

**The Struggle for the Ordinary:
Media Culture, Transgender Audiences and the Achievement of Everyday Life**

by

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**Dedicated to Stephen Ninneman, Janet and Jay Rogove, and my Dissertation
Committee (Robin Means Coleman, Paddy Scannell, Aswin Punathambekar,
Gayle Rubin)**

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Introduction: Locating the Struggle

From the 1980s to the early years of the 21st century, media has increasingly incorporated the stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals. According to Gross (2005), LGBT individuals have today “entered the ranks of our culture’s permanent cast of characters” (p. 519). While mass mediated gay and lesbian portrayals in particular were “all the rage” in the 1990s, leading some to coin the decade “the gay nineties” (Walters, 2001), more recently there has been a noticeable rise in transgender portrayals (See Appendix for a review of transgender terminology). This increase spans medium and genre. Hollar (2007) notes that in 2007 alone the major network and cable television news organizations nearly doubled their coverage of transgender related issues when compared to the previous year (p. 28). Fictional transgender depictions have also become widely visible. Films such as *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) (which also opened as a musical for the Australian stage in 2006), *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *TransAmerica* (2005) have featured transgender protagonists and heroes, and appreciated mainstream and critical success.¹ The televisual landscape has also

¹ Felicity Huffman won a Golden Globe and a Critic’s Choice award for her role as Bree in *TransAmerica*. Hilary Swank won a Golden Globe, an Academy Award, and

witnessed representational change. In moving away from the television industry standard for transgender representation, the single transgender themed topical episode, both network and cable television programs such as *Nip/Tuck*, *The L Word*, *Ugly Betty*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, *The Education of Max Bickford*, *All My Children* and most recently *Glee* have integrated recurring transgender roles and plotlines. Transgender lifestyles and identities have also been a cornerstone on reality television programs such as *America's Next Top Model*, *The Real World*, *Transform Me*, and *Making the Band*.

Susan Stryker (2008), transgender studies scholar, explains that with this proliferation also often comes improving quality, “although the mass media have paid nonstop attention to transgender issues since at least the 1950s, the past several years certainly have witnessed a steady increase in transgender visibility, and the trend has been toward increasingly positive representation” (p. 25). Evidencing this changing texture of representation is the transgender character, Unique, from Fox’s high school themed television musical hit *Glee*. As an African American transgender teenager on primetime network television, Unique is truly a ‘unique’ character. Appearing in season three, Unique is introduced as a charismatic and formidable talent, a star member of a rival glee club who is struggling with whether or not to perform publicly in drag. As her storyline evolves, the show follows her struggles with bullying, social acceptance and the compounded everyday challenges of being both a teenager and someone who crosses gender conventions. The show handles Unique’s intersecting identities, her blackness and queerness, by

an Independent Spirit award for her role as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*. *Ma Vie en Rose* won a Golden Globe for best foreign language film.

marking her as a quintessential 'diva,' a comfortably familiar trope of black femininity. Unique thus represents a strong, vibrant, yet palatable symbol of feminine empowerment. Within the show's diegesis, she is likeable, talented, and believable, a welcomed shift away from the one-note transgender characters employed as narrative devices meant solely to shock, disturb and titillate.

As transgender characters and public figures have started to appear more frequently within popular culture, the press has taken notice. Pointing to Unique on *Glee* and other LGBT mainstays on network television such as *Modern Family's* gay parents Mitchell and Cameron, *The New York Times'* Brian Stelter (2012) finds that since "the cultural battlefield of television has changed markedly since the 1990s," sexual and gender variance has become "all in the family." Moreover, citing the presence of transgender characters on primetime network TV shows like ABC's *Dirty Sexy Money* and *Ugly Betty*, a 2008 Reuters article acknowledged, "TV has never seen more transgender characters" (Baber, 2008a). While the article points out that the number of LGBT characters on television that year in fact decreased, transgender representations appreciated a degree of complexity and humanity not seen before. As a result, the article identified 2008 as "a banner year for transgender characters on television across the board" (Baber, 2008a). Expressing similar sentiments, a 2007 *Seattle Times* article declared, "transgender people have become the new go-to characters on television shows" (Labossiere, 2007), a 2005 *Time Out Chicago* story announced, "gender-bending characters are TV's new titillation" (Lyons, 2005) and a 2007 *Boston Globe* piece headlined with "On TV, shows confronting transgender stereotypes" (Weiss, 2007). Referring to the early

21st century as “a transgender world,” the *Weekly Standard* published a 2002 story titled “She Ain’t Necessarily So,” critiquing the rise of transgender rights activism, transgender visibility and what the author begrudgingly refers to as “transgender chic” (Last, 2002).

The new transgender visibility is evident across a variety of newer, digital media platforms as well. Recently, Microsoft’s Xbox 360 videogame console changed its “Terms of Use and Code of Conduct,” allowing players to identify as transgender in user profiles and Gamertags (Robinson, 2010). Xbox Live Vice President, Marc Whitten, explained that the previous policy, which lacked the transgender identifier, was enacted to protect against using words like “gay” and “transgender” as slurs. After hearing feedback from customers on the issue, Microsoft chose to rectify a policy that, according to Whitten, “inadvertently excluded a part of our Xbox Live community” (Robinson, 2010). Another highly popular digital environment, Second Life, has been particularly welcoming towards the transgender and gender variant community. The virtual world hosts the Transgender Resource Center, a networked hub for information about the transgender community both in real life and Second Life. The Transgender Lounge, a discussion/ support group, along with Elysium Gardens, a full region in Second Life devoted to transgender life and needs, also populate the virtual world’s landscape. Since 2007, the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which honors victims of anti-transgender violence, has been observed in Second Life (Duranske, 2007). At the same time, digital inclusion also reproduces a dark underbelly, as expressions of transphobia become easier to produce and circulate. For example,

iPhone's "Peek-A-Boo Tranny" application, in which the app embeds a picture of a "tranny" into digital photos, is a troubling appropriation and trivialization of the transgender body (see figure 1 below).



Figure 1: *Peek-a-Boo Tranny Application*

Faced with pressure from LGBT organizations such as GLAAD and Bilerico, Apple removed the application from its iTunes store (Simon, 2010). Ultimately, transgender media visibility is a Faustian bargain that both gives and takes, and while cultural representation helps to heal certain socio-political problems it introduces and sustains others. This dissertation examines how the transgender community is making sense of this media visibility, and the strategies they employ in challenging, resisting, adapting to, and/or integrating it into their everyday lives.

The Dilemma of Cultural Visibility

The transgender community is a largely misunderstood and stigmatized minority in the US for their defiance of sexual and gender norms and codes. As a result, many transgender individuals strategically choose to live their everyday lives "in stealth," a process of concealing one's transgender identity through passing as a man or woman. This personal decision to live in stealth, to render transgender identity invisible, is often made in order to appreciate the comforts and affordances

of everyday life such as personal safety, meaningful friendships, and fulfilling employment. As a result of the relative invisibility of transgender subjectivity in cultural and daily life, popular media representations of gender variance are particularly powerful. They fill a void within the cultural imagination. Importantly, media often serve as the vehicles through which many individuals, including transgender people themselves, are first exposed to transgender life and subjectivity (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1999; Hill, 2005; Ringo, 2002). However, this transgender popular imagery is typically produced and circulated from outside the community. This makes the transgender community particularly vulnerable to external definition and “controlling images,” or those stereotypical and damaging cultural portrayals created outside of a social group that justify oppression and violence, determine social value, and delineate social injustice as natural and inevitable (Collins, 2000).

Transgender absence in media and cultural life also contributes to the transgender community’s symbolic annihilation (Coleman and Chivers, 2008; Gerbner, 1972), or the ways in which media absence reproduces marginalization, trivialization, and forms of disempowerment. A recent study by Grossman and D’Augelli (2006) focusing on transgender identified youth in New York City found that their participants largely felt invisible and defenseless. The study concluded that the cultural invisibility of transgender was related to increased health risks, discrimination, feelings of marginalization and a lack of access to helpful resources and services. Similarly, Cashore and Tuason (2009) found that the lack of familiarity with and general invisibility of transgender life forced their study participants to

deal with inaccurate assumptions from others about their gender identity, having to repeatedly explain themselves and teach others about who they are. Moreover, transgender access to media professionals is often unavailable or denied even as activists and community representatives actively seek media coverage (Namaste, 2005). Recounting her own experience as a transgender community organizer, Namaste (2005) remembers the countless “faxes and press releases ignored, phone calls not returned, vague commitments without appropriate follow-up, letters of protest and correction unacknowledged and unpublished” (p. 45). Namaste (2000) ultimately concludes that, “erasure is a defining condition of how transsexuality is managed in culture and institutions, a condition that ultimately inscribes transsexuality as impossible” (p. 4-5).

Within the economic and political realms, this disregard generates adverse consequences. A recent survey by a national LGBT organization concluded that the transgender community experiences twice the rate of unemployment than the general population, endures almost near universal harassment on the job, and about one in five has been or is currently homeless (The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2009). Consequently, media industry leaders do not recognize the trans community as a viable consumer market, while political leaders often turn a blind eye to their needs and struggles. Moreover, even when certain minority groups can be “all the rage” in media culture, as gays and lesbians were in the 1990s, they may be simultaneously denied certain human and legal rights (Walters, 2001). Importantly, the above mentioned cultural,

social and political conditions render everyday life for most transgender individuals a constant struggle.

However, while cultural invisibility generates troubling consequences, the potential outcomes of media presence are fraught with uncertainty and paradox. According to Barnhurst (2007), queer visibility “illuminates a universal aspect of human life, the simultaneous contrast, conceptual and physical, of either-or and both-and conditions” (p. 2). While visibility affirms a group’s existence, it also marks them for discrimination and attack. Even though representation permits entry into the common and shared world of popular media, it also marginalizes some as supremely Other. Although popular recognition works to humanize oppressed groups, it also can erase and depreciate difference. Walters (2001) warns against the “illusion of visibility as progress,” arguing that “visibility can lull us into believing that change has really occurred when it is, too often, purely cosmetic and superficial” (p.12, 24). Some scholars advocate for a turn away from the obsessive focus on cultural visibility, as Barnhurst (2007) suggests, “reject the question of visibility... choose something other than focusing on queer difference” (p. 18). For Gray (2009), who studied queer youth living in rural America, the political strategy of visibility employed by older, urban-centric LGBT activists is not feasible or even desirable for all individuals. Instead, she suggests that scholars interrogate other areas of everyday life turning a critical eye towards issues concerning access to information, healthcare, support services, and community.

Nonetheless, scholars and critics must live within the walls of these contradictions and irresolvable tensions reproduced by the visibility dilemma,

embracing the 'either-or' and 'both-and' conditions. In this dissertation, I navigate and ultimately transcend the visibility dilemma by situating my scholarship within the context of everyday life – “the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric and exotic worlds” (Felski, 1999, p. 15). By leveraging qualitative data gathered from participant observational fieldwork and interviews with transgender individuals about their media engagements, I anchor my inquiry within the stories and reflections of audiences.

The Everyday Work of Transgender Audiences

With digitalization, the ubiquity and cultural primacy of mediated forms and technologies of communication are accelerating the complexity and dynamism of contemporary everyday life. According to Longhurst (2007), contemporary everyday life is 'media drenched' and causes our social and cultural experiences to become increasingly organized around the logics of spectacle and performance. Digital communications technologies like cell phones and camera phones, personal computers, television time shifting devices, hand held electronics, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are pervasive and central components to work, leisure, and domestic life that demand the performance of various selves through voice, text and image. As a result, we are more frequently engaged in the social processes of audiencing and performing, of publicly presenting self and of witnessing others' performances in everyday life (Longhurst, 2007). Furthermore, audiences are making increasingly meaningful and emotionally powerful investments in media, a phenomenon Longhurst (2007) calls “enthusing,”

that have direct implications for how individuals understand personal identity and social affinities.

Within the context of an everyday life increasingly mediated and coordinated by communications technologies, this dissertation explores the dynamics of transgender audiencing, self-performance, and belonging. Five central research questions motivate my inquiry:

- (1) How are transgender audiences adapting to, resisting and integrating media culture within their everyday lives?
- (2) In what ways do media engagements contribute to transgender individuals' understanding of self and belonging?
- (3) What kinds of social, cultural, and political messages are embedded specifically within transgender-themed representations?
- (4) What strategies, "tactics," and "ways of "making do"" (de Certeau, 1984) with media do transgender audiences employ in achieving a sense of self and ordinary life?
- (5) In struggling for self and the ordinary, how do transgender participants negotiate and come to terms with the seemingly opposed cultural logics of normality and queerness, sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion, and structure and agency?

In light of these questions, this dissertation investigates three forms of audience work. First, I investigate the myriad ways transgender audiences make meaning with and against media. Then, I delineate the practice of "resilient reception," or the adaptive act of (re)claiming and preserving self in the face of disempowering media messages. Finally, I highlight my participants' *struggle for the ordinary*, or the constant and deliberate work devoted to achieving the common and routine rhythms and affordances of everyday life. I examine how media representations

and audience engagements with media make a sense of the ordinary more or less within reach. In doing so, a critical optic is turned towards two types of media environments. I investigate the general media environment of the current historical moment with respect to transgender representation. I also analyze the personal media environments transgender audiences actively create for themselves, their processes of 'poaching' (Jenkins, 2004) and selection from the wider culture.

This dissertation develops from and extends the scholarship on media audiences and audience reception which seeks to understand how 'real' people in the 'real' world interact with media to establish meaning in their everyday lives (Bird, 2003; Alasuutari, 1999). It affirms the importance and necessity of careful, long term qualitative interviewing, ethnography and immersive inquiries into audience experiences. Coleman (2000) conceptualizes audience reception as a "nexus between a medium and its audience" that attempts to uncover how audiences discern the nature of reality during media encounters and how this ethnographic information can communicate a larger story about the social structure, political relations and cultural life (p. 12). As a ubiquitous site of cultural knowledge, media produces and circulates the primary myths, dominant ideologies and taken for granted common sense understandings of our time. At the same time, media culture is incredibly polysemic and contradictory, furnishing ample space for resistances, challenges, improvisations and renovations to any kind of established socio-political order. In the reception process, audiences integrate this complex field of signification into their worldview and sense of self. This process of meaning making is one of the central *struggles* examined in this dissertation, which turns a

critical lens towards transgender audiences' everyday engagements with the products and discourses of media culture.

Working within the field of audience 'reception studies,' my work contributes to what Alasuutari (1999) terms reception studies' "emergent trend."² Identifying with a nascent 'third generation' of reception scholarship, my work endeavors to situate audience research within "a larger framework" (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 6).

According to Alasuutari (1999), "the objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary "media culture," particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life" (p. 6). While this tradition might address questions regarding the meaning and use of media content, as "it also includes questions about the frames within which we conceive of the media and their contents as reality and as representations- or distortions- of reality" (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 7).

In line with this emergent approach, I examine the everyday life challenges of having, maintaining, and managing a self and participating in social life within the context of a world increasingly characterized by mediation and saturated with communications technologies. This investigation into the circuit of cultural

² According to Alasuutari (1999), reception studies' first generation, which he calls "reception research," was informed by Stuart Hall's 'encoding/decoding' paradigm, and concerned with the sending and receiving of mediated messages. Importantly, 'reception research' concentrated on the moment of reception, "when the encoded message enters the brain of the individual viewer" (p. 4). Reception studies' second generation gravitated towards modes of "audience ethnography," where "one analyses a programme and studies its reception among a particular audience by conducting 'in depth' interviews of its viewers" (p. 4). Audiences or 'interpretive communities' were the starting point for this kind of inquiry, and individual interviews were employed to access audience meaning making. However, important questions about media as a communications technology and its societal role were sidelined. Finally, the third generation is an born out of the conversations and challenges second-generation audience researchers faced.

relationships between media, personal performances and constructions of self, and everyday life, is informed by what Miller and McHoul (1998) call “ethnomethodologically inspired cultural studies.” As a fusion of critical cultural theory, media studies, and the sociology of everyday life, “ethnomethodologically inspired cultural studies” presents a modality of inquiry that roots cultural meaning within lived experience, conceptualizes culture as ordinary, and witnesses the political everywhere. This ethnomethodological approach endeavors to ascertain how individuals understand, order, and make intelligible their everyday lives. More pointedly, this methodology delineates cultural meaning as produced locally, interactively, and for specific situations. Accordingly, social life consists of “human activities ordered at the moment of their achievement by the members who undertake them, not mere epiphenomena of externally imposed, top-down registers of meaning and organization” (Miller & McHoul, 1998, p. 27). While structural, macro-level relations and processes influence the local,

“cultural studies can benefit most from beginning with actual cultural texts in their ordinary historical and everyday places *before* political and theoretical speculations are brought to bear upon them, *before* they are turned into mere artefacts of social criticism” (Miller & McHoul, 1998, p. 180)

This process of centering the ordinary and everyday embraces a “return of the real” and “an attempt to ground the study of culture more emphatically in concrete phenomena” (Highmore, 2002b, p. 29). Within my analysis, study participant stories, constructions and concerns perform this grounding. By starting with their experiences and life narratives as ordinary cultural texts, and by placing these stories in conversation with critical, cultural theory, I developed the primary

organizing frame for this dissertation, 'the struggle for the ordinary' (for in depth discussion, see chapter 5).

Method

Data Collection

Collection of audience data commenced in the center of the US, as the relevant literature reveals gaps on LGBT life outside of the coasts and urban centers. My work is part of a recent scholarly movement to explore non-urban, non-coastal LGBT experiences (for example, see Mary Gray's book *Out in the Country*). In-depth, ethnographic interviews were conducted with twenty-two self-identified transgender participants from the Midwest. For purposes of comparison, and in an effort to collect more richly textured qualitative data, I also traveled to San Francisco, a site with a strong transgender presence. There, I conducted eight individual interviews, observed three transgender social functions, and met with local leaders in the transgender community. In addition to individual participant interviews, I also observed transgender political, cultural and social functions, and met with transgender service providers, counselors, community organizers, and entrepreneurs.³

In finding participants for this study, I employed snowball and purposive sampling techniques; one participant would connect me with another participant, who would then recommend someone else, and so on. Gatekeepers such as transgender activists and community organization leaders were also instrumental in connecting me to individuals within the community. In addition, some

³ This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan.

participants answered my research call for a study exploring “transgender representation in the media” placed in online transgender news groups.

Over a period of two years, I also observed weekly meetings of a transgender support and discussion group at a LGBT community center in the Midwest. It was a space fundamentally devoted to affirming transgender identity, and to sharing advice about everyday concerns and issues. In line with the request of the group facilitator, I was allowed to record notes about general themes and issues that arose during the two-hour sessions. However, to protect the anonymity and privacy of the group participants, I could not record any identifying information about them. The meetings served as a kind of naturally occurring focus group, providing fertile ground for rooting my inquiry in real, ordinary life. Focus group dynamics allow a plurality of voices, themes, and opinions to be heard through the medium of everyday talk, and galvanize a more variable account of ‘truth’ (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). These communicative structures encourage “conversation, public discussion, and gossip... all important processes in the production and reproduction of meanings in everyday life” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 9). The transgender discussion/support organization allowed me to witness when, how and if the topic of the media and popular representation arose during interpersonal conversation.

