

Trans vlogs beyond the transition process: transnormativity, visibility and controversy in Kat Blaque's True Tea Videos

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RESUMO

No YouTube, os vlogs de transição podem ser incrivelmente úteis para pessoas curiosas ou que estão passando por um processo de transição de gênero, contribuindo para contra-públicos afetivos na plataforma. No entanto, a visibilidade criada pelos vlogs de transição também contribui para estereótipos que apresentam a transição de gênero como um processo linear que começa em um gênero e termina em outro, reforçando os estereótipos binários de gênero e a transição médica como alcançáveis e acessíveis a todos. Apesar da extensa literatura sobre vlogs de transição de gênero no YouTube, ainda há uma lacuna na compreensão de como as experiências cotidianas de YouTubers trans são retratadas nos vlogs. Nesse contexto, este artigo investiga a série “True Tea” da YouTuber Kat Blaque como contribuindo para uma ruptura da transnormatividade na plataforma. Considerando que muito permanece desconhecido sobre os criadores QTBIPOC no YouTube, este estudo destaca como os vlogs de Blaque abordam aspectos subversivos e mundanos de identidades interseccionais. A partir de uma Análise Crítica do Discurso Feminista de 10 vídeos selecionados da série “True Tea”, de Blaque, eu mostro como os vlogs sobre outros temas além da transição de YouTubers trans contribuem para dissipar estereótipos sobre as experiências vividas por pessoas trans ao descentralizar discursos medicalizantes. Temas em seus vídeos relacionados à passagem e transnormatividade; pronomes e cultura desperta; e romance e atração sexual revelam que os vlogs de Kat Blaque contribuem para um descentramento da transnormatividade. Esses achados são significativos para a pesquisa sobre vlogs trans no YouTube, pois destacam a natureza diversa e interseccional das experiências vividas por mulheres trans negras. Este estudo conclui que o aumento da atenção às identidades interseccionais de YouTubers trans ajuda a resistir à noção de lógica neoliberal do indivíduo, situando suas experiências como singulares e contribuindo para a criatividade vernacular trans da plataforma.

Palavras-chave: Kat Blaque; interseccionalidade; transnormatividade; YouTube; vlogs.

ABSTRACT

On YouTube, transition vlogs can be incredibly helpful for folks curious about or currently undergoing a gender transition process, contributing to affective counterpublics on the platform. However, the visibility created by transition vlogs also contribute to stereotypes that presents gender transition as a linear process that begins in one gender and ends in another, reinforcing binary gender stereotypes and medical transition as both achievable and accessible to all. Despite extensive literature on gender transition vlogs on YouTube, there remains a gap in understanding how trans YouTubers' everyday lived experiences are depicted in vlogs. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates YouTuber Kat Blaque's series “True Tea” as contributing to a disruption of transnormativity on the platform. Considering much remains unknown about QTBIPOC creators on YouTube, this study highlights how Blaque's vlogs address both subversive and mundane aspects of intersectional identities. Drawing on a Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis of 10 videos selected from Blaque's series “True Tea”, I show how vlogs about topics other than transition by trans YouTubers contribute to dissipating stereotypes about trans folks' lived experiences by decentering medicalizing discourses. Themes in her videos relating to passing and transnormativity; pronouns and woke culture; and romance and sexual attraction reveal that Kat Blaque's vlogs contribute to a decentering of transnormativity. These findings are significant to the literature of trans vlogs on YouTube, as they highlight the diverse and intersectional nature of Black trans womens' lived experiences. This study finds that increased attention into the intersectional identities of trans YouTubers aids in resisting the notion of neoliberal logic of the individual by situating their experiences as singular and contributing to the trans creative vernacular of the platform.

Keywords: Kat Blaque; intersectionality; transnormativity; YouTube; vlogs.

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Introduction

On YouTube, the most viewed videos made by trans creators are vlogs documenting the transition process. These transition vlogs can be incredibly helpful to folks undergoing the process, and may act as an “archive of feelings” that aids to create affective counterpublics to confront antitrans discrimination or stigmatization (Raun, 2012, p. 166). However, these videos document and display the ongoing journey of trans folks undergoing the process of transition, often through a longitudinal gaze that presents gender transition as a linear process that begins in one gender and ends in another, reinforcing binary gender stereotypes and contributing to transnormativity. While many authors have discussed the potential emancipatory effect of trans visibility on YouTube (Horak, 2014; Miller, 2019; O’Neill, 2014; Raun, 2012), few have addressed YouTube content made by (and for) trans folks that is not focused on the transition process. As such, the importance of trans creators’ contribution to the overall culture of the platform remains largely unknown even though there are many trans creators who chose to make content about topics other than transition. Considering this, Kat Blaque stands out as an example of the trend, as she is an artist and YouTuber who creates content on the platform that addresses many issues relating to the lived experience of being a Black trans woman. This essay will discuss how Kat Blaque’s content disrupts the pervasive transnormativity of the platform, by looking at a selection of her videos that address intersectional identity issues on passing and transnormativity; pronouns and woke culture; and romance and sexual attraction.

