

# Accessing Womanhood: Jenna Talackova and the Marking of a Beauty Queen

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**Abstract** In March 2012, Jenna Talackova was disqualified from the Miss Universe Canada pageant on the grounds that she was not a “naturally-born” female. Following this decision, Talackova and the media contested her exclusion, and Miss Universe allowed her to compete. This manuscript examines the ways that Talackova’s gender performance challenges notions of who can compete as a “true” woman while it simultaneously supports cisnormative understandings of the constitution of preferred womanhood. In their framing, media outlets articulate three markers of preferred womanhood: bodily markers, legal markers, and beauty markers. These three themes situate access to womanhood as contingent upon physical and legal markings, thereby using the narrative about Talackova to both challenge and reify gender norms.

**Keywords** Gender performance · Public narrative · Transgender · Feminine gender roles · Marked bodies · Cisnormative

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## Introduction

Jenna Talackova, a transgender woman, made international headlines in the spring of 2012, when she was disqualified from the Miss Universe Canada Pageant. Talackova's disqualification did not follow usual lines, such as scandals involving sex or drugs. Instead, her disqualification reflected institutional policies about the types of bodies permitted to compete in this type of pageant. The Miss Universe organization released a statement asserting that "after review, organizers discovered that Talackova falsified her application and did not meet the necessary requirements to compete" ("What secret disqualified," 2012, para. 7). The alleged falsification was that Talackova indicated she was female on her application. Miss Universe contended that because she was assigned a male identity at birth she was not a "naturally-born female" (Hopper 2012; Woo 2012) and her claim to womanhood was a lie.

This classification was inconsistent with Talackova's view of herself and of her gender identity. Talackova expressed dissatisfaction with her culturally-assigned gender at age 4, began hormone therapy at age 14, and underwent sex reassignment surgery at age 19 (Hopper 2012, p. A2). In 2010, she competed in the Miss International Queen Competition, a pageant for transgender and transsexual women, in Thailand ("What secret disqualified," 2012) and, as Barbara Walters (2012) suggests, she then set her sights on the "biggest and grandest" pageant in the world (para. 1).

Following her disqualification, media around the globe began challenging her disqualification and pressuring the Miss Universe Organization for not only an explanation but also a dissolution of the "naturally-born female" requirement. Talackova's disqualification "won [her] widespread sympathy and raised the question of whether the pageant has the right to decide who is female" ("What secret disqualified this beauty queen?", 2012, para. 8). Shortly after Talackova's story reached headlines, she sought legal counsel and prepared to argue that the policy was discriminatory as it reduced men and women to their biological markers (Duke 2012). Later, the organization officially removed the stipulation from its qualification guidelines but dismissed the lawsuit as a contributing factor.

Regardless of whether Miss Universe chose to embrace Talackova, or whether it felt forced to include her due to public and legal pressure, examining her story is important because it interrogates what it means to be a woman in a public space designed to draw attention to women. While previous research examines how media representations challenge normative assumptions and create new understandings of gender identity (Bennett 2010; Mackie 2008), limited research exists that examines media use of cisnormative tropes to grant access to historically single-sex spaces. As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) note, "the criteria for determining gender vary across social situations" (p. 34). Since 2012, this issue has garnered broad support, primarily in cases of historically single-sex colleges (Atkinson 2014; Leland 2014), sporting competitions (Sloop 2012), and public restrooms (Booth and Leland 2016), making it particularly relevant to current discourse on gender identity. In particular, in "situations that derive their form and logic from gender oppositeness" Westbrook

and Schilt (2014) maintain that “social actors tend to enforce more rigid, biologically-based criteria” (p. 35). Beauty pageants derive their form and logic from gender opposition, but because their framing also relies on the performance of femininity, they may be a rich site for examining assumptions about biologically-based and performance-based criteria.