Data Collection	Interviews	Observations
Midwest	22 (37 hours)	26 (58 hours)
San Francisco	8 (14 hours)	3 (7 hours)
TOTAL	30 (51 hours)	29 (65 hours)

Figure 2: *Summary of Data Collection*

My practices of data collection and analysis were often collaborative efforts, wherein participants and I worked together in the production of knowledge.

Towards that end, I employed 'member checking' when possible, a process where a researcher reviews participant constructions and interpretations with subjects.

This process helps to ensure credibility and "fairness," in that "a quality of balance" becomes instituted in the research practice (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 180).

Towards the end of interviews I sometimes asked study participants to comment on the preliminary themes and findings I was currently developing, a strategy that made data collection and analysis more dialogic. During my fieldwork, it was also common for participants to email me with additional thoughts and comments after interviews, or to send me relevant news articles they found pertinent. A few days after our first interview, one participant mailed me a three-page, handwritten letter that reflected on how our conversation helped her better come to terms with a variety of thoughts and feelings she had been experiencing for a long time. Finally, in trying to perform a more immersive inquiry, I frequently attended parties, informal gatherings, lunches, shopping trips and movies with my participants, who were generally eager to share the full range of their lives with me.

Interviews

In trying to create a conversational space, a communicative environment outside traditional academic, institutional contexts, interviews were predominantly conducted over coffee, lunches, and snacks. I met participants on their terms, in spaces they chose and in social arrangements where they felt safe. Interviews would start with impersonal, general questions about media use and taste, and shift to more intimate, subjective queries like "Growing up, do you remember seeing representations of transgender?" These types of general, more global probes would

allow participants to construct their own stories in highly contextualized and personal ways. Participants commonly discussed life moments and stories that at first glance seemed unconnected to issues concerning the media, but offered significant context and texture. Encouraging participants to “tell stories” created an opportunity to determine whether issues and opinions concerning the media and popular representation would organically emerge within the act of narration, or would go unremarked. Whenever possible I have tried to triangulate my participants’ constructions and narrations, attempting to enrich and complement interview data. Some participants allowed me to talk to their family and friends, others provided me access to MySpace and Facebook pages, blogs, diary entries, letters, poems, as well as other forms of personal artefacts.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Emergent Category Designation (ECD). ECD is a systematic, analytical tool where interview and observational data is pooled into theoretical categories and significant themes as identified by the researcher (Erlandson, 1993). In this process, each unit or chunk of data is compared to all others in the attempt to create and re-create categories that speak to meaningful themes and patterns. The five-step process includes reading the first unit of data, reading the second unit of data, and proceeding until all the units have been assigned to a category. A researcher creates category titles and/or descriptive sentences that make the category unique, and finally starts over (Erlandson, et al. 1993). This ‘constant comparative method’ continues as fieldwork progresses and new data enters the research project and

emergent analyses and themes are tested. Theory is inductively produced from the interviews and fieldwork out in the 'real world' (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Sample

The study sample highlights the variability of the transgender community, a community sutured together primarily through shared identity, common interests and goals, and often not via geographical space. As such, my study's demographic composition with respect to geography, age, economic class, relationship status, profession, and education is diverse. For example, the sample includes social workers, scientists, teachers, political activists, students, web designers, and cosmetologists, and while some have high school diplomas, others have advanced degrees and PhDs. Even personal definitions of gender vary. While all identify in some way as 'transgender,' some prefer strictly male or female gender pronouns, and one participant, for example, continually changes gender pronouns and presentations based on mood, desire, and context. Another participant explains, "*I would say I'm trans and I am a woman, and I am also a boy, and I'm sometimes gender queer, and I'm definitely queer. That's how I would identify. I like to be called with female pronouns.*" In terms of sexuality, some self identify as gay, straight, queer, bisexual, or as one participant described, "*I don't know. It totally depends on the person, male, female, trans-whatever. I've been attracted to boys as boys, girls who are boys, boys who want to be girls.*"

These features have enriched my investigation by bringing into conversation a broad range of voices and experiences. Regrettably, there is less diversity with respect to race, as most participants identified as White, and a few claimed mixed

race identities. Since I often used transgender organizations and Internet groups as portals into the community, I believe the sample's racial composition speaks to the ways in which the category "transgender" as used by social service and community organizations hails certain kinds of individuals.⁴

The Path Toward the Ordinary: Through Normal and Queer

In this dissertation, I explore how both media texts and audiences negotiate a sense of the ordinary - the ways in which each define, delimit and refashion everyday life. While the ordinary first appears as self-evident, transparent, and immediately comprehensible, upon closer interrogation it emerges as opaque and evasive, an "elusive" (Rosen, 2002), "uncertain" (Green, 1992), "illusory" (Lefebvre, 1958/2002), "clandestine" (de Certeau, 1984), and "ambivalent" (Highmore, 2002a) construct. Likewise, the ordinary is ordinary is complex, tied to specific contexts in space and time, and as these variables shift, what is considered 'the ordinary' changes. In light of this complexity, its wholeness escapes the purview of the theorist who writes from within its confines, but who simultaneously struggles to be positioned outside of it as reflective observer. Consequently, the ordinary can never be fully written, and although defining it presents an incredibly frustrating challenge, it is a worthy one. It is exactly this difficulty, along with the ordinary's ubiquity and fecundity, which makes it a compelling and necessary object for analysis.

⁴ For a detailed exploration of the ways in which the category transgender performs modes of social inclusion and exclusion see Valentine, 2007.

The notion of the ordinary emerged as a powerful, ambivalent and highly contested (“the struggle”) idea across my ethnographic interviews and participant observations concerning the transgender community, media and everyday life. Most interestingly, different participants passionately mobilized, discussed and defined the concept in various ways. In this study, I look to disparate texts crossing fields of philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, queer theory, LGBT studies and media studies to more fully contextualize and extend the utility of the concept. In the following sections, I will delineate two interrelated terms “normal” and “queer” in order to arrive at the meaning and significance of the ordinary. This dissertation offers “the ordinary” as an alternative to two dominant and canonical concepts, the “queer” and the “normal,” which have structured and restricted much of the conversation around LGBT issues and media culture. In theorizing the ordinary, I am responding and contributing to discussions about the contested terrain of queer (everyday) life, media, politics and LGBT possibility.

Locating The Normal

As the LGBT community continues to leave behind the confines of “the closet,” they are increasingly ‘mainstreaming’ into both civil society and popular culture. According to Gross (2001), mainstreaming describes a “centering of political and other attitudes” and “the embodiment of a dominant ideology, cultivated through the repetition of stable patterns” (Gross, 2001, p. 7). As Becker (2006) has shown, as gays and lesbians entered the television mainstream throughout the 1990s, gay and lesbian life and subjectivity “became more palatable” (p. 178) and “often resembled the demographic profile of the upscale, well-educated, urban 18-to-49

year old viewer networks were most interested in reaching” (p. 179). Media scholars have noted that the process of mainstreaming - the complicated mix of requisites and consequences that materialize as a result of this push towards the center - end up aligning queerness with normality and the normal. Seidman (2002) notes, “the cultural underpinning of the closet is under assault by a new discourse that asserts the ‘normality’ of being gay” (p. 126). While cultural normalization may seem preferable to marginalization, Walters (2001) cautions that in media culture, normalization produces new modalities of the closet in which LGBT life and subjectivity are restricted to positions of either sameness (normalness) or “otherness.”

In his work *Stigma* (1963), Goffman offers an account of the modern, Western world in which the process of categorization, of dividing people into the ‘normal’ and the abnormal or the ‘stigmatized,’ plays a central role in societal organization. According to Goffman (1963), in order to effectively navigate the social world, individuals harbor culturally specific “anticipations” and “normative expectations,” bringing “righteously presented demands” to their social and cultural encounters in everyday life (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). Individuals who comply with these social expectations are marked “normal” and appreciate the rewards of this status. In the eyes of others, they are perceived as “ordinary and natural” (Goffman, 1963, p. 2) and gain entrance into collective social life. Those who deviate from social expectations (as transgender individuals do with respect to sexual and gender conventions) suffer from “stigma” (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatized figures are “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one”

(Goffman, 1963, p. 3).

In further developing the theoretical scope of the normal, Jakobsen (1998) differentiates between the normal as “the average, the everyday, or the commonsensical,” and norms as “the imperatives that materialize particular bodies and actions” (p. 517). As social imperatives, norms are incredibly powerful and durable, and often rely on binaries for their definitions (for example the gender binary norm of male/female). Moreover, norms are never singularly constituted, as they are bound and threaded to other related norms and social standards (for example, the male/female norm is related to other norms concerning attitude, behavior, lifestyle, sexuality, etc). Norms are essential components in the social process of normalization, a process by which “the normal becomes attached to norms” (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 517). Foucault conceived of this ‘normalization’ within wider social relations of power, and more pointedly, as a force that performs the work of social arrangement and political ordering.

Informed by the dynamics of discipline and dominance, Foucault (1995) conceptualizes normalization as a complex process comprised of five components: (1) “it refers individual action to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed” (p. 182), (2) it differentiates individuals according to “an average to be respected... an optimum towards which one must move” (p. 183), (3) it “hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals” (p. 183), (4) it offers a “constraint of a conformity that must be achieved” (p. 183), and finally, (5) it sketches out the “external frontier of the abnormal” (p. 183). In sum, normalization “compares,

differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” (p. 183). In part, normalization is perpetuated externally through social and political institutions, promoting both conformity to a certain set of standards and individualization through assessments and classifications. Yet, as an operation of disciplinary power, normalization is also internalized by individuals living in modern societies. As a scholar of Foucault, Halperin (1995) conceives of normalization a manifestation of “liberal power.” According to Halperin (1995), normalization is a function of “the modern liberal state, which takes as its objects “free subjects” and defines itself wholly in relation to them and their freedom” (p. 18). According to this conception of power and agency, everyday thought and action are generated by individuals within “the allegedly sacrosanct private sphere of personal freedom,” a sphere which is theorized as never fully private or free. Penetrated and compromised by larger formations of power and ideology, this ‘private’ and ‘free’ space is populated with ‘disciplined’ individuals who “*freely and spontaneously* police both their own conduct and the conduct of others” and are subsequently rewarded with a collection of rights and privileges sanctioned by the State (Halperin, 1995, p. 19). Forever surrounded and entrenched in them, the subject of discipline willingly conforms to the classifications, schemes and normalizing agendas of state and capitalist institutions. Ultimately, a normalization rooted in discipline is a ubiquitous operation of power that maintains the socio-political status quo. Importantly, while Foucault concedes that power is admittedly complex, productive and can always be contested, normalization is a process by which modern modalities of power (such as contemporary media for example) delimit and confine individual identities and

performances, as well as collective possibilities and practices.

As it pertains to sexual and gender identities, being a *normal* participant in social life, and thus avoiding the stain of stigma, is typically predicated upon fidelity to the norms of heterosexuality, an identification that wields its own disciplinary and normalizing logics. As a specific modality of normalization, 'heteronormativity:' (1) defines heterosexuality as an essential, stable and preferred human condition, (2) privileges the institution of marriage as the ultimate expression of intimacy, (3) upholds the binary gender system as natural and inevitable, and (4) maintains traditional gender roles as necessary and legitimate. In this way, the normal is structured by heteronormativity, a dominant social logic that "normalizes heterosexuality, making heterosexual the normal term, the commonsensical position, unremarkable and everyday" (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 518).

In thinking through the assimilation of the LGBT community within larger social and political formations, scholars have theorized the concept of 'homonormativity' to explore the ways in which queer individuals are integrated within the mandates of heteronormativity. Duggan (2003) argues that homonormativity as a political modality is one that fails to oppose heteronormative knowledge and structures, and instead "upholds and sustains them, whilst promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depolitized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 50). Homonormativity is the reproduction of sameness, conformity, cosmopolitanism, and privilege. It is often articulated in accord with a neoliberal agenda defined by self-reliance and the desire for domestication and privacy, exactly the kind of

'privacy' that Foucault and Halperin problematized. Homonormativity then lacks "a collective, democratic public culture" as well as "an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics" (Duggan, 2002, p. 189). It is a fully 'disciplined' and normalized identity.

Similarly, Warner's (1999) book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* posits the normal as a complex site of repression, where sex politics, and expressions of difference are subordinated for the desire to blend in and assimilate. It is a 'place at the table' politics structured around acceptance from the dominant (heteronormative) culture. Normality minimizes and silences the historical traditions of the LGBT community that celebrate nonconformity, disobedience and social transformation. Resultantly, the normal generates a "betrayal of the abject and the queer in favor of a banalized respectability" (Warner, 1999, p. 66), and creates a "hierarchy of respectability" (p. 49) that awards the disciples of normality. Warner's primary objection to normality concerns the way it stigmatizes, how it "merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability. It does not seem possible to think of one's self as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological" (Warner, 1999, p. 60).

Additionally, according to Warner, the media are mechanisms of disciplinarity and normalizing power:

"[The media] makes us imagine that we want to be normal. And it makes us imagine that by consuming mass images of gay people we somehow belong completely to the wider world, even while we stay at home and make dinner for our boyfriends. Instead of taking part in a queer movement, we become part of a gay trend" (Warner, 1999, p. 70).

Echoing the Frankfurt school's critique of the culture industries, which argued that mass culture offers false pleasures that legitimate the dominant ideologies of capitalist production, Warner concludes that in offering a false and illusory sense of pleasure and community the media pacify and domesticate the LGBT community. This in turn transforms LGBT creative activity and political engagement into a banal quest for normality.

According to the logic of normalization, LGBT media personalities and characters are deemed credible and worthy for being similar to their straight and cis⁵ gender counterparts in every arena except sexual or gender identity. Many media studies scholars have critiqued the ways media align LGBT characters and stories with heteronormative scripture. For example, Dow (2001) has argued that in order to normalize lesbianism, the media personalized and depoliticized Ellen's coming out in 'real life' and on her sitcom. In doing so, the TV show ignored the ubiquity of homophobia, turned political issues into jokes and presented Ellen's homosexuality as relevant exclusively for its impact on personal, mainly heterosexual, relationships. Similarly, Shugart (2003) argues the gay male-straight woman coupling seen in the TV series *Will & Grace* and the films *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Object of My Affection* and *The Next Best Thing* normalize homosexuality by assigning traditional heterosexual signifiers to gay male characters and positioning male homosexuality in accord with masculine privilege. In his study of gay-themed film from the twentieth century, Seidman (2002) contends that homosexual

⁵ Cis gender is a word that has recently emerged within the transgender community and gender scholarship to mark 'non-transgender' subjectivity and expression.

characters move from sociopathic, impure and 'polluted' figures to psychological and moral equals via the construction of a "normal gay" character type. He concludes, "the gay citizen, it seems, can be tolerated only if a norm and an ideal of America is defended that asserts the good, right and normal status of dichotomous gender roles, heterosexual love, marriage and the family" (2002, p. 140). According to Walters (2001), the emergence and dominance of this representational paradigm has the potential to "erase and marginalize those who desire something more than mere inclusion in straight society" (p. 19).

Although the "normal" is central to and ubiquitous within critical cultural scholarship, Jakobsen (1998) nonetheless observes that theorists often over simplify and reduce the concept: "the norm, the normal, or heteronormativity – is a site of frequently overlooked complexities" (p. 513).⁶ For Jakobsen it is not 'the normal' per se that is problematic, but the force of 'normativity' as "a field of power, a set of relations that can be thought of as a network of norms, that forms the possibilities for and limits of action" (1998, p. 517). Some norms may in fact be worth salvaging. Other norms are less restrictive, and some norms can be leveraged in order to refashion others. Jakobsen offers the self-performance of Jewish

⁶ For example, the norm of heterosexuality is dependent on its binary opposite homosexuality. Heterosexuality is also typically linked with Whiteness, maleness, middle class status, and Christianity. Thus according to Jakobsen, simply resisting one norm has two adverse consequences: (1) it incorporates one in the binary relationship and (2) fails to disable the network of power relations within which the norm is connected. Consequently, resistance or "queering" "works most effectively when it troubles multiple norms at once, when it addresses a network of dominant norms" (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 528). However, this process of resistance is complicated. As Foucault has illustrated, power is multidimensional and generates variable consequences. While it works to subject and discipline, it also produces opportunities and potentiality.

celebrity Barbara Streisand to illustrate how the “enactment of her body” performs a “resistance to normativity and its contemporary normalizing power” (1998, p. 527). According to Jakobsen, Streisand’s refusal to ‘fix’ her nose in line with contemporary standards of beauty coupled with her performance of ‘Jewishness’ in excess “queers in part by refusing both the norms of Christian embodiment and those of proper womanhood” (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 529). However, in the everyday world, Streisand is only able to resist certain norms by holding onto and maintaining others, such as the norms of celebrity and star quality. Consequently, in order to initiate social and everyday change we have to both “rely on and trouble norms” (Jakobsen, 1998, p. 530).

While Jakobsen has made significant inroads into challenging and complicating ‘the normal,’ it is by and large operationalized as a top-down force that maintains the status quo. In responding to the normal’s orthodoxies and limitations, I argue ‘the ordinary’ offers a more productive frame through which to understand how queer individuals engage with media and the mainstream, and the ways in which they accomplish an everyday life. I offer a full conceptualization of ‘the ordinary’ after the following section, which examines the normal’s cultural foil: queer.

Queer Resistance

Within queer and critical, cultural theory, the normal is often contrasted with the concept ‘queer,’ its elusive and mischievous counterpart. As Epstein (1996) emphasizes “queer *politics* emphasize outsidersness as a way of constructing opposition to the regime of normalization” (p. 156). According to Halperin (1995),

queer is a strategic identity without specific definition or content that locates itself in opposition to the norm. It is a social and political stance characterized by and manifested in resistance: resistance to the established political, cultural and social order. It is a “positionality vis-à-vis the normative... available to anyone who is or feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). In other words, queerness is not only a distancing of self from sexual conventions, but from all acceptable and established forms of social and cultural life.

The term ‘queer’ gained cultural ground in the West during the 1990s as a result of its articulation within the discourse of a more radical sexual politics. Organizations such as Queer Nation, Outrage and Act Up were energized by widespread social discrimination, anti-LGBT violence and the AIDS crisis (Epstein, 1996). According to a leaflet distributed by “anonymous queers” at 1990 rally in New York:

“Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets” (Anonymous Queers, 1990/1999).

The category queer enables a separatist, anti-assimilationist politics focused on social justice, the dismantlement of prejudice and the elimination of oppressive social privilege. As Epstein (1996) explains, queer opposes “the inclusionary project of mainstream lesbian and gay politics, with its reliance on the discourses of civil liberties and civil rights” (p. 153). As a “politics of provocation” (Epstein, 1996), queerness challenges, destabilizes, questions, complicates, baffles, instigates and antagonizes. It celebrates the marginal, the outside, and claims a more fluid

understanding of identity. Informed by constructivism, queerness critiques and questions the stability of sexual and gender categories in particular, and social categories more broadly (Duggan, 1992). In place of a constant and essential self, queer identity offers an unpredictable, multiple, and decentered self.