As a platform, YouTube has been characterized as overwhelmingly White, cis and heteronormative by both scholars and users of the platform. Noble (2018) asserts that Google reifies racist dynamics through their search engine, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Black folks through Google image searches. Similar dynamics are at play on the Google-owned YouTube video service. Often, Black YouTube creators vocalize their observations about not being favoured by the algorithm, which is “black boxed” to them in that no part of it is available to the public (Aina, 2020). The impacts of the algorithm have material implications for Black creators earning a living on the platform, acting as a “paradigmatic tool of necropolitics” (cárdenas, 2017). While we can only speculate about the mechanisms of the YouTube platform, it appears that there are internal structures that promote and devalue certain content along racial and gendered lines.

Generally, the aesthetic preferences made by advertisers are what is promoted on YouTube: the most popular beauty/lifestyle YouTube channels are led by White, thin, able-bodied, cis women. Those who produce “advertiser-friendly” content are favoured by YouTube, as the platform offers incentives to its creation through the threat of demonetization (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). This skews monetary success on the platform towards increased homogenization of content that caters to advertisers’ ideals. In the “niche” sphere of trans YouTube, transition vlogs dominate the narratives circulated about trans existence, creating the illusion that no other content is created for or by trans people. Horak (2014) states, “The popularity of transition vlogs, and of hyperattractive, predominantly white vloggers, institutes hormone time, beauty, gender cohesion, and whiteness as uncomfortable norms” (p. 582). For example, a quick search on YouTube for “trans vlog” yields results almost exclusively related to transition, surgery, passing and hormones, made by what appears to be primarily White creators. As Eckstein (2021) argues, this whitewashing inherent in the video selection favoured by the YouTube algorithm is indicative of “broader social normalization of unmarked whiteness that constitutes naturalized racial hierarchies” (p. 140). As these norms of the platform are institutive of the creative vernacular (Burgess, 2006) of the trans community on YouTube, Kat Blaque’s channel emerges as a prime example of counter-hegemonic intersectional discourse about Black trans folks’ everyday lives.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a critical feminist perspective to the study of trans YouTubers and their content, which centers their experiences (Johnson, 2015). Labelling content produced by trans creators as “trans YouTube” considers it a genre on the platform. In this paper, the term will be employed to refer to YouTube content made by trans creators but does not aim to qualify that content as homogeneous or all-encompassing by any means. Rather, it situates and highlights the discourses created in this YouTube “niche” as trans YouTubers create discursive counterpublics (Eckstein, 2021; Fraser, 1990) who are both in conversation with each other and with YouTube at large as a cultural industry.

In order to look beyond the transition vlogs that dominate trans YouTube, attention must be given to YouTube content made by trans creators that does not focus on the transition process. By turning our focus away

from transition vlogs and towards more “casual content,” researchers may be better attuned to understanding the lived experiences of Black trans folks as documented through vlogs on the platform. By disrupting the gaze from focusing solely on the body as a site of visual and societal obsession, trans vlogs may bring increased visibility to trans issues to a mainstream audience, challenging transnormative discourses circulated by transition vlogs made by binary White trans creators.

As transnormativity relates directly to gender binarism, Judith Butler’s framework of gender as performative is particularly useful. Butler (2004) states that gender as performative goes beyond the mere “act” of embodying a particular gender in a predominantly binary system. Rather, gender identity is always already governed by power relations that make it impossible to exist outside of its own regulatory framework which is historically anchored in the idea of binarity. Thus, gendered norms are produced and reproduced through a negotiation with these power dynamics (Butler, 2015). Any agency that one has to assert their gender identity is then limited through the range of action that is grounded in a social world that is ultimate not of one’s choosing and that limits one’s own capacity for said gendered agency (Butler, 2004). The implications of these power relations upon gendered identities can have material effects on one’s life chances and ability to live within this framework. As Butler (2004) states,

Transgendered and transsexual people are subjected to pathologization and violence that is, once again, heightened in the case of trans persons from communities of color. The harassment suffered by those who are “read” as trans or discovered to be trans cannot be underestimated” (p. 6).

Transnormativity enacts gendered expectations upon trans folks that can range from a lack of acceptance to outright transphobic violence. In this sense, the gender binary produces and reproduces power relations upon trans folks, regardless of their gender identification that is compounded through intersectional identity claims.

While transition videos on YouTube can be incredibly helpful for trans folks seeking first-hand experiences with the medical transitioning process, they often fall into transnormative stereotypes pertaining to that process. Johnson (2016) defines transnormativity as

a hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a

hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual transgender people’s interest in or intention to undertake medical pathways to transition (p. 466).