Such analysis is needed because media outlets frame public narratives in ways that are important to cultural understanding (Condit and Selzer 1985; Jarlenski and Barry 2013; Wessels et al. 2012). The stories surrounding Talackova, then, provide important insight into how a transgender individual’s story may be told. Furthermore, institutions play a significant role in our understanding and acceptance of sex and gender roles (DeFrancisco et al. 2013). The narrative about Talackova forced a major organization to acknowledge that a transgender woman could legitimately be the most beautiful woman in a country, or, perhaps, the world. However, this narrative relies heavily on cisnormative understandings of womanhood. This reliance allows Miss Universe, and society, to reinvest Talackova’s gender challenge back into supporting dominant systems of gender representation. There is no denying that, when the Miss Universe organization changed its policy, it was a step toward social inclusion. However, cisnormative re-creation of a transgender identity functions to uphold the status quo instead of challenging the ways by which an individual’s so-called “true gender” becomes known.

The purpose of this manuscript is to explore the ways that an allegedly transgressive performance is framed and how that framing serves to reinforce the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on theories about sex, gender, and the marked body, we argue that the public narrative about Talackova relies on cisnormative ideas about the relationship between sex and gender to grant access to womanhood. We begin with a brief discussion about the use of sex and gender to mark identities before exploring the way cisgenderism is communicated, and reviewing previous critical examinations of beauty pageant culture. Next, we discuss the methodological approach for this project and explore three cisnormative themes used to create the public narrative about Talackova. Finally, we discuss the problematic implications for transgender identities when public discourse insists on framing them with cisnormative themes that support the master narrative of gender, particularly in its effort to grant them access to single-sex spaces.

## Literature Review

In studying the transgender community, we acknowledge the popular and academic conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality, despite their distinct differences (Baker 2008). Adams (2011) argues that we understand these three identity markers in relation to one another and in stable ways that rely on familiar sex and gender binaries, both of which are often confirmed visually. Biological sex relies on biomedical assumptions that mark bodies as possessing particular sex organs where we expect females to have a vagina and males to have penis. Gender is a cultural construct defined contextually. It uses reference to physical and behavioral characteristics, such as attire, movement, hairstyle, and personal interests, to signal

levels of femininity and masculinity to others (Booth and Leland 2016; Mackie 2008; Sloop 2000, 2012).

These identity markers inscribe meaning onto our bodies; meaning we use them to make sense of our place in the social, political, and cultural world and to judge the place of others (Bordo 1997; Foucault 1997). Inscription often manifests in the inclination to include sex or gender qualifiers when describing identities that seem to violate role assumptions (e.g. female doctor, career woman, male nurse) (DeFrancisco et al. 2013). These markers grant varying degrees of access to society (Warner 2002), particularly to single-sex spaces (Sloop 2012). The taken-for-granted assumptions about gender identity, as natural extensions of sex organs, are really performative acts perpetuated by our understanding of social sanction and forbidden acts (Butler 1999). For the purpose of this project, the words female and male are used to describe sex and the words woman and man are used to describe gender. This in no way asserts that there are only two types of bodies (Stryker 2008) but rather allows us to discuss the way bodies are marked.

Additional terminology is critical to navigating this manuscript. The term *cisgender* refers to individuals who identify with the gender assumed to match the sex they were assigned at birth. Its use draws attention to the assumption that everyone is nontransgender by marking a formerly unmarked body. It challenges the neutrality of nontrans\* status to disrupt the associated privilege (Aultman 2014; Booth and Leland 2016; Miller 2015; Vaccaro 2013). *Cisnormativity* assumes that only two genders exist, that gender remains stable (Lennon and Mistler 2014; Spencer and Capuzza 2016), and that gender aligns with the sex a person is assigned at birth (Miller 2015). Lennon and Mistler (2014) assert that “the presence of cisgenderism exists in many cultural institutions, including language and the law, and consequently enables prejudice and discrimination against the transgender community” (p. 63).