The media sphere has served as an important cultural conduit for the circulation of queerness, albeit in often restricted and hidden ways. According to Doty (1993) queer characters, narratives and sensibilities are ubiquitous within media culture. Queer media provide “a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and expression” (Doty, 1993, p. 3). Even though historically media organizations have been influenced by the same kinds of anti-queer prejudices and injustices as the wider culture, queer media auteurs and producers have employed “a repertoire of sly working-within-the-system expressive tactics” to express a queer point of view and to reach queer audiences (p. 26). As a result, mediated queerness has always been hiding in plain sight, available via connotation and culturally coded for those ‘in the know.’ For example, Doty (1993) reads Pee Wee Herman (the flamboyant fictional character of actor Paul Reubens in vogue during the late 1980s and early 1990s) and his television show as a queer space that playfully critiques heteronormative conceptions of sexuality and gender. Doty understands Herman’s performance of gay male femininity as a campy and affirmative expression of sissyness.

Recent queer scholarship is particularly exciting and innovative. It advances the conceptualization of queer beyond the ‘anti-straight’ and pro- sexual/gender nonconformity orientations proffered by Doty. Notably, Edelman (2004) articulates

a provocative argument that conceptualizes queerness as essentially 'anti-social,' occupying a space of absolute social negativity, located "outside and beyond" all forms of collective intelligibility (p. 3). Theorized as 'anti-social,' queerness positions itself against all modalities of community, identity and relationality. In clarifying Edelman's anti-social proposition, Halberstam (2008) writes that within history and culture, the 'queer subject' "has been bound epistemologically, to negativity, to nonsense, to anti-production, to unintelligibility" (p. 141). Rather than protesting these linkages, queer individuals should "embrace the negativity that we anyway structurally represent" (Halberstam, 2008, p. 141). Moreover, queerness as anti-sociality opposes the future oriented, reproductive and utopian politics of a heteronormative mainstream. As an example of the ultimate fulfillment of these politics, Edelman references mainstream cultural discourses surrounding the child. When employed in popular, political and social conversation, the child is routinely portrayed as the pristine symbol of a future temporality, and a vulnerable, impressionable, and 'pure' figure worth defending. Protecting the child and her innocence is then used as a justification to suppress the 'corrupting' and 'troubling' force of queer life, desire, and otherness:

"on every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an "otherness" of which it's parents, it's church, or the state do not approve, uncompromised by any possible access to what is painted as alien desire, terroristically holds us all in check" (Edelman, 2004, p. 21).

In opposition to a heteronormative futurity represented by the image of the child, to whom queer adults are in constant service, Edelman suggests queerness embrace

the perversity of the 'death drive,' "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (p. 9).

Edelman offers a radical, compelling, and trenchant polemic (much of which I am sympathetic towards). His critique of heteronormative futurity and the utopian politics in the name of the child is theoretically daring and necessary. Yet, as Halberstam (2008) notes, this theorization of queerness essentially promotes "a nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction" (p. 154). Rather, Halberstam (2008) insists on the social quality of queerness in order to "craft a queer agenda that works cooperatively" with other groups and communities that advocate and fight for social, political and economic transformation and justice (p. 154).

As with Halberstam, Munoz (2009) offers a more hopeful alternative to Edelman's polemic that highlights "the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity" (p. 11). Moreover, Munoz (2009) argues that queerness must promise a future. It must generate visions of utopia, for queerness "cranes like an approaching wave of potentiality" (p. 185). Queerness is most viable, most productive, most useful as a horizon, encouraging us "to extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious" (Munoz, 2009, p. 28). Ultimately, queerness as anti-sociality is fundamentally at odds with the ways in which individuals live their everyday lives. Queer individuals live in a social world, an interconnected space where we are inevitably threaded to each other. Moreover, those with the ability to live as anti-social purists, to constantly argue against and to survive on the extreme margins, themselves occupy

a position of privilege. This safe position is often situated behind the walls of the academy's ivory towers, which provide space and protection for this mode of oppositional life. For many queers living in the everyday world, like the participants in my study, a life defined by complete rejection and disturbance fueled by an anti-social politics that enacts "the primacy of a constant no" (Edelman, 2004, p. 5) is essentially unlivable. Moreover, it is undesirable. For while study participants did explicitly express sentiments of queer refusal and separatism, they simultaneously in part desire inclusion into the rhythms and affordances of normative everyday life.

Although queerness is very much a contested terrain, critical cultural scholars almost uniformly affirm that queerness is the sine qua non of transgender experience and subjectivity (see Bolin, 1998; Hale, 1996; Hausman, 2006; Stone, 1991). Transgender individuals are held up as a complete and fully realized expression of queerness at work. Celebrated for its utility in cultural disruption and political critique, the transgender figure is articulated as harboring a "dangerous magic" (Paglia, as cited in Phillips, 2006, p. 4) that destabilizes dominant gender ideologies. As Crawley (2002) maintains "the existence of transgender people creates a purposeful critique to the rigidity of the binary gender paradigm" (p. 19). In this way, queer politics mandates that transgender individuals turn their life and identity into a political expression. For example, Sandy Stone's (1991) "The Empire Strikes Back," a seminal text that authenticates and legitimizes transgender subjectivity, argues for the expression of gender ambiguity as a political strategy. She advocates that transgender individuals refuse to pass, urging them to employ their bodies and identities in a radical, transformative politics. Moreover, she

critiques those 'normal' transgender folks who want to remain invisible.

However, this hyper-queer strategy of visibility and disruption, while provocative and compelling, may ultimately be untenable in everyday life. As Ashley Love, a transgender blogger, explains, "so many "transsexual" women selectively choose when to stay "in the closet"... And I don't think they should be called cowards or sell outs" (Love, 2010). Love (2010) takes issue with the oft cited phrase "the personal is political" because she believes it is uncritically employed by those "who disagree with the group of trans people who just live their lives as the gender they are, with out using every chance they get to say how "different" they are." In the effort to advance the transgender person as an instrument of queer theory and transgressive politics, I argue that everyday transgender experience and the community's struggle for the ordinary are largely overlooked. This dissertation is an attempt to remedy this oversight. I offer the 'ordinary' as a corrective interpretive frame that offers insight into how 'real' individuals participate in and are influenced by media culture, how they challenge and subvert the mainstream, and how they work to achieve an everyday life.

Arriving at the Ordinary

In the previous sections I delineated the terms 'normal' and 'queer' in order to set the stage for my arrival at the ordinary. These two stances represent the dominant ways that critical scholarship approaches the study of media and LGBT representation, life, and identity. In many ways, normal and queer reside at opposite ends of a spectrum. On one end, normality presents a space of repression, mindless assimilation/sameness and 'selling out.' On the other end queerness

champions difference, resistance, separatism and acute political consciousness. In building theory and argumentation, LGBT media scholarship largely genuflects towards one side or the other, summoning the stifling structure of normalization or the untamed agency of queerness. However, when scholarship endeavors to revolve around the axis of everyday life and root the study of culture within lived experiences of ordinary people, things get complicated quickly. In accounting for this complexity, I argue that “the ordinary” offers a productive frame for understanding the intersection of media, LGBT identity and everyday life.

Rosen (2002) delineates four general features of ordinary experience that offer a starting point for my investigation into the *struggle for the ordinary*. First, the ‘inner connection between truth and goodness’ suggests that in ordinary life, individuals predominantly wish to achieve goodness, or that which is estimable and respectable. Echoing Raymond Williams’ (1989) hopeful declaration that ordinary culture reflects, “a desire to know what is best, and to do what is good” (p. 7), Rosen (2002) contends, most individuals are constantly struggling to “do the right thing,” determining between better and worse, striving to “respond correctly to things, experiences, events, and so on, as they actually are” (p. 263). Rosen continues, “A life devoted to getting things wrong is inconceivable, since if it succeeded, it would destroy itself” (p. 263). Rosen’s second proposition asserts that although ordinary life is often contradictory and heterogeneous, it is encountered phenomenologically as a unified process. It is “a coherent unity of differences,” an experience of “what happens usually,” and an “ongoing continuity of experience” marked by the vacillating tendencies of the ordinary and extraordinary (p. 263, 265). Similarly, the

ordinary is defined by a dynamic of regularity, by a level of predictability. Rosen connects this third feature of the ordinary, regularity, to the natural world, “The unity and regularity of praxis, the domain of intentional human activity through speeches and deeds, is itself dependent upon the unity and regularity of existence, to which we sometimes refer, not with complete accuracy, as the order of nature” (p. 266). Finally, Rosen (2002) proposes the notion of comprehensiveness, arguing that ordinary experience is, always has been, and always will be the place from which we speak and live. It encompasses us, as “we are never about to enter into ordinary experience but are always already there” (Rosen, 2002, p. 272).

Rosen’s work opens space for thinking about the ordinary, and articulates a strong and ambitious foundation from which to start. Motivated by his work and in building upon it, I propose the following:

- (1) The ordinary is realized and manifested within the everyday, and can be well understood via the sociology of everyday life.
- (2) The ordinary represents a “coherent unity of differences” (Rosen, 2002, p. 263), and with respect to the work of identity, it mandates a process of ‘hybrid self-making.’ Informed by Bhabha’s (1994) theory of hybridity, I refer to hybrid self-making as a process where seemingly divergent elements (such as queer and normal, sameness and difference, etc.) are negotiated and woven into one’s identity and life narrative.
- (3) The ordinary represents a practical accomplishment, an achievement that in the contemporary moment is often made in and through media culture.

The ordinary represents the complex modality in which the participants in my study live out their lives. The ordinary generates pragmatic and often unpredictable

compromises between normal/queer, opposition/ assimilation, macro/micro, and structure/agency. It is a space where structure and agency collide, in which individuals navigate relations of social and institutional power with varying degrees of success. As such, the ordinary exists,

“somewhere in the rift opened up between the subjective, phenomenological, sensory apparatus of the individual and reified institutions... Institutions, codes, and paradigms are not abstract constructs confronting us in some official ‘out there.’ Nor do we come to institutions alone. We live in them in historically specific ways, and we live them.”
(Kaplan & Ross, 2002/1987, p. 79).

The ordinary is exactly this space of ‘living,’ of living with, living in, living alongside, living against, etc. the micro and macro dynamics, forces and relations that structure everyday life. Interestingly, this modality of living is experienced as commonplace, matter-of-fact, and unexceptional.

The sense of mundane routine, of the familiar quotidian, of general goodness, and of balance and compromise between opposing forces in one’s life, ‘the ordinary,’ is essentially a practical accomplishment: the end result of individual and collective labor. The ordinary is not simply granted. It is one’s business:

“Grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task. This is also why Emerson says, “Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.” His words have the rhetoric of a bargain, or a prayer, as in “Give us this day our daily bread”; it is not something to take for granted”
(Cavell, 1988, p. 171).

Cavell’s recognition of the ordinary as a task to be achieved, as an all-consuming performance worthy of prayer, aligns with the scholarly tradition of

ethnomethodology. Fundamentally, ethnomethodology insists that everyday individuals have an active role in creating and giving meaning to their life.

According to Garfinkel (1984), at the core of ethnomethodology lies the demand for a close scrutinizing of everyday, common activities, “to learn about them as phenomena in their own right... that such practices consist of an endless, ongoing, contingent accomplishment” (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 1). In order for the ordinary to be realized, social agents must act on the basis of shared, normative expectations and common knowledge (‘common sense’) of the everyday world, actively producing forms of social and cultural order within local contexts. Social situations are rendered ‘intelligible’ in that we generally understand their dynamics and expectations, and ‘accountable’ in that we expect fellow social actors to also understand the norms of social situations and assist in maintaining and accomplishing them (Garfinkel, 1984). Importantly, the reasoning we use in accounting for our deeds directly contributes to the social scene itself, they constitute its structure, and as a result “*recognizable* sense, or fact, or methodic character, or impersonality, or objectivity of accounts are not independent of the socially organized occasions of their use” (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 3). In other words, social participants work together in creating and structuring the situations within which they interact. While ethnomethodology’s value lies in its construction of the ordinary as an achieved state made by social actors, it has little to say about the media’s role in this accomplishment. Informed by my participants, I argue the ordinary is increasingly accomplished in and through media culture.

The Ordinary as Everyday

Although many employ the term 'ordinary' as a surrogate for 'normal,' my delineation of "the ordinary" is informed by what sociologists, philosophers, and cultural theorists identify as "the everyday," that space within which life is lived that is simultaneously mundane, routine, complicated and perplexing. In theorizing the everyday, Felski (1999) affirms:

"Everyday life simply is the process of becoming acclimatised to assumptions, behaviours, and practices which come to seem self-evident and taken for granted... it is a lived process of routinisation... the quotidian is not an objectively given quality but a lived relationship" (p. 31).

Felski (1999) makes sure to underscore that although the everyday's process of routine may be politically problematic or hazardous, it fails to embody "an intrinsic political content" and its ideological orientation is not "intrinsically reactionary" (p. 31).

According to Lefebvre, a Marxist thinker and one of the first to theorize everyday life, the everyday is a historically contingent phenomenon. It is only with the diffusion of capitalist modes of production, the acceleration of urban migration, and the rise of the middle class and bourgeois society where "a distinction was made between man 'as man' on the one hand and the working man on the other," that the everyday becomes a legible social reality (Lefebvre, 1958/2002, p. 227). As a Marxist thinker, Lefebvre's everyday is a space of exploitation governed, constricted, and 'colonized' by the logic of the commodity and relations of capitalist production. Under capitalism, the everyday became 'upside-down,' where individuals feel 'free' but are ultimately in shackles, subjected to a constant and

relentless rhythm of alienation. The study of everyday life confronts “the concrete problems of *production* (in its widest sense): how the social existence of human beings is *produced*, its transition from want to affluence and from appreciation to depreciation,” endeavoring towards a “reversal of the upside-down world” (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 23).⁷

However, as a dialectic, the everyday was not entirely a space of dissatisfaction and hopelessness, for it harbors the potential for pleasure and emancipation, what Lefebvre envisaged as a theory of “moments.” According to Highmore (2002 a), Lefebvre’s “moments” are “instances of intense experience” that illuminate the everyday in new ways: “moments of vivid sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight and so on, which although fleeting, provide a promise of the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time puncturing the continuum of the present” (p. 115-116).⁸

Like Lefebvre, de Certeau’s (1984) main concern was with everyday life within contemporary capitalism, a world increasingly ordered, managed and constrained by a Foucauldian ‘grid of discipline,’ normalization, and a dominant social order. However, de Certeau re-envisioned the everyday as a space of creativity and improvisation, lending more power and agency to individual social actors. At

⁷ For Lefebvre (2002/1958), the distinct elements of the everyday include work life, family or private life, and leisure, forming an interconnected totality, a relational dialectic.

⁸ Importantly, leisure or what he called ‘compensatory leisure’ must sever or “break” the flow of the everyday, offering an escape and a distraction that supplies liberation, relaxation and pleasure to those who seek it, a compensation for the struggles in everyday life. Importantly leisure mitigates “dissatisfaction,” the feeling Lefebvre identifies as “the secret of the everyday” (2002/1958, p. 233; 230).

the heart of an everyday life organized around capitalist relations lie practices of consumption, the fundamental organizing logic of social activity. Although consumption is ubiquitous, its effects are not universal or wholly repressive. It is a personal and social practice defined by “its ruses, its fragmentation... it’s poaching, its clandestine nature ... since it shows itself not in its own products... but in an art of using those imposed on it” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 31). As such, practices of consumption are complex, and can function in creative and transformative ways. For example, de Certeau identifies media reception as an active practice, a “silent production” where “a different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place,” transforming the media text into an “inhabitable” and “rented” space (2002/1984, p. 71).

For de Certeau, the dynamics of everyday life mirror ordinary language usage. The creativity that individuals express in constructing sentences and words from a pre-determined language structure is akin to the creative and agentic moves and practices performed in daily life. In both instances individuals create their own collages and montages from materials already fixed in the world. It is the re-appropriation, the ability to combine elements in new and unexpected ways, a form of drawing outside the lines while still remaining on the page, that bears witness to assertions of power, agency and creativity. de Certeau’s notion of resistance is not simply “oppositional” or “the inverse of power,” but the stubborn will to conserve in the face of change, and the ability for inventive everyday activity (Highmore, 2002a, p. 153). Characterized by a “tireless but quiet activity,” de Certeau’s resistance is subtle, a less outwardly defiant and politically overt modality (1984, p. 31). It

emerges as “a conservative force that is more easily associated with a slow tenacious refusal to adapt to the rhythms of modern capitalist culture” (Highmore, 2002b, p. 13).

de Certeau is often criticized for romanticizing and uncritically celebrating the ordinary man (his book is dedicated to him). Critiques have also been leveled at his work for aligning itself too heavily on the side of human agency and creativity, and for overemphasizing and glorifying the notion of resistance. While these critiques have merit, de Certeau is compelling specifically because of his tenacious desire to privilege the everyday as a site of creative potential and vitality. de Certeau’s desire to create a “poetics” of the everyday and his recognition of the creative, dynamic and adaptive nature of everyday life have deeply informed this project. While everyday life for most is complicated, it becomes even more uncertain terrain for those who transgress the intractable gender norms of American culture. Although this study focuses on the ways in which media make everyday life more cumbersome and problematic for participants, it equally devotes space to exploring how media engagement was creatively used to achieve the ordinary, and to assuage the challenges of living as transgender in the everyday.

As with defining the concepts ‘queer’ and ‘normal’ above, discussing Lefebvre and de Certeau’s differing yet corresponding formulations of everyday life exposes the underlying and indelible question of power, the tensions between structure and agency, domination and resistance, and the macro and micro dynamics of daily life. The micro practices and dynamics of everyday life *can* reveal larger political, social and cultural orders and relations of power. However this is not guaranteed or *a*

priori. Highmore (2002b) argues that literatures of everyday life typically pledge allegiance to macro or micro oriented theory. Macro oriented scholars such as Lefebvre, Bourdeieu, Freud and Marx understand everyday life as a space of misrecognition and false pleasure. It is essentially exploitative and repressive, an unrecognizable formation, disguised behind a façade that operates on an unconscious register. As structural theorists, culture is not ordinary or a lived everyday experience, it emerges as “the arrangement – the *forms* – assumed by social existence under determinate historical conditions” and thus culture is determined by larger political, ideological, and economic formations (Hall, 1977, p. 318). While individuals appreciate some sense of awareness of themselves and their life situation, according to macro-oriented structural theorists, they are essentially products of a dominant ideology. In the end, this theoretical paradigm posits individuals as the discursive outcome of language, social categories, interpellations, and power relations that reproduce them as “subjects” not “agents.” Highmore (2002) identifies the question of power as “the most central question for the recent history of cultural and social theory” (p.5).

By contrast, micro oriented scholars, such as de Certeau, Williams, Fiske, Garfinkel, Goffman, and thinkers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham whose work focused on youth subcultures (such as Hebdige’s (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*), view everyday life in terms of willful action and creative resistance to power, conducting their work within the particularities and local contexts of ordinary life. As “culturalists” (Hall, 1980a) these thinkers reject the Marxist notion of everyday culture as “prescribed,” ordered

by an economically “directive element,” rather cultural meaning is “made by the living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance” (Williams, 1989, p. 8). Moreover, the culture of everyday life “is ordinary” (Williams, 1989, p. 7), accessible to and intelligible for all.

