

## What Do Queers Do With Media? Two Different Visions of Media Power and LGBTQ Identity

Andre Cavalcante, **Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018, 221 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$27.00 (paperback).

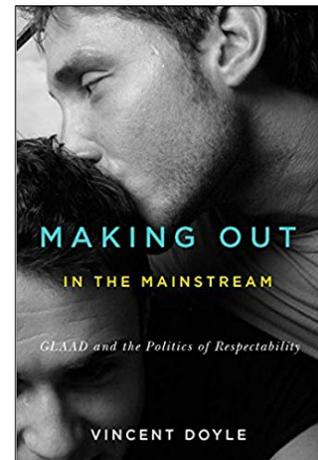
Vincent Doyle, **Making Out in the Mainstream: GLAAD and the Politics of Respectability**, Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016, 316 pp., \$24.95 (hardcover).

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That media is a central force in both the formation and articulation of LGBTQ identities is hardly a controversial claim, but it is a claim scrutinized and retheorized by both Vincent Doyle and Andre Cavalcante in their respective monographs. Each investigates, in his own way, how media acts as a vector of identity, either in packaging it for interpretation by others (in the case of Doyle) or in unpacking it in interpreting oneself (in the case of Cavalcante). Both further concern themselves with the ambivalent (per Doyle) tensions between making do with(in) the systems of media production their subjects found themselves up against and the harms caused by the continuation of those systems. But there, more or less, end their similarities.



Although both draw on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews as their primary data (with Doyle further employing archival research), Doyle and Cavalcante take markedly different approaches to constructing their analyses, guided by opposing theoretical orientations. For his part, Vincent Doyle follows in the analytic footsteps of queer critical theorists such as Lisa Duggan, Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner in his focused critique of neoliberalism as the structuring force underpinning the “mainstreaming” strategies of LGBTQ media activist group GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). Across the six chapters of his book **Making Out in the Mainstream: GLAAD and the Politics of Respectability**, he provides a compelling, if cutting, account of how GLAAD navigated the normative culture of the American media system to make queer people “respectable” subjects and, in doing so, shored up their institutional credentials at the cost of reinforcing the marginalization of those LGBTQ people who fell outside the White, middle-class, normatively gendered, and conservatively sexed mainstream. He takes particular aim at the strategies centered on “visibility,” critiquing the ways in which making queer people more visible served to profit (both socially and financially) the individual and organizational actors fighting for that visibility as well as at the strategies that played into “diversity” discourses as a means of building ties with corporate donors.

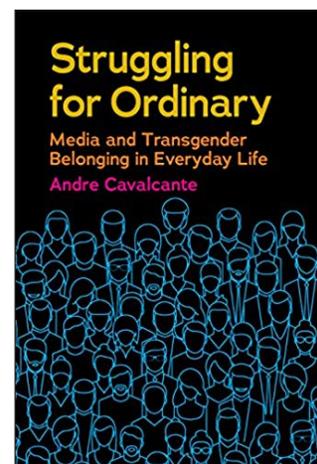
Chapter 4 of Doyle’s monograph, “Sex, Race, and Representation,” is exemplary for its interweaving of both critiques. The chapter closely reads two contrasting controversies from Doyle’s time

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in GLAAD's offices: GLAAD's responses to the release of *Queer as Folk* and Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP*. In the former case, Doyle argues GLAAD mobilized a critique of racial representation—that is, *Queer as Folk*'s lack of people of color—as a smokescreen for leaders' discomfort with the “negativity” of depicting gay male promiscuity while simultaneously appeasing critics who charged GLAAD with failing to advocate for the interests of people of color. Ultimately, though, GLAAD walked back their critique and even advertised *Queer as Folk* because GLAAD wanted to preserve a positive relationship with Showtime, the network that broadcasted the show. In the latter case, Doyle illustrates the complex dynamics that played out both within GLAAD and between GLAAD and music industry actors as pertaining to issues of race following the release of *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Protesting the homophobic content of Eminem's lyrics, GLAAD found itself in an “unholy alliance” with conservative Christians and in a tense standoff with the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (now called the Recording Academy) and prominent members of the gay and lesbian community. In staking out this position, Doyle notes, GLAAD “did manifestly little to elicit the participation of . . . gays and lesbians of color, whose relationships to Eminem and hip hop were considered too complicated to warrant public discussion” (p. 219). Placing these examples in conversation, Doyle makes a compelling case that GLAAD claimed to represent the concerns of gay and lesbian people of color when advantageous for their aims of “respectable” representation in media, while casting aside those concerns when it complicated their aims.

The vision of media power that emerges from Doyle's analysis throughout the book is in many ways Adornoian. The media industries that GLAAD sought to influence are just that—industries—with all the attendant dynamics articulated by Adorno and those who have followed in his intellectual tradition. As such, in Doyle's vision, media exerts profound power, not only on “society” as a category of analysis but also on the activities and the ideologies of the activists he studied at GLAAD. These activists, in turn, sought to influence media as a lever of social power, but in doing so came to wield power over articulations of LGBTQ identity in ways Doyle compellingly argues are limiting, if not harmful, to large swathes of LGBTQ people. Power, here, resides within media and is exercised by those who influence media; consumers and audiences are saddled with the consequences, but they have limited means to resist (though see chapter 3, “Insiders—Outsiders: The Dr Laura Campaign,” for an illustration of successful resistance).

