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Feeling as Knowing: Trans Phenomenology and Epistemic Justice

B. Lee Aultman

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FEELING AS KNOWING: TRANS PHENOMENOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

by

B LEE AULTMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018
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B Lee Aultman

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Feeling as Knowing: Trans Phenomenology and Epistemic Justice

by

B Lee Aultman

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This dissertation is a critical intervention into the literatures on epistemic and phenomenological claims about trans experiences, and embodied knowledge more generally. It also addresses the conception of ordinary affects, or feelings of self-adjustment in everyday life, and their political implications for trans people. Traditional literatures on the political tend to avoid questions of embodiment and the experiences of everyday life in favor of institutional interpretations of courts, elections, and protest movements. This has become particularly true of scholarship on trans politics and theories of ordinary life. These literatures often reduce political movements to their presumed universal intentions for constitutional equality and legal parity. Theories of life, for example, biopolitics and recent attention to neoliberalism, more often describes trans people as effects of power relations. Bodies are disciplined bodies otherwise evacuated of any sense of agency and being. In the most generalized instances, trans people are represented in two ways. On the one hand, they possess a liberal desire toward a normative life of assimilation. On the other hand, they are rebellious, possessing an anti-normative desire to abolish sex/gender binaries altogether.

Each of these representations of trans people severely impairs understanding their how gender nonnormative forms of life actually live in under ordinary circumstances. These representations also reduce the richness of trans knowledge claims. Such commitments create the conditions for misunderstanding, and misreading, the complexities of trans histories, narratives,
and even what it means to possess an embodied sense of selfhood. These misunderstandings create the conditions for many continued forms of epistemic injustice, a form of injustice that is characterized by the reduction of a person’s, or a group’s, capacity to engage in claiming knowledge about the world as well as the production of knowledge itself. Descending into what this dissertation calls the “trans ordinary” is a means for arguing that feeling, that is to say the live sensations during scenes of ordinary moments, serves as a co-present condition for knowing and thus making claims about the world. This work is a theory of feeling as knowing.
Preface

The Latina philosopher and phenomenologist Mariana Ortega, whose work I found exceptionally incisive and inviting, write about “hometactics” in her book *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*. Really, the term is articulated at the very end of her erudite discussion of marginally gendered and racialized selfhood. She argues that writing that book was an exercise in finding herself, in locating a home in a series of academic worlds that might feel uninviting. I didn’t know it yet, but I too wanted to write an extended dialogue about our attachments to gender and what this dissertation (intentionally or not) might do to complicate movements toward or away from those attachments. I had felt an uneasy but durable sense that political science in particular and theories of the political in general lacked a sustained conversation with the plurality of gendered existence. It was at first a stinging realization that transgender and gender nonconforming (trans) political life had (and has) been given very little attention other than what investigators find as reactions to institutional action against trans communities, a study of their social movements, or the backlash when their constitutional rights were asserted. So, *what are we thinking about when we think about gender?* Bodies, sex, experiences, identity, subjectivity, theories, living moments, and/or psychic states? Are they common and shared by all or simply personal and isolating in nature only to us? To get at some answers to these broad questions, this work is situated within the larger literatures of queer theory, political theory, and transgender studies.

My visit to the Transgender Archives in Victoria, British Columbia, in 2015 proved to be one of the most transformative events in my graduate career. The archive, in general, has a peculiar kind of affective economy. It is often cold and silent. Few people are there. Books don’t speak. The experience of the daily walk to the archive (I was on campus as a visiting scholar and
the Archive was only a few building away), the routine of requesting the cart of boxes that I had requested the day before and interacting with the pleasant staff gave it a more relational feel. Sifting through pages of books and newspapers, adult magazines and stickers, pins and other ephemera, I was often up and out of my seat scanning material into my online cloud storage. I read closely any word that might indicate something political in the ordinary lives these files contained. It could simply be the description of a scene at a pageant or an eruption of violence in a protest. Often I would find headlines concerning the death of trans people. It struck me that each folder contained not only words—but life. There were texts that merely represented facts, such as newspapers and academically oriented books. But there were personal effects, diaries, poems, stream-of-consciousness notes, and other miscellanea. These words were typed by human hands. Most were typed by trans people long since passed away. It was history in the present, what Walter Benjamin might have called human knowledge in the nucleus of time.

But I was affected, particularly, by a typewritten page, stuck between two old newspaper clippings, so out of place. A single line on a blank page. I scanned it (see image below):

*These are the times that try men's souls*

![Image 1.0 Scanned Fragment from the Archives](image)

The mystery of this note, its affective attachment of this short typed piece I still carry with me, haunts this dissertation in a way. I find these perennial words of Thomas Paine’s “American Crisis” moving anyway. But, I wonder if not all times, in the sense of our ordinary coming undone, isn’t somehow always already trying our souls. Through the many literatures I started
searching in order to find meaning in the process of what this dissertation will be frequently referring to as “meaning-making,” Lauren Berlant’s work stuck out the most. She argues that everyday life is filled to some extent with a broad array of attachments and that these attachments, however banal, create the conditions for our own unhappiness. This is particularly heightened when the ordinary comes under siege. As I will repeatedly explain throughout the following chapters (perhaps to a fault), the ordinary is how everyday life (from pain to joy) is folded and otherwise justified so as to make do. When these concerns of making do are jeopardized, when “The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy...the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to ‘have a life’ that adjustment seems like accomplishment” (Berlant 2011, 3). If being trans these days means putting up with open political hostility, denied access to health coverage, bathroom access, and continued sustained everyday violence—then, indeed, these are trying times.

Affect theory could be described as observing how things affect, and are affected by, other things. It’s a nebulous term—affect—that describes an array of unthought and taken-for-granted forces that shape our orientations to the world around us. To be affected by ordinary circumstances offers insight into where everyday life emerges as more than variables in a complex discourse. To feel at home, to be at home, to rest in bed, to feel upset, the feelings of anxiety or sadness, the amorphous feelings that circulate in our ordinary day on a commute, all compose our attunement to the world. Indeed, to be in the world is human being—to belong in a world, to act in a world, to associate in a world. So to invite affect from ordinary life into our thinking about gender would be critical to thinking gender, full stop. (As an exercise: begin to
sense your body’s shape and position in which is currently situated; notice how it relates to the space and objects within it, the feeling of the elastic bands from your clothing, the tightness or looseness of your pants or dress, the way a shirt falls over your chest, or the tingle of hair over your eyes or neck. These are feelings, illegible at first, but are shaped by some of the very assumptions we have about the gendered body itself. Weight, height, hair length, the presence of hair on the body at all, our (non)reproductive organs—these are all conditioned by a litany of discourses, memories, stories, and objects that shape your relation to your body and the world it moves within.) The ordinary is, in fact, gendered.

But suppose that I don’t read philosophy or social theory in a manner, as scholars would like presumably, from a purely academic angle in this dissertation. Thus, I wouldn’t read Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1958) monumental *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* as a philosopher, or a social theorist, but as a human, in what Heidegger called my everydayness, endeavoring in what humans do: make a life. The book was supposed to be about, as I’ve learned over the course of writing this dissertation, ordinary language and forms of life. I think this becomes a more illuminating ground for how one might approach Wittgenstein’s theories of games and language. It was for me. In other words, it isn’t for the philosopher to determine what constitutes language as such. It isn’t for the social theorist to let the people know what is social and cultural. It is, rather, people who do it. The contextual arrangements among collectives of human “we’s” that crystalize in order for (personal, social, cultural) meaning to happen. That, as for language, *speaking* and action is a “form of life” (11). That language games should be understood as metonymic with a kind of (sociological, anthropological, philosophical) life, or life-making. That as we move through the world, or our various worlds in the production of that life, we find “family resemblances” amongst and between common structures, places, and things (32).
Imagining, then, the whole of *PI* becomes less a task of dismantling the complexities of what constitutes a “game” as such. It is rather an exercise leading to a powerful conclusion: That the ordinary in life-making consists of contexts and micrological meanings, not macrological propositions and “ideals.” There is something non-replicable about the human experience. There is a kind of being of monumental importance that is involved in our attunements to one another as we fasten meaning to places and things, other people and other times—life in the making.

This, I think, is the beginning of a venture into the ordinary that Veena Das (2007) ascribes as the crucial task of understanding subjectivity. It is not enough to understand the large structure that “we” all “know” explains this or that. Capitalism and work. Neoliberalism and market-logics of exclusion. Heteronormativity and sexual desire. Rather, delving into those forms of life, that “way of speaking,” requires of us investigators a special kind of attention. That even the banalities of a simple existence become a site of plastic and innumerable meanings. This simple existence may find attachments to all sorts of structural or unanticipated aspects of our culture, or society, or their local socialities and life-worlds. This simple existence, this form of life, is a generative concept that heaves upon the investigator the onus of more than framework-development. It is only through descending into the ordinary, to borrow language from Das, that one might begin to understand how this form of life takes its shape in comparison to, but also complete unto its own self, others. Because, importantly, to live a life is to learn (when did we learn) the meaning of our language games within a “family of meanings” as they are led within (the ongoing question of) the “bounds of the incidental” (37). There, between the lines of scoring the commonplace definitions of things, a kind of life exists. He is complicating how one might compartmentalize meanings, look at data, and render forms of life intelligible. He seems to reach out from the text and suggest that our ontologies need excavating, that our
understanding is buried too deeply normative assumptions. That he is not entirely invested in language, per se. He is invested in life as living forms of interaction, meaning-making, emotion, affect, contradiction, affinity, and difference.

I have no doubt, and I would be foolish to think otherwise, that Wittgenstein had in mind the special place of rules in meaning. Being invested in everyday language rather than “ideal” forms of linguistic syntax, he affirmed the basis of understanding and knowledge—of finding some common ground for truths. But, again, this is qualified by a particular insistence on the rules of a game as they are carried out in life. As so many signs along the path of living. His philosophy, the way I read it, is less a suspicion of abstraction and more an assertion on the commingling of abstraction and concreteness within everyday life. Learning and playing, discovering and naming—that is to say, living—avoids the “ahistorical” methods of some philosophies. Rules of a game, like words (like life!) occur within history like so many parts of human constructions. Again, with qualification. Things are not constructed “all the way down.” Rather, things are held within meaningful constellations, family resemblances, and human relations. The descent into how these play out, how these make sense, of how human beings make do in their ordinary lives: I think this marks the philosophy in PI.

These are among the many methodological problematics in PI. For instance, I find certain phenomenological insights crucial to understanding ordinary life. First, that there isn’t the penetration of phenomena, but rather the “possibilities of phenomena” (42). That is to say, what grounds our shared world of understanding isn’t so much firmly planted beings, but shifting forms of meaning about them. Second, when he writes that “our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away” (44). The importance is found in understanding the various ways a
proposition (or forms of life) comes to mean something, somewhere, to someone or some people. Again, I find this to be a philosophy of life, not mere words. To me, as to Das, life and words are inextricably bound, nucleated by cultural, social, and everyday affinities. To understand propositions we must first learn to understand the forms of life from which they flow. Thus, what we take as linguistic must be understood as emanating from some affective “signposts” for everyday practice. Kathleen Stewart’s (1996) work in A Space on the Side of the Road has read these signs with exceptional clarity.

Parts of life-making vary. Parts of which—being made and remade in processes that cannot unfold simply for the critic—only the human (however it is so defined) can perceive them, make them “move together,” or not. There are parts completely opaque to the critic (an affective attachment to a particular chair). There are parts uniquely understood by the critic (an affective attachment to a market of “free” labor). There are others that must remain open and fluid (the feelings, the felt sense of being gendered, racialized, and sexed). This list can, and should, be exhausting in its scope. The endlessness of meanings that socialities and members of groups and social individuals attach to places and things, others and “home,” are grist for excitement—a certain philosophical zeal that should be tempered only by an ethos not of (feminist) care, but “reparative nurture.” One can nurture a story, a narrative, or history of a place/people, without “caring” for it in some particular way. I could still get it wrong, though I “took great care” not to. Or, I could care and nurture, where the latter is most important. I care about trans communities, and desire to nurture their narratives and history. I care about them in ways singular to my own personal attachments (my own identity, my own felt sense of embodiment). Thus, I seek to nurture, in a way, a form of life with which I find a family resemblance, a kinship, a close relation to—and take care not to fuck up.
This kind of confession isn’t an empty piety. It speaks to a certain kind of theorizing that I feel must go into talking, thinking, and investigating certain ways of being in the world. It speaks to a personal history cross-cut by other histories that seemed only to have meaning upon embarking on this research. The snapping into place of all those moments (of meaning) that had been, until a specific time of reading in an archive or the pages of a book, like frozen crystals hanging from the walls of my memory. And they suddenly came to life. Given words, these memories were exposed to meaning and significance. I suddenly found that I, too, was within a constellation of forms of life—a part of something in another world (still this one, but not quite). I had been (economically and racially) privileged and spirited away from that other world, however. I had been tamed by something I would learn were called “norms.” I had learned to temper myself through the reproduction of these norms. And in this “tempering” I realized that making do isn’t something one just learns from living in poverty, or the mere words of a parent-like figure. Making do meant toughing it out even when you knew those conditions were wrong, problematic, unjust—but you lacked the grammar to make sense of it (Wittgenstein was right that such investigations are grammatical). So, going deeper into history, I realized more meanings, more constellations, more life needed excavating and nurture. Not just subjugated, this knowledge was sedimented, ossified, absent the meaningful experience that words provide—only meaningful to that form of life hidden within the texts of poetry and autobiography. How to give them life again, to redeem them as Walter Benjamin sought in his critique of history, is a part of my aim in this dissertation.

Thus, the ordinary as a part of the meaning of making a life becomes clearer as the dissertation progresses. However unique or singular it is to one life or another, the ordinary doesn’t deny a cultural “snapping” into place of meaning. That words, language even, is imbued
with a kind of power that gives expression to those things we call memory and memory, likewise, imbues language with the power of experience and the past. That history and time, if only the concatenation of momentary “now’s,” become the keepsakes of thought horizons of being in the world. That, as Martin Heidegger envisioned, memory becomes the gathering of all thought—calls us to thinking. To pay homage to those socialities and forms of life that seem to defy the imaginaries of scientists, critics, and theologians; to pay homage, in a certain sense, to life-making in spite of all the critical bullshit, is another way of imagining this dissertation’s trajectory.

Consider, for a moment, the following story. A young child, no older than six, was visiting family in North Carolina back in the 80s after spending time in England (the father was a military man). The living room is filled with aunts and uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters, telling stories in the living room of a special woman—mother to some, grandmother to others. Some laughter was punctuated: “Ann was a meaner ‘an Hell when she was younger.” Ann looked up from painting her nails. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean, Bob?” The six-year old danced and watched and listened. Aunt Ann gently grabbed the child’s waist, pulling them in for big, all embracing hug. “Let’s paint your nails, too.” The living room fills with laughter as this little creature proudly gallops around the room, showing off a freshly minted pink. Little fingers were delicately outstretched, touching the arms and foreheads of aunts and uncles and teenage cousins. A quiet consternation nestled between growingly nervous laughter. The laughter stops when an uncle says it’s time to take off the polish—the charm has worn off. The child stiffly refuses. And not without a fight, without some embarrassed tears and frustration, the polish was removed. The little boy who loved his pink nails ran to a TV room and wondered what was wrong. It’s “effeminate,” someone had said. What does that mean?
The boy would grow up in several states. The schools and people changed as quickly as they would appear, forming sinuous memories of friendships and relationships—faces and names often melded together. The banal and the fantastic seemed to sit side-by-side in his mind. Like when he was thrown into a garbage can for being a “faggot.” *Never knew what that meant either.* He told no one this: But when he discovered that touching certain parts of his body felt good, he thought of that bully. In high school he joined a church that preached a unique gospel. That effeminate men (*there it was again*) were abominations. “Fairies will burn in Hell.” *Fairies?* He pleaded with the congregation to pray for him—and as they laid their hands on his head and shoulders, he cried as he had done at in a North Carolina living room—another layer taken away. His mother was not so amused upon learning of this. Baffled at her son’s odd behavior—his isolating and moody affects, his righteous accusations about identity. She firmly stated that he needed to stop attending this church. “God is not hate. God makes no mistakes.” She said this with a delicate southern drawl, disarming, loving. She reached for him—and he wept again because he didn’t know where he belonged. “Here,” she whispered.

As a sophomore, he met a lesbian! She took him to the places that had all the “gay stuff.” He secretly accumulated adult magazines for “gay” men. He began to pilfer his mother’s nail polish, eyeliner, blush, and mascara. But he only put it on in the bathrooms at school. Never at home. Never to be caught! One year, he was given his father’s pickup truck. He was now independent. So he exploited that independence. He would paint his nails in the truck when he got to the school’s parking lot. He would gel his hair with a glitter-like product. His lesbian friend had given him butterfly berets to style his hair. He had skirts, dresses, and lipstick. He had boy clothes and girl clothes but couldn’t quite tell why they were entirely separate in the first place. Though he would outwardly play at being coy when girls wanted him to put on the skirts.
That all ended, of course, when his father discovered the polish, the glitter, the makeup. His mother told him that he needed to stop. His father was upset. *Where do I belong?*

This story is a part of a litany of others that this dissertation treats narratives of transgender and gender nonconforming (trans) life. No narrative is universal in character. But this narrative is *mine* to share. But it is already shared by others: my mother, my cousins, family, and friends—now you. But what makes it political, or where was politics expressed at all? The school’s bathroom, of recent importance for transgender rights, was a site where I, by necessity, applied make-up? The privacy of my new truck that afforded me the opportunity to get ready on the way to school or in the school’s parking lot? Even the exchanges between a young queer and their lesbian friend? These all have political importance for queer life. These spaces and moments in time, however ordinary and trivial they might first appear, are the foundation of an embodied politics that comprises the very grounds forming a life. As I created myself from within the complications of ordinary events, I found my own agency, voice, and way of being in the world. I want to explore what this journey has meant for others.

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This project, really, began as a research paper during a graduate seminar on feminist epistemologies taught by Linda Martín Alcoff at The Graduate Center. And it was nourished by the friendly and rigorous debates among my friends and colleagues from the Always Already Podcast, John McMahon, Emily Crandall, and Rachel Brown. It was during and after the recordings of those podcasts, amongst friends who had as deep a commitment to questions of social justice and gender, that I decided to apply theories of epistemic injustice to a sustained engagement with trans studies. But it was Emily in particular who encouraged me to revise and submit that seminar paper on trans epistemology for publication. I owe a special debt of gratitude for that encouragement.

I spent part of the summer of 2015 at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, partially funded through the Advanced Research Collaborative, the Doctoral Student Research
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I want to thank my students at Purchase College, SUNY, for holding me intellectually accountable and for ensuring that intersectionality was always more than a catchphrase for us all. They continue to be a source of criticism and joy. Much of the material from this dissertation emerged as classroom discussion when I first began teaching affect and radical organizing in 2016. For all my students in Queer Politics, thank you for keeping me on my toes. Those classes have always been a real treasure to teach.

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I dedicate this project to my mom, Barbara Jean Harrison Aultman. The world lost one of its lights, and a child their mother, far too soon. But you shine here and elsewhere always. You gave me the courage to ask questions, take risks, and be reflective even during times of great pain and self-shattering doubt. You showed me what embodiment means that no text could ever capture; what it means to live that no theory ever could ever describe; and to make do, even though you were always there to make sure I wasn’t just getting by. “Pooter” did it.

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Foreword: Notes on Sex, Gender, and Identity

Studying sex/gender systems and the outgrowth of human identities has undergone extensive crises of interpretation in the last two millennia. The body has been a kind of map or project of these interpretations. Philosopher Michel Foucault traced this scientific development of the human, noting that as both object of study and subject of philosophical inquiry the human had become a “empirico-transcendental” doublet (1994 [1970], 303-343). The human (or more to the point the “man” of mankind) is constructed and can only be understood through this constructed historicity responsible for shaping culture’s expanding and contracting theories of knowledge (or epistemology). Since Foucault’s genre-creating (and shattering) observations, scientists and social theorists alike have been preoccupied with the “constructedness” of most facets of the human being, most especially that of sex and gender. As queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put it, “the charting of a space between something called ‘sex’ and something called ‘gender’ has been one of the most influential and successful undertakings of feminist thought” (2008 [1990], 27). I would like to briefly examine these in relation to trans in order to set a baseline of working assumptions for the rest of this dissertation.

Queer and Feminist Criticisms of Sex/Gender

Discussing trans histories is to implicate feminist debates over normalizing sex and gender within history. Since at least Simone de Beauvoir’s now canonical claim in The Second Sex that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, “sex has had the meaning of a certain group of irreducible, biological differentiations between members of the species Homo sapiens Gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female of identities and behaviors” (Sedgwick 2008 [1990], 27). What is less well known, despite their use in both popular and academic cultures, is that the
terms “gender” and “gender identity” did not emerge as qualifying the human condition until somewhere in the late 1950s with psychologist John Money and his peers (Jordan-Young 2010). Gender was a social manifestation of sex, but gender identity was a deeply sensed psychological connection between the body and mind. Bracketing “gender identity” momentarily, the analyses restricting sex and gender to different spheres of the human condition with lasting implications for both gender and sexual minorities.

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<td>XX Chromosome, Estrogen</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man</strong></td>
<td>Masculine-defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive towards sexual partner(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker or laborer (Public)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject of heterosexual desire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woman</strong></td>
<td>Feminine-defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive and welcoming toward sexual partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caretaker and domestic laborer (Private)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object of heterosexual desire</td>
<td></td>
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Table 1.0: Sex and Gender

In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, historian Thomas Laqueur (1999) argued that as far back to second century, the body, though sexually classified into two complementary visions, were primordially the same. Males were, from Greek anatomist Galen’s point of view, the central and defining embodiment from which women, as “inverts” of male bodies, grew. It is often the case that gender roles have always been conceived out of the sexual differences of human bodies. One of Laqueur’s crucial yet missed points, however, was that “there [was] no effort [at that time] to ground social roles in nature; social categories themselves
are natural and on the same explanatory level as what we would take to be physical or biological facts. Nature is not therefore to culture what sex is to gender, as in modern discussions” (29). A definitive point in the re-telling of that history, borrowing from and yet transforming the meaning of theological accounts on “good sexual politics” along the way, was the Enlightenment phenomena of modern science and rationalism from the 17th century onward. There, it was possible for two sexes to emerge and to anchor two parallel social categories with normative assignments for both. And yet the problematic remained, “social and political changes are not, in themselves, explanations for the reinterpretation of bodies the remaking of the body is itself intrinsic to each of these developments” (11). The features of each cultural development, and the theories of knowledge (or epistemologies) they produce, have a tendency to harden into normative practices or commonsense.

As feminist philosopher Charlotte Witt argues, from the moment of the Enlightenment onward, regardless of etymology and interpretive shifts, gender had an important cultural component that divvies up social positions in which the complexities of everyday human life are carried out (2011, 29-30). Gender determines a social function “in terms of the different socially mediated reproductive functions of men and women” (29). In other words, gender difference became a popular, not a purely intellectual, reflection of sexual difference, and the two maintained each other in a kind of perpetual dualism. The resulting social functions carried out over time, becoming fixed, erased the complex and intersecting histories of sexual differences and established new practices. This fixity led feminist historian Gayle Rubin (1975) to argue that sexual norms and gender norms are mutually reproductive, creating what she called the “sex/gender system.” The effects of this system are manifold: reaffirming the sexualized roles of men and women meant reaffirming the bodily requirements for being a male or female (that is,
genitalia capable of sexual reproduction); this naturalized hetero-sexed couples and reaffirmed heteronormative sexual desires and prohibited homo-sexed desires, laying the cultural groundwork for homophobia; insofar as roles were developed, so too were the norms of masculinity and femininity, ascribed as “natural” behaviors to the sexes; by naturalizing heteronormativity, the sex/gender system coded men’s bodies as stronger and women’s bodies as weaker, or to recapitulate Witt, gender roles could be fashioned around sexual virility and desire.

In short, masculinity and femininity became part of a symbolic and yet manifestly “real” network of social forces that separated men from women, males from females, normal from abnormal behaviors and practices. With these conceptions of gender on one side and sex on the other, history had been written in mostly normative tones. How this history would deal with trans communities who, in some form that did not yet have a name until the 20th century, is fraught with empirical and theoretical consequences.

Trans-ing Sex/Gender Trouble

Making distinctions about sex and gender are part and parcel of both queer and trans studies. Indeed, they are the root of contemporary theories about nonbinary gender identities. But these terms (sex and gender) continue to have vexed relationships. “Sex is not the same as gender,” remarks historian Susan Stryker (2008, 7). Her landmark Transgender History was one of the first attempts (following her co-edited volume of The Transgender Studies Reader) at collating the critical histories and terms underscoring the debates in queer and feminist theories. The fact that Stryker appears so adamant is not a simple reflection of past scholarship, where biology (sex) and social function (gender) are kept related but distinct. Other foundational thinkers in the field of gender and sexuality studies, since the 1990s, propped this position of hers up by a sustained attack on the validity of the sex/gender distinction. Sedgwick, for
example, calls into question the usefulness of this division altogether. She had argued that the
sexed body, beyond the dubious distinctions relying by chromosomes or hormones, called into
question how sex is precisely a physical phenomenon where gender is not. Rather, “usages
involving the ‘sex/gender system’ within feminist theory are able to use ‘sex/gender’ only to
delineate a problematical space rather than a crisp distinction” (2008 [1990], 29). She was not
alone.

A decade before, French philosopher Monique Wittig had stated, at a conference of
professional linguists and theorists, that “lesbians are not women” (quoted in Hale 1996, 94). She
argued, in part, that because “lesbian” as a category can never fulfill the status as both an object
desired by heterosexual men and object desiring heterosexed affection, lesbians can never fully
inhabit the social position of “woman.” This might seem fanciful if not eccentric. But other queer
theorists used this as a means of rethinking the sex/gender system tout court. Queer theorist
Judith Butler (2008 [1990]) has been one of the most influential thinkers in this area. In
developing her “performative theory” of gender, Butler also criticized the distinctiveness of sex
and gender for its occlusion of certain political powers. For her, “the identification of women
with ‘sex,’ is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of
their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly
enjoyed by men. Thus, the destruction of the category of sex would be the destruction of an
attribute, sex, that has, through a misogynist gesture come to take the place of the person” (27,
emphasis in text). In short, what has been understood as gender has been sex all along. Even
Thomas Laqueur, almost a decade after Sedgwick and Butler’s respective texts had
revolutionized queer studies, wrote that his book “show[s] the basis of historical evidence that
almost everything one wants to say about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a
claim about gender. Sex, in both the one-sex and the two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power” (1999, 11). If sex and gender referred to the same thing, then what of those whose sex did not, in a sense, coincide with the gender that had been ostensibly destroyed?

It was at this point of the debate, where feminists and other theorists were determining just how “constructed” gender and sex were, that trans activists and scholars were reintroduced into the mixture. But their voices, as Sandy Stone (1987) has argued, were already spoken for. Some radical feminists like Janice Raymond, Stone argued, made trans women and nonnormativity seem like conscious efforts by biological men to encroach on women’s spaces. Raymond refused to call trans women real women or to unsettle gender norms except in politically salutary ways. But the most prolific in the field of radical queer feminism was Judith Butler. For Butler, the sex/gender collapse was not just a call to political intervention on behalf of women. She was convinced that gender (indeed sex) was a part of a representational system, an illusion and not a material form. Gender, she argued, was nothing if only the reenactment of cultural norms over time that, following Foucault’s observations about the human, performed and generated truths. “Discrete genders,” she argued, “are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (190). The norms governing gender possess “truth” only in the context of the performances and the repetition of those performances. Her work speculated that gender has no original, no first man or woman who could provide an adequate or original truthful account of what gender was. “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a
construction that regularly conceals its genders” (ibid.). Butler’s points are radically progressive and yet prohibitive for gender nonnormative identities for a few reasons.

The progressive implication is that the linkage between birth-assigned sex and gender must be broken. Sociologist Lori Girshick might sum this perspective best: “the presumption that two genders correspond to two sexes is doomed to be false when we realize that there are more than two sexes and, therefore, more than two genders” (2008, 24). If there is no true gender, or sex for that matter, then the body is not a naturalized given but an ongoing constructed thing. Politically, the gender subversive person could wield this knowledge and “parody” gender, just as those who perform drag do in the subcultural scenes of gay and queer bars. But the prohibitive possibilities of this theory suggested a lack of materiality to both the body and the gender: no real gender means no real body. If that is the case, are trans people merely reproducing fictitious gender norms that, when one comes right down to it, mean that the trans identity itself is fictitious? Can the trans body exist as materially situated, possessing a gender and identity, without its being considered merely an effect of something else (for Butler, that “something else” is the regulatory effect of power)? In another text, Bodies that Matter, Butler (1993) slightly revises her argument to argue that the body is the material remainder of gender’s relational power. But limitations of this argument are still captured by other trans phenomenologists like Jay Prosser (1998), who argued that trans bodies were very much “here,” not in some distant elsewhere of discourse and fantasy, possessing a phenomenality unique to the person.

Materiality is an important component of the debate concerning gender nonnormative life. Although the radical critique of gender as a performative, and thus constructed, aspect of everyday human life opened the possibility that the rigidity of the binary must become more flexible, it did little to establish “realness” or “reality” to a trans phenomenology of the body. If
anything, it took energy from it. Somewhere between this debate of construction and its polar opposite of essentialism, considers biology as an important part of the sex/gender equation, but not a deterministic one. Biologist and feminist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) has written extensively on the existence of the five sexes, inclusive of intersex communities. Fausto-Sterling has offered readers more than a brilliant account of the diversity of the human sexes. She also demonstrated that the study of gender and sex can be empirical as much as it is theoretical. For Rebecca Jordan-Young (2010), a “three-ply yarn” theory works best for interpreting the complexities of material and symbolic forces that affect the identities of a person. She writes that the realms of sex, gender, and sexuality all work in biologically diverse and socially distinctive ways. Each are co-productive, or relational, terms that cannot be taken in complete isolation of one another: “I find the [three-ply yarn] metaphor appealing because it suggests three strands that are simultaneously distinct, interrelated, and somewhat fuzzy around the boundaries” (15). For feminist philosopher Charlotte Witt (2011), some gender essentialisms are not themselves a bad thing. Rather, gender essentialism is a way of forming one’s identity around a singular (and personal) understanding of a given norm experienced in everyday life. In this way, Witt argues, gender’s essence is less about violently limiting a human being through normative sanctions (although that can happen). Rather, gender essentialism exists on a number of levels that give a social actor the opportunity to experiment with the generic practices of gender and the conventional standards that circulate in a culture about the sexed body.

This is the intersection from which my own assumptions about sex/gender emerge. Namely, that there is materiality to the body. We need not focus on pre-discursive or purely discursive practices to make claims about human life in terms of sex and gender. The task of this dissertation will be to examine how interactions of material, linguistic, extra-linguistic (such as
gestures and performances), affective, and life-making practices co-construct one’s sense of gender. And finally, that even these are linked with heterogeneous social, economic, and political relations of power that engage with subjectivity that create an affective condition for the possibility of knowledge.
Introduction: Thinking about the Trans Ordinary

Feeling as knowing does not conflate affect, or sensation, and knowledge-claims that posit “facts” about the structure of the world. Rather, feeling beside knowing, as a supplement and update to knowledge, is suggestive. It is a commitment to the theory that everyday life is filled with fits and starts of singularly lived and culturally shared energy that is felt, lived, and embedded in situational contexts. These feelings surge from moment to moment or can stabilize into patterns indistinguishable the face of the everyday. These moments and temporal punctuations, shocks to our nervous system and feelings of being-at-ease, all tend to settle in the ordinary—a space of living out the complexities of the world in terms of feeling and being present to change, stasis, crisis, or wellbeing. That is to say, the contemporary “present” of our lived experience is felt intensely, experienced in a kind of existential thickness. Time can stop and the experience of a moment can become terrorizing, pulsating, and subject to as much painful clarity as anxiety-inducing confusion. In one example of these extremes, poet Claudia Rankine captures the intensity of this temporality in a vivid poetics from *Citizen*. “Then flashes, a siren, a stretched-out roar—and you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (Rankine 2014, 106). She is writing from the narrative-life of marginalized Black bodies in American culture. In an age marked by economic inequalities compounded by social divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, class, and ability, the marginalized feel this thick present in particular emphasis. Even the most routine of day-to-day things, like driving, might become a situation waiting to become an event. “Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. I must have been speeding. No, you weren’t speeding. I wasn't speeding. You didn't' do anything wrong. Then why are you pulling me over? Why am I pulled over? Put your hands where they can be seen.
Put your hands in the air. Put your hands up. Then you are stretched out on the hood. Then
cuffed. Get on the ground” (ibid.). This scene of ordinary life, where driving to and from a store
(or a parent’s house, a lover’s apartment, the homeless shelter) becomes a site of something
Gloria Anzaldúa called “intimate terrorism” (Ortega 2016, 20). Because it is a scene taken right
out of everyday life that, for most is mere background noise, it makes getting past the trauma that
much more difficult. Because it happens in the ordinary, this kind of violence disrupts the
familiar and transforms it into an uncanny object of state terror. These moments might be
singularly lived but no less culturally shared. Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes these scenes of
ordinary life where “everyone knows something” whether its “not quite right” or just there. The
scene sticks to local and cultural imaginaries.

The following dissertation is an exploration of this cultural and singularly lived space.
But through the lens of trans experiences, I am calling it the “trans ordinary.” It is a study in
phenomenology of the body alongside affective experiences in gender nonnormative forms of
life. By intertwining these sometimes disparate methods of theory and philosophy, I hope to
establish the presence of a felt sense of knowledge for trans communities. But first, there is some
necessary ground-clearing. I am not making a metaphysical claim that the ordinary is similarly
situated across worlds. Rather, I am arguing throughout that the ordinary is, in the present, being
felt as something both stable and discontinuous. The ordinary is not the forgettable banalities of
existence nor is it a space defined by purely repetitive habit. It is, rather, a site of meaning-
making, forming and carving out a life, interpretation, interpellation, variation, and
improvisation. Where the “everyday” in “everyday life” consists of the ideological guarantees
that things will go according to plan, the ordinary consists of precisely how forms of life engage
in practices that come to define those plans. Imagine the narrator in Rankine’s poem cited above.
What practices does she/he use to turn this site of intimate terrorism into something thinkable, workable, livable? How do forms of life adjust to these environments that seem so hostile to them? I use “forms of life” to designate how the construction of “living” a singular iteration of a larger picture of life has a form and content (although neither can be precisely detailed) without neat classification. And therein lies the frustration for scholarship. As a site of improvisational life-making, ordinary life is messy (Stewart 2007; Das 2007; Berlant 2011). All one can hope to do is gain a descriptive insight into what kinds of practices and improvisational work goes on in making sense of life in the sometimes personal, sometimes impersonal zones that suggest to onlookers that “something more” is there. That is why the ordinary is both a cultural (that there is something more) and lived (that there is room for improvisation) space.

