Self-Image as Intervention: Travis Alabanza and the New Ontology of Portrait Photography

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Abstract: A close analysis of the Instagram feed of Black British, gender-non-conforming, trans-femme performance artist Travis Alabanza reveals their production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography via the social media platform Instagram as a timely and necessary intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but their oeuvre constitutes an imperative and complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such constituencies produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of photography and self-portraiture. To understand the nuances and interventions of Alabanza's self-images, this chapter will model a trans-visual studies approach, in which methods of analysis are co-informed by the object of study. Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view aesthetics as being about communicating, identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

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1. Introduction

In an image posted on their Instagram feed, on 13 January 2020, Travis Alabanza wears a dark pinstriped blazer, open in the front over a lacey red and black bra and dark, high-waisted pinstriped suit bottoms (see Figure 1). Their hair is straight and long, a gold hoop earring catches the side light coming from what might be a nearby window; they lean back toward the bare white wall behind them in a slightly sultry pose, lips pursed, cat eyes looking directly at us through the picture plane.[1] Alabanza is mobilizing a sophisticated and sexy version of themself, a non-binary femme-ness unabashedly wearing a bra while having a slightly hairy chest. They take up the central location in the frame, cropped at the hips, with a small amount of negative space above their head, frontal facing in shallow pictorial space; the framing,

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[1] Alabanza's appropriate pronouns are the singular uses of the pronouns they/them/theirs.

frontality and composition of the image references the aesthetics of a long tradition of Western portraiture, traceable back to the sixteenth century.[2] However, here, the aesthetics of the image-maker/subject are a radical intervention into the visual field. Rather than a cis Caucasian man self-imaging via entrenched art historical materials, Alabanza disrupts aesthetic and media-based hierarchies and traditions of self-portraiture.[3]

The ethos of Travis Alabanza's self-imaging praxis does not embody a desire to create positive visibility, but rather to be understood outside of current regimes of visualities. Moreover, while Alabanza lives and makes images in a location ideologically invested in the idea that *seeing is knowing*, Alabanza's self-image photographs are performed as intentional interventions into visual culture, and are challenging the very understanding of representation, portraiture and visual encounters.[4]

Trans self-image makers like Alabanza are invested in challenging how we have come to view and conceptualize representation and photography in the so-called "West." Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view surface aesthetics as about communicating, identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations. The Instagram feed of Alabanza, in its production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography, presents a timely and necessary intervention into Western visual culture, bringing into being complex, expansive and intersectional identities while reworking Western concepts of photography and portraiture. Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but their Instagram feed constitutes an imperative and

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2 See my introductory chapter in this volume (Lehner 2021).

3 This chapter aims to interrogate what Alabanza's self-images on social media are doing as an intervention in discourses photographic portraiture and identity representations. In this chapter, I will not focus extensively on the debates around selfies. I have traced these in the introduction of this book (Lehner 2021). I have also written more on the debates around self-portraiture and selfies in "A Multi-Dimensional Matrix of Visual Apprehension: The Gender-Non-Conforming Selfies of Alok Vaid-Menon," in *Trans Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* (Lehner 2020) ProQuest ID: Lehner_ucsc_0036E_12015. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5rn8jgp. For other sources on debates within selfies and self-portraiture, see (Cruz and Thornham 2015; Schlief 2004). Moreover, see (Murray 2015; Giroux 2015; Goldberg 2017; Gorichanaz 2019).

4 It is important to note that the very idea of being able to create "positive visibility" is itself a misconception; representations can never remedy social issues and injustice, but rather are always bound up with the negotiation of identity. Many feminist scholars have made this point; see, for example, Solomon-Godeau (1991). Similarly, one could discuss this as a feminist practice of narcissism in conversation with what Amelia Jones has observed regarding the female [in this case femme] narcissist as being a threat to patriarchal systems as she (or they) makes the male viewer irrelevant as she (or they) need no confirmation from him of their "desirability." (Jones 1998).

complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such constituencies produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of photography and self-portraiture.

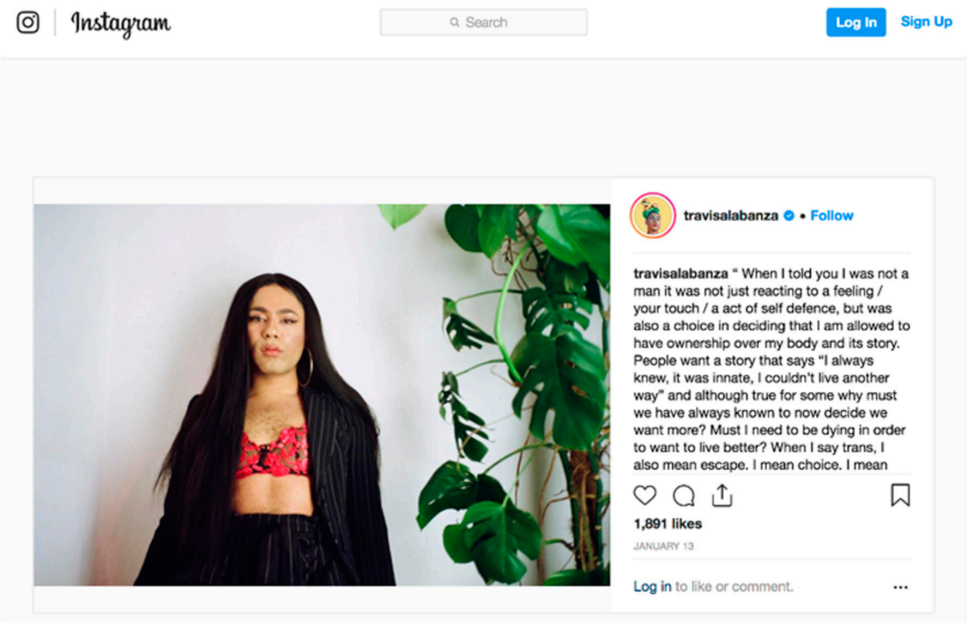

Figure 1. Self-Image of Travis Alabanza on their Instagram feed, posted 13 January 2020. Source: Screen grab image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

To understand the nuances and interventions of Alabanza's self-images, this chapter will model a trans visual studies approach, in which methods of analysis are co-informed by the object of study. Wherein I aim to attend to the specificity of Alabanza's self-imaging and undo essentialist ideas about interpreting work. In order to situate the discussion of Alabanza's self-images, I will briefly discuss key points in the representation of trans femmes in visual culture, the discursive framing of photography in the West, and the intersecting visually oppressive regimes of racialization and gender as bound up with representation and identity formation. I will then briefly situate Instagram as an extension of contemporary photographic art practices, and finally, I will attend to Alabanza's work as an intervention into the above-outlined areas.

2. Travis Alabanza

Predominantly known for their work in performance, Black British, non-binary, trans femme artist Travis Alabanza grew up in working-class Bristol, England, and is currently based in London, active in the performance and theatre scenes there.[5] In 2017, Alabanza became the youngest recipient of the artist in residence at the Tate workshop program. They've performed in venues such as the ICA, the Roundhouse, and Barbican. Alabanza has toured throughout Europe and the United States in hundreds of venues (Minamore 2019; Pengelly 2019; Rasmussen 2019; Sanyang-Meek 2016).[6] Using the platform Instagram, Alabanza inserts radical aesthetics into the visual field, critically engaging in discourses of trans identity formations, photography, and representation. Blurring distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, the use of Instagram by image-makers like Alabanza mobilizes the platform as an ever-evolving, self-curated solo exhibition of self-portraiture. This not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define portraiture and photographic practice, but also confounds the way in which stereotypes of marginalized constituencies are established. Rather than creating static and reductive representations that narrowly demonstrate essentialized ways of being an acceptable trans subject, Alabanza's self-representations present a diversity of potential ways of being non-binary and Black, while the specifics of Instagram also facilitate that they speak for themself.