By sharing their experience transitioning, trans creators offer a large amount of vulnerability into their experience seeking gender-affirming medical treatment. However, these types of vlogs, which are often in a linear timeline punctuated by the administration of hormones as part of the transition process, often reify notions of goal-oriented medical transition that considers binary gender the ideal result of transition (Horak, 2014). For some, medical transition may not be desirable or may not be accessible. For others, identifying as trans does not necessarily equate with a desire towards passing. Furthermore, there are gender, race and class barriers to achieving medical transition (especially in the United States, which is overrepresented in trans YouTube).

As Miller (2019) states, transition vlogs can often leave out trans folks who identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming.

In part because of both trans and nontrans people sensationalizing our stories for a largely non-trans audience, many assume that the “trans community” is composed of trans women and men whose goals include social integration into capitalist, heteronormative institutions such as marriage and the military. This monolithic understanding of transness has prevented a deeper analysis of the often contradictory “ambiguities and polyvocalities” of trans lived experiences, ultimately limiting the ways gender-variant people can express themselves (Stone, 2006, in Miller, 2019, p. 816).

This pervasive transnormativity on YouTube echoes the media narratives about Christine Jorgensen, the first transgender person in the United States to undergo gender-affirming surgery. Through the hyper-mediatization of her medical transition process, she was presented to a mainstream American audience as “the good transsexual” (Snorton, 2017, p. 141). The media portrayed her as attractive, binary, able, heterosexual and thus ultimately more “authentic” and relatable to a domestic American audience than trans folks who has not undergone or did not have access to surgery. As Snorton (2017) states, “Though America’s initial romance with Jorgensen soured, her story

narratively consolidated an understanding of transsexuality as the outcome of surgical implementation and other medicalized treatments aimed to address gender as an anatomical and biological proposition” (p. 141). It is in fact this emphasis on the medicalization of trans identity that YouTube transition vlogs perpetuate through their emphasis on physical transition, linearity in the transition process and binary gender passing as an aspirational goal.

Race plays a pivotal role in the transnormativity present on YouTube. Authors such as C. Riley Snorton (2017), Hortense Spillers (1994) and Christina Sharpe (2016) have written about the *longue durée* of transatlantic slavery and its effect on Black folks and Black trans folks' identity in the wake of the contemporary and persistent effects of colonialism. This article builds on Snorton's assertion that Blackness and transness are inherently interlinked, created from the nexus of transatlantic slavery and ongoing colonial erasure of Black folks. Snorton (2017) states,

There is a growing consensus in transgender studies that trans embodiment is not exclusively, or even primarily, a matter of the materiality of the body. Where one locates a “transsexual real,” whether phenomenologically, in the practices (social, medical, legal, and so on) of transition, in narrative, via the cinematic, or even in the unspeakable and unrepresentable aspects of imaging transness, shifts in relation to racial blackness (p. 175).

In order to deconstruct the notion of transness as primarily material and visible, attention must be given the interlinked discourses of Blackness and transness as results of colonial and imperial domination of the world by European colonisers. Beyond the discursive notion that power is embodied and enacted by and on individuals through the biopolitics of modernity (Foucault, 1976), it must be recognized that the creation of binary gender is part of the imperial “civilizing process,” a process that unfolded with hatred, violence and intentional degradation of Black and Indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, American gynecology is founded in colonial racial hierarchies that perpetuated attribution of gendered vulnerability only to White women, while Black women were forced into invasive and violent medical testing. Enslaved women such as Anarcha Westcott were victims of non-consensual medical testing, demonstrating the “possessive scopophilic dynamic that characterized the enslaver's relation to the captive” (Snorton, 2017, p. 40). As Snorton (2017) remarks,

As Greg Thomas argues in his trenchant analysis of the coloniality of gender and sexuality, Foucault's history of sex refuses to understand ‘sex categories as explicit categories of empire’ wherein ‘the colonial vocabulary of sex is part and parcel of the modern production of heterosexuality as a defining feature of Occidentalism’ (p. 40).

Considering this, the Foucaultian (1976) framework regarding the medicalization and control of gender and sexuality perpetuates the Western erasure of the actual and material effects that enslaved Black folks endured during the ongoing effects of chattel slavery.

Thus, this article is anchored in an intersectional awareness of how multiple identities are not merely additive in their lived experience but rather result in compounding factors that stem from structural inequalities. While activist movements have historically sought to protect the rights of singular groups such as women, Black people, LGBTQIA+ folks, intersectionality is a framework that enables understandings of how historically oppressed groups have diverse and overlapping experiences of oppression that can overlap. As Crenshaw (1991) states,

The problem is not simply that both discourses [anti-racism and feminism] fail women of color by not acknowledging the “additional” issue of race or of patriarchy but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to the experiences of white women, anti-racism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms (p. 1252).