In this introduction, I hope to elaborate how the ordinary will be a part of the intellectual architecture of each subsequent chapter. Namely, I want to point out how the ordinary, and more specifically the trans ordinary, is site of rich experience as much enmeshed in history as it is in feelings of the “thick present.” I want to flesh out how “the political” and “politics” attend to future projects of self-making that engage with this felt sense of temporal thickness. Insofar as being-a-self, or being-in-worlds more generally, is multiplicitous and ongoing, attention to improvisation and adaptation is crucial to this study. But I also want to illustrate how the trans ordinary is a space of affective arrangements, structures, and orientations. It is a site where the everyday has to make sense. It is a space where one’s affective “furniture,” so to speak, is in a constant state of arrangement, or sometimes not. The differences matter. The ordinary might be thought of as a “poetics of space,” where subjects feel their way through in particular ways that potentially share an aesthetic.
I often use the term affect as means of tracking historical feelings and moods into the ordinary spaces of present trans life-making and world-building. One familiar with phenomenology and continental philosophy might find these terms familiar, and others uncanny. My sense is that affective experience can be brought into play, so to speak, so as to argue for a thing like “affective intelligence,” for feeling as knowing. This is my take on the “streetwise theorizing” that feminist philosopher Mariana Ortega (2016) illustrates as critical experience in her book on Latina phenomenologies. There is an epistemic component in the trans ordinary that is rich in narrative and emotional content. It has feeling. Not only is it a living thing, the ordinary is also a deposit box of shared histories, narratives, and culture. I believe that the trans ordinary captures a particular kind of bodily knowledge as experienced in living time. At least, that is my ultimate goal for this dissertation.

**Politics and the Political: A Distinction**

As a political project, this dissertation makes certain claims about what constitutes “the political” and “politics.” There is already a long history behind these terms and their insistent dichotomy. For example, the canonical view holds that the political is an existential space of contest generated by the conflict between governance and rights. This conception, borne out by the liberal conception of the public, suggests that the political is a terrain inhabited by citizens and would-be citizens who vie over their share of recognition, equality, and relative power over the narrative of the good life under the aegis of the nation-state (Geuss 2001). According to theorists like Chantal Mouffe, traditional liberal concepts like equality and liberty are political precisely because they make distinctions amongst imagined communities who delineate “us” and “them,” “public” and “private” (2001, 40). Politics is then defined by the various ordinary and
exemplary practices coordinated by the masses and elites in articulating these distinctions and rendering them more concrete over time.

As other thinkers such as Sheldon Wolin have argued, such a system becomes mechanistic and bulky, unable to attend to the everyday needs and improvisational nature of everyday life. This typical view of the political and politics has saturated contemporary American culture. It is also the subject of a longstanding feminist critique for its tendency toward exclusion based on arbitrary, albeit historically ramified, conditions that privilege masculinity. (More recent feminisms have taken up claims of intersectionality, whereby identity is based on mutually constitutive and relational social positions of race as well as gender.) The public and private distinctions amplify feelings of mutual antagonisms (along racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines) by privileging certain voices that all seem to share a common (fantasmatic) conception of the good life. The feminist movement behind “the personal is political,” the mantra of certain 20th century feminisms, sought to break down this public/private divide by politicizing, or de-naturalizing, the intimate oppressions of private life that women, and particularly women of color, routinely experience. This adds a sense of urgency, intensity, and importance to matters often relegated to the margins. But these claims, from whatever strand of feminism, are often attached to the state as the mediating agent as well as space in which rights are meted out. Most radical coalition movements couch their demands in terms of preserving even the minimal welfare state.

My view on these matters changes this feminist critique only slightly. My sense of the political pays less attention to the state as legitimating force and imaginary terrain that citizens and would-be citizens negotiate to assert and participate in the good life. I think the state has served, and probably will continue to serve, a purpose in guaranteeing the protection of persons from
certain kinds of harm. But I do not think that this is the only form that such a socio-political service or cultural norm may take. I think of the political, and the practices of politics, as a reflection of the affective worlds of people who fantasize about their place in the larger good life narrative. It is a space of attachment and a question of what that attachment does. This means, at least in part, that the political is a desire for and attachment to reliable or even experimental methods of feeling as though one were a part of that narrative.

Following Lauren Berlant’s work on “intimate publics” I also argue that what constitutes the political desire is a longing to feel a sense of security in an insecure world. This does not mean that everyone experiences this desire equally. Of course, the problems of political participation, of “political depression” as Berlant would put it, persist (2011, 227). But I tend to think, along with Berlant, that contemporary reflections on the political are about the need to satisfy feeling even at the expense of a material outcome. That is, political depressive does not abstain from politics or voting simply because they think their vote does not count or their voice will not be heard. They abstain because they get the sensation generated by desire from elsewhere. The political and politics should be thought along these lateral lines, where ordinary life and the political event might be one and the same—shaped by the same forces and animated by the same desires. Perhaps my view on the political and the practices of politics can be summed as “sometimes you just have to forget the state and go for the immediacy of feeling together, of being-at-ease in explicit publicness.”

The Trans Ordinary and Phenomenology

It might be useful to give a few examples from the phenomenological perspective to illustrate why this area of philosophy is so critical to the present study. I understand phenomenology to be the study, and attendant methodological urgency, of experience. Although
first-person narratives have often been faulted in theoretical studies for overly subjective, epistemically confusing, or obscurely lived components, they have played a pivotal role in feminist and transfeminist studies of selfhood. One can use these narratives as a means of collecting ways that the self is constructed in worlds, across times, and within specific lived contexts of what Martin Heidegger called “everydayness.” To capture this mode of everyday being is to be attentive to mood, to what existential phenomenology calls “attunement.” As will be discussed under the title of affect, mood and attunement is a kind of preconscious form of knowing things. Moods are the staging ground for the affective furniture that orients us in the world. Furthermore, feminist phenomenologists in particular treat the historicity of lived and living experiences into their investigations. The benefits of this move are numerous. History is an important component of how we, as living beings, are raised to encounter the worlds we inhabit. Cultural theory has all but settled on the contingency of historical experiences and self-making. In other words, forms of life are context-specific and inquiries into them must be context-sensitive. Histories play an important role in how we can proceed investigating, say, a trans person’s testimonies in the early 20th versus the beginning of the 21st centuries. It means that one must track moods and shared attunements across time retracing affective entanglements in ordinary scenes of life.

Thus, personal narratives are not meaningless subjectivisms. Latina phenomenologist Mariana Ortega, for example, writes that her own experiences as a woman from Nicaragua have had profound effects on how she perceived her own sense of “otherness” in mundane circumstances. “I got looks of surprise or even uncomfortable and unfriendly looks when I approached people to kiss their cheek, and as I was looked at with mocking or confused glances while I stood up to greet teachers, I stopped relating to the world in terms of practical
orientation” (2016, 60). She uses these experiences to examine how anxiety, from a phenomenological point of view, affects one’s orientations to the world as being in worlds. It is disorientating to have one’s habits or customs mocked or treated with open derision. As embodied forms of life, the subjects of Ortega’s philosophical inquiry possess intersectional identities. That is, identities that are coextensive and relational. A marginalized person’s sense of self-hood is constantly jarred, experienced in different temporalities than others in non-dominated social positions. “My point,” Ortega explains, “is to note that the experiences of the selves described by Anzaldúa, Lugones, and other Latina theorists include a lived experience of constantly not being-at-ease due to the numerous ruptures or tears of everyday norms and practices, the numerous deeper existential moments that they experience, the confusions and contradictions about their selves [sic], and the unwelcoming, threatening nature of their experiences given their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, and other social identities” (2016, 61). Ortega is arguing for an application of “multiplicious” self-making. Further, Ortega insists that this multiplicitous self has a continuity with the worlds it is in, despite the changing nature of those worldly contexts and however thick those feelings are.

I think Ortega is right on both counts. But the intersectional essence of self-making is complicated by trans narratives for a number of reasons. The first reason might be the complex biopolitical histories that can be tracked in trans narratives. Pathologizing language, feelings that are said to stem from dysphoria, psychiatric and therapeutic modes of care, all paint a picture of everyday trans life that is often overstating the medical. The other reason for complication is the privileged role of “continuity” in the stream of conscious (and unconscious) self-making that often attend cisgender accounts of the body. These narratives seem to flow from birth to present to future, changing from “world to world” as the embodied subject travels (Braidotti 2011, 137-
140; Ortega 2016, 89-90) whereas trans accounts have a story punctuated, often abruptly, by experiences of sexed/gendered otherness unique or distinct from others. This reason, too, might be attributed to the tightly knit structures of medicine and embodied cognitive dissonance, that is, an unstated or smuggled in subject of dysphoria. In any case, author Juliet Jacques writes that her own feelings of anxiety, ones that were rooted in commonplace spaces, were often interpreted through the lens of a “split personality” (2015, 117). Even reading Jacques’ words of spending “a whole day as Juliet for the first time” can be understood as existing “between” sexed and gendered worlds (97); the reactions to intimate terrorisms during gay pride celebrations, “someone in a passing car yelled ‘faggot’ at me. This is my day, you shit-stack, I thought, but I said nothing” (99, emphasis in text); or of being with others who are at ease with her appearance while she is still urged to take note of the experience itself, “I almost forgot that I’d ever been made to feel that was an issue” (99); or the self-presencing needed during a postal delivery, “Incredulous, [the postman] looked at me, unshaven in my dressing gown. Do I have to do my makeup and everything else even at home? I wondered, signing for the parcel” (185, emphasis in text). My point is that reading these experiences, that is to say from a phenomenological perspective, has to respect the urgency of those moments of self-making and self-articulation.

They are taken as they stand for themselves as experience in spite of tendencies toward quick historicisms. This is a reading practice of “bracketing,” one advocated by Edmund Husserl, a founding member of the phenomenology movement in the late 19th century.

**The Trans Ordinary: Affect and Genre**

I follow much of the structural arguments about affect and affectivity from critical theorists Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In particular, my sustained engagement with Berlant’s work is an attempt to replicate her own subtle and probing
attention to history, phenomenology, and affect as she illustrates contemporary life for the economically marginalized under regimes of a globalizing capitalism and neoliberalism. Although these latter “catchphrases” can often do more work than that of the investigator, phenomena like capitalism, globalization, and neoliberalism do have particularized effects on forms of life. As Alyson Cole and Estelle Ferrarese (2018) have argued, capitalism itself can be understood as its own form of life, as an ethical arrangement, or as a project modulating senses of the self. Kathleen Stewart has also provided a collection of works that examine how people in the most banal circumstances make do under systems of economic despair. Rather than define them by that despair, Stewart understand these forms of life as signs embedded in everyday meaning. Her critical ethnography of Appalachian coal mine culture in West Virginia is particularly compelling for its attention to meaning-making, symbolic interactionism, and the power of narrative to convey feeling. Eve Sedgwick’s later work on affect has made a particular impression on my own affective theories. She finds affect to be “irreducibly phenomenological,” and bound up with ordinary ways of bodily sense, touching, feeling, and grasping for meaning in a growingly chaotic world. In such an ongoing scene in ordinary life, Sedgwick’s inclination was toward reparative criticism where the thinker conceives of what is singularly or culturally broken as well as what might motivate beings to maintain their attachments to its broken-ness.

Berlant’s take on everyday forms of this kind of self-management is that certain affective “structures” emerge under neoliberalism. These structures situate people in proximity to objects that reinforce generic fantasies of the good life. This is central argument in Cruel Optimism. Cruel optimism is an affective arrangement whereby the promises of the good life attached to an object (a thing, a someone, a habit, or a lifestyle) overshadow that object’s potentially devastating and self-dissipating effects. Berlant’s investigation wonders “why people stay
attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost bounds” (2011, 2). Plunging into the depths of the ordinary is an attempt to understand, if not to repair, the sensorium in which these attachments become fixed over time for trans communities. I am likewise convinced that such “good life” narratives not only abound in the trans ordinary. They have a coordinative effect on trans peoples’ attachments to capitalist forms of living. If the good life, for instance, means getting work, and maintaining that job, then the politics of “passing” is as imbricated with the need for productivity as it is for everyday recognition and growth as a self. It is in this sense that one might ask what it means to be attached to normative fantasies of success and work as they relate to everyday bodily comportments to the sex/gender system.

In this sense the trans ordinary is a collection of bits and pieces of normative and nonnormative forms of life in a particular sex/gender system. It is a space that requires a certain skill at making a self intelligible, or not, in one’s own publicness. The trans ordinary serves as a bulwark against what the fraying genres of reliable living that Berlant (2011) concludes are no longer capable of making sense of intimate worlds. In such a life of crisis, living a life is more a series of practices of self-management, acts and performances that enable a human being to bear the weight of systemic forces like sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, violence, discrimination, and the day-to-day concerns of the bare reproduction of life under capitalism. Since the neoliberal worlds we inhabit are saturated by the desire-constructing fantasies that market forces will “work themselves out,” and hard work will eventually “pay off,” all forms of life learn to cope and make do when these generic attitudes fail. But that is not all. Making do is not merely a means of survival or tactics of living. Making do consists of an entanglement of
conventionalities, a play on affective and material resources that are at hand, and a means for (trans) people to manage feelings of normalcy, to ensure that the cliché “tomorrow is another day” has the substance of a promise, or that they are at least proximally close to something like it.

The trans ordinary is a narrative space, “a site of an opening or reopening into [a culture’s] story” (Stewart 1996, 3). This space contains a variety of scenes and situations, events and happenings that can fall within a “trans genre” in my re-telling of our culture’s story. This genre is a collection of stories that share conflicting and similar, shared and contradictory, visions of the past and future. They run the gamut of social location in terms of class, race, ethnicity, and even the very definition of trans itself. But as in any genre, it contains a multitude of practices that push the very limits that individually and discursively define it. Genres are able to contain contradictions and contradictory conventionalities by allowing room for narrative change. Following Berlant’s trilogy on national sentimentality, I am also inclined to certain identities as genres of being, “as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations” (2008, 4). This decidedly aesthetic moves provides a framework that is both historical and formal by reading and viewing genre-making events and life-sustaining conventionalities as they are lived, reiterated, and improvised in ordinary life.

The archive that constitutes this genre is sufficiently large. Although I have personally travelled to the largest physical archive of trans history at The University of Victoria, British Columbia, for my present investigation, the trans archive is also one feeling, as critic Ann Cvetkovich (2003) might say. Developing a political aesthetics of trans culture (e.g., one that establishes a viable socio-economic complaint or political critique) means that questions of what
forms of recognition, what at-hand affective and material resources, as well as what actually narrated feelings of belonging (what Ortega would call the existential state of “being-at-ease”) should have reparative, Sedgwick-like attention. In the sense that I am deploying here, my genre tracks affects across the last 60 years of autobiography, poetry, and personal testimony. In addition to personal narrative, I look at culturally mediated representations of trans life and documentation of trans legal complaints as a means of understanding the when, where, and what of this emergent aesthetics that capture trans forms of life.

**The Ordinary as Epistemic**

As a site of narration, practice, and symbolic interaction, the ordinary is also a site knowledge production. The epistemic qualities of the ordinary is the last but coequal movements of this dissertation. In making both phenomenological and affective claims, my aim is to contribute to the ongoing debates in feminist thought and political theory concerning marginalized knowledge in general but trans knowledge in particular. In this sense, my project frames the ordinary in ways that can track singular and cultural experiences in (hopefully) intelligible and longitudinal ways. Importantly, the knowledges produced in the ordinary may be durable or transient, germaine one day but forgettable the next, but always interwoven with the rhythms of life-making. To think of the trans ordinary as a space of knowledge-making does not resuscitate an old philosophical debate about the agency of the epistemic subject. My philosophical commitments here are similar to Ortega’s work as well as the works of Miranda Fricker (2007) and Linda Martín Alcoff (2006). The critique of this so-called sovereign subject has a long history in feminist texts and continental philosophy as well as postcolonial critiques. I am deeply committed to this lineage.
I argue, as I have up to now, that knowledge is deeply rooted in the fleshiness of the body. It is situated in sociality as well as singular and lived. My intervention is, simply, that ordinary knowledge might not always have the look of knowledge. A hand gesture in one instant might not provoke a desired effect in another. A situation might arise where a transmasculine person adopts a more normative or conventional masculine action. A gender nonconforming person might leave the apartment on a given day at a given time in a certain outfit and not another. Although there are reasons to hazard this generalization, the reasons for such disparate practices are rooted in the anxieties that gender nonnormative people have about ordinary scenes of recognition and living. Knowledge of sex/gender norms means practicing them, performing them, and improvising them in public and private spaces, surely. However, as a means of managing feelings of belonging, recognition, and well-being, certain affective intelligences is required. Since the ordinary is the folding-in, the making-do, the messy and otherwise sense-making of a life’s project, the aesthetic forms I draw from within the trans genre illustrates how the existential qualities of affect, of living a life of feeling, structures the means by which people navigate their everyday epistemologies. In sum, these affects help guide and determine what claims can and are made by trans communities. But these claims are more subtle than those often posited under the rubric of identity (with its political ends).

I do not aim to invest the genre of trans life with a particular political outlook, or scan the archive for convenient “facts” that comport to the identitarian claims made to support some, and not other, trans communities. Such claims often delegitimize marginalized knowledge before they reach the political table (Ortega 2016, 176). I am, rather, aiming to approximate how affective orientations in trans life, as they are experienced in living time, constitute a kind of epistemic claim to the structure of our shared world. Let us consider a few illustrations. Berlant,
for example, has argued that such affective intelligences grow out of the urgent needs of ordinary life in the contemporary present. Marginalized groups must register the constant flows and disruptions of the ordinary while “structural antagonisms [play themselves] out….Affective crisis wears out individuals and spreads across days and myriad lives until publics see themselves constituted in their precarity and in whatever enclaves and pleasures they can produce amid threat” (Berlant 2011, 73). This knowledge of the precarious is at once of an intentional-conscious and intuitive-unconscious kind. It is a conscious in that people make claims to the structures of the world(s) around them. But it is unconscious because “people follow their intuitions about what they don’t know and so change the shape of the present, which is not fleeting at all, but a zone of action in a space marked by its experiments and transitioning” (Berlant 2011, 77). These are as much epistemic as they are affective attachments.

I will end this account of the epistemic by illustrating a sustained sense of “something there” that is tracked throughout Claudia Rankine’s work in *Citizen*. Rankine describes a scene, a potential situation, where “standing outside the conference room, unseen by the two men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say to the other that being around black people is like watching a foreign film without translation. Because you will spend the next two hours around the round table that makes conversing easier, you consider waiting a few minutes before entering the room” (2014, 50). Why is this a scene, or rather a moment, and not a situation in which Rankine’s narrator confronts the two men? Rankine suggests the narrator waits it out in order to avoid that situation. But the affective furniture, so to speak, toward an aleatory encounter was already set. Rankine’s narrator, living amid structural antagonisms of racism and sexism already playing out (the two *men* talking about *black* people), considers waiting only to ease the inevitable professional exchange. She avoid the additional energy drain of even saddling the
knowledge that they, the two men, fear that she heard them and knows. She would only confirm a suspicion. She is attached to the self-dissipating moment not only of necessity but a desire to keep things stable, however awkward and unjust that stability is. She waits, considers, listens, and hesitates. Much of Rankine’s previous entries in Citizen reiterate this kind of vigilance, a constant mode of scanning and being present, the anxiety of not being-at-ease. I consider Rankine’s poetics to be the illustration of a certain kind of claim upon the world, one informed by the affective attachments of experiences that occur in the most ordinary scenes of life that are worthy of epistemic merit.

**Outline of the Dissertation**

Chapter One is my attempt to trace the history of shared affects in trans narratives. Although there is a wide span of time in which gender nonnormative practices existed, the bulk of this chapter reads the archive of feelings decades after the invention of the terms transsexual and transgender. I deal with the issues raised in biopolitical accounts of trans self-making. However, my intent is to conduct a “redemptive critique,” a move coined by Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin, that seeks to dislodge narratives from certain discursive emplotments. In other words, it is an attempt not only to reclaim narrative power for trans communities. It is also developing a sketch of the historical sensorium of gender nonnormative life, or an aesthetic grounding for what constitutes the contemporary trans genre. There, I develop a re-telling of trans narrative histories, illustrating the divergent social, economic, and political claims made by trans communities in affective terms that construct the present trans ordinary.

Chapter Two delves into the existential and felt realities of the trans ordinary. In that chapter, I develop a phenomenology of the present in terms of affect. By tracking shared and divergent senses of history, my aim in that chapter is to dispense with notions of trans
embodiment that focuses on a disparate or inchoate self that projects to a better, more perfect and truer trans identity. I try to distance myself from a liberal and assimilationist mode of politics as well as a purely anti-normative mode. Instead, I illustrate how the trans body is simply there, felt and articulated in and through encountered worlds. Adopting a few tenets of Latina phenomenology and existential phenomenology (especially Ortega’s notions of being-between-worlds and being-at-ease with Heidegger’s phenomenology of moods), I look at how trans people deal with the benign and the traumatic, the banal as well as event-making, of life. As a special case study, I look at self-harm as self-interruption, a form of self-management that is not reducible to mental illness—just as all anxiety in trans people is not reducible to dysphoria. Rather, it is symptomatic of the kinds of systemic and everyday antagonisms that dissipate the creative life energies of trans being-in-worlds.

Chapter Three updates certain claims within feminist epistemologies by engaging with Rachel McKinnon’s work on the subject of trans epistemology. My aim in this chapter is to provide more robust phenomenological and affective setting for the analytic claims McKinnon and others make about everyday knowledge. Although McKinnon’s epistemic claims about the world reflect a range of trans embodiments, the project of epistemology can benefit from outlining the intensities of living a nonnormative life entails. This does not detract from the central critiques of the epistemic justice literature. My intent is to supplement its ontology with a renewed interest in forms of attachment that shape the life projects of the multiplicitous selves that inhabit the trans ordinary.

Chapter Four explores the juridical and institutional representations of trans life. There, I make the claim that politics and justice can only be realized when the sensorium of trans experiences is taken seriously. This chapter explores the role of the trans genre in making
political and cultural critique. Taking intersectionality as my central method, I explore how precedent and contemporary modes of judicial justice fail to adequately deal with the “intimate terrorisms” and affective orientations composing gender nonnormative forms of life. Although this is neither a new claim nor one unique to trans communities, my argument extends into new fields of everyday forms of justice that engage with coalitional work across issue-platforms. The cultural politics of justice must reflect really existing emotional, affective, and material circumstances for trans people if it is to “get it right.”

Chapter Five seeks to complicate notions that affective and epistemic claims are divergent phenomena. In that chapter, I explain how the affective intelligences formed under ordinary expressions of self-management discussed in Chapter Two actually shape the epistemic claims of trans people. Being-at-ease and being-between-worlds explain the kinds of existential experiences trans people have. Yet, these phenomenological categories can also be used to describe a phenomenology of moods that construct ordinary knowledge of being-in-worlds. I use this as a means of crafting a preliminary statement about ordinary feelings as forms of knowing the world.

My Afterword is a reflection on the political potential of the trans genre to be read as the “trans complaint.” Borrowing from Berlant’s work on the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture, I consider the implications of developing a trans complaint as a response to everyday and political projects of gender change. This entails a re-consideration of the liberal and anti-normative traditions. There, I wish to think about the trans complaint as embodying and distancing itself from a larger cultural critique of the gender binary. I want to meditate on what it means to lead a life within the binary, within the conventionalities of gender normativity, where the attachments to that life can be said to spring from heterogeneous interactions among diverse
gender identities and expressions. The trans complaint is then a genre of self-containment, a way of making sense of a singular life within a larger heteronormative and homonormative affectsphere (a public space of shared sensation), and as a means of gender critique that can cut both ways.
Interlude: Reading a Story from the Trans Genre

The following is a brief meditation on ways of reading stories and narratives of the trans genre. The purpose here is track the narrative emplotment, shifts, and affective arrangements in this entry so as to establish some grounds for a practice of reading deployed throughout this dissertation. Although this particular piece has no date, and is a stated work of fiction on the part of the author (whose name is, perhaps, Dickie), we can infer a few things about its timeline and a bit about the author. First, it must have been typewritten sometime in the 20th century. Given its location in the physical archives at the University of Victoria, I surmise that it was written by a member identifying as gender nonnormative (if not trans). It was buried amongst other papers in the Rikki Swin Collection, an authorless piece called the “The Danish Training School” in a document called “Dickie’s Diary.” We are invited into a scene (perhaps what can actually be called a situation) where Leslie, the narrator, is subjected to what on the surface amounts to torture. This is definitely a literal reading. But this piece might also grant access to a shared affective sense of things that many gender nonnormative forms of life experience. Leslie’s story is an albeit disturbing example of being-between-worlds, Mariana Ortega’s existential phenomenology of multiplicitous self-hood. Selves navigate multiple borderlands where norms and conventions (the very genre of one’s being) are challenged. Whether they are preserved or potentially undone is a question of resources. Although I have interwoven my own comments throughout the piece, and provided direct quotes for clarification, my aim is to clarify the kinds of affective comportments Leslie (and potentially others like her) embody so as to adjust, manage, and construct a self to make a life in light of structural antagonisms and everyday oppressions.
Leslie awoke to find that she had been taken during the night from her hotel. In terror, she searched her clothing. She had artfully concealed her “true sex”—but her concealments had been taken. Leslie’s aversion to her “organ/person” is captured in a supplemental diary entry, also without a date, under the name Dickie. “What mistake did Nature make when she made me a boy? I wonder? And what mistake did Nature when she made that big, broad-shouldered woman. She glares contemptuously at me and my dress when we chance to encounter” (Dickie’s Diary, 1-2). Leslie discovered that her “organ,” or rather “person” (she never described it as a penis directly), was covered in dried red paint. She knew this “Scarlet Letter,” as she called it, branded her. “They had known all along my true sex. They had penetrated my disguise quite easily. I was a prisoner” (Danish Training, 1). Her tormentor is named Madame, a person Leslie perceives as female bodied and describes as a perfect enactment of the female from her waist, her bust, and her silky gown. Madame addresses Leslie as “Mr.” She decides, as punishment, to discipline Leslie. If that is what Mr. wants, then Mr. will become a woman. “You think because I have an elegant slender waist and wear the most delicate of bottines, that I am weak. Well you are going to see, just for your benefit I will call no assistance, but will deal with you myself” (2). Leslie’s normalization as a woman proceeds as a combination of psychological, emotional, and physical acts of humiliation. It was only after several beatings and simulated penetration that Madame addressed Leslie as “Miss.” Even after this act of “recognition,” Leslie is subjected to continued abuse. Frequent physical examinations, psychological torment, and electroshock treatment are used in conjunction with the medieval use the rack. “You think the Danes are fools, eh. They are easily fooled, eh. And you, a fool of an Englishman dressed up to kill, can bewitch a young Danish boy who happens to be a friend of mine? You have been playing with fire” (4). Leslie’s “training” is that of trauma.
From a certain angle, one elaborated by Ann Cvetkovich (2003) and Lauren Berlant (2011), trauma is its own cultural genre for story-telling. Trauma in this sense is often used as a means of making sense of life after the traumatic event, as a way of re-orienting oneself toward what is now perceived as shattered worlds. Trauma is a way of re-thinking the construction of the self on multiple fronts. Although Leslie’s torment is a constant reminder of her sexual difference, the allegorical account (of disciplinary gender practice, of her own feelings of incongruity) is an exercise in satire of the major biopolitical narrative of the day for trans identities: on the one hand, Leslie is a prisoner of her own (wrong) body. Madame serves as three roles: cultural interlocutor, disciplinarian, and an extension of Leslie’s psyche. Madame is the ideal of being woman. Leslie’s narrative torment is represents in shocking ways the mostly ordinary ways that femininity is mapped onto bodies. She is forcibly dressed in overly tight and revealing clothing and underwear. She is the object of make-up rituals such that Madame “made up [Leslie’s] boyish face to look exactly like that of a fashionable woman. I could not recognize myself” (8). Even the instruments of incarceration were made of gold and embellished with lavish jewelry. Further, Leslie was forbidden from feeding herself. She had no agency. On the other hand, Leslie’s time at the Danish training school was one author’s vision of feminine socialization. Fellow girls participated in Leslie’s training under the supervision of the Madame. Protestations meant lacerations with a whip or electric shocks. It can be said to track not only a trans person’s own situatedness in such normative forms of policing. It is also a larger story about the nature of sexism itself.

This brings me to a few concluding remarks. First, Leslie’s story illustrates how a person embodying a gender nonnormative form of life reflects feelings in the world of normativity. It is a product of a certain sensorium of a certain time. Leslie’s self-reflexive prose is an engagement
with the wrong body narrative as well as a parody of it. Even a story such as this can represent
the conflicting affective comportments that people configure in face of their being-in-worlds.
Second, as a source reflecting one author’s narrative experience of culture, Leslie’s story tracks
the effects of biopolitical as well as intersubjective forms of becoming a self. Throughout this
kind of becoming, anxiety is maximized. This mood, so critical to a number of phenomenologies
of marginalized selfhood, is personified in Madame, the school, other girls, Leslie’s training,
even Leslie’s inability to recognize herself in the mirror as a woman. Her being-a-self is attuned
through an everyday routine of seemingly abusive rituals. And finally, Leslie’s story outlines the
ways that trans people have been viewed historically. Narrated as a trickster and fraud, as a
foreigner on a “temporary” journey to another world, Leslie’s experience captured a particular
kind of self-knowledge and historical commentary about the sex/gender systems that comprise
our normative worlds. Chapter One, “Reading the Signs,” is an attempt to ground stories like
Leslie’s in a shared and overlapping sense of historical continuity called the sensorium. By doing
so, I aim to write about how feelings and affects of belonging (or not), of being out of place or
not being-at-ease, have changed given the course of intersecting relations of power like markets,
technology, and practices to make do.
Chapter One: Reading the Signs

This chapter situates memory and affect as indispensable to the production of the trans ordinary. Its descent into the historical construction of gender nonnormative identities, as a history of the trans ordinary, is animated by what is taken granted in cultural stories of gender nonnormative forms of life. In other words, historical and cultural (impersonal) and singularly lived and mediated (personal) forces are in living tension throughout the practices of making do. This suggests that over the course of the last century upon which much of the archive of this dissertation is drawing, there is a series of changes in the conditions for how people understood themselves in the genres of sex/gender that have profound effects on modes of experiencing the world. Forms of life took shape under innumerable tensions that have grown out of processes that are socio-economic. These have likewise ineradicably altered meaning-making in nearly all ordinary spaces of life (Thrift 2008, 101-103). Dramatic shifts at the turn of the 20th century occurred in the relations of production, the spatial arrangements induced by urbanization, and the growth of new information and media technology all did their job at reshaping human experience, that is to say produced a series of new sensorium for human life, as we know it.

Meanings related to these historical moments or events will snap into place as a result of these emerging sensoria. Take, for example, what Kathleen Stewart (1996) refers to as “the space of the sign.” The sign, as I understand it, is an embedded or situated object that, given its local contexts, might run against the grain of accepted cultural narratives of the good life. Somewhere between this contextual and affectively charged sign and the cultural narratives it mediates are the experiences that, drawn together, constitute how forms of life feel themselves out into changing worlds. The aim of this chapter is to determine how we might read the signs of trans narratives and track affective orientations across the time of just under one hundred years. By
considering history as an ongoing construction, a presently felt and lived structure, and narrative as the critical object that grants access to human life, I use an archive of testimony through prose, poetry, autobiography, and culturally mediated popular representations of gender nonnormative cultural practices. Understood in this way, the “redemptive critique” that Walter Benjamin argued could salvage the past from the grips of the enemy traces an omnidirectional trajectory to illustrate gaps and lacunae in trans histories. I aim to provide the historical grounds for a trans genre, to gather together (much like I did in the preceding interlude) narrative power for advancement of social, political, and activist knowledge.

This assemblage of meanings and connections bundle together in ways that cull histories, places, affects, and human lives. Kathleen Stewart argued that signs “can suggest association but they can also deflect the [researcher’s] dream of certainty” (Stewart 1996, 146). Her study was of those spaces on the side of the road, ruptures and openings that serve as unread but open challenges to grand narratives of the good life. For Stewart, as for me, reading these signs as a means of pushing back against the construction of otherness is part and parcel of the redemptive critique. Otherness licenses an asymmetrical symbolic relationship between those who embody the master narrative and those who, by no fault of their own, do not. Stewart’s was the “southern other” to American dreams of upward mobility: the simple life against the advanced industrial age, the slow and quiet against the hustle of urbanization (1996, 7). The signs that forms of life construct to make sense of things provide details that highlight how life adjusts.

Signs also indicate the presence of a story in the archive. They act as the connective tissue between global and local meanings. It is a kind of shorthand to maintain the rhythmic flows of the ordinary. One powerful example could the sign of a traumatic event like a memorial remembering a murdered trans woman. It serves as a sign to members and allies of those
communities that a certain space, at a certain time, is unsafe. This memorial, and others like it, transmits meaning through its aesthetic presence by breaking up the continuity of a scene. It could be along the Christopher Street Piers in New York or on the streets of the nation’s capital. Such signs have the power to associate meanings among the people who are most affected by such violence. It connects the realities of a gender nonnormative life with the everyday activities of making do. It acts as a kind of allegory or reminder for what counts, or whose lives matter, or what dangers lurk in the folds of the ordinary.

Signs are more than “just talk.” They hold a place in cultural memory because they possess an extralinguistic meaning. Images and aesthetic forms are a part of the basis of redemptive critique. As critic Walter Benjamin notes, “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (1968, 254). In other words, the past possesses the index that describes the present with material force. Redeeming that past requires special attention to the affective attunements of the narratives and stories we intend to unearth, so to speak, and treat them as potentially resistant counternarratives. This means locating the force of the narrative as a site of knowledge of places, affects, culture, conventions, and genres. The force of that sign, as a dialectical image that can seemingly stop the free flow of unilinear time. It shocks the scene of the present by enlisting the voices of the past. Second, it would privilege the power of image and context as means of discovering how “the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting” (Benjamin quoted in Stewart 1996, 90). The image, as I understand it, is not solely visual. It is an aesthetic form that establishes a grounding for certain kinds of meaning.

As a means of grounding trans history so as to trace affective registers within it, I turn to the time I spent at the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, British Columbia during the summer of 2015. My aim is to illustrate how these critical objects (whether through
pictures or written texts) can provide a history of unfolding and intelligible feelings that compose the present trans ordinary. Trans narratives actively make connections that are not reducible to a single point of recognition, moment of resistance, or insistence on a certain kind of gendered practice. There is no one way of being trans. There is no single trans community that captures the singularities of making do in life. Rather, there are gender nonnormative forms of life that might enforce or destabilize life’s forms. Although the term “trans” is contested, I use it here to refer to a large swath of gender nonnormative embodiments. And at every step along this historical process I hope to point out periodic shifts in the ways of making sense of feeling and realizing one’s own nonnormativity.

**Affective Visions of History: The Historical Trans Sensorium**

Arguing that we are all actors in the historical construction of the present is to assert less an image of agency. Since history also constructs what it means to experience being human, being an actor or participant, I mean that affects run throughout the unfolding of any historical sense. Karl Marx had famously argued that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (1978, 595). And yet one of the most powerful criticisms to date has been that human beings disappear from this history. Entire forms of life and practices fall away, if not permanently then transforming into other forms and practices (Thrift 2008). History hurts. But if trans people have engaged in constructing their own historical narratives, then crafting an historical genre of trans life would account for how feeling trans, as trans being-in-worlds, has been recorded. History as an ongoing process of events and untold happenings can also be read in fits and starts, like so many tableaux that capture some of
the aesthetic economies of gender nonnormativity. At any rate, even if such scenes might depict
the defeated it is my intention to illustrate how those defeated still managed to carry on and made
do.