## Communicating Cisgenderism

Media, including televised spectacles like the Miss Universe pageants, contributes to cultural discourse on femininity, impacting both men and women. It not only contributes to the ways we appear and behave, but helps create preferred narratives about how we are *expected* to appear and behave, thus shaping how we are treated and how we treat others on a host of fronts, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender (Betterton 1987).

Mackie (2008) asserts that “gender identity is about the narrative of shared experiences. A person who is unable to share in the exchange of stories will not be interpellated as belonging to that group and will not recognize him or herself in these narrative exchanges” (p. 414). Storytelling is an intrinsically social activity (Lindemann-Nelson 1995) and the popularity of media in today’s social world creates a venue in which public narratives might spread. A public narrative is made-up of the stories that exist in public discourse about a particular topic. In the context of gender, public narrative is a powerful (Dubriwny 2012) tool with which to influence people’s understanding of the social world and their place within it (Condit and Selzer 1985; Dubriwny 2012; Wessels et al. 2012). Cisnormative

representations uphold the dominance of cisgender identities, situating them as normal and transgender identities as deviant (Barker-Plummer 2013; Miller 2015).

Transgender media portrayals play an important role in transgender identity formation (Kenney 2008; Mackie 2008). However, news coverage often confuses and conflates trans\* specific terminologies where sex change, gender reassignment surgery, gender change, transsexual, and transgender person all seem to mean the same thing. They also rely on assumptions about sexed bodies, verified through invasive questions posed only to transgender individuals (Capuzza 2016). Mackie (2008) argues, “individuals who seek to develop new gender identity make reference to culturally approved models of masculinity and femininity, whether this be to affirm such models in order to “pass” as male or female, or to challenge such models” (p. 412). This negotiation may be useful in upsetting cisnormative assumptions and creating new queer representations in public discourse but only if they explore different ways of knowing the world (Baker 2008; Bennett 2010; Thomas 2000). Scholarship on the ways in which media representations contribute to identity formation finds that transgender people, specifically, are dissatisfied with such media representations and the limits they present (Ringo 2002).

Within cisnormative public narratives that accept manly, masculine male men and womanly, feminine female women, maintaining a neutrality of gender for transgender men and women becomes difficult, particularly in the realms of pronouns and activism (Butler 2003; Wilchins 2002). People rely on familiar cultural understandings to understand new events (Sloop 2010) and are constantly looking for the ways in which people transgress (Wilchins 2002). Although transgender narratives and performances have the potential to inform different ways of knowing gender, Stryker (2008) demonstrates that these narratives and performances can also uphold cisnormative understandings. As she explains, in the case of transsexual individuals, the transition from man to woman often involves hormones, surgical intervention of both the reproductive organs and the chest, and, in certain cases, the permanent removal of body hair (Stryker 2008). With this transition, physical markers are altered in order write markers of the preferred gender identity onto the body. In so doing, the body to be obtained through transformation is one that fulfills cisnormative and cisgenderist ideals.

Perhaps the clearest forum for identifying culturally preferred bodies is the beauty pageant where the transformed body, should it become ideal, is one that would qualify for a pageant like Miss Universe. For large and small scale beauty contests, formal contestant qualification guidelines, including limits on age (18–27) and family status (never married, no children), restrict access to who can be judged most beautiful. Communication scholarship on beauty contests demonstrates that a variety of norms comprise the beauty myth often produced and reinforced by male-gaze and institutional power (Dow 2003; Watson and Martin 2000). Contestants are challenged to meet the standards of beauty outlined within that myth. Quite often, that ideal begins with being light-skinned, European-oriented (Watson and Martin 2000), thin, and young (Roberts 2002; Watson and Martin 2000). Winners are generally innocent, (Roberts 2002; Watson and Martin 2000), passive (Dow 2003), able-bodied (Watson and Martin 2000), and middle-class (Parameswaran 2004). These singular facets of character are often examined as intersections of race, class,

gender (Chow 2011; Oza 2001), and education (read: English-language training) in pageant culture (Billings 2011).