In thinking through these questions of power, I argue that the concept of the ‘ordinary’ as articulated by study participants offers a constructive analytical optic for understanding power. Their struggle for the ordinary mirrored *my struggle* as a media and cultural scholar to locate a discourse suitable for conveying their experiences. How can I speak to participant stories resided at the complex intersection of structure and agency, and domination and resistance? How do I articulate the constant, unpredictable and variegated negotiations with (media) power study participants enacted in everyday life? *The struggle for the ordinary* is an attempt to begin thinking through these questions.

In addition to social power, this dissertation investigates how ‘the ordinary’ is reflected, reproduced and achieved in and through media culture. As Bonner (2003) asserts, certain forms of popular media and light entertainment like daytime television talk shows or lifestyle programs can be theorized as generically ordinary. Ordinary television, for example, is characterized by mundane concerns, the importance of interpersonal talk and relationships, and populated by ordinary people who appear as themselves. Ordinary media texts borrow from the flow of everyday life in order to screen “the representation of the ordinary, an illusion of normality” (Bonner, 2003, p. 32). Moreover, Bonner (2003) suggests that media is not solely a reflecting surface for the ordinary, it actively constructs it: “the content

of television calls on ordinary, everyday concerns and patterns of behaviour, using them, furthermore, not just as topics but as guides to style, appearance, and behaviour” (p. 32).

Turner (2010) introduces the notion of “the demotic turn” to capture how ‘the ordinary’ and everyday is increasingly constituted within the domain of media and mediation. This shift is characterized by current industry trends that incorporate ordinary, common people into media content and creation, as well as audience behaviors that point towards increased participation, interactivity and do-it-yourself creative production. Turner (2010) offers:

“While the idea of the demotic turn emerges as a way of describing the increased participation of ordinary people in the media, it has a more widespread potential for helping us to better understand the cultural function of a commercial media system that is more focused on the distribution of entertainment and the production of cultural identities than ever before” (p. 6)

Turner’s (2010) conceptualization understands that everyday media engagements are intimately linked to (1) the production and circulation of social identity, and (2) to the achievement of the ordinary. In thinking about media, transgender subjectivity and everyday life, this dissertation focuses attention on these two forms of audience work.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one offers context and lays the necessary groundwork for the following chapters. I argue that starting in the late twentieth and early twenty first century the surge in popular media visibility, as well as academic interest in transgender life and issues, results from four wider social, cultural and political

processes. These include (1) the political mobilization of the transgender community that culminated during the 1990s (2) the development of a new media environment providing space for minoritarian voices and discourses to flourish (3) the rise of gay-themed media content during the 1990s and the media industries' interest in younger socially liberal audiences that lead the way for transgender portrayals, and (4) the increasing visibility and openness of transgender public figures.

Chapter two explores what is at stake in mediated representations of gender variance for the transgender community and the ways in which transgender audiences interpret and interact with media culture. Although there are complex and engaging transgender portrayals within media culture, I consider the implications for society, politics and self of three dominant transgender stereotypes: the sensational human anomaly, the tragic figure, and the comedic jester. In particular, I analyze how these symbolic tropes influence transgender audience's sense of self, belonging, security, and interpersonal and everyday life. While the media landscape is admittedly problematic for transgender visibility, I conclude by highlighting silver linings in film and television.

Chapter three illuminates transgender resilience and practices of affirmative identity work with and against the contemporary media environment, and in the face of widespread adversity. I deploy the term "resilient reception," a concept that emerged out of the participant data, to explore the adaptive act of continuously (re)claiming and preserving self in the face of disempowering media messages. Informed by de Certeau's (1984) theory of everyday "tactics," I investigate the

methodologies of survival and “ways of making do” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29) study participants employ in negotiating media environments. I offer an analytical lens to the ‘tactical’ ways transgender individuals creatively mine the media in search of resources for self and belonging.

Chapter four argues that talk shows present a cultural site in which discourses of normalization and marginalization collide and coalesce to produce what I term the ‘queerly ordinary,’ or the ordinary with a twist. It is an identity position that accounts for the dynamics of difference and sameness expressed by mediated performances of transgender identity. I illustrate the ways in which transgender guests are positioned and position themselves as queerly ordinary on talk shows, and the ways in which this subjectivity emerges from the productive tension between a media text’s structure and the agency of its guests.

Chapter five investigates the ways in which participant data render visible transgender audiences *struggle for the ordinary*, the constant and deliberate work devoted to achieving the uneventful, the common, and the routine inclusions and affordances of everyday life. In accord with Garfinkel (1984), Goffman (1959; 1963), and Sacks (1984), I view “the ordinary” as an achievement. I argue that for transgender individuals the media play an especially central role in accomplishing or failing to accomplish a sense of the ordinary within the context of a daily life that is increasingly mediated and coordinated by technologies of communication.

I conclude by considering how *the struggle for the ordinary* poses important questions for queer theory and challenges some of its most fundamental

assumptions. Ultimately, I insist on the value of the ordinary as a useful conceptual lens through which to explore media, LGBT subjectivity, and everyday life.

My Location as Insider/Outsider

“We need to avoid the objectivist stance that attempts to make the researcher’s cultural beliefs and practices invisible while simultaneously skewering the research objects beliefs and practices to the display board.” - Sandra Harding (1987, p. 9)

Knowledge production is never value free, in that scholars interject themselves into the research process and deeply influence the kinds of interpretations and conclusions reached. This rings particularly true when interacting with and ‘decoding’ human subjects; our values, attitudes and beliefs color our reception of other individuals. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explain, “There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity” (p. 19). In order to account for these ‘lenses’ in data analysis and interpretation, I account for my social location through a brief self-reflexive detour. Self-reflexivity is “the process of reflecting critically on the self-as researcher” and requests that we interrogate how “research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). In underscoring the role of self-reflexivity in research, Portelli (1997) asserts, “to be aware of ourselves is essential to a delineation of otherness” (xiv).

As a highly stigmatized and relatively small minority group in contemporary America, gaining access to the transgender community as a researcher presents numerous challenges. Understandably, the community is often suspicious and weary of outsiders; particularly those who seek to conduct research. However,

during my fieldwork I presented myself as an advocate and scholar, somewhere between insider and outsider. My social identity as a White, educated, gay male who grew up on the East Coast of the United States is a complicated subject position from which to enter this project. Growing up gay afforded me an acute sensitivity towards and respect for forms of social difference, and in many ways, I often felt interpersonally (perhaps politically) connected and similar to my participants. Although I am not an insider or part of the transgender community, the political mobilizing of LGBT communities has positioned me as a sympathetic ally. I occupy a middle ground that grants me certain advantages and disadvantages. My participants may be more likely to trust me in that we potentially share similar, although not identical, experiences of community, oppression and prejudice. It is possible we've shared feelings of shame, confusion and the complicated, ongoing relationship with 'the closet.' However, there is also the chance that I may take some knowledges and ideas for granted, leaving some important aspects unquestioned. I attempt to be constantly aware of this and actively work to continually ask 'why' during interviews.

At times, I became emotionally invested in unexpected and surprising ways, holding back tears or experiencing intense feelings of joy in tandem with participants. Unable to achieve "detached observer" status, my emotional investment has allowed me to somewhat "awaken to" my participants. According to Witz (2007), 'awakening to' acknowledges the epistemological value and research benefits of emotional investment in the process. It sheds light on the affordances of intense affective awareness of both self and participant. It allows the researcher to

“become aware of and feel in her a consciousness, a concern and intent, or a self understanding... similar to the consciousness, concern, and intent, or the self-understanding that exists in the participant” (Witz, 2007, p. 244). As a form of grounded theory, in “awakening and articulating” the researcher accesses and expresses the “profound subjective involvement of the investigator with what she is experiencing” (Witz, 2007, p. 250). Yet, one can never fully be awakened to another, and multiple forms of distance always stood between participants and myself. Being White, male, educated and economically stable provides me with certain kinds of privileges that may be denied to my participants, and thus I tried to be mindful of possible social power inequities. During fieldwork, my black spiral notebook that logged my field notes quickly became a stark symbol of my authority and position as an outsider. During support group sessions and interviews, the moment the black notebook was removed from my bag my social position shifted and the distance between participants and myself became apparent. The discussion group facilitator would often have to explain the notes I took to group members ensuring that anonymity would be respected and that discussions about my experiences there would be done with broad strokes and thematic generality.

Finally, as a result of my own identification with the LGBT community, I am invested in offering a balanced and hopeful scholarship for readers of all kinds. Although stories of pain and struggle are vital in advancing scholarship and understanding (and are fully represented in this dissertation), they can often eclipse other equally important themes and discourses. While my work is decidedly critical, I intentionally present the transgender experience as more than tragedy and

repression. I focus on practices of resilience, affirmative identity work, and the accomplishment of everyday life within a context of struggle.

**Chapter 1: “We can no longer hide in plain sight:”
The Growth of Transgender Visibility in the 21st Century**

While scholars and the popular press have noted the rising cultural visibility of transgender (as discussed in the introduction), the transgender community itself has perhaps most acutely discerned the representational change in popular culture. During interviews with study participants, the growth of transgender discourses and visibility across media platforms was a recurrent theme. The shift in media attention was particularly apparent to older participants who grew up in a culture defined by what Clark (1969) terms ‘nonrecognition,’ when social groups are generally absent from the products and discourses of media and popular culture. For example, Maggie, a divorced trans woman and electrical engineer in her late fifties, observes, “*It’s been changing dramatically in the last 10 years. TV shows come out with trans members of families. I think now the general public is aware that the T community is apart of the diversity of the planet. It used to be that we were completely invisible to most people. Now we are becoming very visible to people. We kind of had the ability to hide in plain sight 15-20 years ago. We can no longer hide in plain sight.*” Likewise, Rayanne, a trans woman from the Midwest and social worker in her forties, notes, “*Right now there’s more of it. I’m not sure about the quality, but there seems to be more media exposure. I hope as time goes along the quality of it will*

improve. It seems to me to be kind of a hot topic. You see trans characters going up in scripted television, reality television.”

Perhaps, one reason transgender is a ‘*hot topic*’ for media is that the transgender experience offers potential for a compelling narrative. Transgender subjectivity often serves as a vehicle for stories of change, disruption, and the search for self. According to Prosser (1998), transsexual narratives in particular represent a “journey trope” (p. 117), a “voyage into the self... a trajectory in which episodes lead toward a destination” (p. 116). For example, writer and director of the transgender themed film *TransAmerica*, Duncan Tucker, explains that his movie addresses the story of when “somebody has to go on a journey they didn’t expect” (Bastian, R., Dungan, S., Moran, L., Macy, W. & Tucker, D., *TransAmerica* DVD, 2006). He clarifies, “This movie is about finding your voice... Finding who you really are. It’s the journey of a person whose felt she’s always been an outsider, always misunderstood” (Bastian, R. et al., *TransAmerica* DVD, 2006). As a journey, the transsexual experience offers a narrative structure of “departure, transition, and the home of reassignment” (Prosser, 1998, p.116). Nonetheless, although the narrative quality of the transsexual journey is suitable for storytelling, this alone cannot account for transgender’s recent rise in cultural visibility.

In this chapter, I argue that starting in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century the surge in transgender media visibility results from four wider social, cultural and political processes. These include (1) the political mobilization of the transgender community in the 1990s (2) a new media environment that offers space for minoritarian voices and texts to flourish (3) the rise of gay-themed media

content during the 1990s and the media industries' interest in younger socially liberal audiences, and (4) the increasing visibility of gender non-conforming individuals in the public sphere. These historic developments serve as the backdrop to this study. They inform the nature and circulation of transgender cultural visibility. Furthermore, these socio-political shifts also penetrate the myriad layers of participant life stories, informing their practices of self-making and experiences with media culture.

Political Mobilization Under the Category Transgender

Contemporary popular transgender visibility is in part the result of the sociopolitical mobilization of the transgender community around the term “transgender” toward the end of the 20th century. This organizing allowed for a very diverse community to speak with a collective voice, holding media organizations accountable for their transgender portrayals. The antecedents to the modern transgender rights movement stretch back to the end of the 19th century into the 20th century, as the work of European sexologists increasingly transformed the phenomena of gender and human sexuality into discourse (Foucault, 1990).

Investigating what was known as the ‘sexual perversions,’ thinkers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin researched and diagnosed those who engaged in non-procreative, non-heterosexual sexual acts and practices. Although ‘sexual inversion’ was a principle concern for sexologists, the concept itself was a strange brew consisting of a variety of nonnormative sexual *and* gendered practices and preferences. As

Prosser explains, “what sexologists sought to describe through sexual inversion was not homosexuality but differing degrees of *gender* inversion” (Prosser, 1998, p. 117).

Sexologists eventually became the first advocates for the transgender community. During the 1920s, Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin developed some of the earliest surgical procedures for changing the sex of the physical body. Through the institute, Hirschfeld arranged transformative surgeries for individuals who wanted to change sex, and in 1931, coordinated the first documented male-to-female reassignment surgery performed on Dora Richter (Stryker, 2008). Starting in the early 1930s, the institute began to officially publicize the sex change operations on “homosexual transvestites” through its journal (Meyerowitz, 2002, p. 20). As Stryker (2008) notes, “Hirschfeld was the linchpin, and his institute the hub, of the international network of transgender people and progressive medical experts who set the stage for the post- World War II transgender movement” (p. 39).

Although early sexological texts primarily constructed transgender feelings and behaviors as pathological and immoral, their work produced varying and complicated taxonomies of sex and gender that readers could use in expressing their identities. As the discipline progressed, sexological conceptualizations of gender became increasingly nuanced and heterogeneous. By the middle of the twentieth century, sexologist Harry Benjamin promoted the word ‘transsexual’ to describe individuals who wished not just to impersonate the opposite sex, but change their sex if possible via surgical procedures. His book *Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) is

an engaging, critical and thoughtful polemic on gender variance. It argues that transsexualism cannot be cured, transsexuals should seek psychiatric help, in some cases hormonal therapy and surgery may be necessary, and finally, medical professionals are responsible for helping transgender folks achieve self-realization. Benjamin (1966) argued that in a modern, technological and scientifically advanced society “the concept of “male” and “female” had become rather uncertain,” arguing instead for thinking about “various kinds of sex” such as “endocrine sex,” “anatomical sex,” “psychological sex,” “social sex,” “sex of rearing in childhood,” and “legal sex” (p. 3-9). Many transgender individuals themselves read the medical and psychological literature on transsexuality, which offered them an important language. Armed with this discourse, they were able to discursively stake an argument about their wishes for identity and transformation to doctors using the official language of the medical field (Meyerowitz, 2002).

At the same time, during the second half of the 20th century, transgender representations became part of American popular culture, as the 1950s proved to be a pivotal decade for transgender visibility. The post-war era was marked by a shift in economy from one of scarcity to abundance, a development that led to the flowering of consumer culture (Scannell, 2007). Energized by the exponential growth of television, this era witnessed the maturation of mass media culture and an explosion in its ubiquity and popularity (Scannell, 2007). With the global economy improving, people enjoyed an increasing amount of leisure time, which they often occupied with mass media and entertainments. Mass media increasingly became a window onto the (unknown) world. This new media culture helped to

generate a global publicity storm that circulated around one of the most widely publicized gender transformations in history: that of Christine Jorgensen.

Jorgensen's gender transformation during the early fifties made sex change "a household term" in America, firmly establishing a place for transgender issues within the American popular imagination (Meyerowitz, 2002, p. 51). In fact, the Jorgensen story was so ubiquitous and influential that Meyerowitz (1998) divides the history of transgender visibility throughout the 20th century into B.C or 'before Christine' and A.D, 'after Denmark.'

Christine Jorgensen, a Danish American from the Bronx, was born George Jorgensen and had served in World War II as a Private. In the early 1950s Jorgensen traveled to Denmark in order to privately undergo a series of sexual reassignment surgeries and hormone treatments only available in Europe at the time. *The New York Daily News* picked up her story and on December 1, 1952, the newspaper published an article titled, "Ex GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth." The story instantly spread to national and global newspapers, magazines and TV news broadcasts. In her autobiography, Jorgensen recalls feelings of shock and bewilderment at the level of publicity she received, and was dismayed that her personal journey overshadowed news coverage of the historic hydrogen bomb tests at Eniwetok Atoll. Jorgensen attained celebrity status and even styled herself as one, with her hourglass figure, strawberry blonde hair, love for jewelry and acute sense of modern fashion. Although she was often ridiculed and mocked in the press, her story provided a human face to sex and gender transgression and she served as a role model to others who felt similarly to her.

Transgender writer and activist Leslie Feinberg (1992) remembers, “in all the years of my childhood, I had only heard of one person who seemed similarly “different” ... I had no other adult role model who crossed the boundaries of sex or gender.

Christine Jorgensen’s struggle became a message to me that I wasn’t alone” (p. 6-7).

Following the global news coverage of Christine Jorgensen, psychotherapists increasingly took seriously the issue of transsexuality and entered the debate over its origins (Meyerowitz, 2002). As a result, the 1950s witnessed one of the first major professional symposiums on transsexuality lead by Harry Benjamin, an event that was prominently covered in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*.

Energized by the flowering of political consciousness, the social upheavals of the time, and the new vocabulary of gender variance proposed by individuals like Benjamin, the 1960s witnessed the birth of the first transgender organizations. Virginia Prince, a pharmacologist, medical researcher, and fierce advocate for heterosexual cross-dressers, spearheaded the first transgender themed publication in 1960, *Transvestia*, and in 1962 started “The Society for Second Self,” or “Tri-Ess,” an organization for cross-dressers still active today (Stryker, 2008). In 1964, Reed Erickson launched the Erickson Educational Foundation (EFF), a progressive organization that furnished support to certain social and political movements. The organization invested heavily in transgender advocacy, advancing the cause by funding medical research on transsexualism, distributing transgender oriented news and providing support to those in need (Devor & Matte, 2006). The 1960s also witnessed one of the first instances of transgender political resistance in the US. During the summer of 1966. In San Francisco transgender and gay residents

banded together to collectively resist police brutality and oppression at a local restaurant, Compton's Cafeteria, in what has been termed the "Compton's Cafeteria Riot."⁹ Notably, this act of resistance occurred three years before the now famous Stonewall riots in New York City, which was another collective response to state-sanctioned, institutionalized homophobia, bigotry and persecution. Also, during the summer of 1966, an organization of LGBT San Francisco youth from the Tenderloin District called "Vanguard" started organizing to improve the social climate of their local community. The group's statement of purpose announces,

"Vanguard is an organization for the youth in the tenderloin attempting to get for its citizens a sense of dignity and responsibility to long denied. We of Vanguard find our civil liberties imperiled by a hostile social order in which all difference from the usual in behavior is attacked" (Members of Vanguard, 1966).

The group staged public protests, held social functions, and published a magazine featuring poems, essays and political writing meant to mobilize queer individuals and reach out to young sexual and gender minorities.