Thus, the historical record could be read as if “transsexuality” emerged as a being
through medical discourses only in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It would be tempting, from a biopolitical
angle of history, to situate all remaining forms of gender nonnormative life in that narrative. And
yet, if medicalization created the conditions for certain forms of gender nonnormative life, it left
out the conditions for numerous others. “First, let me state that ‘gender dysphoria’ has never
meant confusion of who I was or am” (The Quest, Undated). Perhaps, to reconstruct Marx’s
idiom, it is “our modern understanding of gender that is haunted by dead generations like a
nightmare.” The trans historical genre is likewise a refusal of this nightmarish hauntology. The
trans genre pushes against pathology as well as ordinary conventions of gender.

Normatively defined sex/gender in Western cultures is marked by as many discontinuities
as there are rational explanations for sexual difference (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Laqueur 1990). As
for any “unifying” narrative, I identify at least two centripetal forces/discourses that have pulled
trans histories together (however violently, as I will argue) in significant ways. These include
Western norms governing sexual difference (sex/gender as organizing principles of sociality) and
the institution of scientific explanations of both (biology, medicine, psychiatry). Thus, by telling
these stories, I could suggest that these rationalizations of bodily difference would eventually
form tightly bound knots of what Michel Foucault would term discourse, or knowledge-domains
(Foucault 1974). That sex was considered, historically, to be an issue of genital differences
(Laqueur 1999). That trans was nameless, anomalous, an outlier until it was brought into focus
by these knowledge-domains. Trans would eventually become legible, sayable, a kind of being
amongst others. But what I will attempt to highlight at regular intervals is the changing historical sensorium, the historical structures of feeling that made certain affects sensible and livable.

I could continue in this vein and argue that trans people were part of a scientific “fascination” at the beginning of the 20th century that gave them that being. I could argue that as a part of this emerging medical discourse, trans forms of life (“transsexual” at that historical moment) were diagnosed rather than discovered. I could argue that as scientific research on sex and sexuality advanced, trans became part of the grammar of pathology, not practice. Diagnoses like “eonism,” and “Sexo-Aesthetic Inversion” marked this itinerary (Stryker 2008, 38). I could also argue that as early as 1887, Magnus Hirschfeld, had founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee whose mission was to spearhead scientific reforms in the treatment of sexual minorities (39). That Hirschfeld was the first to use, in fact coin, the term “transvestite” and would continue to focus efforts on edifying the scientific and medical communities on gender variance (ibid.). That, despite such advocacy, the role of biology and medicine (e.g., the discovery of “sex hormones”) would alter the way sexed life in the American imaginary would settle (Meyerowitz 2002, 2). And that by the end of the 1960s, the term “gender” would be coined and would work alongside the constellation of descriptive medical terms like “biological sex” (ibid., 3). As Reid Vanderburgh (2014) intimates, “The model that was out there was that trans people feel that they are trapped in the wrong body and have always known they were actually a different gender. I didn’t fit that model and I didn’t know anyone who identified as neither man nor woman, both butch and femme” (105).
The body, in this sense, is a site of cultural accumulation as well as singular mediation. And yet it can easily be overstated when trans people express their perspectives on embodiment.

Consider the following poem, undated and entitled “The Agony of the Transsexual,” as a text that confounds quick readings of the trans experience. It expresses more than dysphoria as the oppressive condition of life. Considering its take on the dysphoric mind/body, the poem also expresses an ambivalence toward the power that the conventions gender possesses. In other words, regardless of gender, there is an anxiety of continuous misrecognition. It can be read literally, as much as “The Danish Training School” can be read in the First Interlude, but that would only encourage the flawed view that trans identities are nothing if only a reflection of medically defined complications of the mind/body continuity. The point I am trying to make is that the poem reflects a certain kind of sensorium, impositions on what feelings in everyday life can look like even if they are not all represented. Here is “Agony” in what is probably its first reprinted form:
If I told the world my one desire
Their laughter could not quench the fire
That burns this man’s soul, torn apart
For in it beats a woman’s heart

I don’t know why, I can’t explain
How this great sickness to me came
Effeminate magic cast its spell
And normal wishes did dispell [sic]

I am a new person, I’m in a new world
I’ve left my past for the life of a girl
I am no masculine
I have become so feminine

To be a girl has been my goal
A transsexual down in my soul
To be a woman has been my quest
In ecstasy I wear a dress

I wear a skirt bordered with flowers
In make-up I spend happy hours
The mind of a girl, my sex has changed
To others what I want seems strange

I want the body of a woman that’s real
For all her emotions to feel
A lady who loves lace and clothes so fancy
From this day on my name is Nancy

And when I bathe with joy I’ve found
My skin is soft, my breasts are round
A bra holds my firm bust in place
While I stare at my pretty face

Church disapproves but still I wear
Jewelry, nylons, and long hair
My Catholic faith calls it a sin
For me to dress like Carolyn

I fell [sic] ashamed, I feel the scorn
An outcast I am so forlorn
Pious men can’t understand
Why I’m a woman and not a man

Is there anyone willing to give
Hope to me so I can live
I search for help, someone that’s kind
But sympathy I never find

I am a man of intelligence
Dressed like a lady of elegance
The desires of a woman are my weakness
Possessing me like a drunkeness [sic]

Deliver me from my sadness
I would not dare to generalize that all transsexual people felt, feel, or will feel any of these emotions. My point here is that the narrator indexes a larger cultural attitude about what having a sexed identity ought to look like, and the feelings that nonnormative people ought to have in light of being nonnormative. She refers to her feelings as a “sickness,” the knowledge and origin of which she cannot “explain.” The melodrama of Nancy’s poem underscores the pervasive and traumatic limits imposed by diagnosis. But it also clarifies and recognizes, through her melodramatic poetics, what is legitimate about her complaint to the reader (see Berlant 1988). Nancy conveys her frustrations and self-dissipation. She must carry these feelings into the larger public world and yet bear the weight of realizing that her self-knowledge is, and can only be understood as, pathological. Rather than reading a “trapped” psychic self in a body, a wrong body, I read a person embedded in a cultural context that cannot help but to reach out of that absorptive environment and into the social as the ballast, a sign, for others. Not so that other can
feel the drama or be interpellated by it. But so she can register her part of this genre-inducing complaint.

This is a powerful effect and promise of poetics. As Claudia Rankine (2014) notes, “the body hauls more than it can bear” (12). Writing can be a form of “catching” this large haul in order to bear it. Mariana Ortega called it a kind of hometactic, where the not-at-home can feel “comfortable and safe, where I can be who I am” (2016, 193). The world would, to Nancy’s estimation, only dismiss these hauled feelings as nonsense or abomination. At every step throughout the poem, she is anxiously aware of her own body and its public perception (“a man of intelligence/ Dressed like lady of elegance”). Again, I read the term “man” as less about a biological reality (a birth-assigned sex) and more of Nancy’s assertion toward a universal qualification of her selfhood. Consider the fact that she has already declared “I am a woman and not a man.” And although her place in the public dialogue of femininity and womanhood is constantly put in question by her own doubts, she must make a life in private. As a plea for help or as an examination of feeling trapped in the wrong culture (not body), “Agony” is an opportunity to understand affective experience within the limits of this history and culture shot through with pathological language. We do not need the language of pathology as the only way to understand her pain.

Activism and Social Change

Gender nonnormative people were (and in many instances still are) viewed with skepticism and ridicule that is explicitly expressed in the poem “Agony.” Even historically progressive actors in the fight for so-called gender equality played their part in reinforcing anti-trans sentiment. Trans exclusive radical feminists (TERFs), such as Janice Raymond, were among a growing number of writers and activists declaring that trans women were nothing than
men invading “real” women’s space. That trans men were simply trying to “escape” the patriarchy. Raymond and others of her kind of transphobic ilk were participating in what other feminists would later call the female complaint, a means of bringing together women’s experiences for the purposes of creating shared subject of femininity. Their so-called radical reactions to patriarchy only served to reinforce some of the most insidious forms of patriarchal power. As Lauren Berlant argues, “the fantasy that all women are, more or less, alike produces a meta-symbolic order in which the female sex is defined as that element which needs to be explicated or contextualized in one or another patriarchal narrative. Indeed, feminism’s crucial fusing of the personal and the political comes from turning women’s individual gyno-genealogical scars into diacritical marks in different kinds of oppositional narrative and social practices” (1988, 238). In other words, these radical feminist discourses produced the very exclusions they hoped to overcome through their own attachment to a generic “women’s” movement.

Caught within the interlocking networks of conventional norms of sex/gender, medical diagnoses of “gender identity disorder,” and trans-antagonistic feminisms (what was then “queer” social criticism tout court) would create a kind of historical gravity well around which trans narratives became distorted. We can interrupt this kind of pathologized and victimized narrative by remarking on social upheaval and agentic self-creation also taking place. In the 1960s, the birth of gay liberation movement was forged, owing to the preceding two decades as a network of connected by bars and dives, secret meetings and public “queer” spaces of queer sexual practices, pushed back against state induced violence (Warner 2000, 1-40). The trans communities of the early 20th century could find respite in these spaces. But many queer bars, for example, would often disallow gender variant patrons, so called “trannies,” and tricksters.
But trans communities would, ironically, have founding members at the riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 (namely, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson).

Image 1.1: Political History of Rebellion

Behind this history are many trans women and men making things work in their lives for communities to be built. They made a life that made worlds possible. Transwomen of color, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Survival and critical attention to space, place, and local memory were crucial. As their sixty-page manifesto/zine intimated, the founding members were “not respectable queers” (STAR No Date, 6). That is, they are signs of that “other” of history that stood against the notions of assimilation, who carried on their very bodies the pain and re-memory of the liberation movement. As the zine’s introduction stresses, “STAR was just one historical note in a legacy of queer insurgency” (10). STAR can be read a sign of social and economic activism of those times. It arose against the backdrop of rivaling socialities, diagnoses, police raids, and local representation who questioned the very legitimacy for trans being-in-worlds. Yet, this group (and other like it) worked alongside revolutionary movements for progress and yet failed to have their affective orientations of anger, rage, and betrayal registered.
Many white trans activists like Virginia Prince, Ariadne Kane, and Reed Erickson engaged in a number of (well-resourced) efforts. Others, remaining silent, wrote op-eds and letters to the editor or shared with national pamphlets and magazines. Virginia Prince’s *Transvestia* was the first magazine (published with Prince’s own money) to become an inclusive text for trans communities. Ari Kane established transgenderist conferences such as Fantasia Fairs where a mixture of crossdressers and trans women were instructed in areas that ranged from voice, comportment, and what looked right for a feminine appearance. It was the vanilla version of Leslie’s training in The Danish Training School (see my preceding Interlude on “Reading”).
Academically (and socially) the 90s marked advances in the study of gender that would invite the perspectives of trans scholars and activists to speak and write about their experiences (“I am not sick!”). Their voices were being recounted in a newly developed discipline of transgender studies—and would work as a bulwark against misleading notions of trans communities.

Interruption: Narratives in the Space of Signs. The following considers the way that language might be used to locate that historical sign-as-bridge to life. I bolded those terms I thought might provide such a way of thinking—asking what hides beneath the meaning of these words and phrases. I owe a great methodological hat-tip to Kathleen Stewart’s style here, especially her use of such bolded terms when she reproduces spoken words so as to indicate local mediation of cultural meaning in A Space on the Side of the Road. Consider the following narrations of life-making in various scenes of life, of affectively absorptive environments:

Before you decide to go public you must consider the risks you are taking. When a man goes in public dressed as a woman, it is possible for one of three things to happen: a) to be discovered, b) to be assaulted [sic], c) to be arrested. It is the extreme of foolishness to pretend that ‘it can’t happen to me’ (Lind Undated, 1).
It can happen to anyone. But it seems that, above, to be discovered at all is violent and leads to the assault and arrest. Violence becomes an ordinary thing. “The transvestite, transgenderist and transsexual will go to great effort to hide their way of living. Obviously because of fear of being ‘read’ found out. Fear of being found out means someone telling friends, wives, children, employers about them. Setting off a chain of events that could destroy a human life” (Lind Undated, 3).

Here, the body is something that is read, a sign—and trans communities learn to speak a language to make sense of their own bodies. Not for the sake of others rather for their own purposes of self-making. “As trans people,” Willy Wilkinson (2014) argues, “we have experienced the world in different shoes, different realities, different bathrooms. We speak a different language” (30). “Along with all that [of being trans] comes the extreme frustration with language. There is only so many words to use for pronouns and genders and sometimes I feel that none of them fit me” (Trans Youth Survey 2001, 18). As Farmer (1993) remarked, “the process of throwing off the shackles of masculinity to become a woman, I call ‘Transition’. ‘Transformation’ has been a revolution in my awareness of myself and of my life” (v). How and when did bathrooms become a site of politics for trans people. Always. The language of the self changes to meet the contingencies of a time—how words harbor meanings that carry content across time and space/place. How images/memories of these places matter to affects of anxiety versus safety, readiness versus quietude. And insofar that trans communities made a language to narrate their being (within or outside of medical models) some life-making and life-building was no “revolution.”

B. Fortune wrote in 1985, as an expression of a life between her female and male self:

“I have a wife who knows, a daughter and family who don’t know at this point. Why
upset those about you unnecessarily? Life is a compromise and I have managed to find a comprised middle ground where I can be who I am and still give those about me the person they need and want” (1985, 8-9).

This is, indeed, a kind of hypervisibility—the bringing of the self into the fore of everyday life. Max, a transgender stone-butch identified participant in Girshick’s (2008) study as well, argues that “Passing must be done sometimes, in order to be safe. But I can’t imagine living a stealth life where no one knows I’m trans. I think it’s important for there to be people who are visibly challenging the gender binary. But I don’t think it’s every transperson’s responsibility to be a gender crusader” (112). As Shannon, a genderqueer identified participant in Lori B. Girshick’s (2008) study of trans voices, says: “If I don’t say something, they’re just going to see me as a ‘regular old dyke,’ which I don’t want—about as much as dykes don’t want to be seen as straight. I don’t want my gender identity to be invisible” (100). What does it mean to have one’s body made visible? How is one “seen” as straight—as this or that sexuality? Embedded in this, somehow, is that haunting presence of those not-so-respectable queers who had to fight and put up with those invisibilizing qualities that, however, paradoxically, made hypervisibility so much a part of everyday life.

We always felt that the police were the real enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals—and we were. We were stuck in the bullpen like a bunch of freaks. We were disrespected. A lot of us were beaten up and raped. When I ended up going to jail, to do 90 days, they tried to rape me. I very nicely bit the shit out of a man. I’ve been through it all (STAR, 12).
Adjustments of Genre in the Neoliberal Sensorium

Numerous socio-political and economic shifts occurred from the 1960s to the present. But the Americanized form of neoliberalism has had a particularly powerful effect on forming new barriers to accessing the good life. This model of market rationality has imposed methods of making do that are particularly traumatic for marginalized groups. I want to briefly focus on these shifts as a means of understanding how, in an age of “inclusion” in the workplace and the amplification of post-racial and post-gender societies, expressions of self-dissipation are as pronounced as ever. I want to illustrate how trans narratives in neoliberal contexts expressions have less to do with dysphoria than with a kind of hypervigilant affect that saturates the ordinary and makes feelings of nonnormative embodiment even more powerful and inescapable.

According to political theorist Wendy Brown (2015), neoliberalism can be thought as a “distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects, a ‘conduct of conduct,’ and a scheme of valuation” (17) that privatizes experiences, selfhood, and feelings within the field of “reason.” The American iteration of it began sometime in the early 1970s. It forms, to borrow from Michel Foucault, a correctional world and a redirection of politics. It entails a dramatic shift away from democratic and social living through a narrative preoccupation with market inequalities as naturally occurring systemic elements. A neoliberal culture, in effect, quiets politics by diverting ordinary affects into the apolitical realm of employment (for example, the market). Losing one’s job may not be the hallmark of phobia or racism anymore. It may be that the neoliberal subject is not performing. Or the market is taking a dive. Feeling bad about this state of affairs is more likely to be voiced in therapy, not town halls. Feelings about this kind of routinized, genre-waning form of existence are, if expressed at all, are seen as being out of touch with how things really are. The town hall has, if anything, become a space of political battles over already
overrepresented groups. As Lauren Berlant (2008; 2011) argues, neoliberalism creates a social and cultural norm of silencing marginal voices (or pushing them further into smaller, intimate publics). These conservative discourses marked the emergence of a new kind of sensorium, one that pushed private feeling even further into the aegis of the domestic.

Consider, for example, Sylvia Rivera’s speech to a Pride celebration commemorating Stonewall in 1973. She was being shouted down. Rivera, an open “transvestite” was neither counted among gay men nor women liberationists who were present. She was in many ways considered another “freak” who sidelined the political unity of those movements. She yelled agitatedly into the mic (and I quote at length):

Y’all better quiet down. [Someone can be heard yelling back, ‘shut the fuck up!’] I’ve been trying to get up here all day—with your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail and write me every motherfuckin’ week and ask for your help. And you all don’t do a goddamn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up, and raped, in jail? [Someone can be heard yelling, ‘shut up!’] Now think about it—they have been beaten up and raped after having spent much of their money in jail to get their [unintelligible] and try to get their sex change. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes—to become women of the women’s liberation and they write STAR, not the women’s group; they do not write men. They write STAR because we’re trying to do something for them. I have been to jail. I have been to jail. I have been raped, and beaten many times by men, heterosexual men, men who do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for them? You all tell me “no,” to go hide my tail between my legs. I will no longer put up with this shit. I have been beaten; I have had my nose broken; I have been thrown in jail; I have lost my job; I have lost my apartment for gay liberation—and you
all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? Think about that. [Applause]. I do not believe in “the revolution” that you all do. I believe in the [sic] gay power. I believe in us getting our rights or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights.

That’s all I wanted to say to y’all people. If you all want to know about the people in jail, and to not forget [Kendry Lamore, and Dora Box, Kenny Messner] and other gay people in jail, come and see the people at STAR House…. (Violeta 2014, My Transcription)

Rivera’s feelings of betrayal and the accompanying anger toward the gay liberation front were meant to highlight the other side of queer emancipatory projects. Transvestites like Rivera were disproportionately targeted by police violence during the regular NYPD raids on gay bars. And yet this community was rarely on the agenda of the gay revolution. Her reaction was enmeshed in a combination of frustration with an American culture that invisibilized her and her community as well as the gay community who ironically perpetuated that invisibilization (recall what the fuck’s wrong with you all?). She’s struggling throughout her speech to assert, and reassert, her legitimate presence on stage as a representative of the movement. And the affective dimensions of trauma (of being raped, being thrown in jail, losing both job and apartment) are made public through anger and militancy. She shares in the real material dispossession that often left gay and queer communities of that time in abject poverty and homelessness. But her efforts are often shouted down.
Rivera is using speech as a vehicle for the expression of her felt experiences of rage, of complete isolation from both society and others in the gay community. And the gay community wanted to distance themselves from her. Her being in jail, her open assaults on the police, her very appearance in public life, is taken as a sign of something that would hinder, not advance, the gay the mainstream agenda of gay liberal rights. She makes reference to the literal incarceration of trans people, which is critical for two reasons. First, trans people could not, literally, participate in public acts because they were locked up. Second, as criminals, one might argue that they have no “legitimate” feelings of anger. Why attack the police? Why push against the conventionality of gender assignment? Why be angry if you’re bringing it on yourself? Her speech does its own damage to the pristine fantasy inclusivity and individuality. As I will explore in Chapter Two, Rivera’s speech appears alongside the emergence of new affective experiences, for example, rage, public expression of self-dissipation, and the pushback of pathological language.

The Legacies of Isolation and Rage

Whether Rivera’s speech is an instance of emancipatory agency and an expression of real trans politics is a dicey decision to make. However, I think that the trans ordinary can repossess
this kind of activist memory. That the sign of a counternarrative is in need of reading. Claudia Rankine (2014) describes such memories inscribed on the body such that “the body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games (2014, 28). And yet, when and where are these bodily memories recalled in the body of culture or politics? Whose history gets to speak and on what register? To what political ends? It was only the violent death of Brandon Teena that seemed to raise a national interest about gender variant people and their lives (Cvetkovich 2003, 274-275). Movies, documentaries, and constant “talk” pervaded the national spotlight in the 90s. Academy awards were given for the cinematic version of Brandon’s life Boys Don’t Cry. Brandon’s name, like many others whose lives were (and are) brutally taken, “cull themselves into traumatic images and then disperse again in the anecdotal flow of just talk” (Stewart 1996, 108). Others, like the memory of Tyra Hunter’s tragic death (ever rarely her life), are only ever brought up during moments of silence and days of remembrance.

Recent murders of trans women reproduce this compounded silence. India Monroe was a twenty-nine year old trans woman. She had been shot multiple times. India, a Virginia resident, was both misgendered and identified using her birth name in initial reports. India’s funeral, held just this January, also had facts that were, on her friend’s accounts, contrary India’s living wishes. Her friends say that not only had she been buried with her birth name prominent at services, but that her hair had been cut, her body was dressed in man’s suit, and that her hands had been covered so that her feminine features were concealed. One close school friend said
“[India would] want to have her nails done, hair done, look amazing, because that’s what she liked.”

India’s life, and death, had lost meaning. She was pulled into the violent undertow in which she still lingers locally in Virginia—but haunts the imaginary and imposes itself upon the present of our collective trans (queer) imaginary. India was left to “an ordinary environment” or simply “episodes, that is, occasions that frame experience while not changing much of anything” (Berlant 2011, 101, my emphasis). Just talk. Episodes not changing much. How does this past intrude upon the present in such a way that it becomes entangled with or enflesh the setting? The memory of a death, of a body, might haunt a particular place—a time, a day, a moment reminding us not to go “there,” not to wear “that.” Remember what happened to…? India’s memory, perhaps linked with Tyra’s, can more than simply a call to action on “days of remembrance.” Surely their memories, that is to say of their lives and the circumstances of their deaths signify a cultural amnesia of certain traumatic events for marginalized people. The question is how any memory might intrude upon a public’s memory and thought.

Stories of life and death are more than simply tales. They are rather access points in a network of knowing/feeling—a remembering that is itself social knowledge, a felt sense of
what’s going on. Remembering these histories inform how we might speak ourselves into existence, narrate our being in (or out of) the world. How does one unconceal this density of historical narrative—to un-conceal their bundled truths? The shock of trans history imposes itself as so many traumas on the memory/mind in the phenomenological world through a shared knowing/feeling of pain. In light of this intrusion, we may speak of places, names, memories, events, and everyday banalities that build upon a “local epistemology of re-membering impacts by re-tracing them in graphic images that stand at once as refuse and refuge” (Stewart 1996, 91). In this local epistemology, a cultural and social trans epistemology, how might the graphic imagery of violent death be read in the archive of everyday news? One can trace these epistemological repertoires by reading reports that deal with trans death as a sign of otherness. The absence of care here or the swift remark about national policy there make their deaths seem like the forgettable kind of ordinary. The historical tableaux against which the contemporary trans ordinary is propped offers a critique of such cultural erasures. I want to track those erasures as products of our culture’s historical relegation of gender nonnormative selves. But I also want to retain the sadness and felt sense of loss without the melodramatic sentimentality that C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) call “trans necropolitics.”

Image 1.6: Tweeting in the Archive of Life and Death
Out Magazine did not detail the life of Alphonza Watson. Only that, according to her mother, "She was a very caring, passionate, fun person to be around, always in a talkative and playful mood." Their report placed her name alongside those other deaths taking place in 2017 alone. “Alphonza’s death follows the reported murders of seven transgender women of color in 2017. The names of other women killed this year are Jaquarrius Holland, Chyna Gibson, Ciara McElveen, Mesha Caldwell, Jamie Lee Wounded Arrow, Keke Collier and Jojo Striker” (Rulli 2017). As a reader, I’m most affected by the abstracted nature of these kinds of reports. That “one among many” kind of gesture, a name that should be followed by others, constitutes one of a few signs for Alphonza. But they are always connecting with others’ deaths. That her benediction should read “Rest in Power” in the tweet—reflecting a prayer that such an afterlife possesses power. That these stories build upon one another like an impersonal coastal shelf. That each name constitutes a line across points of reference. These names stand like so many signs that seem to have more to say, yet say nothing as they sit on a screen, or a page of a newspaper. Activists did speak out. Director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, Beverly Tillery, stated: “As a society we can stop this epidemic by hiring trans women of color, making sure they have safe places to live and standing up when we see or hear them being demeaned and attacked and simply by valuing their lives. The moment to act is now” (ibid.)

Society. Epidemic. Safe places. Life. Moment. Now. These are words that add an ethical and normative dimension to our present, of the “now” being intruded upon not just by the senselessness of previous murders. Rather, these are words that, pregnant with social and cultural history of things, haunt the present and intrude upon the common sense of activism. It is “now,” in a long string of “nows,” in an endlessness of “nows” that stand as opportunities to act as the archive of trauma fills with signs not read.
In another featured story, violent death meets the ethos of individualism. We know what Mercedes Williamson’s last moments were. *Newsweek* reports:

Joshua Vallum murdered his former partner 17-year-old Mercedes Williamson in 2015 after a friend told him the Alabama-born teenager was a transgender woman. He was found to have planned her murder, luring her into his car. He tasered her in the chest and stabbed her multiple times with a pocket knife. As she tried to run away, he chased her and struck her with a hammer (Rodriguez 2017).

Here, readers are asked to member the ways that certain non-normative lives are devalued. This kind of intimate terrorism is not entirely new to trans communities. But the *Newsweek* article chalks kind of violence to a national epidemic of hate crimes. In the late 90s, the federal government was prompted to enact hate crimes legislation that enhanced the sentences of people found guilty of hate-motivated crime. Such legislation was brought about as a result to the violent deaths of Matthew Shepard (a gay man) and James Byrd, Jr. (a black straight man). I might recall here that Brandon Teena or Tyra Hunter, having met their end during that same stretch of time (‘96-’98), were not given such federal heft. Tyra’s memory were left to days of remembrance. Brandon’s memory was sensationalized in a critically-acclaimed movie. The U.S. General Attorney reflected on the culture of bias in a provocative way:

‘Today's sentencing reflects the importance of holding individuals accountable when they commit violent acts against transgender individuals,’ U.S. General Attorney Jeff Sessions said in the DOJ statement. ‘The Justice Department will continue its efforts to vindicate the rights of those individuals who are affected by bias motivated crimes.’ (Rodriguez 2017)
What is the meaning behind fashioning the narrative of redemption, the excavation of voices, the “unforgetting” of life, out of that cultural debris called normative history? It should be the realization that these crimes (physical, emotional, affective, epistemic, historical) aren’t about individuals against individuals. It is, rather, about the cultural against the lived and actual—about socialities forgotten, or lost, or never having the chance of being vindicated because the cultural script has always been about the “abstract individual.” Thus far, it has not been about communities who have not mattered as a result of this kind of cultural investment. Changing culture cannot be done based upon a constant attention to what I would call the “presentist political” of neoliberal individualism. Marginalized forms of life need vindicating from this hurtful history.

As theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues:

Not only does performance [as an archive] act as a repository for ephemeral moments, it can also make an emotion public without narrative or storytelling; the performance might just be a scream, a noise, a gesture without a sound. It also displaces the dyadic and hierarchical relationship between doctor and patient that governs clinical approaches to trauma, opening that relationship out into the public sphere and expanding the repertoire for the expression of emotion. When culture takes over from the clinic, though, it continues to perform therapeutic functions, but these functions are embedded within collective and public practices (2003, 286).

Performance, here, can be understood as the combination of both objects and humans in a given space, a combination that has an emotional effect. I wonder, then, what kinds of objects or what kinds of human gestures help shape and signal the continued dialectic between clinical venues of expression and cultural ones of trans experience?
Perhaps the act of redemption found in a memorial-creche placed at the location of a transwoman’s murder. Such a creche can be understood in numerous ways. As the assemblage of affects associated with life, this memorial “speaks” to some by associating memories with a painful history of discrimination, violence, and erasure. As such, it is a reminder of both vigilance and the need for activism. Yet, for many others the memorial is a reminder of the vibrancy of community life and of a personal relationship with that community’s histories and narratives. And even if it has the common effect to onlookers of reminding them of the everydayness to violence, it has affected the trajectories for navigating what happens after that encounter, and thus their day, and their life.


Perhaps redemption is found in the act of remembrance itself, remembering the materiality of the past struggle. These are often forgotten in contemporary narratives of activism. They might muddy the message in an age of mass-mediated infotainment. Perhaps on its own, or to facilitate such remembrances, national campaigns like the #SayHerName project bring local tragedies (like the death of India Monroe) into a public dialogue that doesn’t dispense with the affective dimensions of trans lives. It revels in them. These avoid the “necropolitical” extraction of value from the emotional existence of trans people.
Perhaps redemption can be located in the everyday movement of bodies where “they do not belong,” so to speak. There is a recent trend in the physical occupation of private/public space is a necessary strategy of forcing the issue of visibility. Consider the history of the Christopher Street Piers, for example. The Piers was a site in which the contest over capitalism, rights to belonging, and feelings/expressions of outrage over structural and historical dispossession take place in non-intuitive. Queer and trans expressions of life can merge in this space. “The Pier has therefore served as a hangout for queer and questioning youth for years, providing a venue for socializing, after-bar parties, the dance and performance culture that influenced New York’s drag balls” (Walker 2011, 95). In “Pier Kids: The Life,” the space is still used as a ground for gathering together, enacting ballroom scenes (like voguing and catwalks), and a site to find some respite within an otherwise heteronormative policing of their activities deeper in the City. This occupation of that site recalls a scene from life in history, recapitulated in David France’s documentary “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson.” Collecting and recasting the work of Victoria Cruz’s activism to uncover Marsha P. Johnson’s death, the documentary has a chilling moment when Sylvia Rivera, then homeless and struggling with alcoholism after Johnson’s death in 1992, looks over the squalor of the Piers and says, “we tried, Marsha.”
Summary

The animating thrust of this chapter has continued to be the affirmation of Stewart’s urgency of reconstituting nonnormative histories against the grain of larger narratives. These narratives downplay the affective squeeze most marginalized communities experience in their life projects toward the fantasies of the good life. Sara Ahmed’s admonition that “forgetting would be a repetition of the violence or injury” is of particular importance (2014, 33). Ahmed argued, and I agree, that it is how the past intrudes on our present and interrupts the smooth surface of our continuity that provides a chance for redemptive shock. And yet I want to make clear that this is not an invitation to reopen wounds in order to politicize life already subject to political whim. Rather, I am arguing that these are wounds not because they represent old forms of violence, death, and isolation. They are wounds because the very premises of their being forgotten is wounding. Unforgetting is, in a certain sense, the necessary step toward understanding the shared affects of unbelonging, of not being-at-ease, as Mariana Ortega might
argue. This historical grounding of the trans genre explores why bias-motivated violence hurts so much in the first place. It compounds the problem.

This chapter has argued that such violence is not just the practice of the living now. It is conducted within the shadows of the present made possible by the overgrowth of shielded history. That kind of historical overgrowth must be cleared. The recovered signs understood, nurtured, and given an appropriate place as potentially resistant but always indicative of how people manage. That is, in so many ways, the final redemptive power for trans narratives. Their voices, not merely decoupled from medicine or social norms of gender, are also divorced from the sentimentality of progress that has, as of yet, to manifest in fully emancipatory ways through acts and performance. Chapter Two will deal with these intensities and performances, offering a phenomenological account of the trans ordinary and its affective politics. It will also explore how affects, shared and mapped across history in this chapter, shape the ordinary in gender nonnormative life.
Chapter 2: The Trans Ordinary and its Affective Politics

Whereas the last chapter dealt with the historical conditions for feeling, and the absence of trans histories from many normative accounts of gender nonnormativity, this chapter focuses on the present experience that is impacted by such histories. This chapter is an attempt to clarify what the felt sense of the body is, mapping the affective and phenomenological terrain in terms of the everyday. This chapter explores the lived aspects of feeling. In particular, I take up the affective conditions of being “happy” or feeling “normal” within the rhythms of day-to-day gender nonnormative life, or what I have been calling the trans ordinary. I use shudder quotes here to point toward the normative perils of assuming that happiness extends from accepted healthy attachments to things, life-activities, and people. My aim is not to argue that normalcy is impossible to achieve or that the things we enjoy will always disappoint us. I do, however, have questions about happiness’ solidity across forms of life. What is it to be happy/normal when attachments to unhealthy habits (whether to fast foods or so-called unsafe sexual practices) may produce feelings of emotional contentment but reproduce conditions for social ostracism or poor health, or both? Is this sense of happiness most crucial to a person when life is patterned around a constant state of exhausting vigilance whether about one’s own sense of belonging in the world or of local safety or ordinary mutual recognition and reciprocation? Might happiness be understood as phenomenological, that is to say as irreducible experiences of the bodily type? Or as affective attachments that do not fit neatly within liberal commitments to self-sovereignty or radical left critiques of power and of revolutionary empowerment? These questions are just some of the ways that this chapter will re-frame affect as it is lived in the fragile grooves of the trans ordinary.
For me, affects of all types are relationships obtaining amongst people, things, institutions, social forms, or worlds—object-desires that might provide a sense of longevity and stability in the face of insecurity. It is not an emotion, *per se*. Happiness often reflects an adjustment of everyday practices, and their relational attachments, to the sometimes fantasmatic genres of living a good life, being a member of a good society, and so on. Happiness is often more an assemblage of feelings that can be described as attempts at “getting there” rather than some existential mood of “being there,” where the “there” is the projected space, the finish line of, happiness. By “getting there,” and the affective structures attending practices associated with that phrase, I mean that nonnormative life adjusts itself in ways that fit as best it can to the fantasy of a normative “good life” because this so-called good life is perceived as the only real road to happiness. Of course, nonnormative life faces all sorts of impasses along that road.

Although, I will explore how structural violence manifests in disproportionately higher ways for trans communities (Valentine 2007; Girshick 2008; Fogg Davis 2018), I am more concerned that happiness can arise through various practices that best approximate happy livability. In the ordinary, such “affective attachments” to familiar phenomena are part of efforts to manage feelings of wellbeing in justifiably unhappy circumstances. Tracking the affects of anger, pain, or happy attachments in everyday nonnormative expressions of life means adjusting our own theoretical conception of the normal, the (im)personal, and the political. This means shaking loose some already settled questions in queer and trans theory that include, but are not limited to, the trans body as philosophical sites of becoming (Baldino 2015), the trans body as revolutionary (Spade 2011) or as effects of normativity and normative desire (Butler 1990; Warner 2000).