Alabanza's self-images defy Western, binary gender aesthetic expectations, juxtaposing symbols assigned to the category of masculinity (the hairy chest or five o'clock shadow) with aesthetics assigned the role of femininity (red lips, floral crop top, and long hair). Standing shoulders-back, eyes meeting ours through the picture plane, Alabanza presents an empowered figure who is disinterested in performing within the frameworks of binary gender. Through their mobilization of self-image and text, Alabanza invites us to reconsider how we conceive of gender and trans identities, specifically taking on the narrative of trans folks that was established when media originally spectacularized trans people and psychiatric and medical industries pathologized them, and which has been perpetuated by mainstream media since. This history suggests that a trans person is trapped in the wrong one of two body

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[5] Black British refers to British citizens of either Indigenous African Descent or of Black Afro-Caribbean (or Afro-Caribbean) background and includes people with mixed ancestry as well. This is a term by which Travis Alabanza self-identifies. Non-binary refers to someone who does not identify with the gender binary. Trans femme is used here to differentiate from trans woman. While trans woman as an identity category reinforces the conflation of gender and biology and is rooted in a rigidly bound category with a history of tensions, trans femme recognizes that gender is a free signifier not essentialized nor reductively attached to any gender or biological sex, but rather is about aesthetics and gestures.

[6] Moreover, see Alabanza's website www.travisalabanza.co.uk.

types, and that they must transition as quickly as possible into the other to "feel like themself."[7] This reductive narrative reinvests in the gender binary and effectively erases all who exist outside of or between masculine and feminine. Alabanza's oeuvre prompts questions about how we assign gender qualities to aesthetics; not offering any easy answers, Alabanza uses the image caption to promote further reflection (see Figure 1):

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

Taken together, image and text propose that we need not belong in either one of two gender choices, that our genders may change any time in any way, and that their potential transformations are infinite. For Alabanza, trans is a way out of rigid identarian regimes, a praxis and a life free of living within preset boundaries. Both image and text push us to imagine other ways of being not already modeled around us.

A performer intimately aware of how their corporeality disrupts many peoples' realities, Alabanza mobilizes the aesthetics and possibilities of Instagram to image themself as an intervention into visual culture. With over 70.2 thousand followers around the globe, Alabanza's praxis on Instagram constitutes a compelling intervention into discourses of representation in conversation with contemporary photography discourse and the utilization of self-portraits to interrogate identity formations (see Figures 6 and 7). Alabanza's self-imaging praxis is not an isolated occurrence; it is part of a larger movement of trans folks self-imaging as intervention, a movement building on a long lineage of feminist, and queer photographic

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[7] Part and parcel of perpetuating the binary gender system is the pervasive narrative popularly referred to as being "trapped in the wrong body." This idea has been prevalent since the initial pathologizing of trans people. The idea that a trans person is "trapped in the wrong body" comes from the medical establishment's requirements that in order to gain services, trans people had to articulate disgust at their current biology at the time of seeking services. This was established by the early formulation of trans identities as a diagnosable condition in need of a cure. See Stryker and Aizura (2013). See also: Prosser (1998), Preciado (2013), Ochoa (2014). Moreover, see: Tobia (2019), and "Galvanizing Aesthetics in the Trans-Masculine Visual Field: *Original Plumbing|Trans Male Quarterly,*" in Trans Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography, 2020 ProQuest ID: Lehner_ucsc_0036E_12015. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5rn8jgp.

interventions.[8] However, perhaps the most contemporary movement that Alabanza's work discourses with is post-feminist photographic practices.

In "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," interdisciplinary visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray offers insightful theorizing of what he views as a post-feminist movement reflected in the ethos of the many young women self-imaging on social media. According to Murray, selfies of the post-feminist movement are characterized by a disinterest in taking on the problems of mainstream depictions of one's constituency, instead favoring self-imaging in ways that mobilize the self as sexual, empowered, and an intersectional subject engaging in imaging practices in discourse within one's community. Murray deploys the term "post-feminist" not to signal the triumph of feminism and thus the ending of its necessity, but rather to signal a shift in feminist priorities and strategies that move away from investments of Second and Third Wave feminisms (Murray 2015). He observes that contemporary image-makers working in post-feminist practice in photography engage in aesthetics and discourses that move beyond those of earlier feminist priorities. Positioning Alabanza's praxis in conversation with a post-feminist ethic pushes the limits of post-feminism. To include non-binary trans feminine self-imaging praxis as post-feminist forces the question of the ontology of feminism and unmoors it from outmoded essentialist ideas about gender oppression as rooted in a binary framework, thus calling into question the structures by which feminism is delimited. Post-feminist projects (and feminism) are not necessarily bound to (cis) women, but, instead, are invested in dismantling gender oppression, which can and should be done via frameworks that view gender not as a binary but as a system. The post-feminist ethic creates new aesthetics via viewing perspectives disinterested in debates about the "dominant male gaze" and investing in worlding projects (ibid.).[9]

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[8] Here, I position Alabanza's intervention in a lineage of feminist and queer artists, such as Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Renee Cox, Cathy Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Tourmaline, Loren Cameron, Tammy Rae Carland, Nikki S. Lee, Kalup Linzy, Tina Takemoto, Mickalene Thomas, Zanele Muholi, Del la Grace Volcano, Amrou Al-Hadhi, Tejal Shah, and Alok Vaid-Menon, to name a few. I also situate Alabanza in discourse with scholarly interventions dealing with debates in performance, intersectional identity and representation by the likes of Derek Conrad Murray (Murray 2016), Amelia Jones, José Esteban Muñoz, Mel Chen (Chen 2017), C. Riley Snorton, micha cárdenas, Susan Stryker, Jack Halberstam, Che Gossett, Julia Serano, and Marcia Ochoa,, to name a few.

[9] It must be stated plainly that not all selfies are engaged in post-feminist activities, in fact there is great diversity in how selfies are being mobilized and to essentialize them all under any rubric is methodologically flawed. Some will necessarily be invested in reifying problematics of dominant culture values, such as the neo-liberal capitalist, surveillance state, as argued by the likes of Henri Giroux in (Giroux 2015; McRobbie 2009). It must also be stated that, elsewhere, feminist media scholars such as Rosalind Gill have positioned post-feminism as a "sensibility" and a means of articulating a seemingly regressive practice engaged in by young women that involves self-surveillance, views femininity as a "bodily property" and can be observed in mainstream media in the post-feminist moment. See Rosalind Gill (2007). While other feminist cultural studies scholars such as Sara Banet-Weiser, and Catherine Rottenberg frame post-feminism as contingent on one's perspective, rife

Alabanza's oeuvre is actively disinterested in imaging subjects (themself or others) within normative visual culture standards. Post-feminist qualities are observable in Alabanza's practice, which barrows art historical traditions of portraiture (stance, framing, frontality), but inserts Black British, non-binary femininity as subject and artist, thus resisting art historically entrenched codes of imaging the cis feminine body as passive bodies for visual consumption, thus, intervening in the reductive binary and cis-gendered frameworks of portraiture. Alabanza deploys racialized and gendered aesthetics that rupture art historical expectations and are imaged for Alabanza's community.

3. Representation, Racialization, Gender, and Trans Femmes in Visual Culture

Representations are constituent of how expectations are set up regarding what corporealities are valued by a given culture at a specific point in time. Representations of trans femmes of color today in the Western context correspond with the erasure of and violence perpetrated against trans femmes of color in daily life. As Richard Dyer has insightfully argued, the psychological significance of stereotypes is that they outline the parameters of life for various constituencies at a given point in time in a particular location. (Dyer 1993). What trans femme stereotypes translate into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans, demonstrate which trans constituencies are impermissible, and side-line the majority of actual trans corporealities and experiences.