Emphasis on beauty arguably commodifies women while positioning them as signs, rather than agents; signs meant to embody both the sexual desire of men as well as women's competitive drive to be the object of male desire (Baker 2008; Roberts 2002). Beauty pageants reify the dichotomous relationship between men as actors and women as objects whose primary value stems from their beauty. This commodification becomes more troubling when examining globalization and international pageantry. Oza (2001) characterizes Miss World's presentation of Miss India as "the opportunity for erotic, voyeuristic pleasure 'without visiting' (p 1075). International beauty contests, then, create a venue for experiencing the other from *safe*, familiar surroundings and allows western values and standards of beauty and femininity to leak into international culture (Parameswaran 2004; Oza 2001), even into local beauty pageantry (Billings 2011; Chow 2011). Roberts (2002) argues, "the same issues surrounding portrayals of women in mass media and in public culture are present—even intensified—in beauty pageants where the persons involved are not nameless, faceless producers of media, but local individuals and female contestants themselves" (p. 262). These arguments demonstrate more than just the fact that it takes a specific type of woman to win a beauty pageant but they demonstrate that beauty contests play a role in shaping (reinforcing and resisting) cultural understandings of womanhood and femininity.

Issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, nationality, and agency are all raised in current scholarship on beauty pageants. However, because of a taken-for-granted assumption that all women who can successfully compete in these pageants were born with female bodily markers there is limited research interrogating that assumption in mainstream pageantry. Talackova's attempt to participate in the Miss Universe violates this assumption and allows us to examine the ways access to womanhood and femininity is granted by examining a space that requires a particularly cisnormative type of gender performance. The initial ban on her participation and the ways that Talackova, media, and her lawyers frame her eligibility reveal how public narratives of gender and a narrative of transgender experience intersect to both challenge and reify gender norms.

In examining the public narrative about Talackova, we are interested in understanding the ways that the public narrative about a transgender woman produces and reproduces western cultural understandings of womanhood. Her story has the potential to shape both the way transgender identities are understood and the way transgender individuals understand their place in the political, cultural, and social world. As such, we examine how the public narrative surrounding Talackova creates a cisnormative understanding about what it means to be a woman, who has access to that gender performance, and how that access is granted. In this examination, we employed a critical textual analysis to explore the implications of the public narrative about Talackova.

## Critical Textual Analysis

In understanding the public narrative about Talackova, we critically examined the ways that media describe her by analyzing 314 news articles from both American and international news sources and a *20/20* interview with Barbara Walters. The first author transcribed the interview verbatim. Next, the first author entered Talackova's name into LexisNexis Academic. For the scope of this critical textual analysis, it was important to focus on news coverage surrounding her disqualification, as well as the subsequent coverage following her reinstatement and the Miss Universe policy change. Articles published from her original disqualification in late March 2012 through her elimination in May 2012 were collected. This focus allowed the analysis to focus on how the public narrative about Talackova relates to access.

Using thematic analysis we read through each article line-by-line several times and color-coded to create active terms with which to describe what was happening in the texts (Charmaz 2002). Thematic analysis continued until data saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After identifying several themes, based on similarities that seemed to run through the artifacts, we re-read each text, line-by-line, to isolate the main themes used in sample. The line-by-line thematic coding involved identifying exemplary quotes that demonstrate the themes at work (Charmaz 2002). The broad themes, originally legal versus physical markers, were then refined several times in search of a deeper and more descriptive discussion, particularly in distinguishing between beauty markers and bodily markers. This process took place prior to consulting any scholarly work (Charmaz 2002). These methods led us to identify three central themes the texts presented about how womanhood and femininity are narrated, using (1) bodily markers, (2) legal markers, and (3) beauty markers.