The first section of this chapter sketches the political stakes that phenomenology and affective intuitions create. Between these two political scenes of activism is the experience and
ordinary life in which gender nonnormative people dwell. I will then sketch the
phenomenological and affective terrain onto which rest of the chapter will map experiences of
the trans ordinary. Here I rely most heavily on Mariana Ortega’s *In-Between* (2016), Lauren
Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003), and
Andrea Long Chu’s (2017) brilliant critique of trans phenomenology as much intellectual
architecture. The second section explores the meaning of the ordinary when it is attached to
potentially unhealthy, or “ugly,” affective practices. My archive consists of various stories from
trans women across the 20th century. “On Rage” and “On Isolation” illustrate how happiness is
affectively structured by the need to find continuity in unstable emotional and economic
conditions by engaging the improvisational zones of everyday life. Within this improvisational
zone one discovers that *feelings associated* with the fantasy of the good life often *replace the
object of the good life altogether* through misrecognized power the harmful object posseses. In
that way, I argue that forms of self-management during day-to-day life also include practices of
self-injury. As Adler and Adler (2011) have argued, “[cutting] is, at its essence, about feelings
[and] about the pain that drive people and the feelings of relief they get from it” (66). But as a
cutter with a non-binary identity, I find that most discussions about self-injury render our
communities pathetic, overly-emotional, or pathological depressives. That narrative must
change. I argue that the project of making a life that feels good means dealing with, carrying on,
and making do in the complex attachments to all sorts of tentative social, political, and emotional
worlds (what Mariana Ortega would describe as being-in-between-worlds). For the trans
ordinary, normative fantasies of the good life are lived orthogonally, forcing readjustments and
pursuing happiness even when it is perceived as injurious.
The Politics of Feeling “Trans Enough”: Liberal Inclusion and Anti-Normativity

The politics of this chapter is an engagement with two related imaginaries concerning the trans body. The first projects (and justifies) the necessity for liberal rights, autonomy, and recognition (Steinmetz 2017; National Geographic 2017). Or as I discussed in Chapter One, as a sign of a revolt against the hegemonic and otherwise violent cissexist and restrictive gender binary. I find the consequences of such clashing perspectives (their very existence and whichever one finds a stronger foothold paradigmatically) of political and personal importance. As a non-binary activist and junior scholar, I still find myself attached in various ways to the political, affective, and embodied qualities of the binary. And as we are witnessing important academic, political, and institutional contributions that provide grounding for the diversity of trans voices that act as critiques of trans-antagonism and transphobia, there is a necessary reflexive awareness. Namely, for every political victory or positive discursive shift, there is a strong tendency to homogenize, and thus erase, many ordinary forms of being in the everyday of trans life. Testimonials, autobiographies, and academic studies used in this chapter complicate the sweeping views of what the binary enacts on the trans ordinary. An analysis of the affective practices in the trans ordinary reveals that trans lives, as they are lived, are in fact not rebellious by default. Their experiences, as they are lived, are not indicative of a revolutionary aesthetic. It is exactly an everydayness about trans life that gets lost in all the pageantry that marks our culture of mass mediated culture, the political maneuvers of neoliberal inclusion, and the powerful critiques of normormativity.

My political argument operates against what I identify as two broadly defined imaginaries in trans politics. The first is what might be generally referred to as the transnormative. It consists of the tendency of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
(LGBTQ+) liberal politics advancing progress in the name of recognition and equality, touting achievements in areas like employment nondiscrimination as signals of change, all the while overlooking areas of everyday violence in trans life (Valentine 2007, 173-177). This imaginary holds fast to a constitutional argument that trans citizens are (rightly or wrongly) just like anyone else. Although important for any number of reasons, this way of thinking often ignores the very conditions and practices that have made that trans life livable in its singularity. Trans life is sandwiched between the political rhetoric of equality and the promises of the liberal rights ethos of citizenship (Girshick 2008). It often politicizes spaces that were already considered to be a part of a political tapestry of the trans ordinary (take bathrooms, for example). The second imaginary consists of an anti-normative politics that takes the everyday violence of the conventional gender binary to be reasons, prima facie, for undoing gender categories and politicizing non-normative identities to seek those ends. Trans becomes the revolutionary subjectivity. Dean Spade (2011), for example, has made compelling and accurate arguments about the violence of the gender binary in American law and policy. His work, however, seems to argue that “revolution” should impinge on every gender-variant person’s consciousness.

More recent politics for gender nonnormative communities reflect some of its queer political affinities. But the strategies receiving the most attention often rely on overdetermined conventions like sentimentality/various attachments, the affects of rage, or a combination of the two. Rocko Bulldagger outlined a foundational way of looking at nonbinary politics through the vicarious lens of sentimentality in “The End of Genderqueer” (2006). For Bulldagger, a genderqueer person (and thus a general politics) is one who “[is] painfully deliberate and consciously political in their gender expression; identifies with efforts to subvert oppressive power dynamic by undermining gender expectations; [has a] gender presentation is
overdetermined by traditionally gendered signs—somebody who displays excessive femininity or masculinity” (139). The first of these three intersecting guidelines forces an affective point, namely that someone has experienced a certain kind of pain owing to their gender expression/identity that would lead to being consciously political. Although the second and third guidelines serve as declarations of solidarity and the (albeit hyper-generalized) aesthetic conventions to do it, there is a kind of underdescribed attribution of experience to political consciousness. These notions borrow from the other movements, such as Queer Nation and STAR before it, whose aim was to subvert cisgender heterosexual patriarchy at any cost. But many would consider this to be precisely the problem with explicitly defining nonbinary politics as a stance against gender conformism. Ally or trans identifying, it is easy to conflate desiring political intervention with an ethical obligation to act—forgetting that to act is a privilege based on a number of intersecting factors.

Trans Phenomenology and the Political Spaces of Ordinary Practice

Given the breadth and scope of identities and practices falling under the trans umbrella, so diverse that Gordene O. MacKenzie once observed that the term contains a veritable “gender galaxy” (quoted in Currah 2006, 5), where does one situate a phenomenology of trans? The answer involves the complexities of social and self-perceptions, affective practices and feelings of self-worth, and self/public acts of recognition. In other words, studying the diversity of gender nonnormative identities is often a phenomenological undertaking (Prosser 1999; Salamon 2010; Chu 2017). A phenomenology of gender identity entails, at least in part, describing what it means to experience gender and sex. It leads to identifying gender nonnormativity as one among many of these modes of experience (Ahmed 2006). The question of identity, no matter how one poses
it, is as deeply a philosophical as it is deeply a personal (and thus political) one. These range from empirical questions of what a body is and its relation to what the body does.

I like to think that phenomenology and affect theory can be utilized along the lines of what Sedgwick (2003) called reparative—as opposed to paranoid—forms of criticism. Focusing on the day-to-day practices of life within structural oppressions, reparative theorists think in terms of “what is naive, sincere, uncomplicated, unironic, uncritical, unstrategic, or just plain ordinary about everyday being in the world”’ (Chu 2017, 150; my emphasis). Such readings aim to sidestep the claim that humans are simply duped by power and given identity (and desires). This is why Chu’s choice of “naive” is telling and important. “Naive” can be defined as the state of not having been subjected to experimentation. Phenomenology, likewise, argues that things, bodies, and everyday moods are experienced as experience. Phenomenality is literally being here. The body may be ordinary, average, sexy, or sometimes unappealing. But it is already here for us as experience. Experience and activity are then phenomena that invite creativity and, more specifically, “improvisation,” in what closely approximates what Heidegger (2010) called the nexus of life’s available possibilities (see also Harney and Moten 2013, 48-49).

Despite recent inroads made in developing trans phenomenology within this vein—from Jay Prosser’s Second Skins (1998) to Gayle Salamon’s Assuming a Body (2010)—there is still be a failure to take seriously this everyday improvisation. Often following Judith Butler’s (2008 [1990]) take on strong (social) constructionism, these studies misapprehend the day-to-day expressions of bodily experience, of actually experiencing being-in-a-body. Constructionist theories situate the body as reflecting norms (or being “inscribed” by them) through bodily iterations and performances. These modes of being habituate the subject, creating a sense of regularity of being-in-worlds. Repetitions instantiate the norm, making it real. But overemphasis
by such trans phenomenologies elide what it is to experience the singularity of having a body, and particularly a trans body, in spite of themselves. For example, Chu’s (2017) review of these phenomenologies argues that Prosser, while discussing the “wrong body” narrative of transsexual experience, suspends the body in a “literal-to-come, linked to an imagined, idealized, or phantasmatic future where the ‘imaginary or phantomized signifieds’ of the transsexual body image will be—one day, some day—reunited with their ‘corporeal referents’” (149). In other words, trans bodies are not here-yet.

Chu goes on to argue that “to defend a theory of social construction, Salamon must insist that this ‘simple givenness,’ this unproblematic availability of the phenomenological body, ‘is a fiction, albeit a necessary one’—even though she assures readers that ‘to claim that our experiences of sexed and gendered bodies are socially constructed is not to claim that our experiences are fictive’” (146). Can the trans body ever simply exist? Chu thinks so. There is a taken for granted appeal that leaves “[life’s] unremarkableness” in peril. Focusing on what the future trans body ought to look and feel like, theorists retroactively assemble emotions that haphazardly privilege sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and other forms of transition. As Chu would have it, trans phenomenologies should “[succeed] in making transition boring” (142). Being trans just is. Delving into that “is” constitutes the phenomenological intent of this chapter.

If phenomenology seeks to understand things as they are in the everyday, then affect theory is a complementary method of prying open the not-quite-definable sensations that are a part of ordinary bodily existence (Massumi 2003; Stewart 2007; Berlant 2011). Unlike emotions, affects are not immediately intelligible. But they are experienced and thus “known” to exist in scenes of life. We will see this in Susan Stryker’s (1994) account of feeling unsettled by the trip to the hospital during the birth of her partner’s child. Affect theory is concerned with how a
person’s sensations are brought to the surface of perception, e.g., comfort or discomfort, calmness or anxiety, belonging or standing out like a sore thumb. It is all about intensity (Massumi 2003, 34-35). As something felt, “affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (Sedgwick 2003, 19). If happiness is understood as affect then it is easier to see how its production can be attached to things not intuitively “good.” My affective argument centers on practices of making do that dominant (social and intellectual) norms would define as problematic and thus chalk up to pathology or power.

Throughout my following meditations on affect, I depend heavily on Lauren Berlant’s vision of how affective structures in crisis deepen a subject’s commitments to feeling something, anything, akin to happiness. She argues that within widespread contemporary precariousness “happiness exists [for some] in their commitment to bring life in line with the affect they want to continue experiencing” (2011, 166). When the pursuit of happiness becomes a strategy for feeling something at the expense of getting something, the fragmentary and elusive characteristics of being happy begin associating in unanticipated ways with unanticipated lived consequences. Affective structures in crisis time and cultural trauma, where the frequent suspensions of everyday continuity require subjects to find whatever they can to feel solidity, constitutes my theoretical commitment to examine how the trans ordinary is made into an intersectional zone of livability. I am also of the mind that affects are, themselves, “irreducibly phenomenological” (Sedgwick 2003).
Intersectional Concerns of Trans Affective Experiences

As I elaborated in Chapter One, gender nonnormative identities carry a disproportionate weight of the overall historical erasure of “trans” from mainstream LGBTQ+ movements. Even terms like “nonbinary,” “trans,” and still is, associated with a handful of practices and gender expressions such as “genderqueer,” “genderfuck,” and “genderfluid.” Recently, pangender and androgynous have been included within a gender spectrum illustrated below.

Figure 2.0: The Body
Where subjects identify along these spectrums vary. Importantly, locating oneself within the normative lines does not indicate an arbitrary attachment. As will be discussed in this section, the intersections of age, race, class, sexuality, etc., all position people in the world. This “thrownness,” as Heidegger might say, produces adjustments at the lived level. I wish to explore some of these adjustments in order to illustrate how attachments spring outward from the affects developed within those intersectional experiences.

Youth

Realizing that one is different is a common thread of any LGBTQ+ narrative. In a Trans Youth Survey (2001), frequent responses to the question of when respondents knew they were trans or gender nonnormative elicited responses that seemed to share the same affective orientation. Of knowing or, at least, of knowing through learning. “When I was six, I remember thinking that when I grew up, I wanted to be a boy. Then I found out that wouldn’t happen and I couldn’t wait to die and go to heaven ‘cause I could be a boy then. Before then I was masculine, but gender wasn’t that structured” (5). Another student argued, “since I could remember” (ibid.). Some remember specific moments that might relate to a conversation. “At about age 7 a friend and I discussed ‘sex-change operations’ after seeing a talk show on TV” (6). Religion, too, can make a powerful scission in someone’s realization. “I remember standing in front of a mirror and reciting ‘God made you a woman, you’ll die a woman’ over and over as punishment for sinfull [sic] thoughts. :-\ I was a fucked up little kid. (7). As far as terms go, one respondent argued that “I came into being genderqueer in the last year I think, but I still identify as trans too because of the umbrella term thing. Trans is the umbrella and genderqueer is the specific piece of it I identify with” (9).
These stories share similar forms forms. One respondent captured a key insight about perceived gender difference: “…once I started to learn the difference [about gender], I knew I was different…” (8). Their stories tell of a similar narrative, one popular in general and speaks to a certain unique knowledge. “At about age 7 a friend and I discussed ‘sex-change operations’ after seeing a talk show on TV” (6). The unfortunate circumstances that surround nonbinary identities is that what constitutes the limits of visibility are powerful narratives: “one has always known”, or “one was always aware of”, a difference in how one understood their gender from birth, or “learning, over time, what these differences mean.” These narratives invite a kind of static temporalization. The nonbinary subject either knows or not from the start or else they learn what they already knew. It is a consciousness that bars continuity because the framework of self-determination is already determined.

Coming Out

Regardless of the self-discovery narratives, experiences of coming out vary. Many members of LGBTQ+ communities see coming out as both a figurative and literal process of revealing one’s “secret” identity. Coming out is a diminutive of “coming out of the closet,” where “the closet” is a personal and cultural space of shame. For some it is a rite of passage. For others like queer literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2008 [1990]) the closet has marked the “long crisis of modern sexual definition” and shaped, in so many ways, the epistemological commitments of academics and everyday members of the public alike with regard to gender, sex, and sexuality. To that end, sociologist Lori Girshick has rightly pointed out that coming out as trans (in all its complex iterations) must be treated differently from an analytical. Girshick argues that “a different sexual orientation does not challenge people in the same ways as gender variance [sic]. Some individuals who are trans-identified will probably continue to look the same
and may take on the same gender role as a gay man or a lesbian, but a transsexual will dramatically change his or her appearance, body, and gender role. A genderqueer may vigorously confront others’ ideas of what a man or a woman looks like or acts like” (2008, 99). In a number of ways, nonbinary people will often face similar sorts of epistemic, emotional, and physical violence while coming out.

This violence manifests itself within, perhaps firstly, the space of the family. But violence also takes place from peers within educational institutions to everyday life at work. Juliet Jacques’ memoir, Trans, captures the isolation of coming to terms with a dissonant gender identity. Jacques writes: “I’d never dared talk to anyone about my gender identity, or my sexuality. At school, I got told that I sat ‘like a queer’ just for crossing my legs, so I felt that being open about who I was would end badly. There was nothing to help me in Horley Library either, so everything I learned about the subjects came from films and TV programmes—the ones I’d chosen to see by myself” (2015, 31). This is characteristic of a kind of epistemic erasure particular to nonbinary people: a realization that one’s own feelings (regarding gender, sexuality, or everyday embodiment) are not exactly “right.” In Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) survey, over a quarter of respondents suggested that they had experienced some form of harassment within a year of the study, and nearly a quarter of all respondents identified verbal harassment as the major component (94-95). In all cases, whether harassment was reported, respondents indicated a shift in their everyday bodily gestures and gender comportment. Jacques provides a narrative detail of this as she ruminates that her discomfort was based in no small part on the policing of her body (crossing her legs “like a queer”) by other students. She kept her gender identity to herself out of concerns for her own safety if not for the ongoingness of friendship. Where else would it be welcomed? Discussing the complexities of a nonnormative identity would otherwise
“end badly.” She learned how to manage her identity and composure to avoid, no doubt, any physical violence that still haunts queer and gender nonnormative communities.

Transition and Passing

Transition describes a variety of processes. These include social and physical changes, or a combination of the two. Some of these procedures are hormone therapy, vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, mastectomies, full hysterectomies, cheek/chin/forehead shaving and other facial alterations, chest binding, shirt and pants “stuffing,” standing-to-pee devices, complete wardrobe change, makeup, or a new wardrobe that extends a person’s gender expression into the public. As Simmons and White phrase it, “to physically alter our behaviors to align our gender identity with our gender presentation. Some of us take hormones or have surgeries. Some of us wish we could afford surgeries. Others of us do not want to take hormones or have surgeries, but we dress and act in ways that affirm our gender identity” (2014, 7). In this sense, surgical transition is very much a class-based issue. For Virginia Prince, among other transgenderists of the mid-20th century, to realize the self in all its gendered complexity involved a split between two distinct lives: the life of the “femme self” and the life of the “masc self.” The transition between the two could be seamless or full of peril. Her contemporary, Ariadne Kane (1974), also a professed transgenderist pioneer, considered the “genderal” or social boundary called gender as crossed through apparel, comportment, and conventional style.

For many others surgery is not part of the equation. This means a panoply of socially-related (and sometimes legal) changes including name changes, shifts in pronouns, and the self-management that comes with these gender affirmations. Name change can take place in private settings, legal documentation, or both. Some nonbinary people change their names to reflect gender neutrality, shortening birth names to first letters or altering them completely. Nonbinary
identities include new pronouns that may be gender neutral they/them/their, but also consist of ze/zie (pronounced “zee”) or hir (pronounced “here”), or a combination of them. Although these changes in pronouns seem simple enough, Beemyn and Rankin found that misgendering through inaccurate pronoun use (malicious or not) was one of the most pervasive forms of harassment in their study. Some found their peers unwilling to change; others consisted of their families (2011, 151-154).

Passing, whether in the context of SRS, is the recognition of one’s gender as they consciously present it to a public. Simmons and White have described this publicness as having one’s “gender presentation correctly read by others around us, choosing to live stealth. This means that few, if any, of those around us know that we are transgender” (8). In a sense, it can be thought of as the practices of self-management since passing, or the need for passing is also an awareness of one’s surroundings. For example, shopping for clothes can become a situation that invites ordinary violence where a “man in woman’s clothing” is be policed for violating the unspoken norm of apparel. Jacques has also illustrated these moments vividly, attempting to find the means “to pass” all the while being treated as a potential threat. “I tried the charity shops. Ignoring the woman at the counter who told me that ‘the men’s clothes are over there’” (2015, 23). This scene reveals what normativity can do: nullify someone’s feeling of safety through misrecognition.

Thus, the failure to pass can often lead to more than unwelcome guidance from store clerks. It can also lead to physical harm. As captured in the anthology, Nobody Passes, gender nonnormative people realize that “the majority of transgendered [sic] people travel incognito. When traveling, dressing for the occasion means downplaying our gender-bending by dressing to match our documented genders” (Thaemlitz 2006, 173). And, as will be explained in the
following subsection, passing is a function of class and race, intersecting features of human identity that enable or disable making a nonnormative life safe. In activist Toi Scott’s experience, who identifies as transmasculine, there is a continued presence of intra-community policing: “skating the ice between the two genders is a struggle. Trans men want to know why I still have breasts and why I don’t take hormones. Feminists want to know why I pack and bind, why I consider myself transmasculine” (2014, 33). Being in public consists of a complex set of decisions for a gender nonnormative person. But so too is the decision to identify with and participate in a community, who can also serve as a complex policing mechanism.

Race and Class

The notion that gender is a singular identity among many has, so far, been complicated. Intersectional theories of identity, especially those articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), have argued that each identity category is relational, impacting the lived experience of any other one. Trans activist Alok Menon-Vaid (2016) shares this narrative construction of the embodied gendered self. “I struggle with how society is obsessed with the idea of having one self/identity. I struggle with how the only way we talk about gender as an identity. I think gender just like our ‘selves’ [sic] is relational. I think we have been and will become many selves for many different people.” Many indigenous, especially Native American, cultures reflect this conception of plurality or multiplicity for self-hood. Many are re-realizing that trans identities occupy spiritual truths. Cassidy Anne Medicine Horse asserts the importance of Two-Spirit being, that “[a] gender-crossing individual serves as a critical link in the balance of nature” (2014, 70). European colonialism had a prevalent hand in destroying this epistemic linkage to the spiritual trans-self. “The concept of gender,” Toi Scott writes, “is entrenched in the black community, if not the pillar of it. As I’ve come out as genderqueer, I have found it difficult to imagine disassociating
myself from black womanhood” (33). In some instances, communities have now altered their plural and singular ethnic terms—such as Latinx, Latin@, Chicanx, Chican@—to represent the spectrum of embodied diversity present.

Of these intersectional effects are the constructions of race and class, where racial identity in many Western cultures determines the economic success and actuarial rates, where people of color (POC) are disproportionately poorer and whose life chances are cut short. This extends to the realms of health and personal care. Lauren Berlant reports that “[the] symptom[s] of unhealth [sic] does characterize, disproportionately, the bodily propensities people of color now suffer the wearing diseases of old age. High blood pressure and diabetes are especially catastrophic, as these portend early heart disease, liver and pancreatic failure, strokes and aneurysms, as well as blindness and circulation problems” (113). These conditions lead to what Berlant has called “slow death,” a condition that thrives on an historically underprivileged group’s inability to alter the conditions that attach it to the complexities of its own demise. This stems from a number of socially reinforcing stereotypes—such as POC being “too lazy” to find adequate work, “welfare queens” who continue to have kids to stay on public welfare—that reproduce racism in the workplace and in public spaces.

Indeed, in each of Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) studies of harassment, coming out, abuse, employment discrimination, and other realms of everyday life, POC were almost a two-thirds more like to experience a negative encounter than their white counterparts (96-97; 99; 105-106). Race is a built-in part of (especially Western) human lives. Statistics, of course, can only reveal so much. Experiences of racism, especially ones intersected by gender, are often ones of “demonization, scapegoating, police brutality, housing segregation, and lack of access to certain jobs and employment” (Ziegler and Rasul 2014). There have been multiple studies in the 20th
century documenting the various ways that institutionalized racism impacts everyday life for POC. Michelle Alexander (2012) writes in *The New Jim Crow*, for example, of the mass incarceration of black men (that gender assignment in particular). The widespread effects of this racially biased carceral state impacts gender nonnormative POC in other ways than merely being locked up. Such issues include, but are not limited to, higher risks of sexual abuse by inmates and prison guards alike, being placed in the wrong gender population (thus increasing the likelihood of violence), and administrative segregation or confinement to a single cell (Broadus and Minter 2014). Finally, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) have argued that trans POC are only understood in their discriminatory settings as affective tools. That is, their deaths are used as a means of making a larger ideological cause (such as hate crimes legislation, etc.) more pressing.

Sexuality and Intimate Violence

Sexuality has been as much a part of the feminist and queer debates of the latter 20th century as have gender and sex. Nonnormative gender identities are often lost in the ongoing discourses that have emerged out of the evaluations of sexual practices. Often perceived to be either gay or lesbian, or more commonly for members of the LGBTQ+ community queer, people with nonnormative genders involve the complex relationship between that person’s gendered self and those to whom they are attracted. For many, this may involve defaulting to queer because there is a limited vocabulary to discuss sexuality without recourse to binary sex/gender. From the lived, or phenomenological standpoint, gender nonnormativity does not reflect the complex psychic, physical, social, and cultural phenomena that sexuality invokes. Someone who is transmasculine may not consider themselves gay for similar reasons as someone who is transfeminine may not consider themselves to be lesbian. Although “queer” is a useful term to
describe many nonnormative sexualities, its gloss-like cover may tend to erase more than it illuminates.

Many gender nonnormative people feel a particular kind of scrutiny on their sexual practices through a form of social, but also relational, policing. In short, their bodies are subject to a heightened expectation because, as normative conventions of sex(uality) go, a person’s gender expression ought to match their sex (or genitalia). For nonbinary people, gendered appearances can (and often does) fluctuate. One’s everyday aesthetic is not tied to a perpetual attachment to the norms of femininity or masculinity. In one crucial sense, gendered appearance becomes a means of bargaining for normative acceptance for the nonbinary or gender nonnormative people. This concept may be difficult to grasp. Most do not have to consider how one’s own gendered appearance simply matches a normative standard. That is the privilege of “looking” and “being” normal—that one’s bodily appearance under their clothes is the same as the one on the surface.

Summarizing the Phenomenality of the Body

Critic and writer Andrea Long Chu (2017) has argued that the trans body is neither behind nor ahead of things. The body is directly in possession of the person about whom activism or academia is narrating. That argument alone requires a more holistic analysis of everyday trans politics and life. Indeed, if gender dysphoria were the only sensation of otherwise numerous oppressive structures that gender nonnormative communities feel, then cis privilege is not only reified within trans subjectivity. It’s a done deal, so to speak. Attention to other forms of racial and economic marginalizations fall away as the (now de-pathologized) trans body circulates in the zone of cultural mediation. The (cis-) public, such a politics would accede, has finally recognized the real person behind all the discursively defined sex/gender barriers.
Theorizing Self-Management in the Trans Ordinary

Throughout this chapter I have been developing the view that norms and normativity need to be recast in the modes of what living is doing with the norm rather than the other way around. Thus normative accounts of the good life (manifested through heteronormativity [marriage], cisnormativity [passing], and bionormativity [transition-related surgeries]) do not interpellate trans subjects as such. These views of what is otherwise a brand of Althusserian ideology tend to “read normativity too narrowly as an authoritarian desire” (Berlant 2011, 186). In this section, norms are more like genres within which subjects work and make life happen. Each of the following testimonies will indicate that affects of belonging and self-sovereignty (all relationally “happy”) might have to be put on hold, suspended as it were, in response to perceived norms. Yet in each story, these suspensions illustrate a kind of “readying” for (not the hollowing out of) agency, agential intensity that living in crisis conditions induce.

On Rage

Susan Stryker (1994) has written some of the most influential critical on cisnormativity and biological determinism in trans studies. Her style is often disarming, revealing, and resonant with an everyday awareness of lived pain often lost in critical (queer) theory. Her influential “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” captures the powerful affective stakes of the everyday (from transition, to heterosexism, to medical science, to the normative family). The joyous scene of her partner’s giving birth is fraught with all kinds of affective tensions. It didn’t begin at the hospital. It began at home where the decision was made that the birth was to take place at the hospital. The declaration that “it’s a girl,” a trigger in that moment, was also unlocking a series of affects already circulating in Stryker’s experience of the event. “Why, just then, did a jumble of dark, unsolicited feelings emerge wordlessly from some quiet back corner of my mind? This moment
of miracles was not the time to deal with them. I pushed them back, knowing they were too strong to avoid for long” (249). She was already exhausted and disappointed from not having had the chance to have the birth at home. She didn’t want to have the birth at the hospital. This birth was not a part of the normative “script” that she and her tribe (her close friends) wanted. The hospital was a site of ambiguous consent to gendered norms and an ominous waiting seemed to haunt the air. Stryker confesses that, “my body left me hanging” (250). Between her lover’s body and her own there grew a space, an emergent gap that seemed unbridgeable. Her feelings suspended the moment but she was not completely undone. She simply had to catch up to herself.

The sensation of “catching up” is an example of what Berlant (2011) attributes to the peculiar temporal effects of life in cultural crisis, or what Massumi (2003) has called a “pastness opening directly onto a future” (30). Any number of things that are perceived as traumatic or felt as violent do not manifest themselves every day. For example, a homophobic or racist norm, ones that possess the essential effect of dehumanizing nonnormative forms of life, can be felt as tremors in the fields of perception. They are virtual. The become actualized in form and content by a joke, or sexing a newborn child, or being mistaken for somebody else when you are Black in a culture of whiteness. Anthropologist Veena Das (2007) calls the effects of these happenings “the soft knife of everyday oppressions” (218). In this way, crisis is lived as a nonevent, an affective maw spanning across lived time, connecting feelings of presence and precarity in ways that are phantasmatic but materially abrupt. I would describe the sensation as anticipation, worrying affects that ready the subject for the actualization of something “in the air.” This bodily state is anxiety inducing, for sure, because it suspends feelings of control in favor of the potential something to happen. It is a kind of knowledge, an epistemology all too familiar for
nonnormative forms of self-management. Whereas Sianne Ngai (2005, 1) describes anxiety as so many “ugly feelings [that act as] affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity [producing] suspended agency,” I argue that, on the contrary, such suspensions are sites where affective attachments turn into new experimental practices that question the limits of ordinary knowledge and test boundaries.

I say this is a nonnormative epistemology because it runs the full gamut of intersectional precarity. Claudia Rankine (2014) argues that the affects of racialized anger form “[another] kind of anger [that] can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness” (24). One wonders what is known. “You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints. It responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment” (ibid.). The known becomes the realization of having lived in the very impasse being presently faced. Experiences over the long course of making a life accumulates and saddles body with the potential of activity. Minorities of all kinds carry a life’s worth of experiences in everyday life that may never registers at conscious levels. This is especially true of bias and of the expense of energy. The soft knife of everyday oppressions is “soft” precisely because it hews slowly and delicately into the ordinary over the course of time. Unaware of its temporal effects, minoritized subjects feel a continuous sagging by the nonevent of (racial, economic, gendered, or sexed) crisis, a sensation that anticipates a happening before it actually takes place. It’s the difference in what happens and the attunements of the people that count.

This seems to be the case in Stryker’s hospital scene. She must make new attachments in order to make sense of the impossible (her own body’s inability to bear children), to recuperate
from her own feelings of shame at being emotionally distant, and her exhaustion of feeling so overwhelmed by norms that she already knew were there. She writes “I floated home from the hospital, filled with a vital energy that wouldn’t discharge. I puttered about until I was alone. Finally, in the solitude of my home, I burst apart like a wet paper bag…” (ibid.). Her impasse leads her to an attachment of rage, the epistemic continuity she needs to fix what she can fix in the everyday. Her tears of anger at the limitations of her own body are akin to her feelings of pride at having been witness to the birth of a child. This transgender rage, of a particular kind of relation between the trans subject and normativity, de-privileges the linguistic and advances the affective: “No sound/ exists/ in this place without language/ my rage is a silent raving” (ibid., 252). Her rage is a means through which hegemonic gender practices and the limitations of biology get mapped back into her ordinary. She is free to associate with other feelings, ones both cathartic yet emotionally tentative, but given over to potential energy. Rage surely cannot sustain someone forever. But it can situate in their body as virtual affect, waiting to catch up with them again with its situatedness, its promise of knowledge.

On Isolation

The following are taken from the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. I understand that archives are often products of privileged donors, situated in private universities or libraries, exemplifying how certain voices are recorded and remembered and others discarded to history. The materials themselves felt lost—keepsakes, forgotten lives attached in various, sometimes non-intuitive ways in folders and paper clips (much like affective attachments). This place, where the physical archive and the cultural/affective archive buried into each other, prompted a host of personal affective connections of my own. At this burial site, I was left with an unenviable task of “finding” stories, narratives, or “critical objects” to signify
trans life. These stories illustrate that the “I am” is often a linguistic mask for an attachment to “I want to be.” This attachment, often routed through the future-temporality of transition, leads to a number of affective impasses each person deals with in different ways.

Among the number of people whose testimonies I read, Dorothy D. (1979) stood out to me. She, along with many other trans people in the mid-20th century, found op-ed pieces and letters to the editor as means for sharing lived experience. This style of composing a life’s narrative and past was almost anonymizing. Dorothy, living most of her life by another name, writes of the kinds of exhaustions identified earlier in Stryker’s letter. Her identity, she argues, “would be classified by shrinks as an unoperated transsexual. [She hasn’t] gone to the girl factory to get a sex change a la Christine Jorgensen” (1979, 9). Dorothy would, however, “prefer to live as a woman full time. I feel more together that way. I am more comfortable, relaxed, more me. I’ve spent better than 50 years trying to be Phil, and all I’ve got to show for that is a lot of pain and agony, so I think I’ve given my male self a good try” (ibid., my emphasis). Fifty years of waiting, practicing, and being-another to what effect? By the time Dorothy (as Phil) reached middle age, she had joined the advertising business, had served in the military, and experienced economic success. These were all under the pretense of a name she felt alienated from. In one important passage, she asks “where am I, Dorothy, at?” (ibid., emphasis in text). Dorothy discloses herself as herself, her I, as less a part of a constructed “trans-script” and more of an ongoing encounter with the nakedness of her experiences with the world. Her ordinary was trying to make Phil work; and it didn’t work in the emotional longhaul.

Her frustration and exhaustion while living as Phil only tracks into the life of Dorothy. She must consider how “passing” works, how to overcome the former duality of Dorothy/Phil and merge into a unified self. She has to make do with the body she has, and explains how
important passing (its practices, its constitutive features) like this: “[a]pearance can also
overcome a low-pitched voice if you know how to act the woman’s role—carriage, sitting,
gestures. This takes practice” (ibid.). Dorothy’s practice is one that revels in the adjustments to
the norm—of a norm as guide rather than interpellative construct. She is not performing them so
much as living in day-to-day mediations of them. These practices are bound up with pain and
joy, economic success and emotional failure, for sure. But she sutures these events together to
make a life, however unexceptional she defines it. In one sense, it is the boring-ness of trans life
that stands out in Dorothy’s story.

For Dorothy, learning and practicing gender cues does not exhaust her as such. She finds
them to be a part of the bodily package. It’s the wait, of “getting people to believe how I feel—
that when I’m Dorothy, I feel together, secure, at peace with myself and full of self-confidence”
(1971, 10; my emphasis). The feeling of her own togetherness seems to be in a constant state of
risk. Dorothy’s ordinary consists of the sagging sensation of never getting it quite right. One
wonder why she should try at all, keeping at it despite the fact that friends and family continue to
let her down. Why keep those connections, after all, if they are not conducive to self-making?
There is an ambiguity of what constitutes actual social reciprocity (rather than recognition) here.
You take what you can get and make it work so that one day you might rest in the space of some
kind of tenable affective balance.

Dorothy deserves to be understood as she is and deserves access to the medical care her
body and identity require. But I want to complicate the reading of these stories by detaching the
scenes of trans bodily experience from their automatic emplotment in a genre of transition (thus
avoiding what amounts to an identity-based teleology). To that extent, I resituate Dorothy’s
desire for SRS as both a desire to feel at home in her body and access to affects of social
belonging as well as to the conflicting promises that SRS and transition offer. SRS, at best, offers the contradictory guarantee that this form of transition (and there are many forms) will allow her to thrive, but specifically where her family and friends are concerned. But SRS does not fix nor guarantees that forms of social reciprocity will be there. The need to make a (working class) life will continue, regardless of undergoing the procedure. How she makes that life workable becomes the more critical question.

Nancy Ledins (c. 1960), like Dorothy, uses writing as her own kind of vehicle to clarify her vexed identity with womanhood. It was a letter written for a future self. It was meant to be cathartic. But it expressed a tentative connection to her future self-realization, a feeling of belonging in a bracketed yet-to-come. Or as Veena Das (2007) puts it, “writing the self points to a promise—the creation of a future community” (214). In a letter addressed only to “Dear,” Nancy tells her reader that “Bill Griglak is Nancy Ledins—the name I have chosen to be known by in this preoperative stage and, within due time, postoperatively. [But] surgery is not the final answer—not the end-all—not the magical answer” (1-3, my emphasis). What is the promise of the future here, then? In saying, “I am me,” that “Bill Griglak is Nancy Ledins, she places her identity in the tenuous bracket of “becoming.” This “I” comes at a personal cost (no doubt expressed in her grief of capping, repressing, and suppressing her feelings in the ordinary). Rankine (2014) maintains that this pronoun provides a false sense of present and future security. “Sometimes ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then what is comes apart the closer you art to it./ This makes the first person a symbol for something./ The pronoun barely holding the person together” (71, emphasis in text). There is no guarantee that the “I” will ever come through on its promise of togetherness, completeness, or happiness.
Perhaps affects of happiness are always in the mode of catching up, realizing themselves in different scenes of the present from their relations to a past and intended future, but never fully manifesting the way we ever want or expect. Dorothy speculated that SRS would provide the means of dissociating from her old life by making her new life livable. But before, during, and after SRS, Dorothy would still persist in an unjust ordinary of misrecognition, a false reciprocity of that recognition among family and friends. Nancy *knows* how that sagging feeling of incompleteness in life might in fact carry over into bodily life after SRS—a body that, from a phenomenological point of view, was already there. Dorothy felt the ongoing pressure to convince others that her “I” existed. Nancy had to confess to an ongoing construction, a tentative “I” always in process of becoming—as if she needed to prove *to herself* that it was possible to exist. These forms of convincing, of holding out hope, are indexes of affective attachments keeping their present livable when cisnorms prevail.