Given this, the intersectional framework is used here to better delve into the issue of transnormativity on YouTube, by analyzing the intersecting oppression of race and gender. In this sense, the experiences of White trans YouTubers may be inherently different from BIPOC trans YouTubers, just as the experiences of cis Black YouTubers are surely vastly different to those of trans YouTubers. While some critique the intersectional framework as not having an purpose-defined methodological framework (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008) and being white-washed by the academy (Bilge, 2013), it remains the most useful theory to the

contemporary understanding of oppression. Looking at the production of YouTube videos through an intersectional lens enables us to consider how power relations act in the creation of algorithms (Noble, 2018), the perception of creators and content created. By focusing on Kat Blaque's videos as an example of Black trans lived experience on YouTube, I aim to further highlight her content as indicative of successful creation on the platform by gendered and racialized minorities.

For trans YouTube, racial erasure occurs in the representation of transness: if one were to base their impressions on the aforementioned "trans YouTube" search, they may assume that all trans folks are White, able, rich and binary, aiming at medical transition in the goal of passing. This presents a picture that ignores the historical exploitation of Black cis womens' bodies in the research that those medical procedures are based on (Snorton, 2017). Black trans women are overwhelmingly more subject to violence than any other group and have an average age expectancy of thirty five years old (Méndez, 2016; Ussher et al., 2020). Considering this, transnormativity does not only reduce Black trans visibility on the platform but institutes harmful norms of representation that have real-life repercussions.

To counter this lack of representation, this paper presents a case study of a Black trans YouTuber, Kat Blaque, who has produced multiple videos about both Blackness and transness. Building upon Snorton's (2017) assertion that Blackness and transness are irreconcilable and irreducible projects, Black trans YouTubers being visible on the platform may contribute to deconstruct notions of which trans people are acceptable and which bodies are liveable (Butler, 2006; cárdenas, 2017). Blaque's videos are honest discussions of a multitude of topics such as misogyny, transphobia, and racism, where she shares her unfiltered opinions. Considering this, her positionality as a Black trans YouTuber challenges media presentations of both Blackness and transness as identities that are exceptional, eschewing stereotypes about these intersectional identities which remain inextricably bound in her discussion of her experiences.

Kat Blaque

Kat Blaque is a Black trans artist, writer, public speaker and YouTuber^[1] who has been making videos on a variety of topics, including gender, BDSM, polyamory, social media and pop culture since 2005. Her channel counts 372,000 subscribers and displays the videos she has made since 2014. Most of her recent videos follow the sit-down format where she sits facing the camera and talks directly to the viewer. This type of video set-up is evocative of early YouTubers, who would film videos from their bedrooms, creating an intimate relationality with the audience by addressing them directly (often through the ubiquitous opener, "hi guys") (Burgess & Green, 2018). More recently, vloggers have more varied vlogging formats that involve a multitude of settings and actions at once.

Blaque's off-kilter esthetics clash with the norm of minimalist, neutral and curated backgrounds of other successful vloggers: her vlog background is plastered with colourful posters and she often stands next to a bookshelf which displays books on transgender theory and other subjects. Blaque's videos follow the sit-down format that many vloggers use when addressing more serious topics, that predominantly shows the vlogger's upper body. As Horak (2014) argues "Trans 'talking head' videos expand the tradition of the feminist consciousness raising documentary to establish trans youth as experts and create a sense of intimacy between vloggers and viewers" (p. 573). Blaque's channel comprises of reaction videos to pop culture (eg.: "Watching Twilight for the First Time") and Internet culture (eg.: "I'm Coming Out Again... #SuperStraight") as well as videos about dating advice, BDSM, transphobia and other topics. In her series True Tea^[2], she takes a deep dive on a topic issuing her unfiltered opinion (e.g.: "Shitty Doms and How to Avoid Them"). In this series, she stands up and addresses the camera directly, offering topical monologues on a given subject while cutting between two camera angles for emphasis and audibly sipping tea or other beverages.

[1] In a video entitled "Im Trans, but I'm NOT 'Queer' (sorry)," Blaque (2019a) has stated publicly that she resents being called a "Black trans YouTuber," as she considers her transness as only an aspect of her identity and not a totalizing identity (see below). Considering this, I have chosen to use the term sparingly and only to highlight these aspects of her identity as they are crucial to this article's argument.

[2] The term "tea" is generally understood as a term for gossip and is used by the LGBTQIA+ community in online spaces (*Urban Dictionary*, n.d.)