## The Public Narrative About Talackova

The public narrative about Talackova, at first glance, appears transgressive in that a transwoman is granted access to a pageant for "naturally-born" women. However, as the narrative develops, great efforts are made to fit her story into cisnormative assumptions about womanhood. Telling a story, initially understood as transgressive, through a culturally intelligible framing, made it more acceptable. These cisnormative framings attempt to fit Talackova into dominant understandings of gender and sex as binaries in order to grant her access to feminine gender performance and single-sex spaces. This is accomplished in three main ways. First, media emphasize Talackova's bodily markers, referencing sex organs and hormones. Second, media point to legal markings used to grant access, primarily her driver's license and birth certificate. Finally, they focus on her beauty in order to sell the public on her worthiness of access to feminine gender performance.

## Bodily Markers: Possession of the ‘Right’ Parts

The public narrative about Talackova is grounded in cisnormative assumptions about the link between the sexed body and gender performance. Media often conflate sex and gender so significantly that biological markers (the sexed body) are used as evidence of womanhood (gender identity). For instance, some news coverage states that Miss Universe requires contestants to be “naturally-born” women (“In other news...,” 2012; Lawton 2012; “Miss Universe pageant allowing transgender women”, 2012; Walters 2012) while others state that the organization requires them to be “naturally-born” females (“Debate’s a beauty, eh?,” 2012; Hopper 2012; “What secret disqualified,” 2012; Woo 2012). The terms sex and gender are used interchangeably and, even as acceptance of gender as performance grows, the assumption that bodies are naturally “sexed” maintains its stronghold on public discourse (Sloop 2000). In the pursuit of access, public emphasis is placed on Talackova’s possession of culturally expected hormones and anatomy.

Nearly every artifact mentions that Talackova “says she has known she was a female since she was four-years-old. She began hormone therapy at 14 and had sex reassignment surgery in 2010” (Hopper 2012, p. A2). The narrative relies heavily on “wrong body” discourse in order to support access to both womanhood and pageantry (see Catalano 2015, for a review). It requires that transgender individuals have deeply ingrained and well-documented feelings of being born in an incorrect body; a body they seek to *fix* (Barker-Plummer 2013). This reliance illegitimizes transgender experiences that exclude body modification, those that do not originate from body dissatisfaction, and those that intentionally resist gender conformity.

The narrative puts the public at ease by asserting that Talackova was actually a woman all along. It also serves to reify cisnormative assumptions about the relationship between sex and gender, both binaries, by implying a biological mishap occurred. This emphasis is demonstrated in Barbara Walters’ (2012) exclusive interview with Talackova, evident in this exchange:

Walters: I’m gonna have to ask you some tough questions that people really want to know. Part of the sex surgery is that part of the penis is used...

Talackova: That’s correct.

W: To create what appears to be a vagina. Is that correct?

T: That’s correct.

W: It must have been terribly painful.

T: It was terribly painful but seeing something on your body for that long and not being able to look at myself in the mirror because I couldn’t stand seeing the other part. It was actually very rewarding too...

W: Did you also have breast implants?

T: I have.

W: Did you also have to change your voice?

T: I had to have the Adam’s apple removed and I did a lot of vocal training. (paras. 23-35)



There was a time in which Talackova did not possess the *right* parts and, as such, did not have full access to the feminine performance. In order to soothe this tension, Walters moves quickly away from discussing the perceived transgressive performance by interrupting Talackova's description of her experience in order to focus on the current performance where sexed body and gender identity cisnormatively align. In this endeavor, she lists the specifications of the female body: a vagina, breasts, and a relatively high-pitched voice. The interview reads more like an inspection where Walter's checks requirements off her list to ensure that Talackova has earned her access: Is there a vagina? Are there breasts? Was it painful enough? Is your voice high pitched? Talackova understands that there is a test to pass and obliges by emphasizing the bodily pain experienced and her dedication to meeting the requirements. The hormones, the breast implants, the vocal training, and other acts work to remark Talackova's body so that it *exudes* womanhood. To access the performance, she needed to obtain the expected bodily markers. To access the pageant, she needed to prove it by submitting to a line of questioning that would never be imposed on other contestants.