The point I am trying to make is *not* that SRS or transition-related activities constitute a kind of false consciousness of trans selfhood. That would be contradictory and, well, completely off the mark. What I am saying is that attachment to the promissory narrative of transition, a kind of self-extension into the future trans-self-to-be, *may* lead to (Rankine’s vision of) disappointment and of potential self-dissipation. Dorothy and Nancy’s affects of wellbeing swell around such self-extensions as they are lived and performed in their present. They are not duped by the idea of total self-completion through SRS. They have to deal with their body as it is, to the best of the abilities, and persist however wrong or unjust it is that they must persist in a transphobic milieu. As I will argue in the next and final section, this kind of knowledge can also result in attachments where the normative fantasy invites the creation of a sensorium of injurious acts.
Self-Interrupting and Injurious Acts

Theorizing the genre of “life in the crisis ordinary” is also theorizing how everyday violence is woven into the scene of the ordinary. Self-harm (various forms of purposefully injuring the body) is an example of this. When someone’s ordinary is impinged by an injurious world, a subject might find injurious acts enabling continuity and solidity in an attempt to reproduce the normative feelings that “healthy” forms self-care are supposed to produce. These include belonging, grounding, control, and relief. This discussion opens a place for self-injury in the conversation because it “provides an alternative way of talking about phrases like ‘self-medication,’ which we use to imagine what someone is doing when they are becoming dissipated, and not acting in life-building ways—the way that liberal subjects and happy people are supposed to” (Berlant 2011, 100). This alternative thinking attempts to separate the phenomenological act of cutting from the so-called medicalized subjectivity and its implicit need for institutional forms of help.

In spite of itself, this discussion remains adjacent to (if not captured by) psychiatric and psychological discourses. It also must contend with a popular imaginary that reads self-injury as indicative of a poorly managed emotional life. These practices are linked to suicidal ideation (which is often not the case). These perspectives narrate the cutter within diagnosis and melodrama the present analysis is distancing itself from. That is to say that cutters are either a psychiatric subject and are out of control and not able to recognize the healthy decision; or they are liberal self-sovereign agents and in total control, freely choosing to irresponsibly injure themselves as a call for help. Injurious behaviors can pose serious health risks (Adler and Adler 2011; Carmel, et al. 2014, 314; Girshick 2008, 166). But it is consistently the case that psychological (read normative) expertise on the matter of self-injury regularly intervenes in ways
that can trigger a popular response to shame people who self-injure, or deny their ability to think for themselves. In other words, cutters need to view it as their “problem” that they need to change. Neither incriminate the cultural context of crisis, precarity, and inadequate attention to mental health as possible culprits. Self-injurers who are gender nonnormative, already emplotted in a medical narrative, live in multiple, intersecting impasses that deepen that medicalization.

I want to buck this trend and frame these injurious acts as a means of getting by during scenes of perceived irregularities and (possibly) trauma) in life. Often, normative life for gender nonnormative communities seems miles away. It is the fantasy of normativity that becomes self-sustaining. “Moments like this, the fantasy of an unconflicted, normative lifeworld can provide the affective pre-experience of a potential site of rest, even if one has known it only as at best a mirage of solidity and stability” (Berlant 2011, 185). I get the sense that cutting acts as a form of catching up to oneself, that each person is attempting to escape the sagging feeling dragging the self they know to be there. In other words, self-injury qualifies as a means of feeling at home in a given body, temporalizing a sense of self either reeling out of control or discomfited by the contemporary conditions of economic life (see “Reading the Signs”). In fact, there is something that is often left out of this analysis of self-injury. In seeking objects that provide a sense of security and protection, subjects risk “the cost of massive misrecognition” where she denies the object’s instrumentality in causing her ongoing pain (Berlant 2012, 37). This is to say that self-injury is an object or state that can provide that protracted sense of self-stability or interruption, management or mismanagement, that responds to much larger issues than a diagnosis.

Lori Girshick’s (2008) study, Transgender Voices, is a rare but useful archive in this respect. There is not a lot of research about trans communities and their relation to self-injury. I read some of the testimonies in Girshick’s study as demonstrative of how self-injury becomes
attached to life’s maintenance, how affects of rest and stability are tracked through the experience of cutting, and how self-hatred is still read as moments of dealing through violence. I also read how trans youth discuss their bodies in terms of temporal and episodic achievement. For instance, A.J., self-identified as female-to-male transsexual, said “I did have a self-mutilation problem which was like a drug to me. I hurt myself any way I could just as long as I was in pain because I hated my body” (166). This “drug,” was an affective rush, a bundle of feelings that can become addictive for anyone (eating too much bad food, driving too fast—anything can be a drug). For Tim, another female-to-male transsexual, the act was a means of re-grounding everyday experience. “I used to dissociate and that was a way of bringing me back” but stopped doing so once he was able to achieve what he perceives to be his male embodiment. If not personal release, many argued cutting engendered feelings of belonging in an otherwise impersonal world. In some instances, this became a virtual gesture toward being in the world (Adler and Adler 2011, 94-128). For example, the growing discourse on self-injury meant that, alongside rising access to online communities, cutting was being lived as a new form reciprocal exchange, particularly that of recognition that was absent in their everyday offline worlds. Their affective attachments adjusted to make these new virtual fields in order to vitiate the stigma of cutting. In effect, cutters produces an alternative sensorium of well-being.

Gender, race, and class were all significant factors in Adler and Adler’s (2011) canonical study of the phenomenon. Roughly 85 percent of respondents in their study were (I’m assuming cis) women (35). The socialized gender identity of the person also had corresponding impacts on type of injury, location on the body, timing, and location of the act itself. Instances of cutting were overrepresented in white (middle and upper middle class) communities, reports of self-injury have increased in non-white communities as well. In particular were the cases of black
men, whose injuries ranged from scratching with fingernails to the use of shattered plastic. It has become “rampant among the incarcerated, in jails and prisons as well as in juvenile detention centers, where people of lower socioeconomic status and minority ethnicity are disproportionately prevalent, as well as in the military, where stress is high, personal control is low, and racial/ethnic mixing is common” (37). Self-injury is a contingent site where the fragility of being-in-crisis can be ameliorated, temporalizing the body through acts that feel like self-sovereign control. Feeling-like is often everything for feeling itself.

I am tempted to read these accounts of injury together as potentially performative acts of (racialized) masculinity and femininity. This leads to a new, but understudied, notion of gender identity and its attendant affects, emotions, and subjectivities. How might cutting become a performative mode of gendered (and racialized) being? In other words, taking for granted that cutting is more often associated with cisfeminine embodiments, could the act enable a transwoman, aware of this social “fact,” to feel feminine? If so, then the question of healthy and normative practices are inflected if trans women engaging in cutting view these acts as expressions of feeling gender, what Ian Hacking (1999) has dubbed the “looping effect” of social knowns. The same could be said about iterations of cismasculinity, where transmen might reproduce the more severe forms of self-mutilation as a performative part of transition. Or, contrariwise, they avoid cutting altogether as signs of a femininity that does not define their bodily experience as men. Thus, self-injury implies a worrying kind of agency because it enables certain modes of gendered continuity in life. So, when Chu (2017) argues that so-called wrong attachments are necessary, “even if it is the wrong kind of wrong to hold onto,” she’s doing so because nonnormative communities within conditions of contemporary crisis feel the affective pressures to be normal more intensely. The improvisational nature of (being) trans invites
theorists to understand that such improvisations defy normative visions of health and happiness. It is not that happiness is an illusion. When viewed as an affect, happiness is more complex when it is embroiled in making a life.

**Summary**

This chapter has dealt with a large archive of feelings and testimony already. But I would like to end with two images captured during a fraught moment among women to illustrate a crucial point intimated in “Reading the Signs.” These structures of feeling, or sensoria, that often circumscribe the trans ordinary do not just disappear. Even emerging sensoria have residues from those of the past. For example, more than forty years after Sylvia Rivera challenged the crowd at Washington Square Park, trans activists and celebrities Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera appeared as guests on Katie Couric’s daytime television show, “Katie.” The theme was “Transgender Trailblazers” and aired on January 6th, 2014. When Couric began the segment with Carmen Carrera, Couric introduced Carrera as having been “born a man” and repeatedly framed her in this way throughout the interview. There was an obvious assumption on Couric’s part that all trans people must experience “that moment” of identity formation. Couric eventually asked the question(s): “Was the whole process [of surgical transition] painful, physically, for you? [Pause] Your private parts are different now aren’t they?” Carrera hushed Couric during part of the inquiry. Carrera said it’s not something she’s comfortable talking about. And if her gestures capture the spirit of the moment, Carrera showed a sense of shame at even having to express herself in this way.

So before she could begin giving an account of herself on her own terms (that she was always a woman and did not “become” a woman) the plot of her story, in effect, had already been delimited. She had been shuttled between a tradition of sexed bodies “matching” their
reproductive organs and the modernizing discourses of surgery and prosthetics that authenticate such a match. Carrera’s follow up, that she “still had a life to live” after transition, was still caught between these forces. She had to defend her concrete experiences as a woman and, by extension, her rightful place within those cultural fields that authenticate gender/sex identity.

Couric then turned to Laverne Cox. “[Carmen said] people who are not educated about this or familiar with transgenders [sic] are preoccupied with the genitalia question, and I’m wondering if you think that’s true and if you have the same feelings about that as Carmen does.” Laverne, in a short monologue, argues that “I do feel like there’s a preoccupation with [genitalia] and I think that the preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people and then we don’t get
to really deal with the real, lived experiences.” She then identifies the (very real) disproportionate conditions of poverty, bias-motivated homicide, and transphobic abuse that trans people (and particularly transwomen of color) experience. She discusses Islan Nettles, a young trans woman of color beaten to death by a would-be lover. Cox emphasizes at the end of her interview that “by focusing on bodies we don’t focus on [these] lived realities of [trans] oppression and [trans] discrimination.” It’s easy to take for granted that Cox has this opportunity to respond, making these important problems in current discourses on trans communities known to a larger audience by virtue of the invitation to a national television show. But what’s interesting is that the Carrera/Cox interview exceeded the clinical space of feeling. Cox’s reaction was a pushback, a justified activism constituting an expression of feeling. She put words to the affective experience (anger) that the objectifying discourses of medicine has for so long discouraged.

Taking the political aesthetics of this chapter, my aim has been to challenge presuppositions concerning how affects, like happiness, rage, or isolation, are lived in gender nonnormative communities by theorizing its politics. Whose politics and on what register (local, national, affective, tonal, gestural)? Theories of the social have an obligation to look at how contemporary living is often one of getting by as best one can. If our culture expects its subjects to simply bear with whatever it is they encounter in the world by maintaining a self in solitude, then nonnormative life of all forms bears the brunt of attrition (self-dissipation, forms of “unhealthy” self-management) much more intensely. It might seem to be more evident that the trans ordinary is a space where affects of wellbeing come in the form of simple attachments, from the simple elation of an unspectacular public encounter, the boring continuity of having a stable feeling of home (whatever that home is and wherever it is experienced), or even the
production of a bodily scar that temporalizes pain and makes getting on with life better because it is “less bad.”

This has amounted to other concerns, especially how trans narratives are getting spun for political agendas (National Geographic 2017; Steinmetz 2017; Fogg Davis 2018). Circling back to this chapter’s political stakes, trans people are often caught between the belated promises of political recognition and the undertow of fitting into the world of mainstream LGBTQ+ rights. And yet, if not for inclusivity, these same communities are expected to fill in the normative gaps that anti-normative critics claim that trans bodies represent. Their lives are sensationalized through accounts of surgical transformation (one need only recall Katie Couric’s interview with Carmen Carrera in 2014); appropriated for the amplification of a more (homo)normative “we”; or they hardly make headlines because other members of this LGBTQ+ “community” are dying (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Which trans voices get to fill those gaps? In such a political climate, I wonder which ordinaries, which everyday pursuits of a happy or stable sense of self in nonnormative life, will in Audre Lorde’s (1982) words “survive all these liberations” (50).
Second Interlude: Jokes in the Ordinary

This interlude is a means of addressing what is common to nearly every ordinary in every culture: the joke. I take the joke as occupying a particular epistemic role in social life, however, that taps into the affects discussed in the previous chapters. A joke is often a means of communicating otherwise complicated social and cultural symbols, alleviating stress, or creating an atmosphere of camaraderie. And yet they also transmit information. Jokes are by and large means of solidifying certain kinds of ordinary relations. Claudia Rankine argues that jokes, especially ones that place a group, an ethnicity, a gender on the line, are isolating. She describes the following scene and the interpellative effects of the joke.

Someone in the audience asks the man promoting his new book on humor what makes something funny. His answer is what you expect—context. After a pause he adds that if someone said something, like about someone, and you were with your friends you would
probably laugh, but if they said it out in public where black people could hear what was said, you might not, probably would not. Only then do you realize you are among ‘the others out in public’ and not among ‘friends’ (2014, 48).

This is a form of epistemic violence, where the majority (or overrepresented in a community/nation) makes jokes at the expense of the marginalized. Whether one knows it or not tends not to matter as much as when one knows the harm. That for a time they, as subjects of the commentary, have been unconsciously aware (paranoid even) of their own otherness. But the joke confirms it, compounding the effects self-dissipation by generating an excess of anxious affects. The joke also serves as a warning to others, both normal and non-normal, in order to confirm a hierarchy that is only ever really “a joke,” regardless of how harmful that joke can be.

Trans people have been the brunt of many jokes, caught between heteronormative masculinity and its demands that sex/gender cohere. In the comic above, two boys stare intently at an ordinary but well-dressed girl, carrying books, walking down what is presumably a school’s hallway. The shorter boy delivers to his taller teammate the punchline of the joke. The she is a he. Both boys have a grin. The taller seems either fascinated or infatuated by his female teammate—perhaps sexually aroused by her now feminine appearance, sleek dress, and womanly carriage. She, on the other hand, is drawn in a space not only highlighting the divide between her and the boys. She’s cramped. Her lips, unlike those of the boys’, are pursed tightly—as if to imply anxiety or fear. Whereas the two boys are standing listlessly in the hallway, perhaps in between classes, she seems hurried—her right leg about to pass her left in an effort to move quickly away from these two. But who’s the joke supposed to be on? The boys, for having played football with her? For having had her in their locker room, changing clothes in between
games? Or is the joke on her, since she is the one being objectified—the one who is no longer who she “once” was? Her expression implies that the joke, and I would agree, isn’t funny.

These “jokes” are more and more becoming known as microaggressions: ordinary almost unconscious remarks that communicate derogatory, demeaning, or dehumanizing views toward another person’s being. Whether they are intentional or unintentional, these forms of psychically debilitating comments have traumatic consequences. Those who experience the psychic brunt of such microaggressions are at once victims and ordinary listeners (Cole 2006). In a number of instances, microaggressions could be taken as foundations for not just future dehumanizing jokes. If the person who stands up against the joke that everyone seems to find funny, a looming fear of retribution exists. Microaggressions have the effect of becoming aggressions, pushbacks, and hostile interrogation. “The verbal taunts, bullying behaviors, and harassments are preludes to the more severe physical violence” (Girshick 2008, 141). A joke about a he-she, a she-male, a tranny—a passing reference to what the trans communities have called “dead names,” could be taken as social cues for such acts of violence. These cues produce affects, and such affects produce fear, embarrassment, and an internalized justification for self-silence. Juliet Jacques illustrates this point in her recollection of “Home Movies.” The big reveal in Jim Carrey’s Ace Ventura: Pet Detective was that a fellow police lieutenant is actually a transsexual woman who committed a murder. Ace (Jim Carrey) removes the lieutenant’s skirt to show that she had been tucking her male genitalia between her legs and was the assailant who killed the man who found her out. “Every man [on screen] pukes in unison: clearly, I was mean to puke with them, or at least laugh. I couldn't’, but I still felt sick” (2015, 33-40). Jacques astutely observes that the bulk of movies that portray trans women represent them as leading lives as tricksters and deceivers in a culture that expects transparency from all. This is, of course, cisnormativity, or the expectation
that all bodies (sexually, anatomically *from birth onward*) will cohere with its gender expressivity.

In terms of cultural representation, finally, consider how the image and description of a trans woman police officer’s suspension is depicted in the image below. Her picture, no doubt deliberately, is one where she’s next to a “Ladies” restroom sign. The headline describes her as a “sex-changer”—conjuring the image of an inhuman creature who can change embodiments at will. Even the subhead that describes her “bar brawl” situates her in a masculinized way. (Point of fact, a brawl never ensued.) The newspaper publishes her portrait before her transition in the story (not shown here).

![Image 2.3: The Juxtaposition of Symbols. Scanned image from Rikki Swin Archive (Box 3).](image)

This headline delivers an affect that seems eerily similar to the kind elicited in *Ace Ventura*. A transsexual woman alleged to have committed a crime. Her femininity is merely refurbished—situated next to a restroom sign for emphasis (or crude joke). This kind of subterranean “locker room” humor seems altogether gross, out of place, unacceptable to media. Yet it not only fits all too well in the contemporary political climate where a man whose organization once banned “non-biological” women from competing in the Miss Universe pageant, a man who thinks gender expression and identity is a joke, a man who chalked up saying he’d grab any beautiful woman “by the pussy” to locker room banter, is President of the United States. Jokes serve as
indexes of normative cultural values. The next chapter is an examination of how ordinary affect might help overcome some of these epistemic violences by paying attention to what self-knowledge becomes when it is lived.
Chapter Three: The Politics of Epistemology: An Affective Contribution

Thus far I have argued that the trans ordinary is a site of affective, historical, and phenomenal relations that construct life’s meaning-making processes. It is not, however, a place where normativity roams freely to reproduce itself, as if the ordinary were only a garbage dump of culture and social forces. Rather, it is a site where the subject “folds” the norm, the daily grind, the everyday violence, into a means of getting by—whether affects of joy, satisfaction, or pain are present or not. Affective attachments don’t always lead to perceptibly satisfactory living. This chapter will discuss the relationship of affective states to states of being.

Phenomenology might enable a new way of thinking about self-knowledge through its emphasis on situated mood and feelings. I argue that knowledge coming from the trans ordinary to be saturation with getting by under conditions of neoliberalism. I will call these epistemic states of being “affective intelligences.” These epistemic states condition the embodied subject “teachable,” that is to say she learns what it means to make decisions based on intuition and, following Mariana Ortega, streetwise theorizing. Studying affects in this contexts provides an added dimension of meaning to the conversation of epistemic justice. Knowledge is inextricably linked to our affective attachments over the course of history and scenes of our life. At least, that is the demonstrative goal of this chapter.

Broadly, this chapter will bridge multiple conceptions of mood, affect, feeling, and selfhood to epistemology by showing how feeling can be understood as certain kinds of knowledge. Given the fact of affect’s rather slippery and frustrating nature (Ahmed 2010), grounding a study of affect’s empirical interpretation consists of tracking its expression in texts and historical documents as well as mass-mediated cultural representations. My aim is to focus on the living experience, or phenomenological components, of affective realities that inform
epistemic practices. In other words, affects that are coextensive in the production of knowledge, in how such knowledge is conveyed, and how knowledge is lived. This chapter draws from Silvan Tomkins’ (1968) work on positive affects, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003; 2007) and her writings on reparative reading, and Lauren Berlant (2008; 2011; 2012) with her theories of genres of desire, attachment, and affective structure. Each thinker has argued that affect is embodied but not reducible to the body. Affect is part of daily life in singularly lived and culturally mediated ways. They enable certain feelings or emotions to be disclosed or others remain concealed.

I am not theorizing affect in terms of functionality. My argument is that the folds of the ordinary contain improvisations of life that can index certain affective realities. In this respect, I will draw on Martin Heidegger’s theories of mood and attunement from Being and Time (2010). Heidegger believes that moods produce states of being. Anxiety, in particular, is a mood that allows for the subject’s self-reflexivity, a distancing from the moment of things. I am also drawing from the rich tradition in Black and Latina feminist thought and philosophy, primarily from the works of Patricia Hill Collins in Black Feminist Thought (2000) and Mariana Ortega’s (2016) Latina phenomenology In-Between. I am particularly impacted by Ortega’s conception of “hometactic” as pedagogic strategy for establishing one’s being-at-ease. My archive for most of this chapter relies on auto-ethnographic examples from Claudia Rankine’s (2014) poetic work, Citizen, and from Juliet Jacques’ (2015) memoir, Trans. These will ground my reading of affect and knowledge production under the conditions of the ordinary in various lives across time.

Affective Intelligence as Epistemic Practices

I would like to preface this section with a brief meditation on the writing method of a feminist philosopher I have only recently discovered, Mariana Ortega. I do so because I believe
that her personal narratives that accompany her investigations into selfhood are themselves an
archive of queer feelings, affects, and nonnormative orientations. When Ortega writes she does
so with an expressive and unapologetic self-awareness that is rare in philosophy or social
thought. Although the purpose of her book, In-Between, is to offer a philosophical intervention
into phenomenology, she ends up describing more than the experience of “selves.” Indeed, we
are multiplicitous and inhabit plural worlds. We are made to feel a sense of belonging that
depends upon many intersecting cultural and social (as well as singularly mediated) norms. But
she never displaces herself from the writing itself. She argues that this method, drawing from
Gloria Anzaldúa, is meant to provide a strong existential background to her analysis. She is
writing from multiple standpoints (as a Latina, a lesbian, a philosopher). This personal
investment is not absorbed or lost in the style with which she is writing. It is preserved in spite of
the fact that she is writing from within philosophy, a field she and others (such as philosopher
Stanley Cavell) have already noted is hostile to autobiography and the ordinary voice. I make
these observations because I believe that her words offer a means of entering into the epistemic
state I am calling the affective intelligence.

Three Modes of Affective Intelligence: Hometactics, Repair, and Repetition

“To start,” Ortega writes, “I have a confession to make: this writing is an exercise in self-
mapping, an attempt to deal with a certain nostalgia, a painful fixation on loss and a desire to
return to a place called home…. ” (2016, 193). Being or feeling “other” generally entails what
Ortega describes as a being-between-worlds that often feels alienating, uncanny, not-at-home.
Her method for overcoming these feelings consists of hometactics, practices that life lived at the
margins might engage so as to produce a sense of belonging (194). She provides a poetics of
space, a methodical way of engaging the worlds we travel, so as to bring a sense of continuity (or
not, it depends) to the multiplicitous selves that crisscross human being-in-worlds. As my current chapter title implies, there is a politics to (epistemic) location. Some belong to a given location and others do not, even if they were born in that place. Location matters, but not only. “Do I belong with US Latinos, Chicanos, Latin American exiles, or women of color?” (196). In other words, spatial locations and social locations produce affects that orient the subject to her environment. But it is not always safe feelings, of being-at-ease. In fact, these moments of intimate terrorism, of being alienated from what one believes is one’s own (world, people, community) by those objects can have all sorts of effects. How does the subject make do in such circumstances? Ortega argues that hometactics, a spin on streetwise theorizing that puts the subject in a relation of practice to her surroundings that cannot be reduced to pure forms of resistance or selling out. They are improvisational responses to circumstances; they are not predictable and cannot be easily repeated; but they are used to interrupt the sensation of feeling unfamiliar, dislodged, deflated.

I believe that Ortega’s phenomenological description of hometactics describes a certain kind of affective intelligence that subjects experience by virtue of living in between worlds: moods and attunements. These moods are constitutive affective scenes of making do. “Multiplicitous selves,” she argues, “‘make do’ in their everydayness [and] how they engage in hometactics is an important issue that we need to consider if we are to understand the phenomenology of multiplicitous selfhood” (206). These consist of “microtechniques” of lived experience that render mood more or less explicit. In Chapter Two, I argued that these moods are not only historically rooted, but track certain political affects into the ordinary. For Ortega, these moods consist of sensations (she calls them sentiments) of belonging, familiarity, and voice. And they are political, in that they can potentially be replicated for others’ uplift. But they are not
understood in any explicit epistemic sense or refracted into even more sometimes forgettable forms of ordinary activity (see the discussion on Berlant below). In other words, the subject does not express a claim to knowing a world in this or that way, but rather merely claims to feel a way. This does not suggest that Ortega is incorrect. I just disagree with some of the epistemic limitations she places on hometactics. My sense is that such practices are epistemically capacious, in that they produce varying degrees of intensely felt sensations of knowing. These sensations, likewise, get reproduced through the subject’s improvisational acts in ordinary life. When Ortega describes hanging out as resistance, or making food from her native country to feel at ease, or revivifying her concept of family be engaging with neighbors, she is describing a set of performances that produce something. That “something” is not a literal home and cannot begin to change the external world to fit her more personal conceptions of it. They consist of putting her body in moments and scenes of learning what works, what produces and what does not.

Both Ortega and I share the belief that anxiety is a critical mood for certain forms of self and world reflection. Thus, the subject of Ortega’s speculation is what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would call the depressive subject of practice, a position that “is an anxiety-mitigating achievement…[and] a uniquely spacious rubric” (2007, 636). In the sense Sedgwick describes it, using psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s theories of affect as inspiration, the depressive position provides a uniquely reflective moment for repair. It is important to note that the depressive position is not the same as “being depressed” in a purely pathological sense. Rather, it is a reflective space, where the subject might feel most alienated or most depleted, that she learns what resources she possesses can mitigate the conditions for that emotional drain. Here, the subject is teachable, learns what may or may not produce the sensations she requires, or what
repairs can or cannot be made in the world. In short, it is an epistemic state, one that I am calling affective intelligence. But it is important to trace the relationship between these potentially incommensurable theoretical implements (phenomenology and affect).

Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* is a sustained examination of the neoliberal impasse, a feeling of existential stagnation that accompanies modern relations of production. Her archive is literary and visual, but representative of numerous cultural scenes of ordinary life (2011, 11). In a chapter called “Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” she examines how depressive subjects make do in times of intensified impersonal forces such as economies of sex, body comfort, eating, and self-dissipation. The constant drag of the effects, hypervigilance, as I argued in Chapter Two, has shapes how subjects know their worlds so they can be in those worlds. In this sense, the most banal of practices are now raised to a level of affective (and epistemic) importance. The ordinariness of eating a cookie might be self-care if it opens a psychic space of optimism, change, and security. She argues that everyday life is now shot through with practices that personalize the impersonal for subjects, “bodily practices [that] condition them for taking on the risk of knowing everything they can, without being anchored to a particular story that reduces subjectivity to the sum of biography. Embodied impersonality,” Berlant continues, “provides for...the time and space to judge freely, angrily, and bemusedly: to seek the experience of big feeling and the protection from exposure. Impersonalizing bodies facilitate escape from the very monitoring intelligence that [subjects] also cherish” (2011, 143). Like Ortega’s experience of finding a sense of belonging in the economies of Anglo sentiment, or Sedgwick’s depressive subject whose reflections find the means of repair, Berlant understands subjects in their respective worlds as improvising within impersonal spaces by embodying them. Thus, a subject enters the economies of sex or ordinary composure in ways that make a world. In other words,
history hurts but affective intelligence allows subjects to attune themselves to circuits of repair, practices of being-at-ease, even if these are perceived as persisting in a space of self-dissipation. The most banal activities that do not seem to make much difference of anything might be worth something, anything, if it happens to follow on the heels of an event like sex, or a violent encounter, or an awkward public gesture. What these forms of affective intelligence do is serve as a “space of detaching from the normative world while cultivating a parallel sensorium from it” (Berlant 2011, 148). They act as a means for subjects to find spaces where they can reflect on the uncanniness of the external worlds they travel as well as seek reparative ways of engaging those worlds. The construction of a parallel sensorium is a means of reproducing feelings of normalcy, bargaining with their constitutive liminality so they might carry on in precarious scenes of life.

Applying these forms of intelligence to gender nonnormative forms of life requires some further clarification. The first is study how already established theories of experience (what I am calling strong theory) have utilized feeling as a central part of its epistemology. I end this section with a brief illustration describing how trans narratives can reflect these intelligences In Juliet Jacques’ memoir, Trans.

*Strong Theory: Affective Intelligence in Black Feminist Knowledge*

Affective intelligence has been a part of a long tradition in Black feminist writing. Resisting the exoticizing of Black women’s knowledge as either mystical or folksy, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) emphasizes the role of lived experience and everyday self-making in the production of Black women’s knowledge. To that end, she illustrates how the history of Black women’s struggle for recognition (even as a form of life within the category of woman) is often based on invoking stories that attempt to allegorize new meanings. Appeals to the emotional and affective dimensions of these accounts is critical for how Black Feminist Thought situates
narrative. One cannot excise the emotional content of knowing—such as the feeling of sisterhood that Collins discusses as critical to the singularities of Black women’s experience (278). It is here that she provides a re-telling of the ethic of care, one I find more compelling than most feminist interventions on the subject.

Collins places three interrelated components as central to the of a Black feminine ethos: uniqueness as a form of life (or the singularity of a life); a circumspection about emotion within dialogue (a form of knowledge assessment); and, in some ways akin to Virginia Held’s vision of care, the capacity for empathy (Collins 2000, 282-283). The long history and heritage of Black women in American contexts, of interrelated care-giving and support under conditions of both domination and non-domination, grounds Collins’ emphasis on emotional expressiveness as central to knowing. As oppressive structures that obscure or foreclose lived experiences tend to overlap, Collins and a host of other theorists of color suggest re-thinking marginalized epistemologies as a means of locating multiplicity of selfhoods that rise in spite, not because, of oppression. Collins is a crucial theorist who provides these compelling and genre-creating claims to revivify feminist thought (others include bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Angela Davis). But her caveat (like many others) is that such marginalized ways of knowing have more often than not taken the context of emotion as a means of knowledge assessment.

This tradition provides a rich sense of how to read narratives of making do in the face of structural oppressions. When one reads Claudia Rankine’s (2014) work, one is immediately struck by the ordinary affectivity of her writing and its underlying reliance on non-events. *Citizen* describes the cumulative effects of memory and embodied reactions to explicit and implicit racism. Rankine runs the gamut of emotional and affective affinities from feelings of suffocation, erasure, and coping to brief respites of joy and belonging. Rankine’s work is a
poetics, a phenomenology that situates what carrying on looks like in an American culture of hierarchy. These attunements and related reactions form a kind of everyday knowledge that I argue is hypervigilance—an attunement and mood shared by most non-normative forms of life. Because of space, I will reserve my commentary to her opening pages of this written form of self-poetics.

Rankine wrote Citizen as a performance piece but it is a rich archive of racial knowledge in its own right. In this way, Rankine is showing how a parallel sensorium becomes real in the ordinary. She is describing how her life as a Black woman is marked as so many sites of affective intelligences and orientations. If we are intelligent enough to be aware of what sensations reproduce feelings of goodness, then we orient ourselves to routes that best get us to those points. But Rankine also illustrates the lived and felt sense of pain, anger, or lingering exhaustion in the flow of ordinary life for non-white communities. “When you are alone and too tired to even turn on any of your devices,” she invites us to consider, “you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of the clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor” (5). The reader realizes this might be the entree into her past, her presence taking leave for a moment. She remembers events that make a metaphor out of the force of knowing: “The route is often associative. You smell good” (ibid.). This is the parallel sensorium, a detachment from the normative without losing feeling and a sense of the present.

Rankine begins an affective journey through racialized experience at the most formative and seemingly innocuous moments. That’s where the hurt is. “You are twelve attending Sts.
Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person” (ibid.). She allows the white girl access, the privilege of not having the responsibility to study. And she’s told she has white features—as if black features were problematic. As if blackness sullied cheating. So the metaphor draws itself into figures of authority. “Sister Evelyn never figures out your arrangement perhaps because you never turn around to copy [the girl’s] answers. Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there” (6). The metaphor is the erasure of her blackness. Did she even see you sitting there?

Rankine is anything if not attentive to feeling. One imagines that lying back in the comfort of pillows would be soothing, if not for the remembering of times when, as a child, one’s very being was both erased and devalued. Then in a disorienting turn, Rankine remembers another aspect of everyday life. “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words. Haven’t you said this yourself? Haven’t you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper?” (7). The very subtle, almost minute slip of a name can harm because “you assumed you two were the only black people in her life. Eventually she stopped doing this, though she never acknowledged her slippage. And you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don’t forget” (ibid.). Why, if anything, must Rankine
take the onus of feeling not just wronged, but compounded injury by not having acted? Does she lose credibility in the face of inaction? Is her own self-knowledge and confidence violated? She argues that “if this were a domestic tragedy, and it might well be, this would be your fatal flaw—your memory, vessel of your feelings” (ibid.). This unfolding poses the memory, the thing ruminating on the metaphor of erasure, the flaw that serves as the vessel of hurt feelings and a reminder of self-doubt. “Do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?” (ibid.). What seems so powerful in her self-interrogation is that Rankine, alone, must deal with this knowledge of what is perceived as a non-event by her friend—but is altogether painful. Which is it, the brunt of an already caricatured trope (of racial stereotypes) or the feeling of being betrayed?

Moments of loss. Feelings and memory. Hurt and confused. Feeling so close. These ordinary affects brought on by the banality of racism, in cumulative form, start to serve as a kind of knowledge for Rankine. From an epistemic vantage, these affects produce what she will later call an anger as a (tentative) “type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints (24, my emphasis). What could this knowledge do, exactly? I would argue that this reflection feels like a form of reflective wisdom that calls one to think about how all the wrongs and painful slights one accrues, some forms of anger simply eviscerate. Although being angry, feeling the weight of cumulative microaggressions, might not resolve immediacy it may take more of a toll on one’s own energy reserves to carry on in an ordinary one knows contains these kind of affective assaults.

The psychologist Silvan Tompkins realized that the emotional reserves necessary for these kinds of survival tactics could run out. They are not infinite, though we like to think so.
“The activation of positive affect or negative affect is a necessary condition for the mobilization of the energy reserves which support the behavior calculated to achieve...goals” (1968, 304).

Tomkins is describing a general state of embodied feeling (like the “low-ebb” of feelings during a cocktail party after a long day of work), that underscores the ordinary of affective endurance. The paradox is that, as phenomenologists from Heidegger to Ortega have shown, feelings of anxiety create the very conditions of reflection necessary for energy to be directed towards goals. Heidegger would describe anxiety a structural condition of a subject’s “thrownness,” of discovering her random placement in the context of the world. Ortega, however, would describe anxiety for the marginalized, those existing between worlds, as a feeling of unease. This sensation allows for a critical distancing, a bracketing of everyday conventions, to make sense of things. For some, such anxieties respond to emotional depletions folded into the ordinary. For example, when pain becomes expectation for the day the subject learns affective tactics of coping. But is this coping a form of irrationally avoiding or dealing with the impersonal? Is this selling out, to an extent, by allowing some form of pain in so that enjoyment can be extracted in others? Tomkins also wonders “what is the gain, then, in substituting a more severe for a less severe pain? It is that the lesser pain is accompanied by the distress and fear of helplessness and passivity whereas the more severe [self-inflicted] pain is attenuated by the more tolerable affects of excitement and, for some, even delight, in overcoming the distress and fear and the status of helplessness in the face of pain and assault” (59). As I have been arguing, these kinds of substitutions, of extending one bodily orientation for another in order to carry on, is less an internalized knowledge of defeat and more an affective-cum-epistemic response called self-adjustment.
Rankine tells us, like Tomkins, that our bodies are always receptors, whether we are passive or active about the incoming stimuli. “You take in things you don’t want all the time,” she argues. “The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus” (2014, 55). This focus, this snapping into place of a meaning, doesn’t happen in the extraordinary. Much like her encounter with a friend who slips the wrong name but never takes accountability for it, Rankine wonders, “hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that?” (55). This is self-interrogation in the absurd. The absurdity is the shift of blame and burden of responsibility that being black attends—from which being white is absolved. Of having to wonder what the fuck? And have that question linger as a response to one’s erasure. But this cannot be sustainable, if only to make do in shitty circumstances. Even Rankine argues that “the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn’t be an ambition” (ibid.).