Andre Cavalcante's analysis, in contrast, directly and deliberately eschews the resistance politics of queer critical theory in *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*. Rather, as might be expected from his education at the University of Michigan, Cavalcante takes a more hermeneutic approach that “emerges from a rich tradition in the qualitative, ethnographic study of media reception and use” (p. 6). Accordingly, he investigates how media is employed by transgender people as a social resource, as a mode of identity discovery, and as a tool of identity expression. Across the seven chapters of his book, Cavalcante traces a clean arc from the history of transgender media portrayals, to how those portrayals shaped what trans people thought possible in their own lives, to the strategies trans audiences developed to manage the affective toll of negative portrayals, and finally to



how media became (limited) tools to managing the accomplishment of quotidian tasks.

Chapter 3 of Cavalcante's book, "I Want to Be Like a Really Badass Lady: Media and Transgender Possibilities," stands out as a superb representation of his approach to understanding transgender audiences' active interpretations of media. Considering both mainstream media, such as Hollywood film and television, and more niche media, often online, he paints a vivid portrait of the complex and often contradictory ways trans people "mined the media landscape" (p. 112) for exemplars of transness. In one salient example, Cavalcante recounts the teenage experiences of Jen, a trans woman in her early 20s by the time he interviewed her, watching *Jerry Springer*. It was the first time she ever saw trans people and, though she received the intended message that trans women were "freaks" (see Gamson, 1998), she "saw past their poor treatment, extracting images of a possible transgender self from the show" (p. 104). His analysis is not, however, Pollyanna; while the trans people he studied found diamonds of selfhood in the rough of transphobic media portrayals, the process of reception and interpretation had costs that he attends to. Indeed, in chapter 4, "You Have to Be Really Strong: Practicing Resilient Reception," Cavalcante narrates three participants' development of reception strategies, in doing so avoiding the trap of heroic "resistance" narratives while still emphasizing the active work involved in navigating media reception as a trans person.

The vision of media power that emerges from Cavalcante's analysis, then, stands in stark contrast to that of Doyle's analysis. In Cavalcante's work, power is more-so bipolar and negotiated: Media has a power that must be *confronted* by trans audiences, and it's a power that his participants resent. But at the same time, his analysis locates some significant power in his participants' acts of interpretation and selective usage of media both for their own identity aims and for navigating daily life. Where Doyle's audience is an invisible monolith and media professionals and activists are agentic actors, Cavalcante's audience members are agentic and hyperactive and the media industries are the invisible monolith.

Underlying these different theoretical orientations and visions of media power are different methodological orientations and approaches to interpreting social meaning; the fact they both collected ethnographic and interview data belies a significant contrast in how they used these data. We can think of Doyle and Cavalcante as representing two different applications of Geertzian understandings of social meaning. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973) famously referred to culture as "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (p. 452). This literary culture-as-text metaphor describes quite aptly the approach Doyle takes in his volume. The field notes Doyle made at GLAAD in 2000 and 2001 serve as a text in which to read and analyze neoliberal discourses in an analytic tradition derived from the critical theory of English departments. His field notes could just as easily have been a novel or a film; he just happened to write them himself. Nowhere is this clearer than in chapter 2, "'We Want In': The Politics of Access and Inclusion," in which he reads various GLAAD Media Award ceremonies and GLAAD's 1997–2000 rebranding as evidence of the activists' desire for "full LGBT integration into mainstream US society" (p. 79).

Cavalcante's approach is better described by Geertz's (1974) *From the Native's Point of View*, in which he notes the necessity of identifying and analyzing the "symbolic forms" through which "people

actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" (p. 30). Indeed, Cavalcante specifically articulates his preference for an "emic" perspective in his introduction (p. 6). As a result, he exhibits more fidelity to the "native meanings" and experiences of the trans people he studied. Chapter 5 of the book, "We're Just Living Life: Media and the Struggle for the Ordinary," is a perfect example of the power of this emic approach, offering a rich illustration of how his participants experienced "the ordinary" and "the everyday" as elusive, but desirable modes of existence. Admittedly, in doing so he perhaps produces cultural generalizations that may be reasonably questioned by a more critical audience or challenged by those trans people who feel the meanings and values articulated by Cavalcante's subjects do not represent their own. But such is always the case with ethnographic research.

Given these notable differences, to comparatively judge the two monographs directly would be to compare apples to oranges—or perhaps more appropriately, since few scholars seem to realize the problem with it, to compare gays and lesbians to trans people. But if I were to, I would proclaim Cavalcante's monograph the better, if only for his fidelity to his participants' lived experiences. As he compellingly argues in the introduction to his volume:

This book redresses some of queer, cultural, and critical theory's greatest liabilities: their general lack of engagement with everyday experiences, the theoretical impasse they create through the queer/normal binary, and the reductive framework of politics-as-resistance that underpin their epistemic and methodological ground. (p. 22)

While Doyle's analysis is insightful and, to my mind at least, accurate, his argument fits well enough within the traditional Cavalcante critiques to occasionally raise my eyebrow. Where Doyle sees "respectability politics," Cavalcante sees an all-too-understandable desire for "ordinariness," and while both can be true and can arise in different contexts, there's something far more compelling about everyday people's desire for a livable life when thinking about the social powers of media.

Taken together, however, Doyle and Cavalcante present a vision of a media world in tension, where forces from the top down meet forces from the bottom up, vying over media power and control over the articulation of LGBTQ identity. Their books are two sides of the same coin and are perhaps best appreciated alongside one another. Both are necessary additions to the bookcases of LGBTQ media scholars in their own right, but when put in dialogue with one another they become necessary additions for anyone interested in contests over media power or in the complex interrelations among actors involved in the social construction of identities.

### References

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