Method

A critical feminist perspective was used for the analysis of Blaque's video content. Johnson (2015) argues that feminist researchers of trans studies must have the following components of feminist methodology: "stand-point epistemology, acknowledgment of research process power dynamics, discussion of researcher motivation, and a troubling of objectivity" (p. 31). As such, I state here my standpoint as a White middle-class cisgendered woman researcher who is approaching the topic from a position of a certain amount of gender, class and race privilege. Furthermore, Johnson (2015) states that cis researchers must engage with notions of reflexivity as well as avoiding ciscentricity, cissexist double standards, objectification and overgeneralization in trans-focused research. Considering this, care has been taken to avoid ciscentrism in this work, which does not lay claim to absolute knowledge about Black trans narratives on YouTube, nor does this study aim at generalizability by situating Kat Blaque's content as representative of all of those narratives.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyse Blaque's videos, as its outlook addresses how gendered ideologies and power imbalances circulate. In CDA, discourse is considered as a social practice which has a dialectical relationship with other practices, structures and institutions (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Feminist CDA focuses specifically on how hegemonic power relations and ideologies produce, sustain and uphold societally held beliefs about gender and sexuality (Lazar, 2007). Feminist CDA is a methodological perspective that focuses on "social justice and the transformation of gender" (Lazar, 2007, p. 144), which is a particularly apt method to discuss the topic of trans vlogs on YouTube. This method was employed in order to deconstruct meanings about gender and race in Kat Blaque's videos, by focusing specifically on what she says during her True Tea monologues, while putting them into context with their interlocutors, when necessary. While the visual aspects of her videos are also significant in terms of the cultural vernacular of trans vlogs on YouTube, this paper focuses on the monologues themselves, shifting our attention from the overly visual focus on the "fleshy metamorphosis" (Barnett, 2015) generally depicted in trans vlogs.

A convenience sample of ten videos was selected from Blaque's recent video posts as part of her series True Tea, where she explores a subject in depth and offers up her opinions or feelings on the topic. As her videos discuss many topics related to but not directly

addressing gendered and racialized identities, videos that were specifically about Blaque's opinions or feelings on her gendered and racial experience were selected to for the corpus, as these intersectional identity markers are significant to her disruption of transnormativity on the platform (see Table 1). I aimed to select the most recent videos within these criteria as of September 2021, which resulted in a temporality of roughly two years of content after selection. During this period, her channel also features many videos on pop culture and other topics that were not necessarily relevant to this study, such as "drama" videos not part of the True Tea series where Blaque reacts to recent other YouTubers or internet news. By focusing directly on videos with topics that involved her own perspectives on gendered and racial identity, I focused in on the aspects of her channel that speak the most to the pervasive transnormativity of the platform. This selection criteria allowed for a wide overview of Blaque's content on the topics of this intersectional analysis, while tracking the evolution of this series on the channel.

Results

This qualitative analysis of ten videos from Kat Blaque's channel indicates that she is an example of a successful YouTuber who explicitly works against transnormativity by grouping the data into three main themes, following the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the videos: passing and transnormativity; pronouns and woke culture; and romance and sexual attraction. These themes were the most recurrent in the analysis and were grouped together as to reflect the primary dynamics addressed by Kat Blaque in her True Tea videos on the topics of race and gender.

Passing and Transnormativity

Blaque says that her transgender identity is a footnote on the story of her life and says that she resents getting called a "transgender blogger" (Blaque, 2019a). In most of her videos, she does a great deal of educating her audience about gender: she deconstructs gender norms and expectations in how they relate to both race and sexuality. While she says that she does not identify with her transness, her transness is part of who she is:

One of the reasons I'm on this channel is because I want for people to be able to see a functioning, vibrant, you know, trans person. But, I deeply re-

	Title	Date	Duration	Views ³
1	Im Trans, but I'm NOT "Queer" (sorry)	18 June 2019	27:37	115K
2	Would I Date a Trans Guy?	6 Aug 2019	16:33	70K
3	Why I Don't Like Explaining My Pronouns	3 September 2019	14:00	56K
4	Do Black Men Like Trans Women?	3 March 2020	32:11	56K
5	Do I Even Belong In The Black Community?	2 June 2020	38:12	109K
6	Is It Okay To Have Genitalia Preferences?	13 October 2020	27:31	67K
7	They're Poly, but He Can Only Date Trans Women...	1 December 2020	24:52	52K
8	Blaire White Doesn't Get Kink....	2 January 2021	23:08	169K
9	Gender Reveals Are Transphobic?	7 February 2021	11:49	110K
10	Trans Women "Trick" Straight Men?	2 April 2021	16:49	109K

Table 1. Corpus of Selected Videos (2019-2021).

sent the idea that I have to go through my life with my transness being this important thing, when it's really not (Blaque, 2019a, min 15:44).

It is a noteworthy assertion to state that one represents the label while producing videos on topics relating to mostly transgender identity. This opinion frames this discussion of her videos and her opinions, described on her YouTube channel's "About" tab as "about how we can relate to each other more and fight against the things that divide us, while not losing sight of our own boundaries" (Blaque, n.d.). Blaque's ability to state that her transness is a secondary characteristic which is a result of a certain amount of passing privilege, which she recognizes as such. As Tortajada et al. (2020) argue, "Passing is important for many trans people in their process of identification, as not only it provides a better sense of self, but also reduces their risk of facing transphobic violence towards them" (p. 8). In her discussion of passing, Blaque repeatedly mentions how her gender identity is linked to the ideal of passing with the goal of fitting into a binary gender expectations.