In the recent past, there has been an unprecedented number of visual culture examples of trans feminine people in Western European and North American contexts. While it is imperative to not overstate or overdetermine how this current wave of trans representations is shifting culture, it is necessary to study the aesthetic and implications of this moment. While mainstream visual culture, steeped in dominant ideologies and motivated by capitalist investments, has tended to image a narrow set of trans icons (reflecting investments that maintain allegiance to Western art history, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy), in other areas of trans visual culture, one can observe more complex representational strategies, unprecedented aesthetic practices

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with paradoxes and bound up with neoliberalism in late capitalism. See Banet-Weiser et al. (2020). Also see (Bae 2011), (Hall and Rodriguez 2003) and (Holmlund 2005). It is imperative in this case to situate Alabanza's work in a lineage of feminist interventions in visual culture and indeed in line with a post-feminist ethos in order to keep the trajectory of feminism reflecting its alleged commitments, i.e., primarily working to dismantle the oppressive framework of gender inequity. For more on the imperatives of the trajectory of feminism see: (Doyle and Jones 2006) This is critical as, recently, feminist discourse has weaponized biology and transphobic notions of womanhood to malign trans folks and precisely why a trans feminist praxis like Alabanza's is relevant to the work of feminism. See (Serano 2007, 2013; Ahmed 2017).

and interventions that de-normativize dominant visual traditions, cultural ideologies, and capitalistic aims.

In Western European and North American contexts within the canon of portraiture, ideological value systems are continually reified (Bal 2003). Objectifying, sidelining, and erasing representations of those other than cis-Caucasian men from the canon of self-portraiture, this Western art-historical tradition symbolically marks non-imaged constituencies as of little value to said culture (Bal 2003; Dyer 1993; Hall 1981). Although portraits other than those of cis-Caucasian men have circulated art-historically, they have less commonly been self-portraits, and even these have appeared in limited numbers. When such images are produced, they are often generated by members of dominant cultural groups, and from a mainstream ideological perspective—due to the cultural belief that portraits transmit knowledge—such images often transmit and reify problematic beliefs about constituencies other than dominant constituencies (Hall and University 1997; Bhabha 1994; Dyer 1993).

When encountering trans femmes of color in physical space, people have already been ideologically informed via visual culture on how to treat them based on stereotypic representations perpetuated in visual culture. This process is exponentially dangerous when the subject sits at an intersecting point on the visual matrixes of gender and racialization, which positions them as dually visually disrupting of cultural norms. This thinking is indebted to the legacy of Black feminist thought and actively interrogates intersectionality as it impacts trans and non-binary lives. These observations specifically build on Black queer studies methods, which has pushed Kimberlé W. Crenshaw's scholarship on intersectionality to consider interconnectedness as it specifically relates to trans bodies and racialization (Crenshaw 2003).[10] Queer of color critiques have provided additional insightful revelations about the complexity of intersectionality as it applies to scholarship, culture and life. As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson observe, identity politics have historically often reinforced hegemonic power structures and homosexuality has been disavowed in Black scholarship, while race has not been attended to in queer theory. Johnson and Henderson also argue that to ignore the way that multiple subject

[10] The term "intersectionality" is historically linked to the work of Black feminist scholars. The term itself can be traced to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which specifically deals with the study of how different power structures interact in the lives of minorities, specifically Black women. For more information, see (Crenshaw 2003). To hear Crenshaw speaking and to contextualize the critical emergence of intersectionality that comes out of the application of Black feminism to antidiscrimination law, see (Crenshaw 2014). For more on intersectionality and its roots in Black feminist thought, see (Hancock 2016; Collins and Bilge 2016; Collins 2009; May 2015; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Numerous trans and queer scholars have taken up issues in intersectionality as applicable to trans subjectivities, including the likes of Mel Chen (2017), Jack Halberstam, C. Riley Snorton, Kai M. Green, Treva Ellison, and others.

positions interconnect is theoretically naïve and politically dangerous. They urge scholars to consider intersectionality and to engage in the cross-pollination of theories in order to reflect upon the ways in which relying on reductive binary oppositions (for example, heterosexuality versus homosexuality) prevents scholars from critically examining the politics of representation (Johnson and Henderson 2005).

Embodying feminine aesthetics, trans femmes deploy aesthetics associated with those we have been trained to devalue and consume; but in embodying femmeness beyond cis femininity, they become objects of spectacular fascination. The heightened sexualization and exploitation of trans femmes in dominant visual culture is aligned with dominant cultural ideologies invested in dehumanizing them in ways that go beyond the exploitation of cis women. The coupling of both transphobia and misogyny directed at trans femmes objectifies them and their bodies, and demeans their personhood, positioning trans femmes as objects to be perused, exploited, and discarded. In her text *Trans-Misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict them as sexualized bodies in a "titillating and lurid fashion" (Serano 2007, 2012). Transmisogyny has resulted in the "Sensationalization," and "demonization," of trans feminine people in mainstream media (Serano 2016). Transmisogyny has also led to the media's now decades-long depiction (starting with Christine Jorgenson) of "the trans revolution in lipstick and heels" (ibid., p 70). Moreover, the intersection of racism and gender oppression continues to create uneven, problematic, and often dangerous intersections perpetuated in visual culture.

Mainstream visibility for some trans folks comes at the expense of others. Representations of trans femmes in mainstream culture promote specific "acceptable" ways of appearing as trans in the world, while sanctioning acts of aggression toward those who fail to replicate these representations (Cárdenas 2017; Griffin-Gracy et al. 2017; Snorton 2017). Repeatedly positioning trans femmes like Caitlin Jenner (see Figure 2) as the pinnacle of "trans success" reflects what micha cárdenas has suggested is the incorporation of trans folks who uphold neoliberal agendas and ideologies while keeping other trans folks out of public view (Cárdenas 2017, p. 173). In writing about contemporary U.S. culture and the increasing inclusion of queerness in mainstream media, Jasbir Puar observes, "these fleeting invitations into nationalism indicate that U.S. nation-state formations, historically reliant on heteronormative ideologies, are now accompanied by—to use Lisa Duggan's term—homonormative ideologies" that produce and perpetuate essentialized and narrow nationalist ideals of race, class, and gender (Puar 2007). Bringing these observations into conversation with the insights of C. Riley Snorton reveals that not only is the binary gender matrix regulating lives and representations, but its intersection with racialization is always necessarily invoked. *In Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Snorton traces the interconnections between

racism and gender as regulating apparatus. Snorton sees Caitlin Jenner (see Figure 2) in an established canon of trans representations traceable to the first widely celebrated trans woman to appear in visual culture—Christine Jorgensen (see Figure 3). Snorton observes that the canonization of Jorgensen as the "good transsexual" set up a framework in which Caucasian trans women gained an "acceptable subject position," contingent on their Caucasian-ness and their commitment to embodying and reflecting narrowly prescribed cultural norms associated with Caucasian womanhood (Snorton 2017, pp. 140–43)—tropes that are observable in the multiple visual examples we see today of Caitlyn Jenner: affluence, passivity, inviting the gaze, and being Caucasian. Snorton furthers that it was through "whiteness" that trans women were "sanitized" in dominant culture and thus became visible. Snorton also suggests that, in making a narrow fraction of trans femmes acceptable via the whitewashed and rigidly bound gender category, the iconizing of Jorgenson set up a mold against which other trans femmes would be compared (Snorton 2017). Those who did not reflect Jorgenson's precedent lay outside the bounds of acceptable trans embodiment, either due to gender beyond the binary or due to racial appearance other than Caucasian. It must be stated plainly that Jorgensen herself was already repeating entrenched raced and gendered tropes of acceptance. One needs only to look back at the history of portraiture and visual culture in the West and view the lineage of Caucasian women imaged within this narrow aesthetic.[11]

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

[11] On the topic of decolonizing gender and its racist implications, see (Carter 2007; Schuller 2018; Somerville 2000).