Although the 1960s experienced the swelling of a transgender political consciousness, according to Stryker (2008), the 1970s and early 80s were "the difficult decades" (p. 95). In particular, the solidarity that bound transgender and gay political communities since the nineteenth century became tenuous:

"Although gay liberation and feminism are typically considered politically progressive developments, for transgender people they often constitute another part of the backlash, in large part because of the different relationships these movements and identities had to government policy and to institutionalized medical, scientific, and legal powers" (Stryker, 2008, p. 95).

⁹ For an in-depth look at this event see Silverman and Stryker's documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005)

For example, while gay activists sought to distance homosexuality from medical definition and psychopathology, many in the transgender community, specifically transsexuals, were unable to divorce themselves from the medical field. They needed psychological services and surgical procedures for sexual reassignment. At the same time, many in the feminist movement viewed transgender women as inauthentic women, as intruders of female space.¹⁰ In their case study of the alliance between ONE Institute for Homophile Studies in Los Angeles, a gay rights group, and Reed Erickson's EEF (Erikson Educational Foundation), that championed transgender advocacy, Devor and Matte (2006) testify to the challenges of the "uneasy collaboration" between political organizations. Although the collaboration successfully advanced the acceptance of LGBT individuals, it suffered "partly from longstanding concerns about the relationship between trans and gay politics" and from deciding who deserves inclusion within an organization's mission and the allocation of its limited resources (Devor & Matte, 2006, p. 399).

After the unraveling of gay and transgender alliances during the "difficult decades," the transgender community began to more actively organize on its own behalf. Since the 1980s, the number of transgender oriented political and advocacy organizations multiplied: FTM International in 1986, International Foundation for Gender Education in 1987, American Educational Gender Information Service (AEGIS) in 1990, Gender Public Advocacy Coalition in 1995 (GPAC; now disbanded), National Transgender Advocacy Coalition in 1999, Transgender Law Center in 2002,

¹⁰ For example, to this day, the 'Michigan Womyn's Music Festival' prohibits transgender women from attending the event. Each summer, in protest, a group of transgender individuals and activists set up camp down the road (an event that has become known as "Camp Trans") and voice their disapproval toward the exclusion.

National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in 2003, and Trans Youth Family Allies in 2006. Initially introduced by Virginia Prince in the late 1960s, who used the word “transgenderist,” the term “transgender” emerged as a ubiquitous “buzzword of the early 1990s” and was typically “applied to (if not always welcome by) the sociocultural and critical-intellectual formations that were caught up in, or suddenly crystallized by, its wake” (Stryker, 2006, p. 2-3). The broader mobilizing of transsexuals, cross-dressers, and other gender variant people around the category ‘transgender’ in the 1990s offered a collective voice and an identity position from which to advocate for political rights (Valentine, 2007). Social service providers, political groups, and academic discourses started to employ the term transgender to coalesce and mobilize an often disconnected and diverse gender variant community (Valentine, 2007).

Wilchins (2004) identifies the late 1990s as an important “moment of political recognition” for the transgender community:

“Surrounded by scores of transsexuals and hundreds of cross-dressers at conventions, it was impossible for differently gendered people to feel the same shame... Transsexuals and cross-dressers began to see themselves less as social problems and more as the next oppressed minority” (p. 23)

Due in part to pressure from transgender activists, broader LGBT coalition groups in the 1990s began reversing the political fracturing that took place in the 1970s.

Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) started advocating more vociferously on behalf of transgender Americans and including them in their missions. Recognizing the importance of public relations efforts, organizations such

as NCTE and GLAAD began holding the media accountable for their treatment of gender variant people and lobbied the media for socially responsible representations of transgender. These organizations have been central in keeping transgender issues on the legislative agenda as well as the media's radar. Since the mid 1990s, transgender rights organizations and activists have also been tirelessly lobbying congress to include gender identity alongside sexual orientation protections under the purview of the Employment Non-discrimination Act (ENDA), a struggle that still continues.

Complementing this kind of political activity and mobilization is the growing presence of transgender writers and scholars, and the burgeoning field of 'transgender studies' as an academic discipline. Since the 1990s there has been an increase in scholarly texts written by self-identified trans authors including Sandy Stone (1991), Kate Bornstein (1995), Leslie Feinberg (1996), Loren Cameron (1996), Pat Califia (1994), Riki Anne Wilchins (1997), Susan Stryker (1998; 2006a; 2006b; 2008), Jamison Green (2004), and Julia Serano (2007) who mix autoethnography, life history, photo essay, gender theory, historical analysis, and critical, cultural critique to comment on transgender issues and politics. These texts render visible and valuable transgender life and identities, and enthusiastically argue for greater concern with respect to transgender rights and broader social justice issues. These scholars advocate the recognition of transgender voice and agency in the development and maintenance of social service programs, medical and mental health administration, and political policy. Moreover, they attend to the ways in which the notion of transgender can challenge and advance common sense

understandings of sex and gender, as well as enrich a range of academic theory across disciplines.

The New Media Environment

When I was growing up we didn't have the Internet and things like that, and I'm 42. Once I decided I was going to transition I immediately got on the national FTM listserv and I've been on that ever since. I think the Internet has been critical to the advancement of the trans community as far as politics, social agendas and things like outreach and resource networking.

- Don, study participant, 42 year old trans man from San Francisco

A new media environment and digitally based infrastructures offer unprecedented space for transgender representations to proliferate and flourish. According to Anderson (2006), "long tail" media technologies such as digital storehouses like Netflix that offer boundless choice and personalization with respect to media content are changing the economics of the entertainment industry. Whereas an older business model relied upon blockbuster hits for attracting a mass audience, Anderson (2006) contends that, "the hits now compete with an infinite number of niche markets, of any size" (p. 5). Within this new formation of media economics, it is not only possible, but it is commercially advantageous and highly profitable for media producers to cater to increasingly segmented markets. Television scholars identify this current moment as a "post-network era" (Lotz, 2007, p. 245), where changes in television production and distribution methods caused by digitalization have expanded consumer choice, control, convenience, and customization. By comparison, the mid twentieth century was the era of the mass media, dominated by radio, film, and television. These media were structured

around broadcasting, where a small group of elite senders imparted messages to many receivers. Audiences were conceptualized as a 'mass,' in more passive terms (Nightingale & Ross, 2003), appreciating limited capability in terms of communicating with the producers of media and with each other. As Castells (1996/2000) notes, this mass media age yielded to an information technology revolution originating in the mid 1970s that witnessed the emergence of cable television, computer mediated communication, global electronic communication systems, satellite technology, and decentralized communication networks based on shared interests rather than geographic space. Aside from advances in communications technologies, other technological advances such as increased automobile travel, the development of expressways, air transportation, long-distance telephone service and shifts in land use (the separation of work space from residential space) contributed to the development of a 'networked society,' where the network represents the defining logic and key feature of social, political, and economic organization (Castells, 1996/2000; Wellman et al., 2003). With the development and global distribution of mobile communications and Internet technologies, Campell and Park (2008) argue we have now reached an era of the "personal communication society," an extension of the network society of the 1990s, characterized by more individually tailored media forms, more control over sources of information, and more personalized uses of communications technologies. Importantly, new communications technologies make it easier for people who encounter hostile local communities and/or unsupportive family structures to enter

online communities based on shared identity or interest, appreciating forms of social interaction and affirmation unavailable in their everyday 'real life.'

According to Jenkins (2006), the contemporary media culture is defined by technological convergence, a change in how media is both produced and consumed. Production and distribution costs are less, the number of media channels has exploded, and digital technology has "enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18). The changing media environment and the move from a broadcasting, mass media model towards a narrowcasting, interactive social media framework has produced a shift in understanding audience behavior. Although smaller in audience size, televised and other forms of niche content attract loyal and enthusiastic audiences who are willing to pay to access content that speaks to their particular interests and worldview (Anderson, 2006). Audiences are "active" instead of passive, "migratory" instead of stationary and predictable, "socially connected" instead of isolated, and "noisy and public" instead of quiet and private (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18-19). Pushing beyond merely active audiences, Nightingale and Ross (2003) argue, "the so-called *passive* audiences for mass broadcasting are fast becoming not *active* but *activist* audiences for interactive media" (p. 9). Audiences are now better able and more likely to find like-minded others, share thoughts and information, and organize and speak with a collective voice and intelligence.

For example, the shift to Web 2.0 and the arrival of online digital distribution platforms like YouTube allow for an explosion of amateur produced content that speaks to communities historically underserved and ignored by the mass media, and

facilitate new forms of social interactivity. Whereas transgender themed media content used to primarily be available in specialty 'brick and mortar' shops, long tail and on demand technologies like Netflix and Amazon make it widely accessible and easy to find. Popular blogs such as the Bilerico Project, Pam's Houseblend, Planet Transgender and Skip The Makeup along with Internet broadcasting networks like TransFM regularly feature socio-political commentary and transgender related news ignored by most mainstream media outlets. Moreover, online discussion forums, Internet social networking sites, and cell phones have the potential to advance various modalities of sociability for sexual and gendered minorities. These newer, more interactive digital technologies facilitate "networked individualism" (Wellman et al., 2003), the ability of the individual to function as a communications portal, a mobile switchboard in a state of perpetual contact with close and distant others. Digital technologies also facilitate the cultivation of personal "communities of choice," carefully created and managed social groups "that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging" (Wellman et al., 2003, p. 10). However, as scholars have also pointed out, newer communications technologies are not utopian devices and while they can create new circumstances for social interaction, they may also foster feelings of increased alienation and social isolation (Campbell & Ling, 2009).

The shift towards a digital media environment has been especially significant for sexual and gendered minorities who face social stigma and often lack local informational resources, interpersonal support, and a community to call their own.

In surveying LGBT youth, the “Same Sex Attracted Young People’s Project” found that eight-five percent of respondents reported that Internet engagement played a crucial role in fostering interpersonal connection with like minded others, and seventy percent felt it reduced feelings of isolation (Hillier, Kurdas & Horsley, 2001). Importantly, while sixty-five percent of LGBT youth reported that they did not feel part of an LGBT community offline or in real life (RL), fifty-two percent communicated they found a feeling of community in online spaces (Hillier, Kurdas & Horsley, 2001). McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that virtual groups played a more significant role in the lives of individuals with marginalized and concealable identities. They concluded that, “stigmatized individuals strongly possess all of these motivations to belong to a group of similar others, but are unable to do so because of the concealable and potentially embarrassing nature of their identity” (1998, p. 681). Furthermore, the researchers found that the longer someone participated in a newsgroup, the more important and meaningful their marginalized identity became for them, which was associated with higher levels of self-acceptance and an increased likelihood of coming out to important others.

Scholarship specifically addressing the transgender community affirms the central role of media in procuring self- development and awareness. Gagne and Tewksbury (1999) argue that certain kinds of dominant knowledge systems circulated, in part, by and through the mass media influence the development of one’s self-concept as transgender. Their work reveals that mass media play a central role in alleviating feelings of being alone in the world, and in imparting scientific and/or medical models of gender identity, models that are either accepted or

blatantly rejected. In an oral history project with Toronto's trans community, Hill (2005) finds media depictions illustrate that a transgender life is possible and offers "new perspectives and options for living a trans life" (Hill, 2005, p. 43). Similarly, Ringo's (2002) work on transgender identity development concludes that the media functioned as an "actualizing agent" where "media's role can be understood as having encouraged its users' 'qualities of transness' to manifest and strengthen" (2002). Although one's gendered identity originated from within the individual, media served as a spark that ignited identification processes. In a study with parallel concerns, Hegland and Nelson (2002) conclude that cyber spaces serve as a "primary medium of expression" for cross-dressers, allowing men to cultivate a personalized, though culturally informed, understandings of their own femininity (p. 157). Through dialogue with others who share similar experiences and struggles, these virtual tools allow for transgender individuals to tell their stories, and redefine the meanings of self and community (Hegland & Nelson, 2002; Shapiro, 2004; Hill, 2005).

Consequently, the transgender 'community' is very much constituted in and by the new media environment. Along with Facebook, transgender social networking sites such as Pink Essence and TransQueer Nation have allowed the transgender community to connect both socially and politically, developing a highly active, easily accessible and sophisticated online subculture. As Benedict Anderson (2006) conceptualized, feelings of group identity and community are largely imagined. Anderson (2006) explains that community, "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members,

meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006, p. 6). The mass media help expedite this process of creative imagining of communities to which we have little direct, unmediated contact. Like the readers of a national newspaper, readers of a transgender website imagine they are part of a larger collective, sharing the consumption experience with others. Moreover, the modes of address on many transgender themed websites cultivate feelings of group identity. For example, the social networking site *TransQueer Nation* employs overtly nationalistic rhetoric, identifying its users as ‘citizens,’ calling personal profiles ‘passports,’ and encouraging members to connect with ‘allies’ via the site’s communication tools.

In fact, the Internet has been so crucial to the development of transgender communities that many of my study informants narrate their stories of self-identity in terms of “pre” and “post” Internet. Rayanne used transgender Internet blogs to “insert myself into the community.” Rayanne explains the significance of the Internet to the transgender community, “I’ve been out now two years at work, 24/7, living my life and I work in multiple crowded grocery stores. I see hundreds of people a day, and in two years I haven’t run into anyone who is identifiably trans. That puts you in a different kind of minority. If you’re Black, or Muslim, or gay, you can probably walk around a crowded grocery store and recognize yourself in these other people, and I think that’s what gives you the sense of community, even if you don’t know them personally, just seeing them there counts... if there were more trans people out there you would feel a little less alone. That’s how the Internet helps you because it pushes that snowball down the hill. Before the Internet you would hear about transsexuals

and it was good fodder for the talk shows and it was a trickle here and there, but many people were held up by the fact that they felt they were the only one out there like this. The Internet makes it possible to have somebody to relate to. For a minority who can go their whole lives without actually meeting a real trans person in the real world, the Internet was instrumental in bringing people together.” Another informant Linda, a White middle-aged trans woman from a small farming community in Michigan, started to have intense cross-gender feelings upon turning forty years old. Like Rayanne she explains the importance of the Internet for self-making and social life, *“I got my first computer. I got on the Internet and “oh my goodness!” Hey, there are other people out there who feel the same way I do. I’m not a weirdo. And of course now I started doing research.”* After joining thirty transgender themed websites and conducting her “research,” Linda found local support groups, met other trans women, developed close relationships and found a group with whom she went out dancing.

The Gay 90s: Courting the LGBT market and Young Socially Liberal Audiences

In addition to the self-affirming affordances of the digital media environment, the flourishing of gay and lesbian visibility in media culture during the 1990s laid the groundwork for popular transgender inclusion. Throughout the 1990s, various social, political and commercial interests began hailing the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community, actively constructing an LGBT audience niche. Whereas marketers began to recognize and exploit the economic potential of the LGBT consumer market, political elites recognized their importance as a voting bloc

(Walters, 2001). Gay civil rights found its place on a progressive legislative agenda and President Clinton publicly addressed gay rights groups, arguing against bigotry and anti gay violence. While his administration had more openly gay and lesbian officials than anyone before it, they were also responsible for advancing discriminatory policies such as Don't Ask Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act. Consequently the era was marked by "dramatic lurches backwards and forwards" in terms of social and political progress for the LGBT community (Walters, 2001, p. 33).

Complementing this political attention was an energized interest in the gay consumer market. According to Sender (2002) the recognition of a gay market in the 1990s had two origins: "The AIDS crisis and associated activism had brought gay people to the attention of marketers, and the economic recession at the beginning of the decade sent marketers in search of new groups of apparently affluent consumers" (p. 21). As a result, the media landscape of the 1990s witnessed an unprecedented rise in gay and lesbian themed television programming and popular film, and a readiness to embrace upscale gay audiences and eventually certain kinds of LGBT imagery (Walters, 2001; Becker, 2006). As Becker (2006) notes, the 1990s televisual landscape revealed a culture coming to terms with the question of homosexuality. Gay characters along with discussions and controversies about homosexuality appeared in some of the decades most popular and celebrated shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Roseanne*, *Picket Fences*, *Melrose Place*, *thirtysomething*, and a host of others, while programs like *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* featured gay identifying main characters.

In addition to gay audiences, the entertainment industry began to court a lucrative and burgeoning consumer market comprised of younger, upwardly mobile, socially liberal, urban professionals, what Becker (2006) refers to as the SLUMPY demographic. In order to compete with cable's provocative content and its growing share over SLUMPY audiences, network television incorporated gay characters and gay themed material. This inclusion added relevancy, controversy and edginess to programming making it more appealing to the coveted younger demographic. For SLUMPY audiences, appreciating LGBT themed programming was utilized as a marker of self-identity, representing an appreciation for liberal values and diversity (Becker, 2006). Accepting the portrayal of the LGBT community as an audience member was a declaration of hipness, open-mindedness and forward thinking. Importantly, the gay characters within these shows often paralleled the liberal minded, educated, urban, younger demographic networks and marketers wished to attract (Becker, 2006).

The liberalization of popular culture in the 1990s and the targeting of the SLUMPY demographic (Becker, 2006) changed media industry lore and set the stage for transgender representations in the early 21st Century. As with its gay predecessors in the 1990s, transgender portrayals have been particularly noticeable in media products targeting a hip younger demographic. For example, the reality modeling contest *America's Next Top Model* featured a transgender contestant during its eleventh season. The Canadian teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation's* tenth season introduced a transgender character, and MTV continues

its reputation for LGBT inclusivity by assimilating transgender contestants into the reality programs *The Real World*, *America's Best Dance Crew* and *Making the Band*.

The proliferation of gay and lesbian media organizations throughout the 1990s and into early 20th century also helped carve out space for transgender visibility. In 2002, the here! Network was launched as a subscription cable service offering original LGBT themed television dramas and sitcoms and movies aimed at the larger LGBT community. It was followed by Viacom's LGBT cable channel Logo in 2005. Brian Graden, president of Logo, explains, "The gay audience has never felt they had a home... working at MTV Networks, we have a long history of catering to people, of creating networks that fill a niche" (Hill, 32). Aslinger (2009) notes that although Logo's programming often reinforces economic, racial, national, and even gendered hierarchies within the LGBT community, it simultaneously

"illustrates the television industry's increasing willingness to target GLBT viewers directly, the industry's attempts to create and distribution outlets designed specifically for this demographic, and the drive to produce texts that offer up gay protagonists as more than "textual selling points" (p. 109).

Although a majority of its marketing and programming is geared towards middle class gay white men (Aslinger, 2009), Logo apportions space for screening transgender content. Within its line-up Logo has featured a tele-documentary series *Real Momentum* that has devoted several episodes to covering transgender issues, a transgender themed reality dating show *TransAmerican Love Story*, the reality drag contests *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *RuPaul's Drag U*, and regularly airs *TransGeneration*, a documentary following four transgender college students. Importantly, while these programs were initially aired on LOGO, and only available

to those with premium cable, they became available to a larger audience through other platforms. For example, *RuPaul's Drag Race* was syndicated by VH1, and select episodes can be watched free on the Logo website, while the *Real Momentum* series, *TransAmerican Love Story*, and *RuPaul's Drag Race* are available on Netflix.

