that “transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men”77, and that trans people are “impersonators”78. His main argument is that the notion of sex or gender being the result of ‘feeling’ has contributed to even more confusion in society, ultimately leaving “casualties”79 in its wake. Consequently, he maintains that gender variation and confusion should be treated with therapy instead of surgery.

In great contrast stands Judith Butler, whose book “Gender Trouble” clearly upholds that a person’s behavior constitutes gender80. She maintains that gender is performative. In other words, that gender produces a series of effects; one acts, talks and walks in ways that consolidate the impression of being a man or a woman. What Butler claims is that gender is produced, and reproduced, all the time, and that nobody really is a gender from the start.

Jenner’s dating scene in “I Am Cait” is perhaps awkward to many viewers, because of the familiar mannerisms. “It is still Bruce who’s in there”, many would perhaps feel. Also, the political and conservative mind of Jenner was present instantly during the date:

**Caitlyn:** Joe, it was nice meeting you. What do you do for, uh, work? What do you do?

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78 McHugh, «Transgenderism: A Pathogenic Meme».

79 Ibid.

80 Butler, Gender Trouble, preface
Such a line is very characteristic of Bruce. Since the medical discourse like that of McHugh and others pathologize such vital actions of self-definition, Jenner’s dating is one of the things that seem to be the most beneficial with the series. It proves the importance of, and signifies the difficulty in, living one’s true self. In that respect, “I Am Cait” provides the audience with an opportunity to discuss gender performance. In a news magazine interview, Judith Butler suggests that:

> No matter whether one feels one’s gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives. So whether one wants to be free to live out a “hard-wired” sense of sex or a more fluid sense of gender, is less important than the right to be free to live it out, without discrimination, harassment, injury, pathologization or criminalization — and with full institutional and community support. That is most important in my view. 81

With Butler’s quote as background, Jenner’s dating stands out as even more important – actually, nearly momentous and groundbreaking — since the most vital part of the transgender activism is to cause visibility. Regardless of how the conversation on-screen seems awkward, natural, beautiful or arranged, Jenner’s action nonetheless shows that the most important thing is to dare. The portrayed courage of Jenner in this particular scene helps to empower the cause by turning to and challenging the viewers’ instinctive ways of gender attribution.

Since the dating scene depicts a very insecure and afraid Jenner as she is about to date for the first time, the show makes a very important point by underscoring that trans people themselves, as well as many others, even cis people, are afraid, vulnerable and insecure about parts of their own sexualities. With this scene, the show effectively addresses notions of anxiety and the dangers of unsuccessful self-perception, notions that many who have lived closeted lives might encounter when they challenge and attack the established binaries on their way to liberate themselves and degenderize society.

4 CONCLUSION

All things considered, it is clear that the role of Caitlyn Jenner in “I Am Cait” raises several interesting questions worth pursuing.

Even though there are many glasses of wine present in the show, ultimately and too often creating a superficial feel and a sense of doubt with regards to the show’s agenda, it is clear that the show has created more trans visibility. In 2016, a time in which our global society grows more diverse, “I Am Cait” is available on many platforms. The questions remains whether or not the show – and Jenner herself – manages to reach enough viewers that are on different platforms.

My understanding of all of this is that globalization and technological development have contributed to a change within the trans community. Social media and the increase in trans television representations have left the cause more visible, but as both trans visibility and the community itself grows, it becomes increasingly apparent that some parts of it are left uncovered or relegated back to the margins of the mainstream. The highly and disproportionately publicized transition of the privileged Jenner proves concerning, since her experience is shared by few – if any – other trans. Therefore, this thesis has discussed aspects related to whether or not Caitlyn Jenner is an unsolicited spokesperson for the trans community.

A spokesperson should represent the entire trans community; that is, a spokesperson should not only be a manifestation of social change and the processes and dynamics that go with it, but also the very ground on which trans activism and movement is expressed and formulated. Thus, it does not seem obvious that all within the community are content with their newly born star and most famous member. In that respect, I Am Cait” represents an infliction on the community. It seems fair to state that the ultimate aim of all trans narratives should be to describe all aspects of the explicit cause and problem at hand, and moreover, to do so without a commercial determination, political agenda or a particular audience in mind.

Although “I Am Cait” as a trans narrative seems honest, it is not objective, and leave out too many of the stories of the trans community. Jenner’s aspirations and willingness to try, however, prove that here is hope for a better future for all people who are oppressed and discriminated against, not only trans people. Jenner’s effort to date a man, for instance, illustrate both the pain and beauty of a harsh reality, and that no one deserves to be kept in a
moral prison for living out their true personality. While it seems to be problematic that Jenner’s political stance is a deviation to that of her community, it remains true that the community grows more diverse as more people come out of their closets. Also, Jenner’s courage when dating reminds us that it is useless to focus too much on binaries and other fixed categories, as well as dangerous to overlook the power and potential in universal language and traits that all persons share.

Furthermore, When Jenner’s friends criticized her for supporting the Republicans, “I Am Cait” successfully – perhaps without the intention of doing so – points toward the issue of the established, constructed frameworks that society use to continuously judge what something is, and what it is not. Even if Jenner is a conservative, and her friends are not, they still fight together. Caitlyn Jenner is definitely a dividing character as she is hard to “place” between the realities of the privileged, political conservative and the new-born member of a marginalized community. Indeed, as written in chapter 3, it seems as if Jenner struggles to be an activist and a promoter at the same time without revisiting and revising her former standpoints. However, this is an important reminder of everyone’s right to follow their hearts, and as a mayor in NY once said: “there is no Republican or Democratic way of cleaning the streets”82

In that respect, Caitlyn Jenner, from what she represents in “I Am Cait”, should perhaps be welcomed as a wanted spokesperson for the community, but at the same time it does not appear strange that her welcome – within and outside the community alike – has been changing and greatly debated. Her fight is definitely important in order to spread the story of transitioning itself, but perhaps there are too many glasses of wine and dresses in “I Am Cait” to say that is has succeeded entirely in deconstructing the many different suppositions of gender, some poles apart, or permitting the audience to tear down their (cis) sets of prejudiced social structures, hegemonies and privileges.

Life and one’s personal experience of it should transcend all labels and markers constructed by society, including gender. It is not the task of humanity to limit the experiences and justice of others by discriminate against, prohibit or restrict a person’s right or opportunity to live out important acts of self-determination. Put differently, acts that are important to each and every individual in order to find their way. “I Am Cait” showed that Jenner grew and matured, together with the show, and slowly found her own way which culminated into crossing her own fear when dating a man.

It remains difficult to say whether or not Jenner should be the trans community’s spokesperson, but it is nevertheless true that her transition has created an enormous interest in and attention to the trans cause, and ultimately it seems fair to state that visibility is very important for the future. Regardless of any internal conflicts in the community, the trans community should continue their efforts together as a collective to maintain the transgender momentum.

It is in the interest of all trans people to keep the community moving ever onwards.
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