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

Inseparably, when depicted in mainstream culture (if at all), trans femmes of color are overwhelmingly deployed as working in dangerous professions, marginally housed, and often victims of sexual assault and various hate crimes. These stereotypic caricatures reflect mainstream cultural beliefs about trans women of color, demonstrating trans women of color as only ever tragic, unfulfilled victims. A particularly poignant version of this perpetuated, racist, transphobic trope came in the form of the feature film *Tangerine* (2015).[12]

Lauded for starring two trans women of color as the protagonists, *Tangerine* has been the most widely popular representation of trans women of color in mainstream media in the recent past.[13] The two protagonists, Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra, are played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, both African American trans women. Casting actual trans women of color to play starring roles -not cis men as is often the problematic practice in cinema as observable in *Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013 and the *Danish Girl*, 2015 (Friess 2014; Lees 2014; Puchko 2015)- the characters and plot of

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[12] There is an argument to be made here that links the technology of the iPhone to trans femme representations. Low budget and consumer-grade technologies are being used to image trans and non-binary people rather than the high-quality technology and canonical photographer that was used to produce Caitlin Jenner's likeness for the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

[13] Other notable mainstream representations of trans femmes of color include Neil Jordan and Stephen Woolley's *The Crying Game*, from 1992, and the appearance of Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset in Jenji Kohan's *Orange Is the New Black* from 2013–2019, wherein trans femmes of color are also framed as tragic, and criminal.

the film reinforce and reify racist, transphobic expectations, and stereotypes about trans women of color, being incarcerated, violent, and engaged in unlawful activities, to name a few (see Figures 4 and 5). Both the promotional rhetoric and the plot of the movie forward the notion that tragic and tumultuous trajectories are to be expected of trans femmes of color, and create a narrative that makes light of the hardships that they face. The protagonists are both sex workers. Sin-Dee Rella has just been released from jail to find her pimp boyfriend cheating on her with a cisgender woman, and the movie's widely circulated tagline flippantly reads "A hooker tears through Tinseltown on Christmas Eve searching for the pimp who broke her heart."[14] Writing about the film, Morgan Collado observes, "trans women of color are almost always seen as objects to be controlled, held and exploited" (Collado 2015). Such mobilizations are reminiscent of colonial anthropological photographs framing colonized people as less than human, and thus deserving ill treatment (Marien 2015).[15] At first glance, *Tangerine* seems to break through this paradigm in forwarding trans women of color as the stars of the film, but on further assessment, the representations mobilized by *Tangerine* shore up transphobic, racist perceptions about trans women of color.[16]

Alexander Weheliye's scholarship on the complex interconnectedness of violence, racialization, and corporeality proves instructive in light of the specificity of visual culture, life, and the ideological processes of racialization. Weheliye fervently urges that race be viewed as a socio-political relation and not assumed to be a de-politicized visual descriptor. Weheliye is concerned with the ways that visible human difference has been considered in Black studies to better understand the political, economic, and social exploitation of noticeable human differences. Weheliye's conception of "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Weheliye 2014) mark and include some bodies in the realm of the human, based on the aesthetics of their corporeality, while also demarking other bodies based on their aesthetics as outside the realm of the human (ibid.).[17] Weheliye's articulation of the process of racialization is crucial, when it

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[14] This catchphrase was printed on the promotional posters for the movie as well as appearing in publications for the film. It can be seen as the tag line on the film's IMDB page here: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt03824458/.

[15] Notable contemporary intersectional feminist photographers like Carrie Mae Weems and Pushpumala N. Have used photography to speak back to these damaging photographic traditions, particularly in Weems' project *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried* (1995); see (Weems 2000). Moreover, see the artist's website http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html; also see Pushpumala N.'s *From The Ethnographic Series Native Women of South India: Manners & Customs*, 2000–2004. See Saatchi Gallery site https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/pushpamala_n.htm.

[16] Not insignificantly, the film was lauded as well as being entirely shot on smart phones (the same technology that selfies are made with), but the image maker in this case was a cis white man and the final venue was the film-making circuit.

[17] Redefining how we view processes of identification and racialization, Alexander G. Weheliye writes about alternative ways of thinking about race as racialized assemblages, the politics of which Weheliye argues are implicated in global power structures, and should be understood as being defined by

comes to the relationship between visual culture and real-life encounters with trans femmes of color. His formulation highlights how this active process of valuation is linked to the physiology of individuals. It ideologically sutures culturally specific concepts of humanity to constituencies as necessarily tied to visual appearance. Racial assemblages rely on stereotypes, to ultimately naturalize the expulsion of some from the category of human. This visual and cultural process works to sediment racializing assemblages into political relations, normalizing racism, and racial injustice. Racializing assemblages, however, rely on the permanent fixing of identification to the body (ibid.). The use of Weheliye's concept of difference as attached to the body is informative in thinking through the political and social situation surrounding trans women and trans femmes of color. Weheliye's insights help to explain the ideological suturing of values to people based on essentialisms about corporeal aesthetics and why such stereotypes of trans femmes of color persist in order to make the oppression of trans femmes of color appear to be natural and expected.

Figure 4. Alexandra, played by Mya Taylor, engaging in sex work. Source: Screen-grab of film courtesy of Ace Lehner.

intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism. He states further that if we want to understand and abolish our extremely uneven global power structures, that we need to challenge the creation and maintenance of systems of domination, criminalization, exploitation, and violence. Moreover, we must see how all of this is predicated on racial, gender, sexual, and political inequities.

Figure 5. Sin-Dee Rella (played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez) fighting with the woman she discovered her boyfriend to be cheating with. Source: Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

One cannot fully understand and articulate the spectrum of how racialization is enmeshed with visual culture unless one considers how gender regulation is enacted. For, as race is culturally constructed and visually maintained, so too is gender. When trans femmes of color like Alabanza present gender options beyond the narrowly prescribed iteration of binary gender, these performances and corporealities become living examples of how binary gender is unable to contain us. Often, rather than viewed as liberatory for us all, trans people whose genders disrupt binary systems are met with violence, enacted by those who seek to keep intact the binary gender system.

Judith Butler's research investigating regulatory practices that govern gender and culturally intelligible notions of identity is particularly useful here. Her scholarship reveals that some identities must not exist in order for the system of gender to exist. For example, she writes, identities where "gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender," (Butler 2006, p. 24) threaten to expose limits of the regulatory system (ibid. 2004, pp. 67, 42). Those who live outside the domain of the matrix, she articulates as abject, and describes these lives as "unlivable" (Butler 1993). Butler sees the cultural compulsion to maintain a "heterosexual imperative" as enabling specific sexed identifications and disavowing others. She calls this phenomenon an exclusionary matrix (ibid.).[18] If one sees the matrix of gender historically and currently dominating

[18] Butler's personal situatedness and allegiance to philosophy and semiotics frame her argument in that she roots her observations in the way that these practices are played out in language. This is interesting, but more fitting for this project is to apply visual culture as a means of applying Butler's observations rather than language. Butler observes that, via language, identities are brought into being, while at the same time, also inscribing us into discourses of gender and sex. Thus, naming delimits but also reinforces the norm while granting the quality of humanness. Significantly in this

Western ideology as binary and invested in cis normativity, then clearly those folks making other gender options visible cannot co-exist with the binary gender matrix. For the binary sex/gender system to remain essentialized, collapsed, and intact, those whose identities make apparent other gendered options must be punished or made examples of—-as offenders of the system. This is observable in visual culture: we see trans subjects who most fully reflect dominant cultural ideologies being marginally incorporated (i.e., Jorgenson and Jenner), while subjects existing too radically outside sanctioned genders are depicted as not only expendable but necessarily eradicateable, as exemplified by the countless acts of violence and aggression perpetrated against trans femmes and trans women of color, and observable in mainstream visual culture in films like *Tangerine.* The interconnection of visual culture and how it reflects and structures cultural ideologies and expectations about who is valued in society is particularly volatile concerning representations and the lives of trans femmes of color. The total number of trans femmes of color whose lives were lost in hate crimes in 2020 surpassed that of 2019, only half way through the year (NCTE 2020; Aspergen 2020).