In so many ways, the ordinary complicates ways we might consider how subjects make do in the production of local forms of knowledge-production. I began this section by asserting the importance distinguishing affective forms of intelligence. I suggested these can be found in phenomenological theories of hometactics or the affective theories of repair and repetition. Exploring the writings of Collins and Rankine, my hope was to address how the lineage Black feminist thought has reflected upon this affective intelligence. Tomkins himself associates affects with modes of learning. The subject begins to understand how the affect-body relationship operates in the ordinary so as to reproduce livability. Subjects participate in, following Berlant’s lead here, new aesthetic economies in all kinds of ways. For example, subjects alter facial expressions and other bodily gestures. Their bodies (unconsciously) make do as much as their
(conscious) attention to the everyday banalities of social violence. Moments of conscious decision-making, of weighing and understanding the consequences of pushing back, of the realization that shit is happening again, directly imprint upon the ongoing production of ordinary knowledge. Affective intelligence is an attunement to the nebulous but lived incarnations of racism and sexism. Although such kinds of intelligence might not be easily duplicated (as they live in contexts and differing structures) they can be felt as shared, a form of comparative attunement. In Collins’ terms, is an inherited wisdom that seems always present in the life of knowledge. For Rankine, it is a sudden realization that, given time, these feelings become “coded on a cellular level” (2014, 10-11). This code circulates, can be read by others, and can impact the ways certain forms of being-in-worlds get experienced.

*Stories of a Trans Woman*

Traveling to a new city in her home country, England, Jacques is struck by the more progressive campus at the University of Sussex, particularly their queer studies curriculum. The city itself had a number of rebranded LGBT clubs. “The inclusion of the ‘transgender’ made me feel I could go to these places as Juliet” (2015, 73). In making her home, Jacques’ tactics were nevertheless self-conscious, anxious. Although she was accepted, almost to a fault she implies (shops falling over themselves to show her how they accepted her) she was also economically pressed. She couldn’t afford the bus and had to walk to these scenes of social acceptance. On her long walk to such places, Jacques confessed “I worried that people would ridicule me, threaten me, or worse. I preferred the walks in winter. Light and heat made me feel exposed, my makeup running as both fabrics and fear made me sweat. In the dark and cold, nobody looked at me much” (74). She avoided certain streets along the way, navigating around larger groups of men who she defined as being more openly hostile than most. “Over time, I realized that however
vulnerable I felt, the only way to stop them was to hold myself up and try to look fearless. And after the difficulties of getting to my destination, meeting my friends always made these hazardous journeys worthwhile. I’d feel liberated…” (74). Through *detaching* herself from the world that normalized catcalling by men and fear among women and nonnormative genders, Jacques was also *attaching* herself to the safety of her networks, of places that she knew reproduced a sense of being-at-ease.

And yet her friends still made a sense of ease unstable. In one instance, Jacques was questioned as to whether she wanted to “go all the way” regarding sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). But in responding with ambivalence, her friend Phil suggested that the procedures “damage” the body, and hardly resolved the social inequalities Jacques would have to deal with afterward (76). Her networks provided an ongoing, if sometimes tentative, sense of ordinary continuity. “In public, i was playing with my style, telling friends that the notion of ‘male’ and ‘female’ clothes was absurd. I didn’t challenge anyone who called me ‘madam’, just smiling if they apologised. At work, though, I had to be unambiguous, inauthentic in polo shirts and trousers, trying as hard as I could to convince people that they really *needed* that television” (74).

Her hometactics, as is the general case in the neoliberal impasse, is one that must confront the necessities of reproducing the conditions for everyday life: work. Considering that Jacques had wanted to be a writer, she thought back to how poverty would not be so bad if she did what she loved. “*I’m poor now* [she thought back]—*how bad can it be?* I was finding out, trying to balance my job, studies and social life with writing a play….It wasn’t going well” (77). The mixed feelings about her play, as it turned out, would reflect the insecurity she felt in her ordinary life. She tried making up for those lacks through dating a man named Carl.
I am not suggesting that this is an emancipatory narrative that finding friends will make things better. I am also not arguing that getting by as a thing to be nurtured. I am arguing that these scenes describe a set of practices that enable the gender nonnormative subject to move, and be-in, between worlds of work, friends, school, and professional ambitions. For instance, Jacques’ tactics involved identifying, down to the climate and weather, when was best for her to take her walks. Her attachments to a given fantasy, ones that put her in direct conflict with an aesthetics of who she was, were nevertheless powerful enough to get her through. She kept writing because she loved it, in spite of the poverty. She detached from that normative world by living the fantasy of heteronormative love with Carl. Commenting on her first kiss, “I forgot every street heckle and intrusive questions, every newspaper cartoon and TV comedy sketch, and relaxed, letting him love me, letting him fuck me” (79). The relationship was a parallel sensorium, a means of overcoming the stress and doubt the external world induced. She literally could not be herself at work, in an “inauthentic” wardrobe and all. With Carl she could. She developed, within that sensorium, epistemic states of knowing who she was and what she wanted. Affective intelligence is knowing what makes you feel good amidst feeling bad. It means risking optimism in the face of failure and misrecognition. That is, repair in the face of constitutive brokenness. This kind of affective awareness, I will argue in the next section, is glaringly absent from the literature on epistemic justice.

*Trans Epistemology: An Update on Affect*

Trans epistemology, like all intersectional epistemologies, is based upon a relational understanding of social reality. As Mariana Ortega has made clear, we are fundamentally beings in shared worlds, or beings-in-worlds. But Ortega makes an additional distinction. Marginalized lives experience a phenomenological sense of being-between-world. By this Ortega means that
intersectional selves travel across and within multiple worlds that mark their identities (2016, 70-71). These worlds are in a constant state of re-arrangement and subject to improvisational practices. Associations and affective investments in shared meanings suggest that local knowledge cannot be extracted from ordinary source. Context matters. That is to say, the very things to which subjects are attached come to define them; or, in the very least, those objects can be understood as tracking the constitutive desires that comprise the epistemic life of the subject. In this sense, trans epistemology seeks to combine feelings, emotions, and ordinary affects to capture the force of local knowledge in self-making. Additionally, because we are always beings-in-worlds or beings-between-worlds, the culturally mediated norms by which we live are just as indispensable. The caveat would be to avoid universalizing claims to trans forms of life while attempting to preserve the commonalities of shared histories and experiences.

For this section I use the groundbreaking works of philosopher Rachel McKinnon to determine the epistemic dimensions of trans knowledge. Hers is, to my estimation, the most robustly worked-out theory of epistemic practices in trans communities. But, unlike McKinnon, I will argue that emotional and affective practices in the trans ordinary need a more generous reading. I will seek to update this theory with my own conception of trans knowledge production through recourse to what I have been calling affective intelligence. I also find important affective investments in McKinnon’s theories of stereotype threat, ones that can shed further light on the everyday experience of epistemic violence for trans people.

On Epistemic Terms Only

Rachel McKinnon’s work covers, like so many standpoint epistemologies, lived experience and personal knowledge. As a transwoman and philosopher, her social position is of particular importance not just to the credibility of the work. I contributes to the narrative of
nonnormative gender that is a necessary supplement to epistemology in particular, and philosophy more generally. Although McKinnon does not ascribe the belief that transition narratives to any trans imaginary (the culturally intelligible self-projects lived in the trans ordinary), she has argued that “when we consider trans people’s decisions to transition” there is an accompanying epistemological need to understand a shift in social location and situatedness (2015, 420). The bulk of her article, “Trans*formative Experiences,” (henceforth “Experiences”) attempts to understand the radical (her word) social, and by extension epistemic, changes that occur to someone who undergoes sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). For McKinnon an “experience is personally transformative when ‘it may change your personal phenomenology in deep and far-reaching ways’” (421). As I will argue later, this definition misses the crucial underpinnings that undergird the meaning-making process. Thus, when someone transitions from “a relatively stereotypical masculine male identity to a relatively stereotypical feminine female identity, nearly everything about her experiences will change” (422). She qualifies this statement, namely that not every epistemic change is necessary. Importantly, epistemic change does not happen for everyone. I assume, of course, that this stereotypical identity is white and that the everydayness in McKinnon’s form is akin to Husserl’s “average man on the street.” In this sense, the average subject is a privileged subject (male, white, and heterosexual) who may be unwilling to consider that he is in a position to change anything bad. “Men are typically afforded more space than women; women are more likely to be ignored in conversation...the way one relates with social and legal institutions is changed, particularly if the person has to navigate the often complicated systems of changing their sex/gender marker on identification such as driver’s license” (422). In other works, McKinnon (2014) expands the discussion of how stereotyping the other reinforces this privileged ideal. But at its core, or rather in order for this this epistemic
theory to make sense, coming to terms with trans forms of life means something unique, non-replicable, and opaque. The epistemic theory would also need a more worked out theory of desire and affective attachments.

On these bases, primarily on the basis of affect, my objections I have may be outside the immediate project of McKinnon’s piece. But I believe there is an issue, at least in defining experiences in her article, “Experiences,” where McKinnon errs by creating decision dichotomies (a commonplace for analytic philosophers) about happiness and transition. She then uses these outcomes as a foundation for assessing knowledge and as an assessment of happiness. As I argued in Chapter Two, affects such as happiness are complex relations that obtain among many objects. There is a troubling rationality in using these decision tree. As I see it, there is a smuggled “universal knower” in her analysis transparent to herself yet divorced of affective sense, or feeling. I’ll diagram them for visual ease (below). It might be easy for theorists to find this diagram dissatisfying at best or misrepresenting at worst. In McKinnon’s defense, this is to simplify the ways that (I assume) she can reach cis (non-trans) academics dealing in with epistemologies of experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>Not Transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Transition Happy</td>
<td>Not Transition Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Transition Unhappy</td>
<td>Not Transition Unhappy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.0: The Happy Transsexual

I think this kind of thinking can suggest that transition does not work for everyone. Someone cannot be aware of whether their embodiments will enable affective changes. At issue here is what, precisely, defines the affectivity of transsexual life and why SRS (as the form of transition) is the foundational qualifying heuristic of transsexual emotional life. She refers both
the high suicide rates among trans communities and their lower socioeconomic status than many of their cis peers. Noting the critical importance of her language here (where trans means transsexual whose entire emotional life rests on transition), she suggests that “for many trans people, the available options are either transition or commit suicide” (423). This is an overstatement. What occurs in ordinary life is as much about the messes of work as the tragedies of self-foreclosure. Thus, in terms of likelihood, those in the category of “not transition happy” would be statistically negligible. Even in a footnote, McKinnon argues that “transition for the trans people I’ve described often shares the structure of a freeroll: not transitioning essentially guarantees deep unhappiness, so the worst that could happen post-transition is to be just as unhappy as one would be without transitioning” (425, fn. 13). But how can such utilities be applied to the exceedingly personal and emotional complexities of any given transition? Why is it that suicide becomes the only alternative when SRS is not a viable option? These are extremes of affective life where forms of self-adjustment (such as those explored in Chapter Two) mediate what comes in-between.

I cannot argue with her statistics. For many trans people, not being able to transition as a result of insuperable social, political, and economic barriers push many to commit acts of self-injury. But I think this preoccupation with transition narratives much of this might stem from McKinnon’s own personal and affective investments attending what she calls “trans awakening,” a conventionality in the trans genre discussed in historical contexts Chapter One and ordinary contexts in Chapter Two. Her interpretive angle, as I’ve described it here, haunts most of her reading of trans life.

Until I came to know myself as trans, one might say that I considered myself cis (well, I didn’t know about the concept of cisgender, so I merely didn’t consider myself trans).
The truth is that I was long aware that trans people existed. And while I experienced a distinct and persistent discomfort with my gendered self starting around age 12, I didn’t once consider being trans as even a possible explanation. However, I can distinctly remember the moment (even exact date) where I first opened up being trans as a live option (426).

I deeply appreciate McKinnon’s story. In a footnote appending this personal revelation, McKinnon writes “I think it’s important to flag that I don’t share the ‘traditional’ trans narrative: knowing from approximately age 3, not engaging in behaviors expected for one’s birth-assigned gender, having a post-transition heterosexual orientation, the feeling of being ‘trapped in the wrong body,’ and so on” (fn. 18, 426). What I want to say is that my sense of things is that self-making is a constant, critical, and sometimes stultifying act. It rarely happens as events. Rather, these moments of self-clarity are often already there, affectively speaking. We just haven’t caught up to them. It’s a “feeling” one has, but not only.

I want to complicate “that feeling” (whether dysphoric or not), the one that seems to saturate a myriad of differing trans testimonies but discussed in McKinnon’s work. She frames this feeling as a product of, not co-producing or equiprimordial with, certain epistemic shifts. I want to ask, more precisely, what does it mean to feel as well as to know one’s many selves as trans? I argue that these forms of knowing (that I have clarified with Collins and Rankine in the previous section) are based upon a certain kind of affective intelligence, what Collins called wisdom. Consider McKinnon’s claim that “the moment [transition as a live option] is opened up as an option, the phenomenology of the transition to knowing is abrupt and almost instantaneous” (427). The problem here is that such an instantaneous eruption of knowledge is often underscored by a rupture in feeling. What does it mean to feel that something once far
away in terms of possibility might actually become an event? What affective orientations does such a realization make? I do not think this is an issue for McKinnon. And I think this is a problem.

I understand that her project is an attempt to fit such newfound knowledge within an epistemic category she is calling “trans*formational experience.” And I would agree that coming into possession of such knowledge is, indeed, profound. But it is profound (and I would stress here that this, too, is a feeling) because of the histories, narratives, affective attachments, and emotional connections that the subject is undergoing in the scene of that experience. I suspect that part of the reason for leaving out something like affect, emotion, or feeling would be their difficulty in tracking across epistemic states (or their perceived lack of empirical grounding). As I will argue in following section, she has given some attention to affect and the sensation of threat in earlier work about experiences of stereotype threat that can offer much to the general epistemic-affective discussion (McKinnon 2014). In one her most-affect saturated observations, McKinnon writes “even in cases of invisible identities, where the group isn’t aware of her trans status, stereotype threat can operate. For example, she may have internalized the negative stereotypes (or is constantly, acutely aware of them) such that the effects of stereotype threat are present” (2014, 862, emphasis in text). These internalizations are affectively coded. They might also be understood as effects of attuning one’s body to the spatialization that threat induces, just as Jacques did in her countless scenes of self-adjustment throughout her memoir.

It is important to note that McKinnon’s article “Experiences,” and most of McKinnon’s work generally, is a sustained engagement with feminist standpoint epistemologies (FSEs). Thus I do not want to encourage a project that was not hers to begin with. And yet her engagement with FSEs actually helps to illuminate precisely why affect and emotion should not be reduced or
abjured altogether from the epistemologist’s toolbox. Subjects are intersectional beings-in-worlds where social interaction and meaning-making are coded with feeling. Phenomenologies, and thus moods and affective registers (their sensorium), of these beings will change based on their situatedness. “What matters for the situated knowledge thesis [of FSEs] is that one’s social location as, say, a cisgender heterosexual woman, as a member of an oppressed class, may allow her to ‘recognize that many of the concepts and procedures adopted by [a] discipline are problematic when her colleagues do not’” (McKinnon 2015, 428). This much is uncontroversial. For example, José Medina has called this kind of epistemic awareness “meta-lucidity,” a kind of epistemic virtue (similar to W.E.B. DuBois’ “double consciousness” thesis) that makes a reflexive moment to generate the kind of friction for necessary social change to occur (2013, 206-225). It is the epistemological equivalent of the phenomenological primacy of anxiety. Following Miranda Fricker’s (2007) work on epistemic injustice, McKinnon proceeds to argue (again rightfully) that epistemic injustices often occur for trans communities because of ongoing patterns of privileging that remove knowers from ever experiencing these anxieties. These patterns often reduce the subject’s access to terminology necessary for trans life, in her arguments, to experience happiness.

A word about Miranda Fricker’s work and its influence on McKinnon. Fricker’s (2007) monograph explores the ethics of individual and community knowledge production. Knowledge is not simply a given. It is a productive effect of sociality, a good that is circulated amongst society, the conditions for which need sustained interrogation. Who gets to participate in the production of that good? How, in the utterance of knowledge, are people dispossessed of their voice—their attachment to that knowledge? In what ways are people discredited from “really knowing” a thing? These are more than philosophical questions. They run at the very heart of
how power relations operate. If a person, for example, is prevented from knowing where their non-normative community spends its nightlife (like a gay, queer, or trans-inclusive bar), then they experience epistemically disabling effect on their identity. This epistemic foreclosure stunts the growth of their non-normative potentiality. As Heidegger might say, such obstacles conceal rather than enable and disclose the possibility of being. This arbitrarily truncated knowledge (however trivial it seems from a non-queer or non-trans moralism) systematically reproduces concealment: queer/trans existence as “less than,” as deviant and otherwise offensive to the norm of (a certain conception of) community forms of life. This structural wrong is considered an epistemic injustice of the “hermeneutical” or interpretive sort that Fricker has sought to amply critique. Dismissing claims to experiences of structural injustices as merely subjective (as “always being about race or sex,” or emanating from a place that “won’t let history go”) is not just epistemically unjust. It denies political agency and also reinforces the material harm. It makes invisible the varied ways that subjugation works by keeping “subjugated knowledges” from rising to the level of accepted and living experience. Developing a trans epistemology has a common itinerary with feminist epistemologies. They both mark the ordinary as a fundamental site of experience and work to construct a just politics of knowledge and self-empowerment. But I add that without the attention to affective attachments and emotion, epistemic injustice literatures will continue to illuminate only parts of very complex social relations.

But this is where she and other forms of FSEs might obscure, rather than clarify, trans standpoints in terms of their feelings. They lack an attention to affective intelligence in ordinary scenes of life. For example, McKinnon poses a hypothetical trans subject who alters their social location, being upwardly mobile. The radical shifts in perceived social identity, and its impact on certain kinds of access to knowledge, might attend new takes on SRS. But must SRS be taken
constitutively? My concern would be that some of her assumptions appeal to her previous work on stereotype threat in counter-productive ways. Knowing and feeling continue to be separated in the discussion, where feeling is often relegated to a kind of particularized subjectivism. But as I have argued in Chapter One, we can track these affects and affective intelligences across historical sensorium. Moreover, knowing one’s identity as trans must also take into account the feeling one’s embodiment not as a yet-to-happen, but as a here and now. Perhaps my issue is that McKinnon pays too high a price for attending to the kinds of (future-oriented) epistemic states. She often does not take as theoretically central how the multiplicitous self is tethered to a relation to historical and present worlds. Future projects abound. But thoughts about the future emanate out of, not spontaneously erupt, from the historical subject. This includes, obviously, how structural oppressions operate on one’s sense of possibility. But, crucially, there must be attention to the subject’s affective connections under these structures. “Changing my social identity and location to being a woman changed my situatedness and it changed how I struggle against subtle forms of misogyny and sexism. The social change led to epistemic changes” (McKinnon 2015, 436). Yes and no. Changes in social location might trigger epistemic shifts. But these epistemic shifts are more likely to occur under the to the complex ways subjects have learned to orient themselves in economically and socially precarious environments.

As forms life within the scope of the ordinary, trans people engage in a special kind of affective intelligence and orientations toward the world that need special forms of inquiry. The previous discussion in this chapter fleshes out such intelligence. Trans can be defined in ways that weave together the complexities of family life, cultural heritage and race, class, and sex/gender. So, trans narratives and situated knowledges involve survival, or at minimum concern for self-definition and a sense of security, that form affective habits (Currah 2013). I will
explore these affects of security next and see how they might help to avoid some of the costs that
I have suggested McKinnon has paid in order to maintain an epistemic theory of trans
experience.

The Epistemology of Threat: Re-examining Affect and Vigilance

I dealt with some stereotypes of trans people, mostly women, in my Second Interlude in
which I routed them the concepts of jokes and humor. I argued that jokes are indexes of cultural
attitudes and values. They also consist of perpetuating a felt sense of threat. Here, I want
elaborate the important affective dimensions of work of McKinnon’s on trans “stereotype threat”
(2014). The central point of her article is to illustrate the various ways that trans women
experience what she defines as “a dual layer” of such a threat. McKinnon’s own analysis speaks
directly to trans women experiences in order to gain valuable insight into the nature of this kind
of epistemic harm/oppression. This section reformulates McKinnon’s contribution to the
literature on stereotype threat by articulating its epistemic terms through the language of affect
that I have been deploying throughout this chapter.

McKinnon argues that there are at least “three dominant tropes used to stereotype trans
women: the ‘deceptive’ and ‘pathetic’ archetypes, and what we can call the ‘artificial’
stereotype” (2014, 858). Her central argument is that these three stereotypes combine to create a
sustained threat to the epistemic wellbeing of trans women. The deceptive stereotype suggests
that trans women are merely attempting to lure heterosexual (cis) men for sexual liaisons. Such a
misrepresentation suggests that trans women are only about the “reveal,” coming out to their
sexual partners only after they have effectively lured him in. These claims, particularly that trans
women are sexual predators, very much thrive in climates of hostility in which even the
bathroom has become a major moral and political issue. Whereas “deceivers” can pass for a
“real” woman, the pathetic trans woman is portrayed “as weak, meek, and ignorant: ignorant about how to be a woman. Or, at least, they’re bad at ‘playing’ at being a woman” (ibid.). Thus, the pathetic trope situates such trans women in a tragic narrative, never passing and never sexually attractive. This leads to the final trope of artificiality. Trans women aren’t “real,” and are thus merely constructed women. These, by now, should be familiar strategies of narrative emplotment that distort the histories I discussed in Chapter One.

Given these tropes, McKinnon defines “stereotype threat [that] occurs whenever an agent is acting in a context where a stereotype may apply” (860). This means, for example, when subjects engage in activities “meant for the other gender,” or “are less apt at performing.” Multiple registers of epistemic harm occur here. First, if such stereotypes are internalized, the subject may actually engage in the very thing that has stereotyped them (much like Ian Hacking’s looping effects discussed in Chapter Two). When taking trans identities into account, McKinnon notes that such groups have “heightened awareness” or what I can Rankine and others call hypervigilance. “A trans woman knowing that she’s the only trans person in a group” will activate such an awareness. “If people know she’s trans, she’ll be aware of this, and this may create anxiety and make trans female stereotypes more salient to her” (862). This kind of speculation reminds me of Claudia Rankine’s assertion that erasure wasn’t the thrust of epithets and hate speech. Rather, she writes, “you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please” (2014, 49). Much like the narrator of Rankine’s self-poetics, the trans woman is rendered hyper-present,
alert and ready for the potentiality of hateful language, harmful attitudes, and otherwise negative affects.

The important conclusion to be drawn here is that the trans ordinary, as a site that blends the emotional and the affective at the register of the epistemic, produces a rich source of critical material that provide needed supplements to social epistemology. People become aware of potential threats as a part of their varying affective intelligences. They mark out their day according to what they perceive, that is what they know, as safe. These form attachments that might often compartmentalize life into zones of livability. “Apparently benign situations,” McKinnon avers, “become potentially harrowing, and a source of anxiety and situational avoidance” (2014, 868). This is McKinnon’s greatest affective insight. Unfortunately, focusing entirely upon the stereotype and not the forms and extent of self-management in the face of these situations provide only a partial picture. Avoidance strategies become a part of a complex aesthetic weave of life in ordinary modes of being. The create economies of feeling and gesture that might remove (spatially, temporally) the subject from those moments. I am arguing that there must be, on the part of theory, a more attuned view toward how subjects feel their way through the ordinary since so many still persist in zones of threat! This kind of descent into ordinary zones of making do provides a more robust vision of how knowledge and feeling co-produce one another.

Summary

What I have hoped to do in this chapter is describe the various ways affective intelligence can transform theories of knowledge. That is to say, affects are co-productive of self-knowledge and claims about the world. In what other ways can we trace such intelligences? I want to end with a brief but speculative account of how threat gets deployed in ordinary moments of self-
adjustment where the subject seems to be fraying, buckling under the weight of normativity. My archive here consists of a trans youth survey conducted in 2001. I will return to a few testimonials previously discussed in other chapters in order to re-examine the affects of vigilance and their effects on ordinary knowing in epistemic terms.

One youth in this survey responds that their perceived body, what seeming appeared at first hand to render feeling disjointed from reality. It revealed not only a harried necessity to conform. Such a conformism is borne out of a persistent vigilance induced by being-between-worlds, that sense of unease that requires hometactics, a sense of self repair, and repetitions of behavior that orient the self toward safety. “Having to wear all this makeup just to hide the burning stinging redness from the obsessive shaving on my face. Also the fact that I do not have ‘normal’ sized breasts. The other body hair that I have to shave irks me to no end. The worst thing is the hair” (Trans Youth Survey 2001, 15-16). This stress of passing is real and creates a common affective thread of exhaustion. But they are underscored by economic worries (as I discussed in Chapter Two). It is as much about finding access to forms of transition as it is about transition itself. Here, knowing transition is there, but worrying about which forms are accessible, are folded into the fact of living with stereotype threat. “The stress of worrying about passing and being clocked, dealing with people who don’t accept me as who I am and the cost of hormones and transitioning (13).

Bathrooms are a source of anxiety, as one respondent put it, it was the worst part of coming out trans and expressing their body in nonnormative ways (14). Even when sociality is extended, and dialogue among peers is possible, the very basis of dialogue requires a heightened emotional cost. “I have to teach everyone I meet what a transsexual is, and I have to fight their misconceptions. […] Another very difficult thing is that in order to convince people that you are
male, when your body is female, you have to be hypermasculine (which I am not)” (16).

Appearing in public is always an act saturated with affect. As one trans teen argued: “I know perfectly well that the majority of people out there at best view me with something in between revulsion and fascination. Like a circus freak on display. I’m terrified of most of the world” (15).

The perception of safety varies for the experience of gender nonconformity. Finding affective comforts might also appear as reproducing the harmful norms that prolong self-dissipation. Even attachments to the names under the trans the umbrella feel frayed. As one youth intimated, “I came into being genderqueer in the last year I think, but I still identify as trans too because of the umbrella term thing. Trans is the umbrella and genderqueer is the specific piece of it I identify with” (9).

This survey is as much an archive of feeling as much as it is a cartography of how self-making is enabled or discouraged. They reflect a certain sense of when the secret of their trans self is worth sharing not because they are internalizing and reproducing defeat. In these revelations of “knowing” difference, notice how respondents already reflect upon a feeling, a knowledge of culture or attunement to the structures of their worlds to which they must adjust.

“When I was six, I remember thinking that when I grew up, I wanted to be a boy. Then I found out that wouldn’t happen and I couldn’t wait to die and go to heaven ‘cause I could be a boy then. Before then I was masculine, but gender wasn’t that structured” (5). Others knew, or felt their way through, their futures dismally. “I remember standing in front of a mirror and reciting ‘God made you a woman, you’ll die a woman’ over and over as punishment for sinfull [sic] thoughts. :-\ I was a fucked up little kid (7). In a mass-mediated culture, more people have access to the vocabularies that invite McKinnon’s sense of trans*formative experiences. “At about age 7 a friend and I discussed ‘sex-change operations’ after seeing a talk show on TV” (6).
These testimonials speak to a kind of feeling, but not a kind of knowing, in McKinnon’s framework. Yet I surmise that a complete split of knowledge and feeling would be leave discussions of situated experiences inadequate to the task. Feelings are based upon close social interactions, emotional gaps and bridges, affective bonds that form while “growing up” and learning our how we fit in the world. In short, we develop emotional attachments to being and appearing in the worlds we inhabit. Our moods direct us toward various parts of the world and constitute what we find important while we navigate the ordinary. The next chapter will discuss the extent to which these forms of life in the trans ordinary are represented at all in our judicial institutions, especially ones that, from a certain sense of American heritage, are supposed to protect marginalized life in terms of their individual right.
Chapter Four: The Trans Ordinary as a Critique of Legal Institutions

In the last chapter, I outlined the various ways that developing an epistemology of trans experience often meant overlooking affective practices. My hope was to illustrate how affective intelligence possesses epistemic value. Such intelligence orients bodies toward new capacities for learning and uptake; it renders bodies teachable. In this chapter, I want to explore what this means in an institutional context, particularly an institution that is praised as being the bastion of minority rights. Set up as a so-called apolitical institution that alone adjudicates what constitutes rights, and one that abjures the whims of popular sentimentality (here I use that term in its most derisive sense), the American judiciary faces the problem of squaring rights with the ordinary life of marginalized people. Particularly, this chapter examines how trans people experience epistemic violence within the execution of rights. I argue that since knowledge is “generated from histories, social relations, and practices of communities,” the epistemological consequences of translating trans affects and knowledges into legal discourse require serious investigation (Nelson 1993, 126). I will draw on notions of epistemic injustice that was discussed in Chapter Three. Miranda Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice in terms of temporal affect, that is happening when knowers are discredited for their claims to knowledge and/or when knowers who, needing to make sense of their experiences, lack the interpretative resources to do so. In one sense, subjects lack a grammar or vocabulary by which to make their experience intelligible for others. Fricker urged her readers to consider not only what she calls good epistemic conduct but to overcome these epistemic injustices, but also “to lay the foundation of correlative institutional virtues—virtues possessed, for instance, by the judiciary.…” (176). This chapter is a gesture in that direction.

Trans experiences are often translated through an unacknowledged epistemic
commitment to a cisgender sex/gender paradigm. Although many theorists agree that gender, following Susan Stryker’s definition, “is thought to be cultural” whereas sex “is thought to be biological” (2008, 11), they are both, however, linked by cultural and social norms. Much like Rubin’s heteronormative sex/gender system, when a culture naturalizes cisgender formulations and experiences of sex/gender, or normalizes them, it constitutes a cisgender sex/gender paradigm. This chapter argues that particular forms of rationality and legal objectivity that are peculiar to judicial procedure help reproduce this cisgender paradigm. The process undermines the epistemic capacities of transgender people as knowers in their own right. Since gendered knowledges are already pre-fashioned constructions—legal precedent—transgender people enter into the field of liberal legal discourse at a disadvantage. Are there risks of colonizing transgender experiences with a cisnormative, or cisgender-privileged, standard of being? As Finn Enke (2013) notes, “the concept of cisgender privilege provides a necessary critique of structural hierarchies built around binary sex/gender….When cis is taken up as an admission of privileged identity, it is cis-privilege itself that reifies trans as most oppressed—so oppressed, in fact, that it cannot speak out of character” (2013, 240). Accordingly, the courts construct out of the cisgender body the caricature of the transgender body, and thus discipline transgender narratives within legal discourse to meet corresponding cisgender narratives of discrimination.

Even law-enforcement agencies suffer from a limited understanding of the everyday complexities of trans life. For example, well-intentioned FBI report written in 2015 by a respectable list of professors in criminal justice is riddled with the problematics that plague many who speak but who are not familiar with, or a part of, the community (Burke, et al.). Shooting itself in the foot, the report begins with a biography of Brandon Teena’s birth name. This only problematizes the report's assertion that law enforcement officials would benefit from exposure
to Brandon’s story. In many ways this reflects the poor circulation of representative and less harmful forms of information about trans people. Ordinary exposure to these sources might have an optimistic outcome, they “will shift people’s life trajectories in some small way, change them by literally changing their course for a minute or a day” (Stewart 2006, 12). The FBI’s descriptions of sex/gender and the body are even more problematic. “People who identify as transgender or transsexual usually are born with typical male or female anatomies, but feel as though they have been born into the wrong body.” As I’ve argued in Chapter One, these narratives cannot be the sole basis for reading or interpreting trans narratives. Vast numbers who do not identify with their birth-assigned sex do not think along these lines. The inaccuracies continue, from the use of the outdated “transgendered” to a problematic description of intersex persons as living with a pathological ambiguity of genitalia, the report reflects the ongoing epistemological and phenomenological lacuna that haunt mainstream discourses on trans and Intersex communities in Anne Fausto-Sterling’s work (2000).

Rather than painting a disappointing picture of legal change, I do believe that the law in perhaps non-liberal institutional forms, has powerful potential. Even as Kylar Broadus observes, the law has a “tremendous power to reflect and shape larger societal messages of acceptance or rejection” (2006, 99). But this kind of larger cultural uptake happens incrementally, a political problem for the anti-normative thrust of some trans politics. But importantly, courts are not only symbolic. They are both repositories and agents of knowledge. They transcribe the process of how human subjects become legal subjects, how ordinary claims to experience are understood as legal claims to that experience. They trace how social categories (race, sex, gender, age, ability, etc.) are to be understood within a given constellation of rights and statutes. Fricker’s (2007) analysis is a method for not only examining the shortcomings of legal institutions. It invites
alternatives to how they might be reimagined to include the possibility for epistemic justice in law. This chapter addresses how trans experiences of the ordinary might escape from the narrative capture of certain kinds of institutional and cisnormative discourse. In one sense, this chapter is a performative example of creating the conditions for such escape.

**Not Out the Trans Ordinary: Workplace Discrimination and Sex Stereotyping**

Sex discrimination cases refer, inevitably, to the precedent set in Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins (1989). In Price, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that private employers could be held liable for “sex stereotyping” when they engage in open practices of discrimination based on certain preconceived notions of gender. At issue was a cisgender female employee of Price Waterhouse, Anne Hopkins, who was denied partnership at the firm. In filing her claim against the firm, Anne Hopkins asked the Court to consider the disparaging remarks male partners had made during the process of considering her partner. She was held to lack the necessary aggression, the “macho” qualities that being a “woman” naturally foreclosed. Price Waterhouse argued that such statements were not in violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act because they were not made in direct consideration of sex, per se. In disposing the case, the majority discussion held much of sex/gender as one and the same thing. Sex, for this court, became the site on which gender is mapped. A masculine woman or a feminine man cannot be, in this sense, discriminated against as such discrimination constituted an “impermissibly cabined view of the proper behavior of women [or men]…” (Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins 1989, at 237, emphasis added). The majority goes on to reason that

In saying that gender played a motivating part in an employment decision, we mean that, if we asked the employer at the moment of the decision what its reasons were and if we received a truthful response, one of those reasons would be that the applicant or
employee was a woman. In the specific context of sex stereotyping, an employer who acts on the basis of a belief that a woman cannot be aggressive, or that she must not be, has acted on the basis of sex stereotyping (Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins 1989, at 237).

In terms of precedent, the Price decision set the following foundation: The body is either male or female, man or woman, masculine or feminine, and judgments are anchored by these cisgender conceptions of sex, gender identity, and general bodily expression.