Given this, Blaque offers insight into the trans YouTube community by making videos that are in conversation with other more conservative or reactionary YouTubers. In doing this, Blaque exerts a great degree of labour in the idea of deconstructing the pervasive norms that uphold the binary gender system even though she herself identifies with it. Blaque (2021a) speaks out directly against trans-normativity directly in a video about White trans YouTuber Blaire White's criticism of the BDSM community:

Oftentimes when you're trans it's like well, okay, 'I want to be trans but I don't want to be like weird' right? And when I hear a lot of Blaire White [type] of condemnation of a lot of non binary folk or, you know, transgender people who don't quite look like her, I hear a lot of that anxiety. That sort of idea that, 'if you're going to be trans, you need to be the most acceptable, the most palatable version of your gender, you can't have an alternative style, you can't be a little weird, you can't be a little androgenous, you have to fully commit to this particular gender presentation and that presentation needs to be conservative (min. 11:53).

In speaking out against this ideal of transnormativity that is circulated and idealized by other YouTubers, Kat Blaque presents herself as an advocate for gender diversity and non conformism. In this same video, she shows a picture of herself in a much more feminine presentation (straightened hair, casual clothing) than that that she usually presents as in her videos (colourful makeup, coloured contacts, leather bondage necklace). This type of identity self-archiving can "function as a means by which to legitimate trans identification in ways that capture the significance of the past sources of evidence through a process of self-revelatory documentation that reflects the temporality of bodily ontological recognition in its capacity to address hermeneutic injustice" (Martino et al., 2021, p. 10). This also echoes Horak's (2014) argument that trans vlogs on YouTube perpetuate ideals of transition as linear and aim to absolute binarity.

Blaque also resists transnormativity by not focusing on her own physical presentation and attributes in most of her videos, preferring to speak to the general experience of being trans. While this might include sometimes alluding to her transition process, she rarely mentions it in most of her content. Miller (2019) argues, "One way we might disrupt transnormativity is by not exaggerating the physical aspects of medical transition, thus shifting conversations around trans away from medicalized models of transsexuality to everyday trans lived experiences" (p. 827). When she does focus on her own physicality, it is usually in reference to her sexuality, such as her involvement in the BDSM community or her dating life.

Blaque recognizes that there is more than mere representation and visibility that is at stake in disrupting the norms of gender binarity: "For a lot of trans people, not falling outside of the pattern, not falling outside narrative is survival, right? It is survival for a lot people to not be weird, basically" (Blaque, 2021a, min 13:32). In the same video, she says Blaire White is insinuating that being into BDSM is some kind of betrayal for trans people, that it brings shame to trans people. This type of "YouTube drama" is indicative of the ways in which Blaque's digital trans activism (Tortajada et al., 2020) on the platform are particularly useful. As Miller (2019) argues, there is a certain amount of "in-fighting" within the trans YouTube community as to what constitutes a "man", "woman" or other gender, leading to toxic discourse about trans folks on the platform.

Pronouns and 'Woke Culture'

Kat Blaque, while often confronting transnormativity in her vlogs, offers a mitigated stance on some issues such as gender reveal parties, where (generally cis) parents announce the gender of their unborn child based on discovering their sex via ultrasound. She says, "I don't have a massive issue with gender reveal parties, I really don't. Most people who have a penis will be men when they grown up. Most girls who have vaginas will be women when they grow up. That to me is not a terribly shocking fact" (Blaque, 2021b, min 4:34). She goes on to say that the issue with gender reveal parties is not the event in an of itself, but the gendered expectations imposed onto children as young as infancy, elevating the debate away from the individual instances of gender reveal parties themselves to the societal and institutionalized gender norms that encourage them. By doing this, Blaque continuously works against "the presumption of a stable binary" (Ruin, 2016) even

though she identifies with a binary gender, demonstrating empathy and inclusion towards nonbinary or gender non-conforming trans folks, thus highlighting her commitment to digital trans activism (Tortajada et al., 2020).

In an effort to address 'woke culture' as a type of performative activism that caters primarily to the concerns of cis White women, Blaque calls out the hypocrisy of pronoun disclosure in those spaces as being potentially transphobic. She argues that often she feels that people volunteer their pronouns only to be able to label her as trans, when ultimately her goal is to be read as a cis woman. On the overuse of pronoun disclosure in such spaces, Blaque (2019c) states:

As a trans person and as a binary trans person specifically, I worked really really really really really hard to get to a point where people were looking at me assuming my gender and gendering me properly. Now of course, my story is different from a lot of peoples' because my goal ultimately, at a certain point, was to be stealth, right? And so that was really really invested in maintaining the cisnormative idea about what a woman looks like, how women are... classical femininity. I had a lot of stake in these ideas and it was all sort of created so that people could look at me and assume my gender be correct and not be in a situation where I was being misgendered anymore, right? (min. 5:00)