Alongside the neoliberal incorporation of Caucasian, cis-invested trans women like Jenner, there has also been the incorporating of token trans women of color, perhaps most notably Laverne Cox. What this inclusion has provoked adds to the cultural reactions informed by narrow expectations of who is a permissible trans subject. Trans femme of color and longtime activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy notes that the hypervisibility of African American trans femme actress Laverne Cox has, in many ways, led to increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of color. Griffin-Gracy suggests that because Cox is presumably unreachable to most, racist, transphobic aggressors turn their acts of violence against the trans folks who come into their proximity. Griffin-Gracy notes that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation (Griffin-Gracy et al. 2017). [19] Griffin-Gracy's insights about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetail with micha cárdenas' argument that "the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable"; " now more than ever," Cárdenas writes, "it is evident that visibility is a trap" (Cárdenas 2017, p. 70). To understand the complexity of the "trap" of visibility politics, it is necessary to investigate the ideological framing of the ontology of photographs.

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text, Butler observes that gender is a historical category and terms like masculine and feminine are notoriously changeable and contingent on time and place.

[19] Griffin-Gracey's interlocutor CeCe McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on CeCe McDonald, see (Erdely 2014; Lockett 2016; McDonald 2014; Qian 2017).

4. A Brief History of the Discursive Framing of Photography

Tangerine was praised for being shot entirely on an iPhone 5S, the high-quality photographic technology of a consumer-grade mobile camera phone (Newton 2015; Sharf 2017; Erbland 2018). Not only did *Tangerine* reflect dominant cultural values rooted in a legacy of transphobia and racism, but it did so via a specific discursively framed ontology of photography. The conceptual framing of portrait photographs in locations descends from the colonial project, by and large, maintain the ideological apparatus that outlines lens-based images as necessarily able to transmit "truth," (Sekula 1986; Tagg 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Berger and Dyer 2013; Berger 1990; Sontag 2001), or as Snorton has argued, "reality is sutured to the privileging of sight" (Snorton 2017, p. 140). This ideologically constructed and upheld belief has been attached to photography since its inception in the Western context and has facilitated photography's deployment as an apparatus of cultural ideology (Batchen 1999; Berger 2005; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Woodall 1997). The conceptual flattening of the space between the image and the referent is crucial in upholding colonial ideologies. The very conception of photographs at the inception of the media in the mid-1800s was deeply enmeshed with the period's dominant ideologies, invested in the colonial project, and hinged upon upholding the binary opposition that positioned Caucasian masculinities as the pinnacle humanity (ibid.). Jack Halberstam has observed that in the colonial project, binary oppositions were established precisely to facilitate the demarcation of others as "knowable" or "visible", only in order to degrade and dehumanize them. Halberstam (2018, pp. 6–7).

Since its inception in the West, photography has been viewed as an objective recorder of the world. Moreover, we know (as pointed out by many photography scholars, perhaps most extensively by John Tagg) that photography is highly subjective (Tagg 1993). There is still a deep interconnection between viewing lens-based images and a culturally perpetuated belief in these images as somehow factual. The ideological construction to photography in the Western context has fixed ideas of indexicality, evidence, and authenticity to pictures. Yet, photographs are always about power differentials, highly fabricated, and situational. The discursive construction of photographs via this framing sets up a belief about their ontology that perpetuates what Tagg has referred to as the photographs "regime of truth" (Tagg 1993). In other words, photographs are part of constructing our collective reality. Since the inception of the media, they have been mobilized as instructive tools of disseminating cultural ideology often believed simply to be information (Sontag 2001; Sekula 1986; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Trachtenberg 1991; Mitchell 1992).

Photographer and visual culture theorist Allan Sekula poignantly argued that, while pictures are not actual representations of the lived world, the cultural belief in the truth value of photography makes most people consider photographs "congruent with knowledge in general" (Sekula 1986, p. 56). In "The Body and

the Archive" (1986), Sekula traces several ways in which bodies have not only been symbolically but physically possessed. He traces some of the histories of photography through the trajectory of physiognomy and phrenology, as well as police use of photography to reinforce racial and class hierarchies (ibid., pp. 10–11, 51–56).[20] Sekula writes: "the archive [of police photographs] could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal, could assign each criminal body a relative and quantitative position within a larger ensemble" (Ibid. p. 17). Sekula also contends that racist classification or physiognomy is an impulse in photography that is difficult to repress (Ibid. p. 62). The cultural belief in the "truth value" of photography becomes particularly powerful when dealing with images of people. Elaborating on this issue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes that "photography, a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism have been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, p. 257).

Portraits are products of the people who make them, discursively framed and understood via the viewer's highly situated perspective. Portraits are always enmeshed with the ideologies of the image-maker and the viewer. In particular, photographic self-portraits are deeply bound with the cultural belief that the image reveals some inner workings of the subject (Bright 2011, 2015). Via the conception of photography as indexical and ascribing knowledge to images, dominant cultural groups can assign themselves a higher value than those that look different from them that they would like to oppress (Jones 2012; Halberstam 2018; Weheliye 2014).

5. Photography Now

In recent decades, artists have been increasingly interested in photography, and photographers have turned to portraiture for its sophisticated ability to rework concepts behind representation, to engage in different types of power dynamics, and to explore self and identity, both critically and intimately (Bright 2011, 2015). Conceptual art photography purposefully tries to look de-skilled, emphasizing what or who is imaged rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. Such works often call attention to the very ontological contradictions of pictures and highlight the interconnection between photographs, performativity, and indexicality (Cotton 2004. Photography scholar Charlotte Cotton observes that "the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals

[20] Physiognomy is generally understood as the assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially one's face. Sekula describes at length the racist underpinnings and evolutionist tendencies of this assessment. Phrenology is generally described as what is known and understood to be a racist pseudoscience that once believed a person's skull could determine their character.

the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject" (Ibid., p. 137).

A mashup of "Instant Camera "and "telegram," Instagram (also known as IG, Insta, or "the gram") is a free photography and video-sharing social media platform launched in 2010; it remains the fourth most downloaded application of the 2010s (Miller 2019).[21] Designed to be used on smartphones and consisting of scrollable feeds of images, Instagram enables users to create endless streams of images to be shared instantaneously. Connecting on Instagram is primarily based on liking other people's images, and communication is facilitated by the ability to comment on images as well as "heart" them. Key features include the user's ability to post images to their feed, scroll images posted by others, and search for images by their hashtags, such as #trans #selfie or #blacklivesmatter, to bring up images tagged with the hashtag in descending chronological order. From its beginning and still true a decade later, the emphasis of Instagram is images. Positioning images as primary forms of communication makes Instagram an integral component of visual culture, as part of contemporary art and art history, and facilitates interventions into photographic imaging practices and discourse.

While initially the interventions that Instagram users make may seem a radical break with art history, they sit in a long lineage of photographic imaging practices are deeply bound to art historical aesthetics and often build on a legacy of intersectional feminist, queer praxis of self-imaging as intervention (whether intentionally or not). Considering the complex history of photographic portraiture, it should come as no surprise that, as photography scholar Susan Bright has observed, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions" (Bright 2011, p. 21). Following Bright's thinking, we can view Travis Alabanza's praxis as engaging in a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming "truth value" of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects, while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

6. Alabanza's Insta-Interventions

The aesthetics of Instagram as a platform present their viewer/user with the options of viewing one image after another, in a linear top-down feed, or of perusing a set of images in three-square pictures across and a variable number down (depending on the size of one's device). The frame of the viewing device

[21] Created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in San Francisco CA; the social media application has been owned by Facebook since 2012.

almost always contains another partial image (or images) and text. Even on the few occasions that the device frames a solo image, the understanding of the feeds' function and interactivity as continually scrollable suggests ever more images to peruse. By its very design, Instagram lends itself to the production of multiple versions of oneself, a constantly shifting representation of the image-maker.

Alabanza's Instagram feed is a steady stream of self-representations hyper-aware of their physical appearance while continuously creating an overall self-portrait that is uncontainable and always in flux (see Figures 6 and 7). What has yet to be discussed art historically and is particularly apparent when observing Alabanza's use of self-representation on social media, is that the aesthetics of Instagram not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define photography and photographic practice, but it also counteracts the way stereotypes of marginalized constituencies are established.