In addition to gay and lesbian niche media organizations, there is an increased awareness within more mainstream media operations about the proper treatment of LGBT communities. For example, recently Barbara Walters apologized for the way she approached her widely talked about interview with Ricky Martin in 2000, a televised encounter where she boorishly pressured him to reveal his sexual identity. Admitting that her questioning was exploitative, Walters explains, "in 2000, I pushed Ricky Martin very hard to admit if he was gay or not, and the way he refused to do it made everyone decide that he was. A lot of people say that destroyed his career, and when I think back on it now I feel it was an inappropriate question" (Ouzounian, 2010). Shifting to transgender representation, Court TV's (now truTV) 2002 coverage of a case concerning Michael Kantaras, a transgender man from Florida, offered a balanced and insightful portrayal. Kantaras was fighting for custody over his children after his wife claimed he was not male and requested marriage annulment over the illegality of her 'same sex' marriage. Commended by GLAAD and the National Center for Lesbian Rights for offering a sympathetic, in-depth and complex portrayal, Court TV's coverage allocated considerable time highlighting the perspectives of Kantaras and transgender activists in order to counterbalance the wife's accusations. Court TV's senior vice president for daytime programming, Marlene Dann, explained the importance of taking the case seriously,

“The controversy is not that we’re airing it. They are arguing the issues... the issue was very important” (Freiberg, 2002, p. 32).

Increasing Visibility in the Public Sphere

Together with the political mobilization of the transgender community and the changing media climate, there are more self-identifying transgender individuals entering the public sphere, requiring social institutions to rethink organizational norms and operations. A May 21, 2007 issue of *Newsweek* devoted its cover story to exploring the increasing presence of transgender in America. Titled “The Mystery of Gender,” the magazine’s cover promised an exploration of how “the new visibility of transgender America is shedding light on the ancient riddle of identity.” The issue’s feature article “(Rethinking) Gender” discussed the changing cultural assumptions regarding gender in the United States as “a growing number of Americans are taking their private struggles with their identities into the public realm” (Rosenberg, 2007).

This kind of news coverage is precipitated by a number of high profile transgender coming out stories covered by the media since the beginning of the twenty first century. Importantly, this heightened attention helps transgender become a more talkable topic within the public sphere. The very public gender transition of some well known figures such as *Los Angeles Times* sports journalist Christine Daniels in 2007 as well as Largo, Florida city manager Susan Stanton in 2007 accelerated the visibility of transgender. Stanton, who was fired from her public service job after announcing plans to transition from male to female, had her

story turned into a two-hour teledocumentary produced by CNN titled *Her Name was Steven*, while Daniels' transformation was chronicled in a blog she wrote for the *LA Times* titled "Woman in Progress." Both individuals are professional, well-respected women of public prominence who opened their lives to the popular press, supplying a human face to gender variance.

However, the most widely publicized transgender 'coming out' story in recent times is Cher's son Chaz Bono. A 21st century version of the Christine Jorgensen saga, the extensive coverage started with Chaz's announcement to the celebrity news organization TMZ on June 11, 2009 that he was undergoing a gender transition, a declaration that fueled the paparazzi's unyielding interest in Bono. The story's ubiquity can be explained by its potential to accommodate a variety of news frames and objectives. The media narrative included reactions from Cher, Chaz's girlfriend and other celebrities, along with photos of Chaz doing everything from visiting doctors' offices to walking down the street. Media outlets were flush with conjecture about his specific surgeries, the process of his official name change, and his first Red Carpet event as a man. The story filled considerable space on celebrity news magazines and websites such as *Star*, *People*, *TMZ*, *OK!*, and *Radar Online*. It was also featured in the entertainment sections of organizations like Fox and the *LA Times* that published "Then and Now" and "Out and About" photo montages of Chaz, accompanying the embellished celebrity gossip. Using the story to perform an educative service, ABC News discussed the invisibility of transgender men, gender discrimination and health insurance challenges (Cox & Chitale, 2009), CBS News offered a "Pro Bono Transgender Primer" about terminology and the dynamics of

sex and gender (LaPook, 2009), and CNN took the opportunity to inform audiences that “someone’s decision to transition does not necessarily mean they are undergoing gender reassignment surgery” (CNN.com, 2009). Moreover, Bono’s story was turned into a documentary titled *Becoming Chaz*, a Sundance Film festival favorite that also aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), inaugurating its Documentary Club.

Finally, in May 2011, Bono released the book *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man*, an autobiographical account of the public figure’s life in the spotlight. The book’s release was coupled with a public relations media blitz with appearances on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Joy Behar Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and many others to promote his book. For during the second week in May 2011, the popular news media was saturated with Chaz Bono and with conversations about gender and sexual identity. Like the Jorgensen story in the 1950s, these discussions brought (trans)gender identity and life to the forefront of the American popular imagination.¹¹

Shifting to the political sphere, in early 2010, the first transgender appointees in the country’s history were chosen to serve the executive branch by the Obama administration. Dylan Orr was appointed as special assistant to the assistant secretary of labor Kathleen Martinez at the Department of Labor, and Amanda Simpson was selected as senior technical advisor in the Bureau of Industry and Security. In covering Simpson’s appointment, *ABC News* focused on identity politics “First Transgender Presidential Appointee Fears Being Labeled ‘Token’”

¹¹ Chaz Bono has also been featured on the reality TV hit *Dancing with the Stars*.

(Goldman, 2005) and the *NY Daily News* framed the story in terms of Simpson's gender transition "Amanda Simpson, formerly test pilot Mitchell Simpson, gets senior post in Commerce department" (Saul, 2010). *CNN* offered, "Transgender Woman Appointed to Commerce Department," (Kornreich, 2010) drawing attention to Simpson's transgender identity, while excluding her name in the article's heading. The *World Net Daily's* unnecessarily included the cost of Simpson's surgeries in its article sub-headline, "Test pilot had 6 surgeries at cost of \$70,000 to switch from male to female," repeatedly referred to Simpson as "he" in its article, and used the name Mitchell "Amanda" Simpson in a picture caption (Schilling & Farah, 2010). Even the *Late Show with David Letterman's* January 5 opening skit commented on the historic appointment, albeit with cruelty: show announcer Alan Kalter hinted at a previous intimate relationship with Simpson and, upon hearing about her gender history from Letterman, he went running from the stage in horror.

In addition to these instances of popular visibility, transgender presence is increasingly becoming evident in work contexts, presenting challenges to some established institutional routines and traditions. Some business leaders have started to account for the presence of transgender employees within their organization in order to better understand their needs (Human Rights Campaign A, 2010). In particular, many employers are offering transgender health benefits for employees to provide for counseling, hormone treatments, and sexual reassignment oriented procedures (Human Rights Campaign B, 2010). American Express, AT&T, Bank of America Corp., Campbell Soup, Ford Motor Co., Google Inc., Coca-Cola Co. among many others are a sample of major corporate leaders that made the Human

Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index that offer insurance coverage for transgender employees (Human Rights Campaign B). Greater visibility within the work place however also leads to greater potential for discrimination and, as Dishman (2005) emphasizes, transgender employment rights represent an increasingly important issue for both employers and trans employees. This area of law in particular has been developing quickly recently and undergoing "rapid and important changes" (Dishman, 2005, p.121-122).

Somewhat surprisingly, measured and thoughtful discourses about transgender have also edged into the world of collegiate athletics and sports journalism. In 2010, Kye Allums became NCAA's first division 1 female-to-male transgender basketball player for George Washington University. According to one sports journalist, the player's participation in women's college basketball was responsible for "starting conversations never before held in the sport" (Zeigler, 2010). Sports media began investigating questions regarding levels of inclusiveness for gender variant college students in sports, transphobia, sportsmanlike conduct on the court, and how best to accommodate transgender athletes (Zeigler, 2010). For example, a three-person panel on ESPN's sports news program *Outside the Lines* (aired 4/3/2011) used Allums' situation to seriously consider the place of transgender athletes in sports. Explaining that the story "jumps off the sports pages and touches a lot of people," sports journalist Kevin Blackistone praised Kye's personal strength, suggesting "this story is really not about basketball... its about a woman who has decided she is going to become a man first in mind and the physically later on, and it's a courageous step for him." Helen Carroll, a coach from

the National Center for Lesbian Rights, explained that all athletes deserve feeling comfortable and safe regardless of their gender identity and that GWU's primary concern should be "what is the healthiest thing for Kye." The panel also underscored the complications and importance of scholarships for athletes and commended GWU for how it handled the public relations angle of the story. Furthermore, it explored the impact of Allums' identity on his team, and debated whether the story distracted from other equally important issues in women's sports.

Allums' story underscores how the educational sphere more generally represents a public site where gender variance is becoming increasingly manifest, "as a growing number of students throughout the country have begun dressing according to the gender identity they have chosen, which may not necessarily reflect their biological gender" (Urban, 2010). Urban (2010) argues that as a result of an increasing presence of gender nonconforming students, high schools will have to re-evaluate certain policies and traditions such as dress codes and gender based standards of propriety. The controversy surrounding transgender presence at high school proms is an issue that directly affects younger members of the transgender community's ability to achieve the status of 'ordinary high school student.' According to Crystal Vera, the transgender California teen who was refused admittance into her prom, "I have no formal pictures, no memories, nothing. You only have one prom" (Associated Press, 2006). Assistant to the School Superintendant, Sylvester Rowland, cited "the dress code, not the student's homosexuality" as the reason for Vera's exclusion (Associated Press, 2006). However, not all schools resist transgender presence at proms. For example,

McFatter High School, a Florida technical school, named a transgender student its 2011 prom queen (Hernandez, 2011). Although some students objected, Andii Viveros earned the support of her school and her parents, beating fourteen competing women for the title (Hernandez, 2011).

A growing number of colleges across the country are also starting to more fully consider the needs of their transgender students (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis and Tubbs, 2005). Issues concerning gender-neutral bathrooms, inclusive housing, health care, counseling, and campus climate all contribute to transgender students academic success and professional development. For example, the University of Michigan offers “gender neutral housing” options for transgender students. In 2011 the U of M housing department updated and broadened their definition of transgender to mean “a term for people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, genderqueers and gender non-conforming people” (Rozenberg, 2011). The previous definition for transgender determining housing policy was restrictive and based on physical transition. Recently, student groups at the university ranging from LGBT organizations to the Michigan Student Assembly have called for “open housing,” requesting that students be able to choose roommates without considerations of gender, a policy supported by 67% of undergraduates (*The Michigan Daily*, 2010).

Transgender individuals are no longer complacent with living hidden lives, and increased visibility within the public and media sphere only energizes the

desire to outwardly assume the identity of one's choice. In moving from the private to the public sphere, transgender individuals are requesting access to and integration into the rhythms, structures, benefits and affordances of everyday life. At the same time, gender variance is still very much informed by stereotype, misinformation and ignorance, making social acceptance and integration difficult. While there is certainly a swelling of popular transgender visibility at the start of the twenty first century, the nature, tone and texture of this presence is mixed, complicated, uneven, and at times contradictory. Nonetheless, symbolic silver linings are starting to become apparent. The next chapter addresses these representational dynamics, interrogating the politics and implications of transgender media depictions.

Chapter 2: Sensational Anomalies, Tragic Figures & Comedic Jesters: Transgender Representational Trends in Popular Culture

Consistently forged on the fringes of the American cultural mainstream, transgender individuals have been depicted most often in media by way of stereotype. One central problem with stereotypes, according to Dyer, is that they frame identities as “necessary and natural” and “inevitably fall short of the ideal of heterosexual society (that is, taken to be the norm of being human)” (as cited in Gross, 2001, p. 14). Falling outside of what is commonly considered “necessary” or “natural,” popular media culture typically present transgender in terms of supreme ‘Other’ or outsider: as outrageous freaks (Gamson, 1999), duplicitous deceivers (Ryan, 2009), villainous monsters (Phillips, 2006; Ryan, 2009; Sullivan, 2000), subservient mammy figures (Ryan, 2009), martyrs and victims (Halberstam, 2005) or selfless, superhuman deities (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001). This contributes to wider cultural misperceptions that conceive of transgender subjectivity in terms of the carnivalesque, “as a ‘freak-of-nature’ best kept on stage” (Cavanagh, 2003, p. 373). As such, Namaste (2005) argues that transgender portrayals primarily work to “satisfy the curiosity of the non-transsexual viewer” (p. 46).

Offering a more complex evaluation, Halberstam (2005) affirms that transgender themed cultural reproductions may carry various ideological meanings for diverse audiences. For example, transgender representations have the potential

to represent “the enduring power of the binary gender system,” as well as a “utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities,” and/or a postmodern “fantasy of fluidity” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 96). In this way, the transgender body denotes “a utopian sense of pliability” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 123), a postmodern form of embodiment that is unstable without being uncontrollable, and flexible within certain limits. However, according to Garber (1992), the instability and dynamism of the transgender portrayal typically activates cultural anxieties. Cultural articulations of gender non-conformity expose widespread anxieties regarding the inadequacy, frailty and permeability of gender categories specifically, and social categories more broadly (Garber, 1992). In this way, transgender representations can function as agents of boundary blurring, and gender variant persons have the potential to be socially and politically disrupting figures. As a result, within media culture stereotype becomes a dominant representational device that symbolically contains the anxiety and disruptive energy produced by the transgender figure.

This chapter is animated and directed by ethnographic data, detailing the ways in which transgender audiences interpret and interact with the cultural reproductions circulated by popular media. These reproductions typically leave no room for the ordinary and everyday, the very space where life is lived. For Susan Stryker (2006a), a transgender scholar, this denial of her common humanity fosters sympathies with the character of Frankenstein. Stryker (2006a) admits, “Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment ... my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me” (p. 245). Her outrage speaks to the central concern of this dissertation, the

ways in which imagistic neglect contributes to struggles for the ordinary, the pursuit of establishing one's self as "fully human" in a pervasive and complex media culture.

In this chapter, I explore what is at stake in mediated representations of gender variance for the transgender community and the ways in which transgender audiences interpret and interact with media culture. Although there are some complex and engaging transgender portrayals within media culture, I consider the implications for society, politics and self of three dominant transgender stereotypes: the sensational human anomaly, the tragic figure, and the comedic jester. In particular, I analyze how these symbolic tropes influence transgender audience's sense of self, belonging, security, and interpersonal and everyday life. While the media landscape is admittedly problematic for transgender visibility, I conclude by highlighting silver linings in film and television.

While there has been considerable scholarly interest in and scrutiny of transgender depictions in popular culture, there has been less work devoted to understanding the transgender community's meaning making practices in response to these portrayals. Employing qualitative methodological approaches, a small number of researchers have examined the relationship between media representations and transgender subjectivity (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1999; Gray, 2009; Hegland & Nelson, 2002; Hill, 2005; Ringo, 2002; Shapiro, 2004;). The work of Gagne and Tewksbury (1999), Hill (2005) and Hegland and Nelson (2002) speaks to the complex ways in which media figure into transgender self-making, and help to alleviate feelings of loneliness. Ringo (2002) and Gray's scholarship (2009) testifies to media's role in activating and actualizing the desire to 'come out,' transition, and

strengthen one's sense of self, and Shapiro (2004) explores how media facilitate collective consciousness and political mobilization. However, the literature lacks a sustained engagement with the meaning making practices of transgender audiences within the current representational environment. In particular, participant voices, narratives and constructions are often scantily acknowledged or absent. Moreover, in many studies the trans-specific analysis is often part of a larger body of work looking at LGBT audiences and representations in general. Importantly, these studies do not address how transgender audiences navigate and negotiate with a media environment that has historically been hostile and unwelcoming, but is nevertheless starting to change, revealing small spaces of affirmation.

“There is always some big ‘whoohah’”: Transgender as Sensational Spectacle

During my fieldwork, participants consistently referred to the ways in which media presents the transgender body as spectacle, using words like “freaks,” “sensational,” “controversial,” “exotic,” “unusual,” and “dramatic” to describe transgender visibility. As Brandon succinctly explains, *“There is always a sensational atmosphere. The trans person is a specimen, something crazy.”* Participants objected to the specularization of transgender identity and life to attract the attention of audiences. For example, within the daytime talk genre, shows such as *Sally Jesse Raphael’s* “Hot Drag Divas”, “Guess Am I a Man or a Woman?” and “Sally’s Fantasy Female Pageant,” or the *Jerry Springer Show’s* “I’m Pregnant by a Giant Transsexual” and “Transsexuals Attack” frame gender variance as laughable, improbable and pure spectacle.

According to Debord (2004), a first order understanding of spectacle represents the reduction of complex phenomena to an image, “an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances” (p. 9). Spectacle is a process of exteriorization whereby the “attention-demanding factor lies in its formal dimensions” (Aguado, 2006, p. 577). Yet Debord (2004) pushes his conceptualization further, arguing that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (p. 7). Importantly, for Debord this relation is marked by dominance, for spectacle works in the service of a ruling economic and social order, and is “the result and goal of the dominant mode of production” (Debord, 2004, p. 8). Echoing Debord, Kellner (2003) posits that the media spectacle is essentially a commodity motivated by an economic imperative: the drive for higher audience shares and profits. Kellner’s (2003) analysis of media spectacles such as the OJ Simpson trial, the marketing of the McDonald’s corporation and professional sports, for example, exposes how these image systems “naturalize and idealize the given social system” (p. 28). While they have the potential to serve as counter-hegemonic forces, spectacles typically consolidate the ideological by visualizing, celebrating, and cementing existing social, political and economic values and norms (Kellner, 2003). Presented as spectacle, the transgender individual or story is transformed into a marketable commodity, and sold to audiences as an unusual and exceptional variation of humanity. It is this seemingly exploitative exchange that study participants identify when discussing transgender popular representation.

In fictional media, transgender characters represent figures of the bizarre and are often interjected into storylines in order to contribute disequilibrium and controversy. In 2006, when daytime soap opera *All My Children* was declining in ratings share, it introduced a flamboyant, transgender rock star character to the show (Bauder, 2006). In an interview with the Associated Press, executive producer Hanan Carruthers explained that the show was searching for “something new” particularly with respect to gender and sexuality, favorite topics among viewers (Bauder, 2006). Consequently, a transgender character was introduced to spice up the show’s narrative: “After 36 years, you start rehashing... It’s inevitable. We didn’t want to fall back on the baby-switch story” (Bauder, 2006). The strategy certainly attracted media attention as Fox News, National Public Radio, *Slate* magazine, AOL news, and *New York Magazine* were just some of the news outlets that featured stories on the daytime soap opera’s new character.

The transgender body is also spectacularized through the representational work of advertising. A 2008 ad for the Jawbone Bluetooth headset featured Amanda Lepore, one of the most widely known transsexuals of the alternative New York nightclub scene, and appeared as a two-page spread in *The New Yorker* magazine (See Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: A 2008 Advertisement for Jawbone Bluetooth headset featuring famous NYC transsexual Amanda Lepore.