Because Talackova acquires womanhood by obtaining the expected bodily markers, the performative nature of gender may be foregrounded. This ability to alter bodily markers is a continuation of other historical expansions of performing "true womanhood." For example,

Prof. Patrizia Gentile of Ottawa's Carleton University, who did a dissertation on beauty pageants, equated the ban [on transgendered women] with the exclusion of blacks and Jews from pageants in earlier times. "We're seeing more and more transgendered women wanting to be beauty contestants," she said. "The rule is incongruent with the culture." Besides, she said, "Your genitalia have nothing to do with how you perform femininity." ("What secret disqualified," 2012, p. E1)

Gentile's remarks highlight the evolution of access to both gender performance and cultural institutions where being Black or Jewish are no longer appropriate ways to separate communities and deny people full access to society. And, just as the markers Black and Jewish were put under erasure, so too might the trans\* marking of womanhood. However, opportunities for erasure are limited when inclusion is contingent upon cisnormative assumptions that intrinsically link the sexed body to gender performance. The public narrative accepts Talackova's quest for inclusion first, because she altered her bodily markers and, second because she was permitted to change her legal markings.

## Legal Markers: The Burden of Proof

Talackova's claim to womanhood is held to a legal burden of proof which further blurs the lines between the sexed body and gender identity. Full public approval is contingent upon legal recognition, and that legal recognition requires a binary alignment between sex and gender. In fact, it cannot be obtained without medical recognition and supporting documentation, which rely on sex organs and hormones.

As Walters (2012) explains, “There was no more Walter. Next, Talackova set out to make her new gender legal. Presenting letters from her doctors that allowed her to change her Canadian driver’s license, passport, even her birth certificate from male to female” (para. 40). Talackova’s birth certificate, passport, and driver’s license are all cited as *proof* of womanhood because the sex listed on these legal documents indicates that Talackova is female. Walters’ framing grants Talackova access through the legal re-marking of identifying documents, e.g. name and sex. Stating that Talackova’s *gender* is now legal reinforces the mechanisms by which cisgenderism sanctions performance by implying that it was once illegal. This illegality is particularly problematic when considering single-sex spaces because those spaces are policed by visual interpretations of bodily and legal markings. Talackova is requesting access to a gender performance through legal and medical institutions, while “naturally-born” females benefit from the assumption of womanhood.

When asked if Talackova was under any legal obligation to disclose her transgender status, her attorney responds, “None whatsoever, she is legally a female. She is recognized in Canada, as a female, she is recognized as female on her driver’s license, her passport and on her birth certificate. And she is female” (Walters 2012, para. 55). The legality referenced is not about transgender rights but about a legal recognition as female. Currently there are no federal nondiscrimination protections based on gender identity. Her inclusion is based on her human rights, which she is granted by being legally marked as female. As such, no space is created for transgender identities that remain unrecognized by the state.

Despite the legal recognition, Miss Universe, as a private organization, attempts to impose additional stipulations to inclusion. Walters (2012) explains, “a statement released by [Donald] Trump’s pageant officials” states that “Talackova could compete but only if she met ‘the standard established by other international competitions’ as well as the gender recognition requirements of Canada” (para. 58). In changing her legal documentation, Talackova already meets the Canadian requirements, and her attorney criticizes the other stipulation as vague. She pressures the organization to be clearer about whether Talackova meets the burden of proof by saying, “What other international competitions is he talking about? This is extremely ambiguous. Why doesn’t he stop being wishy washy and state, clearly, unequivocally, Talackova can compete and the rule is gone” (Walters 2012, para. 59). Her attorney attempts to demonstrate her distaste with the organization’s reasoning by marking Trump during a press conference, stating, “She [Talackova] did not ask Mr. Trump to prove that he is a naturally born man or to see photos of his birth to view his anatomy to prove that he was male” (Duke 2012, para. 5). This challenge highlights an instance where such a burden of proof seems ridiculous, but in Talackova’s case is considered justifiable by both the Miss Universe Organization and media.