Making photographs and looking at photographs are both active processes deeply enmeshed with, and informed by, ideology (Marita and Cartwright 2001; Sontag 2001; Tagg 1993). During both of these acts, our naturalized—and thus often unknown to us—cultural ideologies are deployed in the process of making images and in making assumptions about who or what we are looking at (Marita and Cartwright 2001; West 2004). The construction of the stereotype in visual culture is contingent on flattening ideas about a person or an identity constituency to a fixed, essentialized icon of said group. Thus, when trans femmes of color are repeatedly imaged as tragic and comedic tropes, and Caucasian femmes are spectacularized, we are bearing witness to the continued suturing of specific ideas to particular constituencies via the perpetuation of stereotypes (Bhabha 1994).[22] We should remain wary of the complicated relationship between the icon and what it represents; we should also view the lens-based image as always ideologically saturated. Moreover, one ought to always consider any portrait as fabrication with significant political motives, whether consciously intended by the image-maker or not. When photography is framed as indexical, "truthful," or "objective," it behooves us to understand that this is rooted in a colonial project, set up to make visual distinctions between oppressor and oppressed (Halberstam 2018; Weheliye 2014; Bhabha 1994). To make a critical intervention into problematic issues in representation, it is necessary to begin to challenge the very discursive framing of the ontology of lens-based images.

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[22] Homi K. Bhabha argues that stereotypes operate by playing on the above outlined cultural assumptions and mobilizing representations of marginalized identity categories as a "fixed reality" which is at once an "other" and produced as knowable by being visible. Bhabha also describes the operation of the stereotype as relying on an anxious repetition of the fixed image.

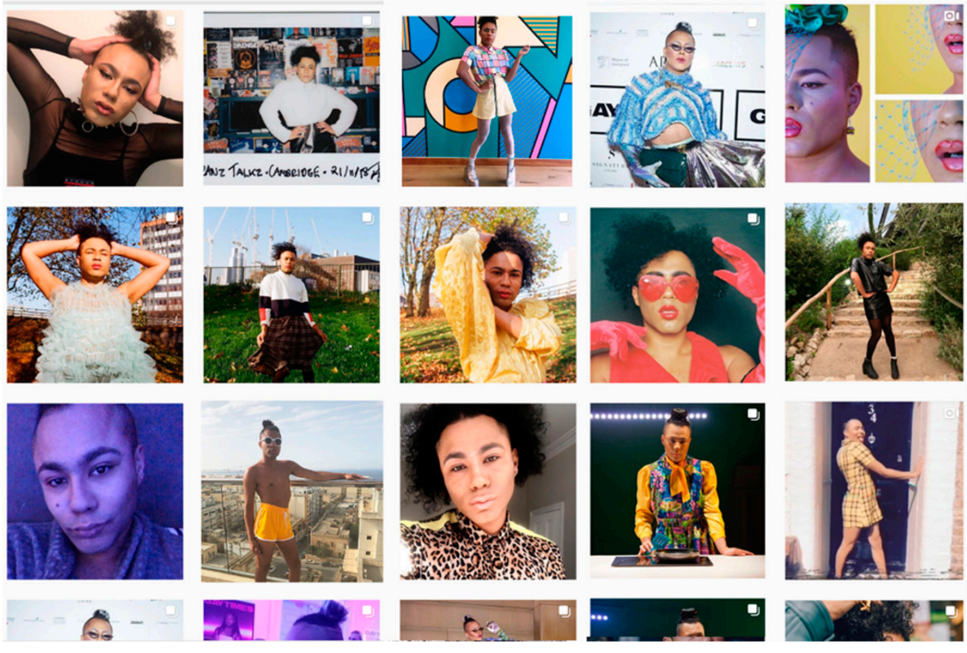

Figure 6. Alabanza's selfies on Instagram. Demonstrating pattern jamming as well as showcasing their ever-shifting gender. Source: Screen grab Courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

Rather than creating static and reductive representations, an icon, or stereotype, Alabanza's selfies present a diversity of potential ways of being a Black British gender-non-conforming trans femme (see Figure 6). They showcase Alabanza's gender and intersectional identity as continually shifting and ever augmenting. Their self-imaging on Instagram reflects no investment in the technologies of art world hierarchies. Instead, Alabanza deploy a vernacular aesthetic, while contemplating the space that photography occupies between index and performativity. The resulting images are highly complex and distinctly contemporary in the service of the conceptual underpinning of the work, and the nuanced process of the negotiation of identity.[23]

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[23] Such practices are reminiscent of the work of Nikki S. Lee, a now canonical conceptual photographer who herself is imaged in her *Projects* series, but is not the person depressing the shutter. For many years in the late 1990s through the early 2000s, Lee, a Korean-born, NYC-based conceptual art photographer, embarked on a series of projects where she embedded herself in various subcultures adopting their aesthetics and ways of life and had herself imaged with members of given constituencies via a point and shoot camera replete with the time stamp photographed by someone else (Murray 2004; Lyon 2002; Allison 2009).

Alabanza's images land as discourse within contemporary debates in photography. For, as Charlotte Cotton, the photography scholar, has observed:

> Rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as "masters" of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship. It made an asset of photography's unshakeable and everyday capacity to depict things: it took on a distinctly "non-art," "deskilled," and "unauthored" look and emphasized that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance (Cotton 2004, p. 21).

Alabanza's self-images challenge established modes of production (with no elaborate or expensive equipment expected in Artworld scenarios), they elide established art world forms of circulation by using social media networking; they also reach potentially massive audiences instantaneously and are readily and easily consumed. They are not beholden to the art world or mainstream media exclusionary practice governing the type of images that go public.[24] Because of its ability to circumnavigate regulatory apparatus, the content that appears on social media sites (such as Instagram) is often more radical, in terms of content, aesthetics, and significance, than that observable in the art world, or popular culture. As art historian and visual studies scholar, Jennifer A. González has observed, increasingly contemporary forms of activist art utilize the Internet and mass media while also interrogating "the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze" (Flanagan et al. 2007, p. 5). Enacting González's observation, trans self-images like those of Alabanza intervene in the politics of representation, corporeality, and the gaze. Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and non-binary self-images, especially those of Alabanza, utilize social media platforms like Instagram precisely for the reasons mentioned above.

7. Between the Image and the Subject

Trans, as a rejection of assigned sex/gender, is a rejection of what was attached to us based on our physical attributes, or assumptions based on surface aesthetics. Trans subjects reject a gender that has been ascribed us based on interpretation of our physical surface, in favor of living our lives based on our internal feeling—something not visible, but rather often expressed visually. Gender is communicated in part

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[24] Circulation, production, consumption and regulation are the concerns of Cultural Studies, the underlining methodology that I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion on cultural studies, see (Turner 1990).

via playing with the aesthetics and expectations of gendered performances and embodiments (Cárdenas 2017; Halberstam 2018). Trans, as an analytic, offers a method to view representations not only as distinct and distant from the subject rendered, but in tension with it. A trans self-imaging praxis like that of Alabanza provides a method that prompts a rethinking of surfaces necessarily relating to essence, identity, and authenticity, unfixing the surface from the subject.

Travis Alabanza's trans self-imaging practice intervenes in methods of photography and its complex relationship to seeing as equating to knowledge, and notions of lens-based imaging as related to unmediated "truth," revealing that the indexicality that we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we in the West are taught to assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification. Current discourse around identity is shifting via trans cultural production and we are seeing a move away from the idea that one can categorize others based on interpretation of aesthetics. Thus, we are now witnessing a shift wherein we learn to respect people's self-identifications, regardless of what identities and values viewers may want to suture to them based on visual assessment (for example, identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and value such as worthiness of being treated as a person, or worthy of degradation and cruelty etc.). In their prolific self-imaging, using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of a continually evolving self, Alabanza's work visually problematizes our cultural belief in the photograph's correlation with authenticity and truth.