The ad depicts a surgeon wearing a Jawbone gazing across the page at Lepore, also wearing a Jawbone. As the surgeon stares in awe directly at Lepore, she is adorned in a skin-tight red dress that accentuates her voluminous breasts and large, pouty lips. The advertisement's copy reads, "People will talk." Engaging a discourse of surfaces, the ad suggests that transgender's value is primarily aesthetic, resting in its ability to serve as a marketable spectacle, and its worth is anchored by its status as fashionable. When employed in advertising, the transgender body openly invites the consumer gaze, and its physicality captures attention for the promotion of products and services. When co-constructed alongside a product or service, the transgender body as spectacle will get 'people to talk,' a primary goal of strategic communication. Brady speaks to the deployment of the transgender body in commercial culture, *"I guess trans is kind of trendy in a way right now. I mean you*

have Ru Paul and all her drag shows, which are really successful, and even someone like Amanda Lepore is all over the fashion world, but it's all about being glamorous, and shocking to look at." Since transgender individuals are often subjected to penetrating and troubling looks from others, Brady expressed discomfort with the idea that transgender was being associated with 'looking,' an act often experienced as painful and humiliating: *"its like look at us, we're so unusual, we're so interesting. It's not always fun being looked at."* Brady objected to how media validates the process of gazing at others. In many ways, media operate as instruments of an inspecting gaze, generating images and modalities of looking that reproduce social relations of power. As Foucault (1995) demonstrates, the gaze operates as a technology of power that at times works to objectify, discipline, normalize, control and oppress. Furthermore, an inspecting gaze has the ability to become internalized, a dynamic experienced by a study participant named Kate, a college aged transgender woman studying in the Midwest.

In talking about media depictions of transgender as sensational and outrageous she viewed growing up, Kate explains, *"they all left ... a horrible memory and made me feel confused and weird about who I was. I sort of refused to take myself seriously. Then I spent a lot of time trying to actively repress these memories. I don't remember much of my childhood to be honest."* She continues to explain how media portrayals combined with messages she received from her local community triggered feelings of isolation and eventually clinical depression. *"I had lots of struggles with depression, a lot of ups and downs, since middle school until about when I came out. I had lots of ups and downs and there were triggers like in media and from*

people in my life that made me feel awful.” Kate was better able to discuss more recent media representations such as the coverage of one trans woman’s struggle in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina: “I read a good amount of news stuff, or get linked through online forums to articles. Every so often there is an article about a transperson and there is always some big ‘whoohah’ about the person being trans. One that comes to mind, there was a transgirl at one of the disaster relief buildings where they were housing the refugees and she used the women’s shower, and they noticed she still had a penis, and there was a big ‘hubhub’ about that. I actually got linked to that article from a site called ‘Fark.com.’ It’s a website that basically links to funny news articles. Funny, strange, freaky, weird. This woman’s hardship was totally sensationalized, made into off the wall news.”

In accord with Kate’s concerns, research illustrates that although news sometimes covers issues pertaining to transgender rights, it typically privileges the sensational and the exotic. For example, Currah (2008) indicated that during 2007-2008, while the media focused on the controversy surrounding Thomas Beatie, the “pregnant man,” the Democratic architects of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act removed “gender identity” from the bill, a move that directly affected the lives of transgender citizens and received little coverage in the mainstream news media. Another participant, Jess, also discussed how trans issues only receive media attention when suitable as spectacle, using the case of the “pregnant man” as an example: *“A lot of the spectacle of it wasn’t new for me, it couldn’t offer me anything new. I was aware of the mechanics of the situation and it didn’t surprise me or intrigue me. It seems embarrassing, not that it happened but that it became such a*

spectacle. It was a big dog and pony show.” Don echoed these concerns. As someone interested in politics, Don worries about entertainment eclipsing the political with respect to transgender media visibility. “Right now there are so many big things going on that have to do with the trans community. You had the ENDA (Employment Non-discrimination Act) that was going on with the HRC (Human Rights Campaign), the senate just held a meeting on employment discrimination, the AMA (American Medical Association) just released resolution 122 which is an extremely pro-trans piece of internal legislation, DSM 4 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) is in the process of being updated. So there is all this stuff happening now and is any of that showing up on television? NO. But pregnant transman is in the media.”

As Don notes, important political projects that have direct consequences for transgender individuals’ everyday life become subject to sensational and spectacular coverage that obfuscates and trivializes the issue. In 2009, the Massachusetts legislature held hearings on a bill (House Bill #1728 and Senate Bill #1687) that would amend the State’s hate crime and non-discrimination laws to include gender identity and expression, legislation that would grant legal protections to transgender citizens. Opponents of the bill spearheaded by The Massachusetts Family Institute (MFI), an ultra conservative Christian advocacy group, were successful in seizing control over public discourse surrounding the bill, labeling it the “bathroom bill.” A radio ad financed by the group warned it would place children at risk to sexual predators: “Pretty soon, you won’t want her to go into a bathroom by herself anymore. Why? Didn’t you know Beacon Hill is about to

make it legal for men to use women's bathrooms?" (Keller, 2009). In line with the group's ideology, local media headlines referred to the legislation as "the bathroom bill:" the *Boston Herald* announced "Critic: Flush Bathroom Bill" (Sweet, 2009), CBS Boston affiliate WBZ ran a story "Ad Campaign Fights Transgender 'Bathroom Bill,'" (Keller, 2009) and WCVB's News Center 5's evening newscast opened their coverage of the bill with "It's being called the bathroom bill, [and it] is essentially meant to end discrimination based on transgender status" (Jacobs, 2009). Some of the news media's coverage performed an educative function, discussing the particulars of the bill and its implications for civil rights. However, the "bathroom bill" language became a dominant news frame as news headlines focused on bathroom themed theatrics. In 2010, the non-discrimination legislation was attached to a budget bill as an amendment, yet failed to pass.

"There's always some kind of violence": The Tragic Structure of Feeling

A pervasive symbolic trope in popular media stages the transgender character as tragic victim or deranged criminal, whereby the character is circumscribed within the walls of disaster and misfortune. Sullivan (2000) argues this pattern was in part informed by the now infamous Ed Gein murders in rural Wisconsin in the late 1950s. Gein was tried for the murder of two women, and according to mental health professionals, robbed local graveyards in search of body parts to construct a female form, a body suit, which would serve as a substitute mother figure (Sullivan, 2000). Although there is no evidence that Gein identified as transgender, popular press accounts often classified him as a deranged transvestite

who wanted to be a woman (Sullivan, 2000). The case's shadowy mythology served as the inspiration for Bloch's 1958 novel *Psycho*, Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960) and the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Sullivan, 2000). These texts help animate a corpus of popular films featuring violently psychotic transgender characters, a "psycho-trans" film genre (Phillips, 2006), where transgender is "associated directly with castration, madness, murder, and monstrosity" (Phillips, 2006, p. 85). Films such as de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and Wright's *Cherry Falls* (2000) depict cross-dressing and transgender behavior as symptomatic of an underlying psychological pathology, a "psychotic erasure of the self" (Phillips, 2006, p. 85-86). In these portrayals, the transgender character represents a symbolic vessel into which many of humanity's fears and anxieties are deposited.

In addition to being portrayed as perpetrators of violence, transgender characters are overrepresented as victims of violence, assault, and murder, and their bodies are repeatedly figured as a target for physical beatings. Transgender fictional and factual narratives often engage what Ang (1985) calls a "tragic structure of feeling," or a sense of unavoidable fatalism and tragedy, pain and suffering that permeate a story's diegesis. One participant, Carrie, comments on how the plastic surgery themed cable drama *Nip/Tuck* is representative of the tragic structure of feeling: "*Nip Tuck really pissed me off. I watched an episode about transgender individuals. It was the episode where the kid of one of the surgeons found out his girlfriend was transgendered, and could not handle it. He went and picked up another trans person at a bar and beat the shit out of her, and abused her. The very*

end of it, when the son was seen by the trans person's friends, she pointed him out to them, and they jumped on him, beat him up and pissed on him. I think it just portrayed hostility upon hostility and gave the impression that revenge is out there to be had."

Televised law enforcement dramas and crime procedurals like *CSI* or *Law & Order* often depict transgender characters as murderers or abuse victims. A recent episode of *Law & Order* titled "Transitions" (2/17/ 2010) is emblematic of this trend. The episode features a 13-year old transgender youth, Hailey (born Henry), whose intolerant, narrow-minded father, Mark, is almost beaten to death. Under intense pressure and duress, Hailey slits her wrists attempting suicide but survives. In the episode's concluding trial scene, Hailey's school guidance counselor, Jackie, reveals that she is transgender and has been brutally victimized her entire life. As a result, she brutally attacked Mark to protect Hailey against his intolerance. Both transgender characters in the story were relegated to victim and criminal roles, suffering from lives marked by pain and tragedy. In talking about this episode, Rayanne comments, *"In scripted television we're either psychos or victims. I think CSI, the original CSI, has had three or four episodes that featured transsexuals, and almost all of them victims, and in one case, a murderer. Last season's episode of SVU had some sensitive conversation, particularly from BD Wong's psychologist character, but at the end of the day the killer was still the trans person."*

For Sebastian, the prevalence of sexual and psychological violence is agonizing: *"There is almost always this horrifying rape scene in every film or movie or storyline or plot that includes transgender people. Like "Boys Don't Cry." (His voice grows louder.) There's always some kind of violence. Either it's past violence like*

being abused as a child, or it's a current violence of being raped, assaulted or murdered, or all of the above. Sometimes it's a psychological violence." Many participants attribute the focus on transgender victims to news stories, which tend to shed light on transgender themed issues only in the wake of tragedy. As a result, while transgender themed films based on actual tragic events like *Boys Don't Cry*, *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and *The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006) warrant telling and depict their transgender protagonists in sympathetic and considerate ways, they nonetheless become victims of highly tragic, often violent and deadly, circumstances. Consequently, the tragic structure of feeling emerges as an official representative of the transgender experience, to the exclusion of other character types and narratives.

At the same time, some participants were in fact victims of violence, bullying and aggression as a result of their gender performances. Linda, a middle-aged trans woman from a small farming community in the Midwest, recalls two painful experiences in particular, and as she talks I see her straining to maintain composure. First she discusses the time her father witnessed her cross-dressing as a young teen. *"My dad caught me and I more or less got thrown against a closet. I was probably thirteen then. He basically told me to straighten up, act like him and my brothers or he was going to take me out of this world. He scared the hell out of me. He was a rough, aggressive man. He yelled a lot. Being the oldest I usually got the worst of the punishment."* Moving to her life as a young adult, her second account details an attempted rape. *"I've had some bad experiences with guys. I've actually had one guy try to beat me up and rape me. I wasn't paying attention. I was too complacent with*

where I was and what I was doing. He got the better of me. Luckily my purse was close by and I carry a can of pepper spray. My dog was right outside the door, so when he threw me across the room, my head hit the wall, and I hollered. The dog barked and started to growl. I managed to get my purse and my pepper spray. He took off, and I never heard from him again.” These experiences profoundly influenced Linda’s sense of safety, *“I’ve learned to watch my back, especially after dark. When I walk outside at night I always have my pepper spray in my hand ready to use. You never know. You just kind of watch shadows, see if anyone is coming up behind you.”* In light of these traumatic episodes, Linda emphatically stresses that her life is defined by acceptance and self-confidence, not tragedy and victimhood. Since coming out as a transgender woman five years ago, she explains, *“I just experience more openness, more acceptance than I thought. I live everyday like this.”*

Similar to Linda, while many informants acknowledge the prevalence of transphobic violence in society, they were particularly apprehensive about tragedy becoming the defining frame for transgender experience, to the exclusion of other frames. As Don points out, *“The one mainstream movie that had a trans guy in it was “Boys Don’t Cry.” Of course he’s like raped and murdered, which was factual, but maybe one of these days they’ll show something else too.”* Likewise, Sandy contends, *“I want to see more of the happy side of it, where people transition and their life gets a lot better. Enough with all the doom and gloom.”* Sebastian echoes these concerns, *“I think there is a great amount of violence that happens to trans people either physically or emotionally in our lives, as there is for a lot of people, but I don’t know that it is the defining... it doesn’t define the trans community as some people think it does.”*

However, Vera, a self-proclaimed “queer,” gravitates toward the excessive, flamboyant, and confrontational, what she terms “*the outrageous version of queerdom.*” For Vera, transgender depictions centered on violence and danger are exciting and attractive, granting gender variant characters the ability to assume dominance and abuse power. Additionally, Vera appreciates how these representations highlight social defiance and cultural anti-normativity, which have been historically celebrated by and have a rich tradition in the LGBT community. While she personally embraces this aesthetic, she also questions its socio-political implications: “*I really like the idea of queers as dangerous people. Do I think politically it was good for us moving forward? No. Culturally, politically and so forth maybe I was more enlightened later when I got to experience first hand homophobia and transphobia and all of the bad stuff that comes along with those kinds of representations. But artistically, creatively, I think it was fabulous. I am still attracted to a great tranny killer. I don’t think everything should be, at the end of the day, family friendly.*”

Transgender identity is so often co-constructed with violent discourse that some respondents express concern that the two are inevitable. In talking about “*the typical transgender plot line,*” Julie maintains, “*Very often we are killed at the end. That really irritates me. I think it gets people to almost expect it, to almost expect if you’re trans you will die for it.*” Likewise, Wren contends, “*There’s also a problem in that especially in the news, you never really hear about trans people until they’re dead. The trans people you know are the ones who have died. There’s always this constant threat of violence and it’s somehow dangerous to be this type of person.*” Some

portrayals imply that the violence is deserved, a consequence for gender “deception,” for failing to pass completely as man or woman. For example, in the popular film *The Crying Game*, the main transgender character’s performance harkens a “transgender deceiver” (Ryan, 2009) stereotype, one that positions trans folks as perpetrators of deceit and duplicity. The character’s gender identity is not revealed to her lover (and subsequently to the viewing audience) until the middle of the movie. During the moment of revelation, the film is shot so the audience joins in feelings of shock and betrayal with Dil’s lover, who reacts by vomiting. Kate elucidates, *“This writer I like talks about the two archetypes of trans-people in the media: the ‘pathetic’ and the ‘deceiver,’ separated by those who can pass and those who can’t pass. I really do see that a lot. If they can’t pass they are some horrible freak, but if they can pass they are seen as some awful person who is tricking innocent straight guys into being gay, like they deserve what crap comes their way. There is a lot of victim blaming like ‘She shouldn’t have pretended to be a woman.’”*

In addition to outright violence, transgender themed media present a tragic structure of feeling by correlating gender variance with social isolation, as transgender individuals are portrayed as abandoned selves, unable to find love, family, and community. A few participants discussed the lack of representations depicting transgender love, tenderness and physical affection. Brandon explained how his brother’s concerns mirrored the kinds of messages expressed in popular media: *“When I came out as trans, my brother was like ‘who will ever love you?’ My answer to that is: Your assumption that no one will ever love me or find me attractive reflects your own fear and anxiety about gender variance. That is what I see played*

out in Ugly Betty, and other media as well. There was this one episode where someone was trying to get her (Alexis, the trans character in the show) out of power because of the magazine. They paid somebody to romance her and take her away to Brazil because they didn't want her to interfere. Of course they had to pay someone! There was another scene where she is shooting hoops in this bar, she is high femme and really gorgeous, with this dude who is clearly coming onto her and flirting with her. Then of course she is like "Oh my god. I think he likes me." The climax of the scene is when he gives her his number and then is like "No way would I ever hang out with you. I know what you are." Rayanne also worries about popular representations of transgender love and discusses the importance of displaying transgender affection, "What we need is positive reinforcement because until it's ok to love trans people we will always have transphobia and violence against trans people. We have to make it okay to love trans people."

When transgender sexuality and affection are portrayed, they are circumscribed within the narrow confines of illegal prostitution, a victimization of another kind. Television crime dramas like the *CSI*, *Law & Order: SVU* as well as local news routinely portray transgender characters as exotic sex workers or streetwalkers, as fixtures of an urban landscape. As finding and keeping steady employment is one of the greatest challenges facing transgender persons, some engage in sex work in order to survive, however this representational frame has become an industry convention. Calpernia Addams, a transsexual actress and Hollywood insider who runs a video production company, concludes, "in Hollywood, it's like the two words go together, transsexual and prostitute... They don't even

question it” (Garvin, 2003). In commenting on the representation of transgender women in local news and film, Brandon noted, “*The media says trans women are supposed to be sex workers, and have HIV, and live in SROs (Single Room Occupancies) in a tough part of town. It is where people who are marginalized stay, at least in San Francisco. That is the niche trans women are allowed to occupy. You’re poor. You’re a woman of color. You do sex work. You’re on the streets, addicted to drugs. That’s what people expect to see or what they think, is that image.*” Thus, the transgender person becomes relegated to a gendered, classed, and racialized rendering of urban decay and social lawlessness. Jen, a twenty one year old trans woman living in the suburbs of a Midwestern city, explains, “*I recently have been looking at newspapers more. Lately there have been a lot of things going around where there have been sex workers who are transgender getting killed and they totally use their male name and place a big emphasis on the ‘sex worker’ title. They don’t really say anything good about the person except that they’re trans, they’re a sex worker and they got shot. So that’s the image. If you’re trans, you’re going to be a sex worker and you’re going to get shot.*” In addition to sex work, her language speaks to a previously discussed theme: the perception that tragedy and death are inevitable for transgender individuals. Jen has internalized a tragic structure of feeling. For a twenty one year old, her thoughts about her own mortality are almost too well developed, as they lurk in the rear view mirror: “*Luckily in my case I have half my family backing me so if something did happen to me I will be remembered the right way. I made them promise me they would present me as a girl. But imagine if you*

haven't spoken to your parents in 20 years and you're a female now and at your funeral they dress you up in a suit and put you in a casket."

According to participant constructions, their everyday life is often punctuated with both outright threats of violence and smaller micro-aggressions like sneers and dirty looks. However, a media culture preoccupied with associating transgender with violence only exacerbates feelings of anxiety and insecurity. For many informants, everyday life is quite ordinary - mundane, uneventful and generally pleasant. It is primarily concerned with the dynamics of what Goffman (1963) calls the "daily round" (p. 91), marked by cyclical patterns of social life including shopping, work, home life, recreation, etc. According to Silverstone (1994), everyday life is an amalgam of moments, comprised of intense meaning and trauma (like violence) as well as the trivial:

"marked by a continuous, predictable and unpredictable, series of shifts between the marked and the unmarked, the sacred and the profane. Daily life is studded with ritual times and spaces in and through which the insistence of the daily round is momentarily put to one side. Stolen moments in front of the television set." (p. 168)."

Popular transgender representations delineating this kind of experience, these sorts of 'stolen moments' that are so banal yet so important and central to everyday life, are typically absent in media culture. Even those who stomach ignorance and cruelty daily want to, and need to, see portrayals of transgender happiness, success and frivolity integrated within popular culture. According to Munoz (2009), media, art and culture bear a responsibility to illustrate what culture could and should be, to affirm how "utopia exists in the quotidian" (p. 9). They must provide counter points to everyday forms of struggle and oppression, creating spaces of hope and

potentiality for LGBT minorities who lack it in their everyday lives. Queer individuals deserve affirmative cultural productions that offer “passports allowing us entry to a utopian path, a route that should lead us to heaven or, better yet, to something just like it” (Munoz, 2009, p. 146)

“So they only exist to be laughed at”: Jesters, Mammies and False Disguise

Apart from violence and victimhood, transgender and particularly cross-dressing are frequently appropriated in popular representation to serve comedic functions, an articulation that situates transgender folks as court jesters we laugh at and with (Evans, 1998; Garber, 1992; Phillips, 2006; Ryan, 2009;). Remi, a graduate student in the Midwest in her late twenties, explains her first exposure to transgender individuals on television and in film, *“They were a source of fun, to laugh at. A figure of fun to laugh at. And sort of improbable as well. I mean like they don’t really exist, really! And if they do exist you just laugh at them. They don’t really exist in the realm of non-jokes. So they only exist to be laughed at.”* However, while comedy genres encourage caricature and stereotype, it has also provided a doorway through which minorities enter into the mainstream (Marc, 1997). From stand-up comedy to the situational comedy, the comedic genre is often the first place where underrepresented groups appreciate a touch of visibility and acknowledgement. However, in terms of gender variance, it is typically employed as a ‘laughing at’ rather than a ‘laughing with.’ For example, the comedic source of *Saturday Night Live’s* iconic 1990s skit “It’s Pat” was the gender ambiguity of the character Pat, an awkward, fumbling, and sweaty gender bender. A more recent *SNL* skit (aired Jan.