Beauchamp (2019) offers a conceptualization of 'going stealth' as "such a practice means not simply erasing the signs of transgender identity, but rather maintaining legibility as a good citizen and patriotic American, providing evidence of legitimate transgender identity that erases any signs of similarity to the deviant, deceptive terrorist figure" (p. 50). Transnormativity can emerge in trans vlogs through the insistence at generalization of the trans experience. By continuously positioning herself in her arguments, Blaque avoids talking for the entire trans community by using first-person pronouns and avoid blanket statements or assumptions about how trans people should live their lives (unlike Blaire White who, in the example mentioned above, issues judgemental statements that situate BDSM practitioners as abnormal, for example). For Blaque, going stealth is a matter of survival, security and gender affirmation. In this sense, Blaque calls upon the notion of surveillance of trans folks' bodies and existences, a practice that is linked to

discourses of state security and US nationalism that pit White heterosexuality against race, gender and sexuality in order to construct deviance (Beauchamp, 2019).

On the topic of passing, Blaque (2019c) states, “Honestly, most of us are just out here trying to survive and for someone like myself, the goal was always to have my gender assumed and have it assumed correctly, right? That’s a very large component of what, for me, puts my gender dysphoria at bay.” (min. 5:47). She insists how her own experience of being trans was based on an ideal of going stealth by passing as her binary gender identity, demonstrating an amount of desired gender opacity within her personal experience. Given this, she is also inclusive of other perspectives, which consider themselves nonbinary or who do not seek to pass as a transition goal. Her take on pronouns is that binary trans people are not fighting against nonbinary trans people on the issues of pronoun disclosure, but rather points to the fact that the cisnormative insistence on pronoun disclosure often ends up making trans folks feel dysphoric.

Romance and Attraction

On her channel, Blaque makes lots of content about dating and sex, openly discussing the fact that she is a polyamorous sex positive person who identifies as a rope bunny (someone who enjoys being tied up) and who is active in the Los Angeles BDSM community. Blaque has been honest in many of her videos that she mostly dates cis men who usually happen to be White, repeatedly saying that her type is “the kind of guy who looks like he can throw me across the room,” volunteering her preference for sexually dominant cis men (Blaque, 2019b). Stating that these men happen to primarily be White, Blaque (2020a) argues in the video “Do Black Men Like Trans Women?” that she has trouble finding Black men who will treat her with respect, beyond sexual objectification. Detailing her dating experiences, she attributes this attitude to a pervasive “racial hierarchy” present in interracial relationships:

There is this weird racial hierarchy among trans women where, you know, Asian women are the most feminine, Black women are the most masculine and dominant... it’s this whole sort of thing based on racism, frankly, that we navigate around as trans women and it’s not that different from the way that cis women navigate through race and desirability but there are layers given certain differences (Blaque, 2020a min. 27:40)

In this example, Blaque calls out Black cis men in particular for not being able to be publicly attached to trans women pointing to transphobia and racism. In this particular example, intersecting identities of race and gender interact to enact both racial and gendered norms onto trans women, through the nexus of racism described above. By looking into how power enacts control on both racialized individuals and gender minorities, Blaque deconstructs how the binary frame of gender affects her as a Black trans woman specifically but also how other women are harmed by these power relations.

Race rarely comes up in Blaque’s videos and it is mostly addressed in videos dedicated entirely to the subject. In a video titled “Do I Even Belong In The Black Community?” Blaque attempts to chart her relationship to her own Blackness. As a child, Blaque grew up in a primarily non-Black community, which meant that she did not grow up around Black people other than her family. As a queer youth, she states that she felt a lot of internalized homophobia from her parents who told her that “being LGBTQIA+ was just a thing we didn’t do” (Blaque, 2020b min 11:35). Given this, she states that she had to “choose” between seeking community in her LGBTQIA+ identity and her Black identity:

It’s weird because I am aware of the fact that there are Black trans people who feel very integrated [in the ‘Black community’]. But I’ve never been part of a ‘Black community’ and I often don’t even know what people mean when they say a ‘Black community’ because Blackness is not universal, it’s not across the board the same thing, like I said: it’s a bunch of different things (Blaque, 2020b min. 16:00).

Again, Blaque issues an intersectional awareness to the issue of race, deconstructing how folks may experience their racialized identities in different ways, questioning the mere idea of “the Black community” and its presumed monolith of experience. The idea of a homogeneous community, often alluded to by cis Black women YouTubers, is deconstructed by Blaque, attesting to her unique ability to shut down transphobic and racist “internet drama”.

On the topic of dating, Blaque demonstrates a frank amount of honesty in a video “Would I Date a Trans Guy?” where she states that in the past, she would not have dated a trans man because of her dating preferences (Blaque, 2019b). In this video, Blaque acknowledges that her dating preferences can seem controversial or transphobic, allowing

her audience into not only the intimacy of her dating life but also into the more controversial topics of hypothetical partner choices. In this way, Blaque demonstrates radical vulnerability about her positionality on social media, as she has no qualms sharing about these very intimate topics. Considering the pervasive transphobic backlash that trans YouTubers experience in the comments they receive (Miller, 2019), Blaque stands out as a fearless defender of her own personal choices and an open advocate for the ability for others to choose as well.