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

Scrolling through Alabanza's feed, one views their gender shift from high femme donning full makeup and pursed lips to wearing short shorts, and no top with a hairy chest (see Figure 6 bottom left and one in from bottom left). Alabanza presents themselves as a hip fashion visionary, wearing edgy, retro fashions full of color and attitude (see bottom row right), not only countering stereotypic representations (as discussed with the example of the film *Tangerine*), but providing a plethora of non-binary and Black British corporealities that push open the trans visual field. That is to say, in forwarding countless images of themself as discrete iterations, Alabanza is mobilizing an infinite oeuvre of Black British trans femme ways of being.

Alabanza's Instagram feed consists almost entirely of self-images. From one image to the next, Alabanza always appears as a new example of gender non-conforming femininity (see Figures 1, 6 and 7). On the whole, their Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation. In contradistinction to the functioning of the stereotype where one images is anxiously repeated and ideas about the subject ideologically, albeit problematically sutured to the token representations of a given constituency, which is bound up with the belief that a singular portrait image is demonstrative of the subject and the subsequent belief that we can assign value and categorization to portrait representations as well as people in daily life. Travis Alabanza mobilizes their Instagram feed in a way that suggests that even with a seemingly endless flow of self-representations, there will never be enough images to depict Alabanza in their entirety, and that identity and gender are continually morphable. Thus, with one image or a thousand images, one will never be adequality capable of articulating a singular visual "truth" about Travis Alabanza.

In contradistinction to the singular isolated iconic portrait photograph, Alabanza's Instagram feed is made up of countless images, always augmenting and showcasing the subject as nuanced, malleable, and continually reinventing themself. Non-binary trans femme self-representations like theirs directly challenge how we have defined portraiture in Europe and North America since the Renaissance. Amelia Jones has observed that in the West, we have a cultural tendency—especially in portraiture—to collapse the representation for the thing itself (Jones 2006, pp. 2–5, 13–14; Jones 2012, pp. 23–24). For the purpose of understanding how Alabanza's work is an intervention in Western photography discourse, it is useful to think through Jones's articulation of the complex space between the surface of the image and the subject imaged. Jones's "gap" is temporal, spatial and conceptual. The flattening of time, physicality and ideas is precisely how images have been confused with evidence, truth and fact, and when we bear in mind that the image is always removed via this multidimensional gap from the subject, then we are infinitely more capable of viewing the image just as a surface rendering and not confuse it for the subject in the photograph.

8. Deploying the Strategy of Pattern Jamming

Alabanza's mobilization of loud, intricate, nuanced, visual aesthetics continually focuses viewers' attention to the surface of the image, making it difficult to see the photograph as a "window into a world." In using visual strategies that keep attention on the surface of the image through the deployment of a bold juxtaposition of pattern, texture and color, Alabanza reminds viewers that photographs are flat surfaces, Alabanza implements aesthetic resistance to the inclination toward believing the image *is* the subject and that simply by looking at pictures, one gains information about the person imaged.

Within the frame of each square image, Alabanza deploys fashions and compositional aesthetics that call attention to the surface of the picture plane, visually reminding us that the photograph does not and cannot contain depth, that it is two-dimensional both physically and conceptually. For example, in the top center image of Figure 6, Alabanza stands in a color blocked outfit that mimics the colors and shapes of the wall behind them. The wall itself runs parallel to the picture plane and appears close behind Alabanza in the image, thus flattening the pictorial space stopping the illusion of depth. The visual similarities between the shapes and colors of the wall are mimicked by the outfit conflating surface of the figure and the surface of the background, further calling attention to the flatness of the photograph. Alabanza's imaging praxis in this way reflects tactics deployed in post-colonial contexts. Such images challenge the ideologically constructed "indexical" relationship between the surface of the picture and what is imaged (Pinney and Peterson 2003). Nicole Archer has noted that contemporary trans artists often use a technique she describes as "pattern jamming." Archer notes that several contemporary trans visual artists, deploy this successful tactic to defray reading through the image, keeping viewers' attention on the surface of the work (Archer 2017, pp. 293–319).

In a small, gridded section of Alabanza's Instagram feed (see Figure 7), the visual rhythm of the work becomes akin to that of an abstract painting. That is to say, the eye is continually moving around the surface, jumping from color to similar color and shape to similar shape, tracing the outline of the figure from one frame to another. In the top left image, the bent knee first appears and is echoed in the second image to the right; in the image below, the bent knee appears again in the opposite direction. A pop of red appears in the top right corner and then again in the image to the left, again still in a small square in the central image, and the eye moves on to note the orange in the bottom row. Then, the blue of that backdrop carries the eye to the bottom left to notice the blue of Alabanza's dress as they sit on a bench, and so on, in keeping the eye moving around the picture plane and on the surface of the image. The ways in which Alabanza mobilizes their likeness in conjunction with fashion, colors, and composition enable a continually augmenting self-articulation that keeps our attention on the surface of the image.

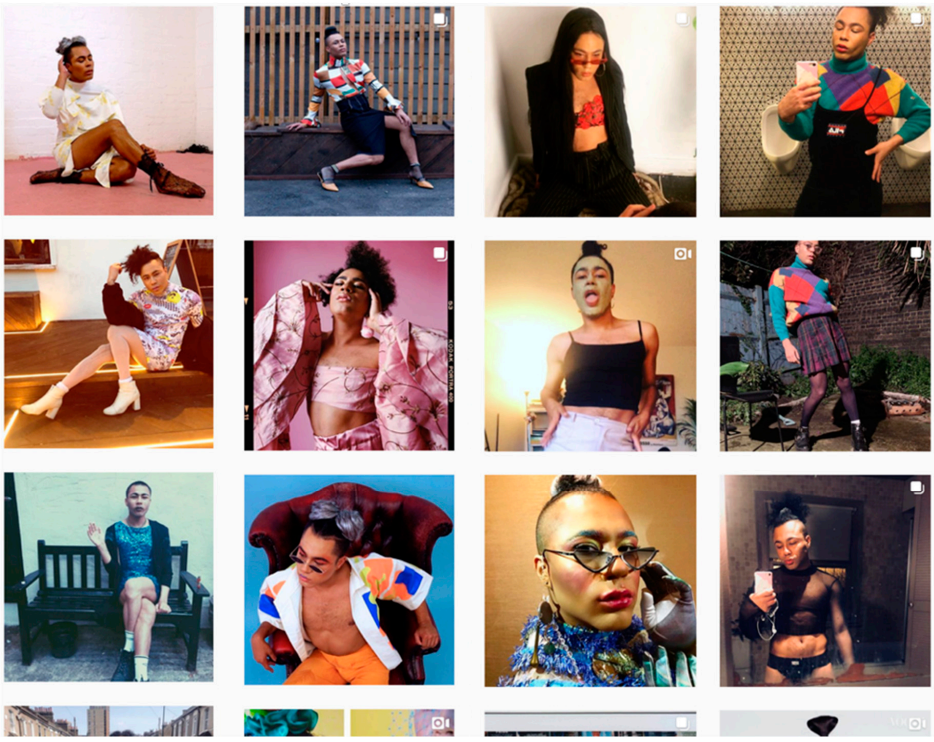

Figure 7. Alabanza's selfies on Instagram. Demonstrating pattern jamming as well as showcasing their ever-shifting gender. Source: Image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

It should not be surprising that artists working in postcolonial geographic locations, and trans artists working in post-colonial locations (ideologically speaking), share a commitment to undoing the conception of photography as necessarily able to transmit information via a surface rendering; it is the discursive framing of photography as a medium of "truth," indexicality, and facticity that has bound it so tightly to the construction of stereotypes and has enabled its being used in the service of the oppression of colonized subjects and trans folks, especially trans femmes of color.[25]

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[25] For more on writing about the "truth" and indexicality of photography and its links to oppression see (Tagg 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Berger and Dyer 2013; Berger 1990; Sekula 1986; Sontag 2001; Halberstam 2018).