In this case, the state, through medical authorization and legal documentation, granted Talackova access to both womanhood and single-sex spaces. Once transgressions of the sexed body are reconciled, either with bodily or legal markers, media can turn to the visual requirements associated with performance in order to package and sell Talackova to the public.

## Beauty Markers: “She’s Beautiful, She has to be a Woman”

In Western culture, there are specific definitions of beauty espoused by media and advertising (Morris and Nichols 2013; Murray 2013; Poorani 2012). Aligning Talackova with those cultural markers of beauty, her appearance is used to mark her as acceptable. An article published in *The Toronto Star* states, “She has all the makings of a beauty queen—a thin frame, flowing hair, pearly-white teeth and bubbly personality to boot” (“Debate’s a beauty, eh?,” p. E1). *The New Zealand Herald* (2012) writes, “Beach shots depict her as every inch a curvaceous beauty queen” (“What secret disqualified,” para. 1). As the pageant progressed, additional emphasis is placed on her sex appeal. She is described as appearing “confident and animated onstage, throwing flirtatious glances over her shoulder as she strutted in front of the judges in a silky red dress with a plunging back. Later, the 23-year-old showed off her feminine curves in a bikini and a tight-fitting evening gown” (CP 2012, p. A10).

These framings allow Talackova to fit into cultural understandings of womanhood and femininity: she is beautiful, thin, long-legged, lean, and flirtatious. The descriptions are designed to sell the public on her worthiness of access to both feminine gender performance and pageantry. In other words, she is a product whose value is confirmed by her beauty and desirability.

Other parts of the narrative, however, sensationalize Talackova’s transgender status as it relates to her beauty so as to differentiate and label her as other. One article opens with the line, “HIP [Talackova’s hip] seductively dipped to the camera, she looks just like any other Miss Universe hopeful—but four years ago she was a HE” (Atkins 2012, p. 33). This line draws attention to the fact that Talackova is beautiful but it also implies that she is *really* just a man dressed like a woman. Her access is granted only by drawing attention to how well she transitioned. One blogger wrote, “She’s very visible, and people are saying ‘Here is a beautiful person who transitioned. So many guys are saying, ‘She’s beautiful, she has to be a woman’—very few people are discussing chromosomes” (Hopper 2012, p. A2). The reliance here on visual cues implies that the acceptance of transgender identities into society is contingent upon them “passing” as men or women. Further, it is her beauty that, in the end, has sold the public on her inclusion reinforcing women’s position as a sign rather than an agent.

Walters (2012) describes Talackova’s experience by stating, “Talackova was chosen to be one of more than 60 beauties to compete for the Miss Universe Canada crown. But before she could put on her evening gown and bikini, she was outed on the Internet as transgender” (para. 51). To counter this outing—this remarking of transgenderism—the narrative emphasizes additional layering of feminine traits to include assumptions about feminine activities. For instance, *The Toronto Star* (2012) explains, “she was also a lover of dance, cooking and shopping...” (“Debate’s a beauty, eh?,” p. E1). These hobbies further mark Talackova as a woman because, in the cisnormative framing, only women enjoy this set of activities.

The description of Talackova's beauty and participation in feminine activities speaks to the cultural privileging of certain identity markers. The public emphasis on her beauty and activities elides three discussions. If Talackova were not beautiful, would we be discussing her rights, as a transgender woman, to compete in the pageant? If she couldn't "pass," would we be concerned about her access to a single-sex space? And, if Talackova preferred sports to shopping, would we call her womanhood into question?

## Discussion

Talackova's initial disqualification raises serious questions about what it means to be a woman, who has access to that performance, and how that access is granted. Her requalification based on bearing the correct physical and legal indicators is even more troubling as it perpetuates cisgenderism's marginalization of transgender identities while feigning tolerance.