In some of Blaque's more recent videos, she addressed transphobia in "dating advice" circulating on TikTok, including a reaction to the #SuperStraight movement as well as Black cis TikTokers making videos about trans women dating cis men. In a reaction video to Kita Rose's "unpopular opinions" TikTok, Blaque (2021c) opens the videos saying, "I am hungering for a time when we can talk about trans women existing without talking about whether or not straight men want to fuck them" (min. 0:15). She explains that Rose's transphobic assertion that trans women "trick" (cis) straight men into dating them by not disclosing their trans identity is inherently flawed because most trans people do not in fact have passing privilege. Blaque (2021c) states,

I think a lot of cis people don't understand that the transgender people you see on the Internet are the transgender people who often want to be seen on the Internet. Most trans people are never going to be able to be a situation where they are read as cis enough to 'trick' a straight man. That's not something that's tangible or possible for the vast majority of transgender people (min. 2:06).

Blaque maintains quite moderate stances on many more "politicized" issues, making her far from radical on certain topics, but what makes her such interesting figure on trans YouTube is her generosity in explaining and deconstructing social constructs in plain language to a largely cis public. In the same video, Blaque states, "I don't think that [romantically] rejecting a transgender person makes you a transphobe. I just don't. However, oftentimes transphobia is very present in the way that people express their rejection of a transgender person" (min. 3:39). Blaque then describes various situations in which it is undesirable or dangerous for women to disclose their gender identity to men, relating it to the larger societal problem of violence against Black trans women. In this way, Blaque takes an Internet controversy from

TikTok and dissects it with respect and authority while educating her audience as to why certain discourses may be harmful. The issue of violence against trans women is brought up in this video, mentioning the murders of Yasmine Vash Payne in 2015, Tracy Williams in 2019, Yuni Carey in 2020 by their romantic partners to demonstrate how prevalent transphobia is even in cis straight men who date or who are married to trans women.

Blaque (2020c) demonstrates a consistent honesty and vulnerability in her engagement with her own preconceptions about gender and sexuality. In a video titled "Is It Okay To Have Genitalia Preferences?" she says "my attraction to men is so steeped in cissexism: this idea that men have penises and women have vaginas, you know" (min. 9:17). In this way, Blaque admits that own view of her gender identity and her attraction to mostly cis men are a result of a heteropatriarchal cissexist society. By always situating her own experience within a variety of diverse trans experiences that may not reflect her own, she resists the singular perspective that is expected in a "(neoliberal) logic of the individual" that is so present in YouTube vlogs (Tortajada et al., 2020).

Discussion

While this article intended to address the intersecting discourses of race and gender in Kat Blaque's videos, during the analysis it became clear that she mostly discusses issues related to race in videos made specifically on the topic (such as in the video "Do I Even Belong In The Black Community?"). This finding is indicative of the deeply intertwined aspects of race and gender that are at play in intersectional analyses: while Blaque does not always address issues of Blackness on her videos, her presence on the platform as in trans YouTube at large acts to disrupt the White normativity of the genre in which she is situated. While she herself has said that she does not ultimately identify that much to her "Black identity," her presence and success on the platform is determinant for the representation of Black trans folks on YouTube. As Martino *et al.* (2021) state, "while the visibility of black trans/non-binary youth and people of colour is disruptive in the sense of exposing 'YouTube's sea of whiteness' (Raun 2012, 307), it does not necessarily mean that there is a focus on 'the complex interplay between race and trans as it unfolds' for these youth in this space (Raun 2012, 204; Bey 2017)" (p. 14). Given this, Blaque's videos are important for their disruptive and educative nature, with their emphasis on inclusion and acceptance

in the realm of intersectional identities, a form of digital trans activism. Her unique perspective on race and gender show how she occupies the complicated space of Black trans woman on YouTube. As the analysis showed, her subjective experiences are not always impervious to narratives of ciscentrism or binary gender ideals, making her a prime example of the trends towards more normative and causal engagement with the YouTube platform while still addressing important issues that affect trans women.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that trans YouTube is much more diverse in nature than solely videos documenting the transition process through a medicalizing perspective. By analyzing ten videos produced by Kat Blaque, it was found that Black trans YouTubers create and disrupt discourses about and by trans folks. Through discussions of issues relating to her trans experience, Kat Blaque demonstrates how her intersecting identities affect her everyday experiences, contributing to the trans ‘creative vernacular’ (Burgess, 2006) of YouTube. By steering conversations by and about trans folks away from the medicalization discourse so prominent in transition videos, Blaque interrupts the transnormativity and White dominance of the trans YouTube community.

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