9. Decolonizing Beauty

The matrix of gender and the regime of racialization become more noticeable as their edges become visible, which often occurs when non-binary folks of color come into view. Their very existence disrupts visually regulating matrixes of gender and racialization (Butler 1993, 2004, 2006; Weheliye 2014; Lehner 2019). Alabanza does not replicate established tropes of trans femininity (the neoliberal incorporate-able: Jenner, the tragic trans figure worthy of mistreatment: *Tangerine*, or the token trans femme of color who fits within established frameworks of expectations about gender and race i.e., Laverne Cox). Alabanza's continuous image feed demonstrates a radical intervention exploding gender expectations, unfixing them, de-binarizing them and proposing new ways of being Black British and gender non-conforming. Forwarding themself as hip, self-assured, fashionable and sexy, Alabanza unapologetically disidentifies with femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with masculinity and femininity, visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty.[26]

In Figure 6, the top left image, we see Alabanza in a black-studded leather choker, tight fishnet shirt over a black tank or bra; they parse their painted lips, beneath sultry eyes, and a hoop earring dangles from their left ear while their hair erupts off the top of their head, in a small dark poof just above their hands. The image is tightly cropped, and Alabanza is cut off at the elbows and chest. They stand in front of a whitish wall in shallow pictorial space. Alabanza looks at us through the picture plane embodying femme goth sultry sexiness through their clothing and expression. In the central image in the top row, Alabanza expresses a perky bright persona via their attire, and poses in front of a bright patterned, muralled wall. In this full-body picture, Alabanza is only cropped at the glittery platformed toe and the top of the flamboyant hairdo. Their outfit consists of bold color-blocked, large check top and short butter-yellow skirt. Alabanza's right hand is on their hip and their knees point slightly toward one another, while their left hand juts out from the elbow in a performative gesture (as if they are about to snap), one that references film-noir cinema and a femme hand holding a long cigarette. In this pose, Alabanza references tropes of feminine glamour in visual culture history.[27] While their outfit is a nod to playful femme fashions of the 1980s and 1990s.

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[26] In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz developed the indispensable concept of disidentification. The term describes acts wherein queer performers adopt parts of dominant identificatory categories, while perverting and jettisoning other parts of those identities with which they do not identify. See: (Muñoz 1999). For more on regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty, see (Bederman 2000; Benjamin 2019; Carter 2007; Herzig 2016; Lehner 2019).

[27] Marcia Ochoa observes that glamour is often invoked as a "form of power" that enables "legibility," "affirmation" and "survival." (Ochoa 2014, pp. 89–90).

In an image in the bottom row, Alabanza stands topless, wearing only yellow swim trunks and big white sunglasses with black lenses. Alabanza looks to be on a rooftop, their left arm extending outward along the top of a glass wall with a cityscape in the distance, while their right arm hangs down at their side. Alabanza's chest is flat above their shorts, which are worn high-waisted. While there are many other photographs in the screen grab of Alabanza's Instagram feed (Figures 6 and 7), considering just these three, a viewer will be hard pressed to delineate Alabanza's gender identity clearly as fitting neatly into any particular category based on binary cis-gendered stereotypes. In fact, no one image reflects a normative and reductive version of binary gender, and neither do all three of these showcase consistencies with any one type of binary gender or racialized expectation. From each image to the next, Alabanza's gender shifts along with the frame, location, and attitude. One might surmise that the image in the top left is a queer cis woman, the image in the middle-upper row a femme-identified retro fashion queen, and the figure in the swim trunks identifying with masculinity in some way. However, these assumptions are all about the same person and are all based on interpretation of aesthetics (clothing, pose, performance), underscoring that gender is not fixed but rather is malleable and contingent, often changing in relation to setting, mood, and companions.

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist transphobic notions of beauty, Travis Alabanza demonstrates gender as performative, but also as a malleable and mobile set of endlessly mutable and ever-deployable signifiers, based in large part on visual communication. Alabanza visually asserts femme-ness as a free signifier, not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics. Underscoring that biological sex has nothing to do with gender, nor is Alabanza's deployment of masculine or feminine otherwise tied to biology. By creating a multiplicity of non-binary, Black, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Alabanza expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being. This work begins to create space for new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated for their multiplicity and transgressiveness.[28]

10. Parting Thoughts

The long-established art historical hierarchy around portraiture based on the method of creation, venue of the exhibition of the work, and the artist's relative

[28] For more on creating new aesthetics of trans beauty that are not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness, see (Lehner 2020; Wilchins 2017).

situatedness in the art world is not only outmoded, but such thinking leads to critical blind spots, in need of reassessment in order to keep art discourse relevant. Measuring the success of a portrait or self-portrait is more productive when based on its conceptual underpinnings, intellectual rigor, and intervention into various visual matrixes. So, when we assess photographic representations, I propose we ask such questions as: How does the image challenge various ideological structures? How does it intervene in visual culture? How does it disrupt previous established aesthetics, methods and hierarchies? It behooves us to change our assessment of contemporary portraiture and self-portraiture and move beyond archaic and insufficient methods of analysis. In writing off contemporary works made using social media because they are made in a relatively new and widely accessible means is akin to writing off earlier forms of photography, like vernacular photography, color photography, Polaroids, and slideshows—-all of which have been inducted into the canons of art history and photographic practice.[29] The category of photographic portraiture and self-portraiture needs to include works in the emergent form of social media, regardless of previous exclusion based on material hierarchies.[30]

Alabanza's self-images are the very definition of a self-portrait: "portraits of oneself done by oneself," but they facilitate a more nuanced understanding of self-portraiture. Alabanza's Instagram feed creates new representations that radically challenge the creation of stereotypes, and, again, they represent a multi-faceted self-portrait of a subject continually evolving—a self-portrait in a state of perpetual production, or what one may call tranifesting (Green and Ellison 2017). Alabanza's self-images produced in the context of their world, their community, and their perspective insert trans non-binary Black British subjectivity in context into broader culture in a way that is not a stereotype and models otherwise unseen ways of being. Thus, effectively, their Instagram feed constitutes a praxis of worlding, of bringing oneself into existence via permitting oneself to appear in visual culture; a radical

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[29] Consider, for example, the success and canonization of William Eggleston's vernacular style color photos, Warhol's prolific use of Polaroids, and Nan Goldin's now legendary vernacular style slide shows.

[30] Evan (2001, pp. 106–7) observes the advent of Kodak's democratization of photography and the ensuing proliferation of vernacular image photography bumped photography from the ranks of cultural elite framing the understanding of photography as a commonplace deskilled and thus less significant and less important form of cultural production. We see this same issue transpire in the case of social media images and particularly with selfies today. However, as vernacular photography was initially maligned, it regained its cultural significance and place in the canon of illustrious art soon thereafter. My anticipation with selfies is that this too will soon be the case but, in the meantime, we are wasting time often maligning the emergent cultural form when much can/could be learned from rigorous study of selfie in terms of both contemporary photography and photographic practices, and shortcomings of photographic scholarship.

intervention from someone who represents a constituency actively erased from visual culture and daily life.

Modelling an interdisciplinary trans visual studies method of analyzing Alabanza's work reveals that there are many hierarchies that could factor into the lack of attention garnered by these important cultural interventions. The scholarly neglect of trans femmes prolifically self-imaging on social media may lie in their being femme, or trans, or not Caucasian, or that the majority of these representations appear as selfies. All of these intersecting factors position these self-image makers and their images as antithetical to what have historically been valued forms of self-representation in the West. Yet, studying these images is integral to understanding visual culture and art today, and many of the self-imaging praxis of trans femmes of color like those of Alabanza radically rework Western discursive framing of the ontology of photography, unseating investment in notions of truth and indexicality, challenging how we understand gender, exploring the intersection of gender and racialization, and creating new forms of self-representation. Thus, I suggest that we view self-images like those of Travis Alabanza as critical and necessary praxis in and of themselves, within the discourse of issues in representation, art history, gender, intersectionality, racialization, contemporary art and self-portraiture.

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