The courts rely on analogical reasoning to conclude that a given litigant has experienced discrimination. This sort of cognition suggests that a person’s experiences of discrimination can be mapped onto another case containing “similarities”. This reasoning situates transgender discrimination squarely alongside cisgender forms of sex stereotyping. In Smith v. City of Salem (2004), the circuit court ruled “(a)s such, discrimination against a plaintiff who is a transsexual—and therefore fails to act and/or identify with his or her gender—is no different from the discrimination directed against Ann Hopkins in Price Waterhouse, who, in sex-stereotypical terms, did not act like a woman” (at 574-75). The question remains: According to which standard of woman did she fail to act, and on whose terms? Although the court seemed to suggest a more expansive view of “sex stereotyping” was on the horizon, the court places the “behaviors” and “appearances” of a transgender woman alongside the characteristics of other cisgender plaintiffs.

In Schroer v. Billington (2007), the court suggested that an analogy be drawn between an employer’s decision to discriminate against a person’s decision to transition genders and a person’s decision to convert religions. The majority concludes that “(n)o court would take seriously the notion that ‘converts’ are not converted by [Title VII]. Discrimination because of religion easily encompasses discrimination because of a change of religions. But in cases where the plaintiff has changed her sex, and faces discrimination because of the decision to stop
presenting as a man and to start appearing as a woman, courts have traditionally carved such persons out of the statute…” (Ibid. 31). The court would rule in favor of the transgender litigant. Yet, the analogy whereby religions stand in for gender would seem to suggest that transgender people are to be taken as “converts,” in the process of moving between one legible form of being to another.

The equivalence of “convert” to “transgender” is problematic in itself, as much as the proclamation that a transgender person experiences “the same” kind of discrimination under employment law as cisgender people would. It suggests a kind of liminality regardless of whether the trans claimant wants it or not, an in-between space for the trans litigant that takes for granted Ortega’s being-in-between-worlds. That is, such existential truths are thrust upon them from the outside. Without the aid of an accepted gender duality, trans people are not, in one fundamental legal sense, a categorically distinct identity possessed of separate kinds experiences. In other words, “transgender” is merely the means through which a court might seek to understand the much more legible experiences of (cisgender) “man” or “woman.” The cognitive movement between two gender poles constructs an isomorphic transgender subject out of pre-fashioned pieces. Caught between these categories that are based on cisgender experiences of gender, transgender narratives as transgender are radically altered or hidden from view. Indeed, the Schroer court would explicitly rule that “transsexuality,” in itself, has yet to be categorically protected.

These sorts of judicial epistemic commitments are typical of cisgenderism, which describes the “cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community. This ideology endorses and perpetuates the belief that
cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege” (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63). Through their institutional power, as (knowing or unknowing) arbiters of cisgenderism, courts create the conditions for hermeneutical injustice. This view is illustrated by jurisprudence finding that gender and sex stereotypes themselves constitute discrimination because they unjustly establish what it means to be a man or woman. However, from this point of view, what standard of man or woman is being enacted, and whose bodies are being posited as reflective of these standards? This legal cognition does not seek to arrive at any meaningful transgender experience of womanhood or manhood. It takes for granted that cisgender experiences of womanhood and manhood (in other words, gendered selfhood) constitute sex stereotypes. This form of reasoning is itself epistemically problematic because it denies the legibility of transgender experiences of gender and sex as such. It also forecloses the entrance of such knowledges into the range of experiences that populate the resources of knowledge that constitute legal as well as social discourse. It is not enough, I argue, that a transgender person has, by law and right, protections against discrimination or harassment.

One of the most well-known cases in transgender employment in recent years illustrates the limits of such kind of legal discourse to take transgender experiences and difference seriously. The case, Glenn v. Brumby (2011) does refer to Vandy Beth Glenn as a transgender woman. It offers the impression that that category itself enters the discursive array of the court’s reasoning. Yet, a closer look suggests that cisgenderism organizes the court’s legal cognition.

In October of 2007, Vandy Beth Glenn, a former naval officer and journalism alum of the University of Georgia, announced to her employers that she intended to live her life as a woman—confirming publicly a personal truth that had remained mostly private. She was
transgender. Having been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), Glenn’s lawyers would later explain that she struggled with her social status as ‘male’—the sex assigned to her at birth. At the time, the DSM-IV described Gender Identity Disorder as a ‘serious condition’ or pathology, in which a person whose gender identity did not conform to their birth-assigned sex (this has changed, as the current edition of the DSM-V [American Psychiatric Association 2013] now describes such a “condition” as Gender Dysphoria, not “disorder”). Her public decision came as a relief. Glenn loved her job. She had been working at the General Assembly’s Office of Legislative Counsel of Georgia as an editor and proofreader for the previous two years.

Glenn informed her immediate supervisor, Beth Yinger, of her intention to transition. Yinger passed along the information to the head of the Legislative Counsel, Sewell Brumby. Sewell would later confront Glenn about her transition-related decision, telling her it was “inappropriate,” firing her as a result. Glenn filed suit against Brumby in 2008. The claim was legally straightforward: Glenn’s firing was a clear violation of the Equal Protections clause of the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution as it related to sex stereotyping. Sex for the Eleventh Circuit court was still considered biological, or birth-assigned. Gender was a separate, socially constituted identity. However, the Eleventh Circuit held that Glenn’s decision to transition was not only considered sex-related. It also touched on areas of gender. Glenn’s assigned sex at birth notwithstanding, her decision to move forward with both physiological and dress-related transitions fell under the court’s wider interpretation of Price. In 2011, after three years of judicial procedure and hearings, Glenn finally won her job back.

In order to determine whether Glenn suffered a violation of sex discrimination under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, the Eleventh Circuit had to come to terms with the definition of transgender as a legal category. The court moved toward a definition of
transgender as that of action and perception. “A person is defined as transgender precisely because of the perception that his or her behavior transgresses gender stereotypes” (Glenn v. Brumby 2011, 1317). For this determination, the court used a law review’s determination that the “very acts that define transgender people as transgender are those that contradict stereotypes of gender appropriate appearance and behavior” (Turner 2007, 563). The court went on to conclude that there is “a congruence between discriminating against transgender and transsexual individuals and discrimination on the basis of gender-based behavioral norms” (ibid.). Discrimination against transgender employees presumes discrimination on the basis of gender norms. The transgender person “transgresses” or “violates” these norms or stereotypes. However, these conclusions are reached through the lens of the very norms found stereotypical. In other words, the experiences of transgender persons, in order to be understood as transgender, hinges on the conclusion that transgender legibility is maintained between two legible cisgender markers.

Much of the Glenn decision does not deal with transgender experiences. Rather, “transgender” is perceived through the precedent that has already made sense of gender stereotypes. The court held that “An individual cannot be punished because of his or her perceived gender-nonconformity” (Glenn v. Brumby 2011, 1319). How is gender nonconformity being perceived, however? Previous cases were primarily dealing with cisgender men wearing jewelry, or cisgender women entering workplaces in pants, or other “typically” masculine attire, or clothing associated with military service and thus being considered too “butch.” “Sex stereotyping,” as a heuristic, smuggles the cisgender body and the gender norms that map onto it as foundational. Transgender experiences of discrimination are made legible through this foundation. In one sweeping statement, the court erases the particular difficulties that transgender
employees face in their lived experiences as being transgender: “Because these protections are afforded to everyone, they cannot be denied to a transgender individual. The nature of the discrimination is the same; it may differ in degree but not in kind” (Glenn v. Brumby 2011, 1319). Such is the nature of equality guarantees. Because “everyone” is afforded protection—indeed a cisgender “everyone”—transgender individuals cannot be denied that protection. Symbolically powerful, but this does not offer epistemic credit to the particulars of transgender discrimination. Indeed, the fact of being transgender—of not only looking and acting “differently” but of actually inhabiting embodied difference—invites social violence and discrimination in various forms that are not taken into account in the Glenn case decision.

These cisgender conceptions of sex/gender undergird even the most recent rulings. Regarding a transgender employee’s termination, the court held: “[I]f the EEOC's complaint had alleged that the Funeral Home fired Stephens based solely upon Stephens's status as a transgender person, then this Court would agree with the Funeral Home that the EEOC's complaint fails to state a claim under Title VII (EEOC v. R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes, Inc. 2015, 2, emphasis added).”

The status of being transgender is not in itself the site of discriminatory action. The court holds to this reasoning because “the EEOC's complaint also asserts that the Funeral Home fired Stephens ‘because Stephens did not conform to the [Funeral Home's] sex- or gender-based preferences, expectations, or stereotypes’ [(Compl. at ¶ 15)]. And binding Sixth Circuit precedent establishes that any person without regard to labels such as transgender can assert a sex-stereotyping and gender-discrimination claim under Title VII, under a [Price Waterhouse] theory, if that person's failure to conform to sex stereotypes was the driving force behind the termination” (ibid., emphasis added). Under this brand of reasoning, the legal heuristic of “sex
stereotyping” does not have to depend upon the claimant’s social identity. In this sense, it is not the transgender person who holds the discursive and epistemic keys to unlocking why their discrimination is patently unjust. It is, rather, sex stereotyping from the perspective of cisgender sex stereotypes that constitutes the wrong, which can be described as a hermeneutic injustice. This lack of a conceptual vocabulary allowing transgender experiences to become legible as transgender creates the demand for a shift in hermeneutical resources for courts of law.

Thus the transgender legal subject undergoes a radical mediation. Glenn’s status as transgender is liminal: her experiences are seen in terms of either cisgender male or female forms of stereotypes, not transgender experiences of these identities. The social qualities of this transgender experience(s) are erased because “everyone” deserves the right to equal protection. Moreover, this invites the question of what type of transgender person is taken for granted. Where, in such a schema, do non-binary people, or those who reject the binary altogether, or “gender bend”—by subverting gender expressions one day but not the next—or who are intersex, belong? Where does race belong in these intersecting phenomena? Recalling my discussion in Chapter One, Rachel Walker’s (2011) examination of New York City’s Christopher Street Pier kids, an ethnographic account of the lives of mostly homeless transgender and queer youth living new the Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York City, illustrates the tragic paucity of knowledge about the conditions in which most transgender and queer people of color experience violence. Walker’s survey of the various transgender and queer identities that thrive on the Christopher Street Piers also highlights the harsh realities of economic marginalization, social violence, and brutal policing of nonnormative bodies of color. Dramatically, transgender experiences are at risk of altogether disappearing in the face of such reasoning in legal discourse.
A Phenomenological Critique of Trans Life in Legal Discourse

For epistemic justice to exist at all, there can be no primarily “authentic” voice, no idealized individual subject. Rather, the composite of voices and experiences that make up an identity should be taken into account. Consider the following stories from trans life. In her story, “Died and Gone to Heaven,” Jane Nance writes about the possibilities and non-possibilities of living life as a woman “full time.” Going to lunches, shopping, appearing and acting—these are “fantasies,” the idealizations that she cannot hope to attain. She goes on vacation with her wife as a full-time woman, “two gals” out on the road. She wants her “mind and body” to feel in “congruity as one!” (Nance, Undated, Died and Gone to Heaven, p 223). She revels in the experiences she shares with her wife as a woman. She speaks often of a body conditioned by the social realities of being male, but of possessing a female mind—of a split. Nance longs for recognition as a woman, of being a woman as well as being recognized in her identity as a transsexual (2).

In 1969, Virginia Prince (1969), a pioneer of the “transgenderist” movement, argued “(m)ost women have little to say about the fact of their woman-hood…I was born a male and raised as a boy and grew to be a man. Today I live as a woman by choice” (1). But she “hastens” to add that she is not a transsexual, that she is “still a perfectly normal male and [she] plan[s] to stay that way” (ibid.). (Cisgender) women have never had to question their bodies as such, in Prince’s view. However, transgender people’s identities are nevertheless irrevocably grounded in embodied norms. Speaking about cultural norms and their pervasiveness in this regard, she adds that “a man is limited severely, however, in the degree to which he can move away from the accepted patterns and requirements of masculinity and toward the more permissive world of femininity…I am a woman by choice” (ibid.). Most of Prince’s publications (including The
Transvestite and His Wife and the magazine Transvestia)—focused on defining, however narrowly, differences among and within transgenderist communities—are meant to spread information and thus create a language, a subcultural grammar and vocabulary of transgender being, a grammar that is often missed in contemporary legal discourse.

In a letter known only as “The Quest,” the writer remarks that she always knew and continues to understand her “body” as male, but that she identifies as female (The Quest, Undated). Under the pressures of ensuring, she stayed employed and she wore men’s attire. When eventually discovered wearing women’s attire, she was labeled a cross-dresser. She herself identifies as a transsexual. In her letter, she describes how she is taking hormones, recounts her desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery, and speaks of the strong urge to have a body that looks like the image she has inscribed in her mind. The author narrates having the fear of being “found out,” of reading what happens when others like her are discovered—of the violence visited on their bodies.

Skye, the author of an undated letter entitled “Paths to Understanding,” suggests only that her appearance will change after transition? She writes for recognition that her “self” be defined by personality—that perception be based on more than just her desired transition (from male to female). But her fear, just like the unknown author of “The Quest,” is that of being discovered—of effeminacy that is mapped onto her “wrong” male body and thus the “wrong” attire she might be discovered wearing:

So, with all this knowledge, how do I feel? I still become depressed. I still am in a recluse phase. I continue with my sporadic ingestion of estrogen. I still long to be rid of my maleness and want to be in my femaleness….Then I think about my deep voice, my veiny hands, my high forehead, and I am caught in the middle of conflict. I stop taking
the estrogen. Nothing is possible. Then I start again (Skye, Paths to Understanding).

Transgender experiences are those of self-creation in a cultural milieu inimical to the idea of gender fluidity; these experiences push boundaries and norms while simultaneously adopting some. Yet for all this gendered and sexed diversity, US-American culture and particularly its legal discourses are fastidiously attached to cisgender narratives of a sex/gender binary that fixes male and female expressions of selfhood.

The movement toward epistemic justice has been illustrated in recent years by numerous agency decries. The EEOC for the US government has insisted in a number of cases that transgender people are protected under federal statutes (particularly Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964) and other precedents. Indeed, the protections against “sex discrimination” act as the bulwark against discrimination of transgender employees. Indeed, from the universal legal point of view, gender and sex collapse on this front. The EEOC’s definition of gender identity as one’s “inward sense” of gender that does not match their “birth assigned sex” is not itself problematic. It suggests that a person’s identity of “transgender” strives at creating a “match” between their cognitive gender and their bodily morphologies. It is important to note that public employees are protected under these new rules. Private employees are not. Local and state initiatives to protect transgender people vary. The EEOC and others have come to terms with transgender claimants and the fact of their discrimination in the workplace, albeit a governmental workplace. Case law brought this American executive agency and legal system to a point of understanding “transgender.” Notwithstanding, the epistemic implications put recent “progressive” views on gender and sex to the test.

Some legal venues have adopted alternative approaches that expand beyond the univocal transgender narrative, creating a kind of legal “epistemic friction” against the cisgenderism of
precedent laws (Medina 2013, 48-55). For instance, in 2001, a New Jersey court moved beyond
sex stereotyping, holding that a “person who is discriminated against because he changes his
gender from male to female is being discriminated against because he or she is a member of a
very small minority whose condition remains incomprehensible to most individuals. The view of
sex discrimination reflected in [precedent case decisions] is too constricted” (Enriquez v. West
Jersey Health Systems 2001, at 372). The court explicitly regards the status of transgender as a
category of identity, holding that the statute in question determines that “[d]istinctions must be
made on the basis of merit, rather than skin color, age, sex or gender, or any other measure that
observes a person's individual humanity and worth. This case represents another step toward
achieving what has thus far been an elusive goal” (ibid., emphasis added). The case further
suggests not only the court system’s own epistemic limits (through its denial that precedent law
has taken up the transgender identities adequately) but also that society has yet to comprehend
“transgender” in its fullness.

Furthermore, a district court in Maryland, more than a decade later, gestures toward this
kind of epistemic comprehension of transgender communities—of taking transgender, in itself,
seriously. In Finkle v. Howard County, Md. (2014), the court ruled that an employee with an
“obvious” status as transgender is protected under “sex stereotyping” claims. The Plaintiff,
Finkle, argued that her appearance as a broad-shouldered, masculine-looking woman constituted,
as appearances go, the reason for her discrimination. The victory itself cautions pause. A more
expansive view of “sex stereotyping” should include the identity of transgender. But a court’s
incorporating this identity can only have epistemic merit when it concedes that transgender
people have particular forms of discrimination such as Finkle’s, where it is situated in a world
outside legal discourse. “The obviousness” of Finkle’s discrimination is founded in the fact that
in a reality composed of degrees of cisgenderism, transgender people become the site difference and derision (ibid., at 13). For the court, acknowledging this site of difference is key to developing good law engaging and dismantling the varieties of discrimination that transgender people face.

Summary

This chapter has argued that “sex stereotyping,” as a legal heuristic, naturalizes cisgender conceptions of sex/gender and fails to take feelings of trans embodiment seriously. How can legal discourse take differences seriously—where the body is the site of the difference? In his analysis of gender construction before the law, Paisley Currah (2006) finds that most winning arguments follow the standard pursued in the Glenn court. Others have followed similar arguments, both critical yet receptive to the power of the symbolic victories these cases carry (Gordon 2009). Yet, the internal power of this judicial reasoning to construct a gendered subject routinely relies on cisgenderism as it organizes the legal imaginary of sex/gender. The anchor is always already a pre-fashioned cisgender body. What can the courts do to comprehend the multiplicities of being transgender, or the experiences that it entails? There must be a sustained epistemic commitment to have transgender discourses and narratives of gendered selfhood enter into these various frames of reference in order for legal institutions to realize epistemic justice.

Dean Spade’s work engages in a sustained critique of this sort of cisgenderism in the law. His perspective on rights, specifically those developed under discrimination law, is founded on what he perceives as the “perpetrator/victim dyad, imagining that the fundamental scene [of discrimination] is that of a perpetrator who irrationally hates people on the basis of their race and fires or denies service to or beats and kills the victim based on that hatred” (2011, 84). The law, for Spade, adopts an already ideological notion rooted in systemic oppression—and thus
becomes a difficult site in which to tackle that oppression. Rather, it reproduces oppression (ibid.). Transphobia and cisgenderism are linked. Once viewed as the foundational body and the accepted norm of bodily appearance and expression, “cisgender” helps to enact social and political violence on non-normative bodies—hence the phobia that increases violence against trans people (Enke 2013). The movement toward legal equality, from Spade’s point of view, misses that point altogether. In order to seek full protections for transgender people, the law must reflect the full diversity of transgender life as it is lived—not as it is idealized within liberal traditions that extol cisgender bodies as the starting point of sexed and gendered subjectivity.

As Bassichis, et al., argue, a radical strategy and critique “is...recognizing that alternative approaches to the ‘official’ solutions are alive, are politically viable, and are being pursued by activists and organizations around the United States and beyond” (2013, 654). Offering “transformative approaches” to big problems that otherwise official, or mainstream, approaches have already attempted, Bassichis, et al. (2013) advocate for community interrelations to organize around and outside of legal strategies. The authors argue in favor of “build[ing] community relationships and infrastructure to support the healing and transformation of people who have been impacted by interpersonal and intergenerational violence” (655). In this sense, creating discursive spaces that open up hermeneutical possibilities for courts to grasp are the conditions for the possibility of creating a legal grammar attentive to transgender diversity. Levi and Klein (2006) have argued that intersecting disability law with transgender discrimination jurisprudence would “transform the colloquial understanding of disability” and expand protections for transgender people while dismantling misconceptions of disability (83). Indeed, “Disability antidiscrimination laws cover both those who experience some limitations because of a health condition, as well as those who experience discrimination solely because of ignorance,
stereotypes, and misperceptions about their health conditions” (75, emphasis added). Multiplying out the number of intersecting legal protections is generative, for Levi and Klein (2006). Disability and transgender should not be taken as synonymous, but productively useful ways of thinking through allying otherwise disparate legal discourses. Most scholars agree on this point: there is a plurality of unconventional and radical approaches, from community institution building to intersectional legal claims, which should motivate interactions with legal institutions for a “more humanistic movement” (Minter 2006, 159).

Through these inclusions, trans narratives would enter into the pool of shared knowledge that forms the foundation of our legal vocabularies concerning marginalization. Indeed, it would help engender a field of judicial grammar that is epistemically inclusive. It would involve the active engagement of justices and judges to exercise a certain “reflexive awareness” of the struggle that trans people face in making their lives legible. It would therefore expand beyond the limited scope of a “protected category” or the use of heuristics such as “sex stereotyping.” Rather, acute attention would be paid to the discursive and material practices that make up transgender experiences of discrimination. In this way, the process of judicial reasoning must intertwine with the process of life itself. A commitment to the everyday should assume that our legal institutions reflect our collective life adequately, grasping at the roots of lived and situated moments in order to understand the varied people that make up transgender experiences. As gender and sex are integral parts of the lived experiences of humans, the institutions that we, at least in theory, consent to govern us must unequivocally understand gender and sex as they are lived in a world of bodily plurality.

That we are social creatures is a theoretical commonplace: “human nature only really exists in an achieved community of minds” (Hegel 1977, 43). But achieving that community, or
communities, requires new commitments to epistemic virtues in philosophy and political life. Fricker agrees, arguing “The only way to fully understand the normative demands made on us in epistemic life is by changing the philosophical gaze so that we see through the negative space that is epistemic injustice” (2007, 177). It is a demand to realize the material force and social location of knowledge in all its diversity and to reflect that knowledge back into our governing institutions. To this end, my next chapter will deal with the holism of affect and epistemology, experience and the redemption of the ordinary in social life.
Third Interlude: The Ordinary and the Politics of Danger

![Image 4.0: “They Don’t Have A Father Anymore.” Scanned image from Rikki Swinn Collection (Box 3).]

Everything that matters can be jeopardized in an instant. Everything is subject to danger. The above image from a newspaper describes how a judge announces that a father’s sexual reassignment surgery meant a subsequent death certificate for that father’s “previous” life. The parent was, in the judge’s eyes, dead. Another temptation might be to avoid implicating law enforcement officers in systemic violence because, as the recent counter-narrative goes, not all cops are bad. But I want to pause and reflect upon how the law has plural manifestations in ordinary life. In this life, “police officers may be charged with implementing the rules and regulations of the state, but they do not cease being members of local worlds with their own customs and habits” (Das 2007, 170). In 1984, for example, a Fantasia Fair legal seminar presented the following scenario: A trans woman is stopped by the police for any reason. The seminar advised

DO ACKNOWLEDGE your male status if you are stopped and questioned by an officer in a public place. DO ASK FOR IDENTIFICATION of the officer especially if he/she is in plain clothes. DO GIVE your real name and address if you are asked to do so by an officer. DO SHOW the officer your legal masculine identification when it is requested. DO NOT OBTAIN driver’s licenses, Social Security cards, etc., in your femme name.
YOU MAY SHOW OFFICER TRANSSEXUAL IDENTIFICATION but they are not legal. AVOID PUBLIC PLACES where you presence might be misunderstood, e.g., busy ladies rooms or street corners where hustling street queens ‘hang out’ also, ‘high risk’ bars, etc. (1-2, capitalization in text)

In the time that has transpired, U.S. states have updated their laws concerning official document changes. Public and community education programs that have disseminated information about the trans have increased. The HIV/AIDS activism of the 80s and 90s altered the course for a flagging LGBTQ+ movement. Progress, so it would seem, must have shifted the socio-legal terrain for trans people. But old habits die hard.

Tyra Hunter, a 24-year-old transwoman of color, lived and worked in Washington D.C. as a hairstylist. On the morning of August 7 1995, Tyra was involved in traffic accident. First responders removed a half-conscious Tyra from the debris. Her wounds, it was later revealed, were treatable and her death preventable. But the first responders, upon cutting open Tyra’s pants leg, discovered that she had a penis. The firefighter was said to have exclaimed, “This bitch ain't no girl...It's a nigger, he got a dick.” He proceeded to joke with other personnel while Tyra, still conscious and audible, was forced to listen. The continued banter,—some calling Tyra the pronoun “it”—was only interrupted when a supervisor arrived and continued Tyra’s treatment. Upon her being taken to the hospital, the ER doctor refused to treat her. She died at 5:20 m.—a result owing less to the trauma of the car accident than to the delayed and woefully inadequate treatments by professionals who were sworn to serve, and, in the case of the ER doctor, “do no harm.”

S. Diamond, a 37 year old resident of the Bronx at the time, came to terms with anti-trans harassment from the police in 2014. An argument with her then husband resulted in officers
entering the home. It was there she was strip searched. When the officer spread her legs, the team began gawking. She had male genitalia. The violence of the process was compounded by the humiliating names “tranny,” “he-she” and “it.” She was arrested and later placed in a holding cell with men. “I felt totally voiceless,” she said after the ordeal. “Like I wasn’t even human. Like my safety didn’t even matter” (Reminick 2015). Prison rights activist Miss Major can attest to these feelings being less than human. “When I went to prison, it was the most frightening thing that ever happened to me because I was a target of so much violence. They strip away your privacy, humiliate you—anything to make sure you know you are worth nothing and while you are there, you don’t exist” (2014, 207). The law is as incarnate within and produce disproportionately more violent relations between trans people and the officials who carry out the bureaucratic implementation of law—from fire-fighters (as first responders), to the police, to prison guards, and other administrative officials—in the vast and interrelated institutions of the American carceral system.
Chapter Five: A Trans Critique of Knowledge

There is always something a little disappointing as one attempts to write a critique about critique. There is a writing practice that seems suspicious of itself, a self-effacement that does harm to the project. Consider that the entire aim of this dissertation, and this chapter in particular, has been directed toward a reparative reading, a means of thinking something beside paranoid critical theories. It was hoped that by engaging in something other than, or beside, this “hermeneutics of suspicion,” that forms of life emerging from within recent shifts in neoliberalism and ordinary life could be taken as they are. Not the piety of letting the subjects “speak for themselves,” but the reflexivity to know when a voice is being obscured. This chapter seeks to make some final connections between affect and phenomenology and their bearing on investigations into the epistemic resources of the ordinary. It will end with a mediation on the emerging genre I am calling the conventionality of gender ambivalence.

The Trouble with Critique

Although it can be read as a derisive expression, deploying the phrase “beside paranoid reading” is alluding to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) here. Speaking of this preposition use as a pedagogical tool, “beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction, or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object” (8). With recent titles in trans studies such as Heath Fogg Davis’ Beyond Trans (2018), “beside” seems like a welcome preposition that captures the spirit of the phenomenological concept. What are we moving beyond and why should we move beyond gender? Phenomenology is agnostic from even its earliest iterations in Husserl, whose emphasis on “bracketing” an object so as to apprehend how the thing, in itself, is given over to consciousness, invites a break with traditional metaphysics. It is an approach both critically
aware of what it is doing but simultaneously uncritical in its return to things and their placement in the world. If it is true that critical analysis seems to have its epistemological commitments founded in the very critical object it seems to want to expose, namely the repression/oppression of power, then phenomenology should be a welcome, if somewhat orthogonal, way of approaching meaning, desire, and all the complexities of embodied experience.

I want to be clear that I am not privileging repair in the sense that it is somehow better than the hermeneutics of suspicion. As I have attempted to parse out throughout each chapter, there is something missing from contemporary analyses of embodied experience, particularly when trans experiences are involved. Ironically it is the embodied experience. Critical (queer) theory has somehow remained singularly attached to constructionism, or speech-act theory, or psychoanalysis, or Marxism. Not that these theories are in themselves incomplete or patently wrong. But each renders the body-as-effect, of being something other than itself. The body’s givenness is a mere fiction. Marx, for instance, argued that objects (even the human being) is never anything other than their economic or historical thingliness. Constructionism holds that everything (even down to the body) can be routed through some explanatory model of the social (also linguistic) forces to understand its “where” and its “what” of existence. Bruno Latour (2005; 2010) called these models, coyly, the “black boxes,” of social theory—they alter the thing to the extent that the heuristic is the thing. Whether we historicize everything or understand the body (as raced, gendered, sexed) as intelligible only through the performative, the body is nearly always just over there but never quite here. It’s difficult to discuss the intricacies of everyday trans life ethically when these “paranoid” theories seem to absolve the critic from ever descending into the ordinary of those deemed oppressed.
Furthermore, these critical theories unfortunately create new dualisms and ontological pitfalls. For instance, a lopsided appeal to the social, economic, or unconscious drives, while trying to expose the constraints they impose on human thought and subjectivity, construct the very subject’s embodiments without ever asking consent. What can be the case otherwise, for example, if a human being is not understood as always already a subject (Althusser 1999)? What can be the case otherwise if a human being is not always already recruited into a biopolitical regime (Butler 1993; Preciado 2010) or, always already subjected to the field of linguistic power (Bourdieu 1993)? The body’s experience, somewhere “in the mix,” plays a decisively limited role. I have already raised this point in Chapter Two, agreeing with phenomenologist Andrea Long Chu (2017) that “the givenness of phenomenality [of the body] as such—how and why what is experienced is experienced as experience—is no more elucidated by social construction or historical materialism than it is by bio-chemistry or particle physics” (150). If they cannot explain this givenness, which is to say the being here of the body, then they are not explaining the experiencing-body at all. There is a felt absence of the human voice, one bearing witness to what the human has experienced as embodied experience, in these expositions.

What I am getting at here is that the body, as a body, enters the critical conversation already other than itself. There must be a renewed attention to things (and bodies) themselves and their practices. What I hope to illustrate in this chapter is that phenomenology can serve as a means to repair this inattentiveness and bring the body back in our theoretical dialogue about selfhood and knowledge. One way, perhaps, to bridge the gap here is to ask what relationship between a body, a person, has to something like structural antagonisms we know to exist (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) I have suggested that phenomenology demands three interrelated epistemic and methodological commitments in developing that relationship. First is a resistance
toward narrativizing bodily and affective phenomena solely through totalizing constructionism and expect the phenomenality bodily experience to “fit” neatly within them. Instead, phenomenologists ask how it is possible that experiencing the body might be elucidated in terms of what Heidegger would call the “ecstatic now” of being (Ortega 2016). This means, for one thing, that the phenomenologist admits that the body is already being affected, not determined, by social, historical, and material conditions. These conditions need to be deconstructed, yes—but in such a way that does not privilege linguistic, social, and economic phenomena over what those phenomena feel like in lived time. Second is to assume that as “thrown” beings-in-the-world, that is to say discovering we are not in control of our situatedness, ordinary human life resists being made into a mere effect of structural power. Human agency, likewise, cannot be reduced to accepting or rejecting dominant forms of discourse (as if only conscious of a certain dichotomy of resistance/non-resistance based strategies to life). Third is the need to avoid the eventful as a roadmap for human affectivity and everyday meaning-making. Rather, a return to the everyday and the ordinary reveals is an acceptance of the potentially uncritical ways subjectivity plays out in the contemporary mode of making do.

Have queer appropriations of phenomenology fared better? Sarah Ahmed (2006) argues in her now classic *Queer Phenomenology*, for instance, that “the racial and historical dimensions [of being] are beneath the surface of the body described by phenomenology, which becomes, by virtue of its own orientation, a way of thinking the body that has surface appeal” (109). Is phenomenology, as a practice, establishing a vision of reality so radically disengaged from the processes of social life? She goes on to describe phenomenology as “[attending] to the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character of embodied reality...” (110). It would seem here, that phenomenology, on its own, fails to consider the world-historical and the racializing effects
of power, such as colonialism, and its effects on embodying the body. Insofar as that’s the case, Ahmed fails to see a problematic dualism she creates separating structure from givenness, depth and surface respectively. Embodying the body, as I’m calling it, is another trope of power-effects—of molding persons as beings. Continuing to bypass whether one can consider one’s body in its naturalness (much like Salamon), Ahmed further limits experience through “the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things ‘have a certain place’ or are ‘in place’” (110). Her shudder quotes indicate a somewhat hidden reliance on ideology, of the Althusserian sort (of “interpellating” persons as subjects). There is clearly “something” at work that constitutes subjects/objects. Granting that racialization affects an embodied perception of belonging, we are still left with how, in spite of being “orientated” or “pointed toward” something, persons engage in the work of life in a web of constantly shifting normative expectations. In what ways do nonnormative bodies feel at home, familiar, or belong while engaged in improvisational life-work? Perhaps, more probingly, is the feeling of belonging the product of improvisational work or the product of the structure or the dialectic between both? Must queer or bodies, for that matter, also bear the signs of abjection and always be orientated by heteronormativity and cisnormativity? If we argue that bodies are always orientated, directed, pointed toward, or effected by normative power, would we also have to concede that we are reifying these same norms temporally—that is to say a cis and hetero present?

I am not suggesting there is some internal inconsistency in Ahmed’s book, which is as erudite as it is clear, or that phenomenology and queer/trans theories are incompatible form the start. I am saying that it merits attention from theorists when critical theories begin to guide, rather than inform, inquiries about forms of life. Theory can maintain one without scraping the integrity of the other. As Sedgwick (2003) illuminates: “for someone to have an unmystified
view of systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid, to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (128). A trans phenomenology is, then, a work of reparative theory and affective reading. It is a pedagogy for the theorist. It has to work out relations between the body as simultaneously reflecting structure and as a singularity distant from it. We might say that a reparative reading “shows” the body, affect, mood, and life as living rather than “telling” that is exercised as ideological interpellation, biopolitical disciplining, or neoliberal commodification.

**Other than Paranoid Theory as Trans Critique**

As “beside” or “other than,” phenomenology is a part of the alternative epistemologies called reparative forms of reading (cf. Sedgwick 2003). It is a counterpart (counteragent?) to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that marks much of contemporary queer and trans theory. In this way, phenomenology thinks itself in terms of “what is naïve, sincere, uncomplicated, unironic, uncritical, unstrategic, or just plain ordinary about everyday being in the world’” (Chu 2017, 150; my emphasis). Out of a number of definitions for the term “naive,” one comes closest to phenomenology’s intention, so to speak: a state of not having been subjected to experimentation. This particular definition allows a clearer entre into understanding what is meant by the phenomenological givenness of bodies in the world. In other words, as bodies are present themselves to consciousness. Humans, Heidegger might say, are the peculiar kind of being that discovers, by and for themselves, already being-in-the-world with other beings—what he calls “thrownness,” the facticity of existence. Mariana Ortega agrees, arguing that this thrownness, however, is something experienced with more dizzying effect for the racially and sexually
marginalized. For Lauren Berlant (2011) this boils down to a methodological question, namely “to think about [ordinary] sensual matter that is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness but that has historical significance in domains of subjectivity requires following the course from what’s singular—the subject’s irreducible specificity—to the means by which the matter of the senses becomes general within a collectively lived situation” (53). In other words, to access and grasp what it means to experience this life, this body, and its encountered-ness in the worlds trans people inhabit, if only speculatively.

This is why Sedgwick (2003) favors privileging, in many instances, the nonlinguistic and theatricality of day-to-day life. These improvisations, or “forms of life,” are not static or easily brought into objective presence by interrogative methods (such as ethnography). They interact, change from moment to moment, and are experienced differently over, as well as through, time and space. One can never know what this life consists of until one has descended into its affective spaces. For instance, anthropologist Veena Das (2006) argues that “the precise range and scale of the human form of life is not knowable in advance, any more than the precise range of the meaning of a world is knowable in advance” (90). From a phenomenological vernacular, human existence is “thrown” into the complex and interrelated environments that make up the world. Experiencing this world is filled with textures (of the tactile senses) and affects (of feelings and emotions) that place the phenomenality of the body in already (tactile and affective) interactive modes with the world. To put it another way, affect incorporates the gestural as a means of disclosing, of unconcealing, the living parts of making do. But also of disclosing their history, their deeply embedded roots in community.