At the conclusion of the pageant, a man is quoted as saying, "I'm happy a lady won. Most definitely. If a fake lady won, it wouldn't have been right (CP 2012, p. A10). However, he goes on to acknowledge that a problem exists. He states, "But hopefully the (issue) gets talked (about) a little more, that people take it more seriously, because right now it's not looked at as something that's serious. It's a lady pageant and women are supposed to be in it" (CP 2012, A10). While it is not clear what "issue" he believes needs to be discussed, his acknowledgment of "fake" ladies implies that there are "real" ladies.

In Talackova's performance and its conservative retelling through the lens of cisnormativity, we see physical and legal markings that dictate who is truly a woman and who is not truly a woman. Prevailing cultural beliefs, that a penis is for men and a vagina is for women, tie the label of sex to attributes adverse to or valorized by conceptions of gender. These bodily markings serve as gatekeepers to gender performance and to inclusion in social institutions. Those labeled as men exist absolutely disconnected from those labeled as women via both institutional policy and the law. This is precisely why gender performances that are not so stifled by cisnormative assumptions are needed: the constant reference back to the sexed body to adversely or auspiciously determine gender identity must be disrupted. Space must be created in which transgender individuals might see their identities acknowledged as both real and valid without reliance on those assumptions.

The legal burden of proof and its reliance on visual cues about gender are particularly relevant to the current cultural and political landscape where gender identity remains unprotected in public (and private) nondiscrimination policy. Opponents of this inclusion rely heavily on images of men in women's restroom and the naturalness of sexed bodies, as demonstrated in recent North Carolina legislative decisions to uphold what is referred to as the "bathroom bill" requiring citizens to use the restroom that aligns with the sex listed on their birth certificate. The ratification of this bill relied on cisnormative assumptions similar to those presented in the public narrative about Talackova. Both demonstrate that "access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differences,

construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct groups, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination” revolves around bearing expected physical and legal markings (Link and Phelan 2001 p. 363).

The public narrative surrounding Talackova does more than reinforce the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of who can be a “true” woman. While these are interesting findings, the most problematic implication of her story is the way that media reliance on cisnormative concepts reifies gender norms despite attempting to challenge them. The authors agree with previous research arguing that media can contribute to upsetting normative assumptions by creating new understandings of gender (Bennett 2010) and that gender identity formation relies heavily on the ability to exchange stories and recognize oneself in the narrative (Mackie 2008). Unfortunately, the story told about Talackova largely relies on cisnormative assumptions about bodies and performance to the detriment of transgender identity recognition and interpellation.

Throughout the analysis it becomes evident that the three themes normalize Talackova’s gender identity by discussing it with the tropes of the master narratives about gender and sex. While the pervasiveness of her story is a step toward creating a space for marginalized voices in public discourse, it still holds transgender identities to cisnormative standards; it further conflates sex and gender by reemphasizing the essential markers of gender identity. Similar to the preservation of gender norms noted by Catalano (2015), the narrative about Talackova is told so as to uphold dominant understandings about womanhood, femininity, and links between sex and gender. While we recognize that social movements often rely on small wins, the public narrative surrounding Talackova must be understood for both its potential to launch transgenderism into mainstream discourse and for its presentation as an extension of the master narrative.

## Conclusion

There are several standards to which Western womanhood and femininity are held. In analyzing the public narrative about Talackova, we have identified three that are particularly relevant. First, a person claiming these identities must possess the correct bodily markers in order to be accepted. Second, the body may be marked legally once the bodily standard is achieved. Finally, physical beauty is positioned as a key marker of both womanhood and femininity. These three themes, taken together, create a cisnormative narrative about what it means to be a woman, who has access to that performance, and how that access is granted. Talackova’s gender performance functions to highlight the ways that cisnormative assumptions are used to maintain cultural and political connections between sexed bodies and gender identity by accepting slight transgressions so long as they remain, to a striking degree, culturally intelligible. If transgender representations are to contribute to social change, they must be publically permitted to exist as valuable gender performances instead of as slight alterations of the master narrative.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** No conflict of interest exists for any of the authors.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent** No informed consent was needed because human subjects were not involved.

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