As mentioned in my Introduction, affective inquiries do not discount structural antagonisms, only the determinism that might follow from theorizing their oppressiveness in the
everyday. Thus, the creativity within ordinary life runs up against what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) is a temporality where “things feel random when they are not, and things feel systemic when accidents actually happen. What threatens might therefore be political where the power stakes are palpable, or entirely fantasmatic—the difference does not make much difference in the encounter with what might happen and what does happen” (73). Thus, as paranoia’s epistemological other, phenomenology and affect return to us the site of givenness that lets improvisation within cultural contexts not only emerge but unfold. Consider the life-altering experiences of violence and trauma and their associated affects (adjustment, fear, anxiety, dread) within everyday life. Phenomenality deals with the body’s being-able-to-live as well as its already-being-there. I am intentionally hyphenating terms to stress how these words hang together as different modes of being under trauma. So, Judith Butler (2004), as a strong constructionist on the one hand, argues that “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies” (20; my emphasis). The social being in the constitution of loss and trauma seems wrongheaded to me. From the standpoint of givenness, there is a void or absence of the body, of that being, already there making do. Again, reciting Chu, because it bears repeating: to admit of life’s unlivability, or zones of livability, is to admit that “[life] is about the livability of the dead-end, the survivability of what’s wrong—whether that is the wrong body, the wrong society, or the wrong genre—even as the wrongness of hat is given is equiprimordial, as Heidegger would say, with givenness itself” (2017, 151). One cannot theorize the body as mere social effect without also explaining how it is that a person’s body is given over to that person’s experience. Thus, Das would argue that “violence seems to define the edges at which
experimentation with a form of life as a human form of life occurs” (86). Whereas constructionism might suggest that our vulnerability is experienced as part of our being socially constituted, phenomenology (while admitting of social effects and affects) directs us toward the experience of vulnerability as an experience of the body as it unfolds as a complex function of finding the rhythm of the ordinary.

This kind of improvising in the ordinary refers to the middle ranges of agency, of the necessity to conceive of human being somewhere between the extremes of buying into or refusing systemic and/or oppressive structures. Consider the beginning of Leslie Feinberg’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Stone Butch Blues* (1994). The story revolves around Jess, a Jewish butch lesbian from a working class family, and her formative experiences of queer sexuality and gender identity. We meet Jess, in letter form, as Jess the lover and Jess the everyday being in the world. She makes a special reference to her interactions with the police. Set in the 50s, the novel deals with a number of police raids throughout Jess’s formative years in the gay bar scene. But in one such raid, Jess confesses that she had been forced to decide whether to perform a sexual act on the arresting officer. Jess writes “I never told you this before, but something changed inside of me at that moment. I learned the difference between what I can’t do and what I refuse to do. I paid the price for that lesson. Do I have to tell you every detail of that moment? Of course not” (5). Jess’s confession to Theresa reveals the complexity of more than just her feelings about love. Love is a notoriously difficult affect for Jess. Jess doesn’t have to tell Theresa every detail about the experience because she knows that Theresa gets it. The butch-femme relationship is famously illustrated throughout Feinberg’s prose. This affective structuration of love establishes a rhythm, a middle agency for how to act in uncertain and catastrophic temporalities. She knows that her body’s violation is her own violation.
In another instance, Jess writes that “I remember when we got outside to the parking lot you stopped and put your hands lightly on my shoulders and avoided my eyes. You gently rubbed the bloody places on my shirt and said, “I’ll never get these stains out. I knew exactly what you meant. It was such an oddly sweet way of saying, or not saying, what you were feeling” (5). That Theresa speaks of the blood stains, and the impossibility of removing them, instead of the pressing urgency of the violence Jess faced is not a disavowal or an acquiesces. It is a strategy, experiencing and expressing what is conceivable within the boundaries of that moment. Theresa is making a world in spite of the sagging undertow of desolation, feeling as though she and Jess are suspended for a moment within a time marked by violence against sexual minorities. She and Jess feel and know it to be true and is expressed through the touching gestures in which they both engage outside the police station. This feeling is what Lauren Berlant (2011) describes this “being in history [as a] densely corporeal, experientially felt thing whose demands on survival skills map not the whole world in one moment but a way to think about the history of sensualized epistemologies in the atmosphere of a particular moment now (aesthetically) suspended in time” (64). Here and throughout the novel, Feinberg describes how the (butch, trans, nonnormative) body, though always seemingly subject to violence, is always part a subjective process of procuring a rhythm that promises a continuity to life in the ordinary.

**The Emergent Trans Genre and its Non-Event**

Much of my own affective learning occurred through a sustained engagement with Lauren Berlant. As I have mentioned before, her argument is that the affective mode of contemporary life is governed, so to speak, by a shared conception that life being lived in crisis. Forms of life in this register are shaped by a temporality of anticipation, of not knowing. This affective state that readies the body something-to-come is, in Berlant’s view, the presence of a
happening awaiting its event, a becoming event. Her answer to this sense of something impending is the impasse. This impasse is felt as a kind of crisis, or trauma, a non-event that may or may not have taken place but is nevertheless known and felt as the body is often the conduit through which such traumas are registered. We might also say that this is a way of thinking “life” as “genre” or of how life is shaped by the kinds of affective limitations human beings perceive as being there. In this way, we can visualize the everyday as being colored by affects corresponding to crisis/trauma (dread, fear, resignation) as well as those pushing against crisis (optimism, hope, or just plain boredom). This kind of thinking spatializes time. Being-in-crisis is a matter of understanding one’s time as being limited to feeling intensely, as somehow bounded by the future potential within this impasse, of an inability to move beyond a given set circumstances, understood and called into presence by a very real past. Life, in such an impasse, is lived with intensity because of the individuation that crisis invokes (this is my crisis, my time, my future). By this, “thinking about life during lived time, everyone is figuring out the terms and genres for valuing living preserving the potentiality for casual life is important in a crisis” (59-60). I find Berlant’s epistemic commitments here to be particularly useful to understanding how affect in the present can shape ordinary life that is both intelligible from a theoretical angle but also phenomenologically irreducible. In bringing culture into conversation with givenness, of crisis with presence, perhaps the perceived movement of much of the trans genre (of affects relating to “beyond” questions of gender entirely) is that we, in fact, feel stuck. We are indeed stuck in the “wrong wrong body.”

The proof that genres of normative life are fraying is something traced but not something one holds in the form in a model. A genre of being looks something like the subject finding an intelligible set of conventions that enable her self-description and self-creation. To an extent,
genres provide some of the very improvisational work that Ortega has described as hometactices (one of three affective intelligences outlined in Chapter Three). But we have seen affective orientations change and the genres thought to contain the narrative plots of trans life. Forms of self-making become clearer or more opaque depending on where the subject stands in the social hierarchy. Thus, an expression of dysphoria that one can read literally in a poem like “Agony” is an expression of discontent with a cultural milieu in another, as expressed in the interview between Carmen Carrera illustrated. Genres do not just disappear, much like practices do not disappear. Contemporary genres on trans life have been engaging in movements toward feelings of sovereign, autonomous safety. And both political forms discussed in Chapter Two (of assimilation or anti-normativity) are expressions of that because they each point toward attachment to a certain fantasy of feeling a sense of being-at-ease. But the trans ordinary is filled with episodes where such fantasies fail. As theorists, we have to be up to the task of addressing both the failure and the cause of the attachment. Where transition does not fulfill what it promised, such as Rachel McKinnon’s analysis of the happy transsexual illustrated in Chapter Three, invites needed critical revision. This fantasy is a poetics, a feeling “misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimating performativity and an affective sense of control” (Berlant 2011, 97). And yet this does not mean that fantasmatic attachments do not do their part in constituting the baseline on which knowledge about the trans ordinary is situated. On the contrary, most of our decisions (our epistemic commitments one might say) are carried out in ordinary life based on fantasies about continuity, of another tomorrow, the comforts of habit, and the like. What I have tracked through my various phenomenological inquiries have been affective adjustments, self-management of a multiplicitous self, and how the ordinary was the site of it all.
Is the recent emphasis on this “beyond” that the so-called trans revolution inaugurated a non-event trying to find its genre? Maybe. I am inclined to call this new epistemic and affective non-event gender ambivalence. As Paisley Currah observes, “much was gained with this movement away from the centrality of the sex/gender binary. But,” he goes on, “one crucial tool was lost: the emphasis on asymmetry” (2016). These new conventionalities that away from the binary have reframed certain affective orientations and attachments by shaking out of the ordinary. Rather than revealing the violence, instability, or fragility that may have always been and thus saturated everyday life, this ambivalence toward the beyond has posited a rather myopic and reified view of identity politics. The neoliberal appropriation of inclusion, of misdirecting politics away from the economy (and which narrative in this dissertation did not deal in some sense with class) has absorbed feelings of normativity. Being healthy is a regime of expertise that suffuses everyday life with normative habits. In this way, “health itself can be seen as a side effect of successful normativity, and people’s desires and fantasies are solicited to line up with the that pleasant condition” (106). This concept, of what is healthy as being a byproduct of the normatively successful or the successfully normative, might also have some explanatory value within debates on (gendered) passing. The problem is that this newer trans genre (if we can call it that) does exactly what Currah is worried about. It masks how power relations obscure the lives and conditions of the poor, a category that both trans and cis people share alike. Take passing, for example. The problem with passing is compounded by the risks one takes at self-making; of being misrecognized in certain spaces for the sake of economic wellbeing; of entering into the world with the affective strain of always being present, always alert, always exhausted; of being exhausted because it comes with the territory of having a job. Going beyond gender does not get at the ordinary pressure that passing is exhausting to nonnormative bodies in more than one
sense. And it is not always the state. Trans people must exhaust themselves in order to become exhausted, in other words normal.

The radical answer to this new brand consumerism on the trans/queer Left has been to mock “it gets better” as a means of normalizing otherwise anti-normative forms of political action. The argument goes something like this. “It might get better for white cisgender gays, but it won’t for non-white, non-cis nonnormative people.” The real problem, in this sense, resides in how the state and corporations market gender and sex segregate. That much might be true. But I supposed the question might go something like this: is it any crueler an optimism to cling to the notion of a better good life because of fate, or because gender revolutionaries are hitting the state where it hurts?

I think these are both liberal conceptions needing to be called out for their equally utopic sense of the future as both do not generally deal with the facts finding work, a home, some kind of health, within a culture that prizes economic productivity. Just “getting by” is, in fact, the norm! It means that the only exhaustion they can every really “complain” about is not from a singular force of bias (sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia), but from the status of work itself. One might think that success in the courts regarding anti-discrimination law for trans people appeals to this notion. But it just reinforces the primacy of work as a central part of contemporary cultural identity. So by “getting better,” this concept of life induces in youth an affective drive to feel better about themselves not for its own sake. Getting better is orienting the will toward finding a place in neoliberal markets through whatever means possible. Getting better is a placeholder that could just as easily mean “get used to it” because that is precisely the attachment expected out of nonnormative youth. An attachment to world order that promises them a place only insofar as they are willing to exploit and plumb their own psychic resources
and physical health in the pursuit of work. If not “get used to it” then “getting better” means the
engineering of affects for nonnormative communities in order to make self-management
(through therapy, sex/gender confirming transitions, etc.) a part of an already privatized
apparatus of medical professionals and experts. Thus getting better is also “getting ready,” if
only because you need the help in order to find the work that will, in the end, exhaust you.

When Currah suggests we bring the binary back, he is also illustrating the fraying edges
of older normativities even though our socio-economic inequalities (those asymmetries) are
getting more and more obscure. Anti-normative critiques of social constructs such as the gender
binary elide the fact that the binary is still very real, and sometimes a very safe, embodied set of
conventions for people. So what is the (gender, class, racial) nonnormative subject to do? Is
being healthy through do it yourself (DIY) self-help bucking the trend? Or should they seek to
deconstruct their own gender daily through practices described in activist zines? The answer to
these question rely on the theme of the similarly situated epistemic subject. That is to say, all
gender nonnormative people can appeal to a singular conception of sociality, a knowledge that
people can change. I would argue that both cling to an image of knowledge that posits a kind of
“true feeling” (one through citizenship and the other through presupposed shared oppression)
without interrogating how those affects frame knowledge of what is ordinary, of what is good,
and of what can reduce harm.

In all of these meditations, the ordinary, as a site of knowledge, is situated within an
epistemic/affective model of self-management. That is to say, knowledge about the ordinary, and
the feelings that are present or emergent within it, turn affective relations of the impasse. That
right now, the now of the present life, we are caught somewhere between those history that
should be behind us as the past and the empty promises that the old genres of being made about
the future (recognition, upward mobility, political voice). The epistemic/affective model of management reframes trans life in terms that rupture the biopolitical and feminist narratives that capture the voices of trans people. Questions of knowledge in forms of life must tend toward how gender nonnormative life orients itself toward affective relations that reproduce a sense of security in an enduring sensation that change is, if not too slow, not happening at all. Knowledge as feeling, and feeling as knowing, is a method in temporality that reveals what is at stake when the ordinary is understood as already containing those forces that have erupted into the cultural events that “change everyone’s perspective” about gender or sex. Bathrooms were already political, already sites of self-care and potential danger. Public spaces were already filled with tremors of violence against nonnormative appearances. Racism had already constructed how sexuality and gender identities were to be experienced in non-white bodies. In this way, the affective intelligences a side of trans life that cannot be sensationalized. They are a means of creating something, making work that makes worlds, Berlant might say. Of feeling a way through these worlds so as to know them.

**Coda: The Trans Ordinary as a Space Resistance**

When epistemologist José Medina suggests that the presence of epistemic injustices (which includes instances dismissing another’s testimony because of identity-bias, the foreclosure of access to what he calls knowledge practices, and the erasure of an entire community’s knowledge from social recognition) calls for “epistemic resistance” (2013, 3). This resistance is mounted on multiple fronts, and includes demanding interaction on equal recognition and the re-emergence of “democratic sensibilities” that place dialogic outcomes as crucial to sustained human life. In one sense, Medina normalizes epistemic conflict—that is to say, struggle for epistemic recognition and justice is a constant in human affairs. However, he
doesn’t seek to normalize it through institutions and apparatuses of consensus. There must be a shared commitment, or ethical bond, among those seeking to evaluate their shared realities. Epistemic resistance is an outcome of this normalized conflict. It challenges assumptions about the realities of identity, the discursive limitations built-into the names given to certain forms of phenomena and activities (such as gender, race, sex work, drug use, criminality, poverty, etc.). These forms of political and lived activities invite the reconsideration of old, and the introduction of new, terms.

But Medina goes a step further. In his own epistemological terms, we are “blind” to asking self-dissipating questions because we have already committed ourselves to a certain way of thinking about the world that we take for granted is real, perpetual, and normatively strong. In a sense, we live in our own moments of privilege. We fear self-estrangement—that is, placing ourselves outside of our lived contexts to investigate whether our assumptions about the world are faulty. We also rarely think of ourselves as the responsible agents in the epistemic interaction. So, thinking requires alienating oneself enough to feel the present—disquieting, upsetting, self-estranging, unsettling, all over which dissolves the predictability of a world of beings that, at minimum, are always under construction, always unfolding their being unpredictable ways, and relating to each other in countless ways. There is an urge explain but not experience. And once that explanation has been rendered, to move beyond it. If gender is performative, then one can move beyond its parodic functions. If it is socially constructed, gender is meaningful insofar a group gives it meaning. “This concern with aim or results, with differentiating and passing judgment on various thinkers is therefore an easier task than it might seem. For instead of getting involved in the real issue, this kind of activity is always a way beyond it” (Hegel 1977, 3). So goes the problem with continuously moving away from genres of
the gendered human: the post-human, the nonhuman, the anti-human. Real knowing, as it were, is shaped by degrees and kinds of relations that force theorists to retrace our steps back to a moment where our thinking stopped, and our instinctual need to explain began. “Instead of tarrying with it, and losing itself in it, this kind of knowing is forever grasping at something new; it remains essentially preoccupied with itself instead of being preoccupied with the real issue and surrendering to it” (Hegel 1977, 3, emphasis my own). The prelude to thinking gender is to surrender to the ordinary but immense affect it has upon our living experiences; to come undone by the sheer weight of our relational experiences that we have with ours and others’ bodies. We must learn to be affected by gender again.
Afterword: The Trans Complaint

In some sense, this dissertation has been a sustained examination of what would it look like if gender nonnormativity were a site of attachment, as a genre in which performances range and expand up the concept of the multiplicitous self. In this line of thinking, to identify as this or that gender is less to suspend everyday activity into a single dimension or aesthetic like we normally do. In a sense, defining “who I am” requires that I must first be willing to accept that my performances will never fully satisfy anyone else. That I will fail in performing a certain masculinity or femininity. That I will fail at looking or acting like a man. That I will fail around loving peers and community members as much as my allies and supporters. And all performances that come after any self-realizing or self-transformative moment are means overcoming the lock and key of my genre, my gender. Being a gender, or not, consists of an infinite array of “somewhere” to which someone might be escaping. And if that somewhere is less a projected moment suspended in futurity, then at least it consists an ordinary of exceptional or perhaps project-worthy human life-making and life-building. I want to speculate as to the possibility of the trans complaint, following writing on a parallel and more sustained project called the female complaint. And it is primarily speculative and hopefully provides a point of departure for future research on mass-mediated trans culture.

To be recognized at all is to allow misrecognition into the fold of our being as an equiprimordial factor of our entering public life. To pass as this or that (gender or race or ethnicity) is to live inside a fantasy in the outside world where that fantasy is tested time and again—whether by others or ourselves. And the escape that generic conventions of gender offers us is a place of refuge as much as it might be a place of injustice or solitude. Perhaps the personal is the political only because the impersonal is what we bargain with when we exist our
homes (if we have one) and enter the space of other human beings. We bargain with the impersonal to make do with a sense of self we feel (we know) to be under new pressures. And if the conventions of normativity engenders a day of rest, or a self-care moment, then those moments should not be cast out of our critical attention. It announces a need for a closer inspection of these ordinary sites in order to measure the extent of the need for feeling normal and knowing what normal is/looks like. Or to put it another way, gender normativity—whether through the so-called imitative properties of passing, living within and accepting normative aesthetics as natural and part of one’s own body, or pushing against these and exploding gender’s fantasy—suggests that people get to feel the guarantee of personal and intimate exchange through the impersonal and convention. The everyday promise of reciprocation (or recognition) is one that is ratified only when someone mentally and bodily navigates their gender genre.

But if the mass-mediated trans culture considers the point of being trans to get rid of gender, to consider gender as an inherently violent aspect of social identities, even undoing gender altogether, does this constitute a kind of narrative complaint. This complaint goes something like this: recognizing gender is necessary but also violent, so abolish it. This means that culturally mediated affect, the way we feel and the way we come to feel normal, is more important than ever for intimate trans publics. If someone’s sense of femininity is attached both to the conventional standards of “the female complaint,” as Lauren Berlant (2008) called it, and to the particular imaginaries that a singular life experiences, we have to imagine that trans and gender nonnormative embodiments are not pushing against but rather living alongside something like gender conventions. Living a gender nonnormative life is not always bound up with the political decision to unmask gender’s illusion. Living that life is a making decisions about what conventions feel most safe or which ones simply do not make sense to the ordinary experiences
within *that* life. In other words, defaulting the context of a trans life to one combating cisgender heterosexuals inadvertently privileges the power of cis and heteronormativity. This means that discussions about “passing” trans identities *must* allow room for all sorts of disappointments that are not going to be linked to the power of cisgenderism or Gayle Rubin’s classic account of heteronormativity. If cisgender is part of, but not primordial to, the conventions of gender normativity, then critics must accept that cisgender possesses a plurality of forms in itself. This is so not because critics have been wrong about cisgender privilege, or that such a privilege needs to take a backseat in critical discussions moving forward.

On the contrary, cisgender privilege, if defined as the ability not to consider one’s gender “realness” in the context of everyday life, is a kind of attachment to which many forms of nonnormative life might make. It is a promise, an unstated guarantee, that if one can obtain it one will be free to move through space without the constant vigilance that attends marginal life. But cisnormativity, like all normative forms that life-making, leads to a kind of cruel optimism. It promises movement through space but never touches the issues of class, race, or ability. Passing as, being one’s “authentic” self against, or just being cisgender does not compute the irregularities that economics and race shuffle into a life that is attempting to make sense of itself. The fact is that people are struggling to get it right. And this struggle is a kind of making do that often requires a certain attachment to a certain feeling, a certain kind of failure—let us say misrecognition—that breaks with the cruel optimism of gender normativity and the privilege of its identity. And if one is suddenly misread, or misrecognized, that break in the script of everyday life is rendered ordinary because trans people have had the necessity for a kind of intuition, experiencing what it means to bargain their gender conformity for their everyday safety, that have made their affective orientations to an aesthetics of the ordinary a complex
affair—more complex than most. So complex that one might ask how does one find a kind of emotional space and release so as not to explode in their own bodies. If gender as genre means that in many instances that genre bleeds into another, pushes its own limits and requires revision, the hypervigilance of everyday trans life is a kind of knowledge that such limits exist in the first place—that normativity is both a safe space and a space whose edges are slowly expanding through action.

The complaint is found somewhere between the fantasy of recognition and the lived experiences of gender nonnormative life. That “somewhere between: is not nothing, not an abstraction, but a felt sense of things out of joint. Although Berlant calls this somewhere critical it is also sentimental—that clings to a fantasy and a certain kind of affective knowledge rather than the “truths” critical inquiry. The media that carry this message convey the following optimism in the complaint: that women can transform themselves in ways to overcome heteronormative conventionality concerning love, or to find a degree of sovereignty within it without changing much of the world around them. And that is the failure of such sentimentality. It clings to the notion that the flaw is in human individuals, not culture; conventionalities of gender and not the larger sensorium of markets, labor, and emphases on individualism. The flaw can be exposed. And this exposure can somehow allow for that singular transformative moment in other women to overcome. In a sense, such a culture allows women (ironically to be sure) to persist under attachments of self-dissipation and disempowerment rather than actual political and social change.

The question of whether there is a trans complaint itself would probably raise some eyebrows in trans activism. What do you mean complaint? At the end of the day, isn’t the whole point to undo the argument that trans and cis are locked in some kind of fundamentally
constitutive dualism? Is this reifying a conception of trans? Aren’t trans women women? Thus, would the trans woman’s complaint fall under the female complaint? To say there is a complaint is to suggest there is a mediating characteristic to culture, something that trans people can share in commonality, but something that nevertheless absorbs their social energies in generic form. Indeed, to argue that there is a trans culture or subculture at all is to take the leap of faith that a common sense of a gender nonnormative selfhood is experienced. It is to accept the possible loss that is experienced when one argues there is “a culture,” where the word homogenizes the otherwise complex lifeworlds of people across lines of economy, race, ethnicity, age, and ability. What cultural precepts are there to suture the gaps that such identitarian categories engender? Are they strong or weak? Or does that even matter if they exist at all?

I would argue that the “trans complaint” can parallel Berlant’s “female complaint” in a number of ways. Trans culture, since the eras of Jorgenson and Prince, Rivera and Johnson, Mock and Cox, have carried the same kind of message: that trans people are neither sick nor abnormalities, but authentic and real in their sexed and gendered being. The public sphere’s uptake of this simple claim has been mixed, at best. Its most recent iterations have been a materialization of de-pathologizing transsexual and transgender identities (the noted change in the DSM-V to gender dysphoria), offering new spaces of representation for trans characters on streaming TV (Orange is the New Black, Supergirl, Transparent, Pose, to name just a few). The political and legal strides made by trans communities have been quite large recently (with the inclusion of gender identity as a protected status under Title VII and Title IX, the inclusion of trans service members in the Armed Forces, and the multi-state actions that no longer require medical approval for changing sex markers on official documents). It would appear, if one follows this path of liberal progress, that the affective world where feelings matter does exist—
and that coming out of the shadows, trans people are finally receiving the recognition they have been demanding since their incorporation into public discourse.

But this intimate public of trans people, a public that thrives on the aesthetics that such political change occurs outside everyday life and is therefore “juxtapolitical” (Berlant 2008, 3). In this sense, the proximity of trans communities to the political is one marked by kind of ambivalence. World circumstances should change, and they can, but such a political world is often filled with corruption and scandal and difficult to manage. There is little control over the narrative in such a sphere. If this is the case, then many trans communities attach to the ordinary in order to “live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire” (3). My archive has already been discussed at length throughout the dissertation: Stryker, Feinberg, Jacques. I believe each of these pieces reflect upon, either directly or indirectly, the kind of politics at stake the trans complaint: sentimental attachment to but critical detachment from (sex/gender) normativity; of a homonormative conventionality (perhaps bordering on, if not creating, transnormativity) that constructs an imaginary that enables coherent communities out of trans selves; this imaginary is its own aesthetic space that allows others within it to feel affective connections with each other, share stories and narratives that make sense, and “get” one another; and that these feelings not only matter but are necessary in order to change the everyday lives of trans people who are commonly struggling in an atmosphere that is toxic to them.

The trans genre is tied up with all sorts of attachments to femininity and masculinity; normative conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality; to what the sexed and gendered body and embodied aesthetic are; of what feelings are tied up with such embodiments; to what an appropriate trans politics would be that reflects the needs of communities. In short, the trans
genre establishes a certain (gendered?) convention of “true feelings” exclusively for trans people. In her previous works, Lauren Berlant identified this cultural milieu of true feelings as a response to the impersonal world of politics—that the result were new cultural forms that fostered what real feelings, well, feel like when one is a citizen, or white, or black, etc. In making political claims (if indeed that is what someone desires), a historicized imaginary would be antecedents for such true feelings to exist. The irony is, of course, that the battle against what is taken for granted as true (true sex, true gender, true biology, etc.) has been the cornerstone upholding the trans movement since its inception. This is no coincidence. It is a necessary bargain that is struck. The moment a marginalized group enters the liberal tableaux of rights, individualism, and citizenship, they need to get their stories straight—their histories might buckle, but not dismantle, the shared history their nation. The genre, the conventions constellated within it, create both epistemic and aesthetic expectations. These expectations tether to those who perform and identify within a genre’s limits as well as for those who bear witness to those performances. Thus, generic limits help constitute certain phenomenological truths in everyday life, sorting out what is ordinary from what is not, what can be from what cannot.

And yet the question of how such cultures (here trans culture and the trans complaint that is concealed within it) persist in an era that has no clear trajectory for how trans people will be accepted. For Berlant, women’s culture was something re-mediated over and over owing to market forces. There is always a market for romance, for fantasy, for the better good life as a woman. As a genre, femininity (and its dynamics with feminism) can play out in the various media of popular culture. The spaces these media create allow for all kinds of feelings about living realities to be purveyed all the while generating a singular response on the part of a female participant. They trigger a realization of what is translatable from the day to day realities of
certain kinds of oppression into the fantasies that love provide in a novel, a short story, a play, or a movie. “The complexities and stresses of lives managed under all of the vectors of subordination that we know about produces a vast market in such moments of felt simplicity. But because those fantasies of translation are in relation to what is hard by surviving, there is nothing simple about them or the astounding amount of creativity they absorb in the course of the ordinary reproduction of life” (7). That is to say, there is nothing about these media that can be reduced so as to sum up what women must be feeling upon watching, reading, or hearing them. The responses that these media produce are means of both political release and optimistic futurity, that even though the future is unknowable, “there’s always tomorrow” and the promise of change.

**Re-Examining Rage in the Trans Complaint**

I want to revisit Susan Stryker. She is a pissed off transsexual woman. She split no hairs about this affective space in her piece, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (2006, henceforth *TR*). “I decorated the set by draping my black leather biker jacket over my chair at the panelists’ table. The jacket had handcuffs on the left shoulder, rainbow freedom rings on the right side lacings, and Queer Nation-style stickers reading BE CHANGE, DYKE, and FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA plastered on the back” (245). She identifies with Frankenstein’s monster, a technological construction, the monster. Her voice is intelligent but belies a concealed politics. And why shouldn’t she be pissed? The first part of this narrative piece is a reaction against those who proclaim transsexuality as unnatural, an illness, or a disease of the will. When queer and feminist communities seem to occult trans histories into something minor, inconsequential, how can the trans subject narrate their own account and order of things? For Stryker, the monstrosity of
transsexuality is not nothing. As a character, the monster holds a critical position of refusal. “The monster problematizes gender partly through its failure as a viable subject in the visual field...the monster accomplishes [its] resistance by mastering language in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied in the specular realm” (247). The monster never passes. The monster, however, may learn to speak critical language—a language that might inspire some to change their minds about what constitutes humanity.

This, I think, marks a limit point for the trans complaint: as an Other, constructed out of the bits and pieces of social, cultural, and linguistic matrices, trans people can never fully occupy that space they hold out for. It is a realist (albeit academic) take on an everyday problem, recognition. Stryker’s use of spatialized language (“inability of language to represent...movement over time between stably gendered positions”) invites readers to witness what appears to be a common frustration for trans people. Phenomenologically, how can one comfortably situate oneself in a culture if that culture’s language never captures the dynamics of self-projection for trans people? But trans people can master the critical language of inquiry—like the monster. As an academic, Stryker can speak and write at the register of the intellectual, in part to provide access to a mode of understanding for the academic communities—in a sense, proving her own humanity. As an activist, she is a body in public—a body, she argues, molds the trans psyche as one built out of technological and psychiatric tableaux. Her body might always be called into question. Her words, however well-spoken and saturated with academic credibility, are likewise questioned for their authenticity. And this leads to rage.

Is there something so common about this rage that traverses communities of trans people, allowing them a space for emotional awareness? Is there room in this piece for any kind of reciprocation and recognition? Or is the trans subject forever attempting to occupy a place in
culture that they can never fully occupy? Can this rage be transformative in the sense that when one reads it, the feel moved by her words and willing to stand up against the very culture she criticizes? And what about sexual reassignment surgery (SRS)? How does this potential moment in the life of a trans person constitute both a moment of relieving change and the cruel optimism that what was hoped for never comes true: acceptance, both self and social? I think these questions underlie the trans complaint because they all touch the essence of liberal cultural norms of self-transformation as the starting point for social change. Be that revolutionary! Own that rage! Piss people off! This is what the trans genre offers: a way to feel political without acting politically. A way toward self-understanding but always at the cost of an optimism that the future self will be one’s authentic self. In a sense, this iteration of the trans genre mediates personal tragedy with critical thinking in such a way that attaches the self to a normative framework of political feeling and detaching from the pressures of real-world pressures in the reproduction of ordinary life.

My sense is that what Stryker is doing here is crucial. It is not in vain and it is not nothing. But it conceals an attachment to a vision of the world that could be if only people would come to their senses. “Sometimes, though, I still mourn the passing of old, more familiar ways” (250). The sentiment that the past is gone and all we have is now belies the fact that Stryker desires a future where people see nature from her point of view. In a way, TR is a self-management piece as much as it is autobiographical. Is that, perhaps, what the trans genre is, a means of self-help and care; of self-management and self-projection? If so, then the worry might be that such writings merely discuss how trans people manage but do so with the backdrop of a bad kind of optimism. Take SRS, for instance. For many, SRS is seen as a means of finally completing a journey of the body, of realizing in a material way what they had been feeling all
along. But the oppressions of bias in the world do not change with the trans patient receiving adequate care. They continue. (People still die of starvation; women are still brutalized by their intimate partners; Black men are still rounded up in the prison industrial complex, a racism that profits from cheap labor.) What I am trying to say here is that embodying the self, one’s feelings of true mental self, does little to remove someone from the world into which they are thrown. And, one can read, Stryker intimates ambivalence toward SRS, at best. So what is the trans subject to do, if only to utilize that rage, own it, and seek change where change can happen?

What *TR* does not equip the reader with is exactly how to manage the affective pressures that the trans subject will face in the world. As an academic, Stryker is more attuned to her surroundings from an intellectual angle. She possesses an intuition that makes her aware of bias, even alerts her to the potential of it. I am not criticizing Stryker for a project she never intended to carry out. I am, however, concerned with what this seminal work in the trans genre is saying about *feeling* normative and the “true feelings” associated with misrecognition. There is certainly a great deal of good feelings, pleasure, when one is recognized for what they are, what they project into the world as beings in the world. But there is also a certain kind of poetics to misrecognition—of thinking that an object or future state will make us happy. In this sense, and following Berlant’s take on it in *Cruel Optimism*, misrecognition is a part of the process by which repetition, form, and release of energy constitute our affective attachments. Our affective states make our bodies teachable (as I argued in Chapter Three concerning affective intelligence). And if that is the case, our reactions to scenes, at least in part, reflect less of a conscious willpower to govern these states than attempts to make the learning moments more tolerable. When rage is overpowering, what is to be done? Do we confront a representation of the problem (say, a white police officer, or a hospital worker) to construct a moment within a world
in which we feel a little less “less than”? When we are stressed by the day to day practices we require to reproduce ordinary life, do we exercise because, as we are told, that it is a natural antidepressant? Or do we eat an entire foot long sandwich from and vomit it up later? When our families no longer accept us for our identities, for our so-called lifestyles, do we “push through” it, knowing that “it gets better”? Or do we turn to sex, drugs, alcohol, or other forms of self-interruption? This rage goes somewhere, but my sense is that Stryker relies to heavily on the power of genre to convey its direction.

I cannot speculate as to the answer Stryker might have. But it seems the normative routes, as deemed healthy by experts, sound a hell of a lot better alternatives than the others. Berlant argues, “Learning to interrupt the present may have something to do with learning to make a political claim on the present” (2011, 159). Perhaps a political claim is being made when someone, owning a certain historical narrative, refuses therapy because their problem is not located in them but in an environment that continues to drain their creative energies. Perhaps the political claim is having too much sex, perhaps drinking a bit too much, not because one is an addict or has “a problem” but because the absence of feeling a real sense of reciprocity, real recognition, is ameliorated through interrupting a present that seems endless. So what if language cannot hold the temporal positionality of the trans subject when trans people are confronted with the lattice work of racism and other oppressions that force an affective orientation that looks less like revolution and more like making do. And if the trans complaint consists of finding recognition and self-love (if only by and through a poetics of misrecognition), if it is about finding a place in the normative world (if only to feel normal), then the critical shift ought to pivot toward that desire to normativity and what affective practices such a desire gives rise to.
So the question still haunting these meditations on the trans complaint (or even the trans genre) could be framed around the desire to feel something like pity, or (re)sentiment about the condition of trans communities. The politics of modern sentimentality is, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would argue, is “vicariousness and misrepresentation, but also as sensation brought to the quick with an insulting closeness” (2008, 150). If Stryker’s readers are moved by her words or interpellated into revolutionary action, it is because they are invited to do so through the temptation to witness the porous and generic pain through the author’s particular experience. Considering that neither author invoked above offer explicit blueprints toward affective release or a political program for a specific kind of cultural change, they stand as examples of the work of sentimentality in the growing subcultural fantasies of norm/anti-norm positions the trans genre. It’s the kind of writing that simultaneously—and importantly—making personal demons public and offering a textual analysis/space of reflection for the reader to change their mind. That is, the reader can (or ought to) change perspectives that accommodate the fluidity of gender, the constructedness of the body, the cultural attachments to the nature/nurture divide (or to nature most particularly), and to de-essentialize the notion of the self. In that sense, the trans complaint aims to usher in what could be called a subjectivity that holds out hope that readers can change because they finally “see the light” between the interaction of theory and personal reflection. But for me, to read texts and think through theory that denudes the fantasies and stability of gender norms, should also hold out for critiques of sentimentality, especially those of personal reflections that absorb, rather than transmit, the vital energy of trans people in their ordinary lives.
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