29, 2011) ignited significant criticism from GLAAD and similar advocacy organizations for trivializing and degrading the experiences of transgender women. A commercial parody for the fictitious estrogen supplement “Estro-maxx” portrayed male actors in dresses enthusiastically praising the benefits of the drug. Featuring bearded men wearing skirts, multiple references to the penis, and close-ups of noticeably fake breasts, the commercial depicted transgender women engaged in a pathetic clowning of female identity.

Creators working in the genre of animated situation comedies such as *Family Guy* and *South Park* employ transgender caricatures as means for evoking the incongruous and nonsensical. In Comedy Central’s *South Park*, the character Mr. Garrison, an elementary school teacher, epitomizes the sexual Other and reinforces cultural stereotypes that equate gay male identity with gender inversion. As a male, Garrison is represented as a highly effeminate, emotionally unstable, erratic individual whose actions imply a tendency towards pedophilia, homosexuality and sadomasochism. Throughout the television series, Garrison undergoes a sexual reassignment surgery becoming Mrs. Garrison. However, Mrs. Garrison eventually grows tired of living as a woman, and returns to male subjectivity. As a woman, Mrs. Garrison is farce: an insecure, balding middle aged “man-in-a-dress” who is never accepted as female. Writing about these media trends, Phillips (2006) acknowledges that male-to-female gender transgression often represents “a comically inadequate copy of women’s otherness” (p. 51).

Even though these depictions are supposed to be interpreted as ironic and hyperbolic, they still bothered some participants. Remi explains, “*I stay away from*

Comedy Central comedy because I think it's crass. It has definitely stepped on my trans toes. Things like Mrs. Garrison bother me. Things like "Family Guy" I stay away from. It's not the crassness, it's just flatly offensive, and thinks that's funny in itself." For Blake, transgender satire is a more complicated act, steeped with contradictory feelings. *"The first time I encountered Mr. Garrison and Mr. Slave and all that, I thought this is funny, and they rip on everyone. They rip on Blacks, Jews, Catholics, you name it, they rip on them. Why should transgender be excluded? I could always pick it apart and be critical, and I'm sure there are a lot of people who are uproarious about it, but I look at it as an acceptable form of mockery. I have mixed feelings about that too though. Where Black people, Jews and everyone else have achieved this status in normal society where you don't make fun of them. If you say the N word it's horrible. It's terrible to call someone a fag. It's already at that level with gay people, but with trans people you still have a tremendous amount of hate crimes and murders each year, more than other groups. In some ways, its harmful, but I hope the people watching South Park are in on the joke. They're making fun of it to make comedy not to promote hatred. Like I said, I do have mixed feelings about it though."* For Blake, the inclusion of transgender individuals into the show's crosshairs is an expression of validation and inclusion, for they join the 'good company' of social groups mocked by *South Park*. At the same time, he acknowledges the highly stigmatized status of transgender and worries about audiences interpreting the show's humor as an endorsement of transphobia and hate.

Within popular cinema, comedic films such as *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), often employ

what Garber (1992) refers to as a “transvestite’s progress” narrative whereby cross-dressing and gender transgression are simply rendered as a means to an end.

Transvestite progress narratives most often involve a heterosexual male character that unwillingly employs cross-gender appearances usually to achieve some personal gain or to overcome a challenge (for example, cross-dressing in order to spend time with one’s children in *Mrs. Doubtfire*). Eventually the character will “resume life as he or she was, having, presumably, recognized the touch of ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ in her or his otherwise ‘male’ or ‘female’ self” (Garber, 1992, p. 69-70). Many comedic texts, and progress narratives in particular, commonly employ the dramatic convention of “false disguise” (Baker, 1994) in which an actor playing a cross-gendered role intentionally reveals their performance to the audience. In male-to-female false disguise, “there is no attempt by the performer to pretend he is anything other than a man playing at being a woman” (Baker, 1994, p. 15). Accordingly, actors send the audience conspicuous clues about their disguise, for example a male actor playing a woman may slip into a deep, masculine vocal register when talking with others. “True disguise” (Baker, 1994) then refers to actors performing a cross gender role without acknowledging the transgression. The audience may know the actor’s ‘real’ gender, but “this knowledge is irrelevant to the nature of the drama being played out, or to the effect of the actor’s work” (Baker, 1994, p. 14). By contrast, in false disguise the gender inversion is integral to the narrative’s unfolding and functions as a central comedic or dramatic accessory. While false disguise by White actors has a long and complex history (Baker, 1994), in contemporary popular culture there is a clearly identifiable

corpus of films that employ Black men in false disguise such as Tyler Perry's "Madea," Eddie Murphy's "Norbit" and Martin Lawrence's "Big Mama" characters. Dressed primarily as mammy figures, these characters are clown-like constructions informed by racial and gendered stereotypes that date back to minstrel theatre.

Female or male impersonation and drag have rich histories as modes of popular performance and entertainment, and media portrayals frequently depict the transgender individual as an entertainer. Popular films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Soldier's Girl*, *Rent*, and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* present transgender characters as performers who entertain both fictional (on screen) and real (off screen) audiences. At stake for the transgender community is the ability to be taken seriously. As Maggie contends, "*Most of the portrayals up until about 5 or maybe 10 years ago, the trans person was "comic relief," we were the clown on stage. That has changed thank goodness. "To Wong Fu" oh god give me a break. Nice comedy, but has nothing to do with who we are.*" Similarly, Ethan notes, "*My first instinct when I think about trans people, especially in film, is that they're often confused with drag queens. I see a lot of comic relief and a lot of parody. It's like trans folk and drag queens are synonymous sometimes. Basically they are there to entertain you and dance around.*" Moreover, these characters live to serve others and help improve the lives of those around them, a stereotype that Ryan (2009) identifies as the "transgender mammy." In this context, transgender figures exist in order "to fix the problems of gender-normative people, add color and spice to their broken lives, and become worthy through their devoted service to the hegemonic class" (Ryan, 2009, p. iv). Films such

as *Too Wong Fu*, *Holiday Heart*, *Flawless* and the more recent VH1 reality makeover TV series *Transform Me* feature transgender mammy characters. The show's website frames the trans women as a trio of magical saviors:

“TRANSform Me is a makeover show in which a team of three transgender women... rescues women from personal style purgatory. Laverne and her ultra-glam partners in crime have undergone the ultimate transformation, so they're the perfect women for the job.... They'll travel the country in their tricked out fashion ambulance, siren blaring, and swoop into scenes of fashion disaster. They'll not only make women look better but feel a whole lot better about themselves... Then they hop in their fashion ambulance, and it's on to the next style crisis.” (*Transform Me*).

This promotional text illustrates Brookey and Westerfelhaus's (2001) argument that popular film often achieves acceptance of queer characters through a “discourse of deification,” portraying characters as morally and “unrealistically superior,” as selflessly superhuman who harbor magic-like qualities (p. 143-144). Brookey and Westerfelhaus's (2001) conclude that gender variant characters are often portrayed in accord with Jewett and Lawrence's (1977) notion of the American monomyth in which “a hero with superhuman powers who enters an isolated community in order to save it from some threat” (p. 144).

While preferable to the demonization paradigm, the transgender figure as self-sacrificing, magical hero functions in similar ways by further marginalizing and removing trans folks from everyday experience. At the same time, the show presents transgender women as queer mentors, constructed as ambassadors of fashion, self-styling and experts in fabulousness. While the women's transgender identity is initially met with hesitation and shock by some of the people they help, as the episode progresses and the three interact with their fashion victims, laughs are

exchanged, personal stories are shared, advice is appreciated and for some, perspectives change. By the end of the episode, the predominantly straight, cis gendered 'fashion victims' look up to the transgender trio and celebrate their knowledge. In this way, the shows spotlights and offers credit to the contributions to fashion, cosmetics and styling that transgender folks have often made.

Perceptible Silver Linings

In discussing perceptions of more recent popular transgender representations, many participants expressed hope that the symbolic landscape was indeed transforming. While these shifts are small and nuanced, they nonetheless bear witness to the emergence of silver linings. Acknowledging the media's power, Ethan, a trans man in his late 20s from San Francisco, perceives small representational changes. *"The media has really deep effects. We're getting to a place now where I think media is prying open some new depictions and some new perspectives for the whole queer community."* Rayanee offers a similar evaluation. *"Well it's getting better. I think it's getting a lot better. I mean there are still some shows like a Jerry Springer type of exploitation show, but I think overall it's getting a lot better. Ugly Betty has got the trans character. It's a fair representation to a certain extent. It's not exploitation. Law & Order: SVU, they've done a couple excellent shows on the transgender community."* Whereas Rayanne notices progress in television, Don looks to film: *"Boys Don't Cry, TransAmerica, even something like Almodovar's Bad Education: these were pretty good films. I think we're moving in the direction that there is a little bit of really positive stuff, a little bit of really offensive stuff, and then there is some lampooning and comedic stuff. But the fact is, it's a topic*

being talked about and presented to the public." Although gender variance has appreciated more multidimensional depictions in smaller independent, art films and documentaries made by the transgender community, recently, some popular media have offered a window into transgender subjectivity and experience, focusing attention on both the real and fictional lives of self-identified transgender persons. Situated outside the realm of farce, caricature and monstrosity these representations have furnished more complex, unpredictable and compelling accounts of transgender life. As polysemic texts, these newer portrayals blend narrative convention and stereotyping with creative innovation and counter-stereotyping.

For the first time within popular film, certain areas of transgender life are being illuminated by a sense of complexity and humanism. The 2005 film *TransAmerica* depicts the story of a single, White, pre-operative transsexual woman, Bree, played by actress Felicity Huffman. Depicted as a sympathetic, quirky and intelligent heroine, Bree realizes one day that years back she "fathered" a son, Toby, played by Kevin Zegers, a teenager working as a prostitute in New York City. Bree's therapist refuses to authorize her sexual reassignment surgery until she resolves her relationship with her son. Posing as a Christian social worker, Bree reluctantly travels to New York to unite with Toby. The two embark on a cross-country road trip where they develop their fledgling relationship, traverse an idyllic American pastoral, and encounter a colorful cast of characters along the way. For Alex, because of its accessibility, *TransAmerica* represents a silver lining, a notable first start in popular transgender visibility. *"I actually liked that film a lot. I know some*

people had problems with it, but you can't look at something and say if I lived in an ideal world how would I want this character to be portrayed. You don't live in an ideal world. Trans people do have problems. You have to think about how the media works. The fact that this movie was made and shown around the world is amazing. I felt like this character created a site where people could interact, at least it got people to think. The fact that it's there and it's accessible, that's important enough." For different reasons, Lisa considers "TransAmerica "excellent." "TransAmerica I really liked because it really showed the struggle of a transgender male to female. It shows the hoops that we got to go through to finally get that letter for surgery, and how that therapist dangled that letter in front of her so she would go pick up her son and travel cross country." However, for other participants, the depiction of transgender struggle and awkwardness was disturbing. Carrie explains, "I think the character was a very needy, very disturbed individual. She was very troubled and was constantly struggling. Yes, we all struggle. But, I know some of the most strongest transgender woman. I am attracted to that strength."

The 1997 Belgian film *Ma Vie En Rose*, a sensitive and at times good-humored portrait of a young cross-dressing boy, Ludovic, also offers an honest story of struggle. The film screens the myriad social and personal challenges Ludovic's gender variant behavior poses for himself and his family. A few participants cited this film as personal favorites, acknowledging the likeability, benevolence, and innocence of Ludovic. Constructed as troubled, disenchanted, and parochial, the adult world around Ludovic struggles to accept and understand him. Brimming with emotional authenticity and a sense of realism, the film grants access to

Ludovic's point of view, framing his desire to cross gender as brave and sincere. Like Ludovic, *Breakfast on Pluto's* (2004) gender bending Patrick, nicknamed "Kitten," inhabits an undesirable world. *Breakfast on Pluto* presents a tale of Patrick Braden, a fiercely confident, optimistic, daydreaming individual with enormous personal strength. As an Irish orphan, Braden commits to searching for his biological mother, a decision that launches a personal journey filled with eclectic urban characters and chance encounters. Wrongly accused of bombing a bar and brutally interrogated by police, Kitten remains a resilient survivor (transgender resilience will be further investigated in Chapter 3). Employing fantasy as a strategy for enduring the everyday, audiences are transported into the vivid, dream-like and surreal inner, mental world into which she escapes. According to Rayanne, the film breaks ground because although it "*says some things about the trans experience,*" its focus transcends transgender topicality, "*it only uses the word trans once in the whole film.*" She continues, "*It doesn't feel the need to focus on that element because that element is obvious. You can then talk about other things important to the story: her quest to find her mother and whether that's a fools end, and the relationship with her father that turns out to be the more important one.*"

Like *Breakfast on Pluto*, the campy rock opera *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) provides access to the surreal, subjective life of the film's rock star protagonist, Hedwig. As a feminine gay teenage boy living in East Berlin during partition, Hedwig undergoes surgical sexual reassignment in order to legally wed and move to the United States. Yet a botched surgery leaves her with ambiguous genitalia, an "angry inch," causing her to suffer from the social and emotional

consequences of unwelcomed gender ambiguity. Hedwig's search for authentic human connection and self-acceptance, her desire for people to "love the front of me" as she exclaims in the film, is honest and innately human. Coping with her struggles through rock music and song, she emerges like Kitten as a resilient survivor, a bold, vulnerable, and poignant hero, as well as an unforgettable artist blessed with the voice of a siren. Inspired by the life and tragic murder of Brandon Teena, a twenty-year-old transgender male who moves to a small Nebraska town, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) is perhaps one of the best known transgender-themed films for the considerable attention it attracted from the popular press, mainstream audiences, movie critics, and academics. As a film that legitimizes Brandon Teena's transgender identity, Cooper (2002) suggests *Boys Don't Cry* advances a "liberatory discourse" that celebrates female masculinity and the variability of gender experiences (p. 57). Similarly, Halberstam (2005) argues that the film's cinematography facilitates a "transgender gaze," an alternative interpretive frame informed by a transgender character's point of view, "a mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body" (p. 92).

Whereas film has provided cultural space for transgender figures in leading roles, the televisual medium has been slower in moving transgender characters towards the center of a narrative. *Pretty/Handsome*, a television drama created by Ryan Murphy (also responsible for the TV hits *Nip/Tuck* and *Glee*) featured a transsexual protagonist, yet failed to find a home on network or cable television. The show told the story of Bob, played by Joseph Fiennes, a White gynecologist and family man living in a conservative New England town who gradually comes to

terms with his desire to change sex. As the first scripted television program to feature a transgender main character, the show would have been groundbreaking. The pilot was developed for cable's FX network, but received scant support from network executives (Andreeva, 2008). Although its transsexual protagonist was placed within a White, suburban, middle class, heterosexual world, the show was marred by reluctance from the beginning, as network executives were hesitant about the appeal of transgender to mainstream audiences. FX eventually passed on *Pretty/Handsome* in 2008, and the series failed to find a home elsewhere (Andreeva, 2008). The story of *Pretty/Handsome* reflects the ambivalent position transgender occupies within popular culture: while enough interest existed within the entertainment industry to greenlight a pilot, the project lacked the support needed to reach the air.

On the televisual landscape, the single transgender themed episode remains a dominant industry model for transgender inclusion on television, particularly in medical dramas like *ER* and *Chicago Hope* and crime procedural shows like *CSI*, *The Closer*, and *Law & Order*. Within the transgender themed episode, transgender characters typically work to more fully develop a text's protagonist, securing their counterpart's gender and sexuality. They also reflect a hero's tolerance, compassion, open-mindedness, and/or edginess. Although the single transgender themed episode is still somewhat paradigmatic, subtle shifts are gradually and unevenly emerging in terms of the tone, texture and frequency of transgender visibility. While their roles are primarily secondary, *The Education of Max Bickford*, *All My Children*, *Ugly Betty*, and *Nip/Tuck* have all included recurring transgender

characters and plotlines. Notably, ABC's *Dirty, Sexy, Money* starred Candis Cayne, the first transgender actress to play a supporting role on primetime, network television. One of the more promising transgender portrayals occurred on a short-lived television drama on CBS, *The Education of Max Bickford* (2001-2002), the first major network show to include a regularly appearing transgender character. The show followed Max, a college professor fighting a mid-life crisis, whose best friend Steve becomes Erica. As character foils of each other, Max's overwhelming pessimism, frustration with daily life, and fear of and bewilderment with change, is countered by Erica's measured optimism, newfound happiness, and willingness to reinvent herself and engage the world. As a college professor, Erica is well regarded by her peers, self-assured and effectively helps Max come to terms with her identity, articulately explaining the decision to transition and embrace her truth. The show's narrative raised the social and political issues commonly faced by the transgender community such as coming out to loved ones, negotiating relationships with family and friends, changing a driver's license, and dating.

In the telenovela *Ugly Betty*, Rebecca Romijn Stamos plays Alexis Meade, previously Alex Meade, a fashion magazine editor for the fictional publication *Mode*. Although Alexis pushes a pregnant woman down the stairs and admits to 'fathering' a child, within the show's melodrama she fails to stand out as an entirely hyperbolic figure. While she encounters crushing social stigma and feelings of alienation (as one participant, Brandon, already mentioned above), she is not written as a tragic, helpless victim. As an ambitious businesswoman and strategist, she conspires with the creative director to takeover the magazine from her brother. While her

transgender identity is a component of the show, Alexis's screen time primary concerns her navigation of complicated family and company politics, especially the lasting rivalry with her brother. Executive producer Silvio Horta stresses, "The audience's response to the character is more about the character and less about the character being transgender" (Baber, 2008b). Finally, although the show was cancelled after two seasons, one of the more interesting examples of transgender visibility was the Style Network's *The Brini Maxwell Show*. Originally a cult classic on New York City's Manhattan Neighborhood Network, the show was a campy and colorful take on the home improvement genre. Maxwell's femininity was an exaggerated and self-aware execution performed with a playful wink and a nod, and the show benefitted from her sharp wit. Although the star's transgender identity was a defining component of the show, it was not its primary focus.

Likewise, the reality television genre bears witness to the most significant representational shifts in mainstream media portrayals of the transgender community. For the first time since GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) has been monitoring portrayals of the LGBT community with its Network Responsibility Index, a network received an "excellent" rating. The score was earned by MTV during the 2009-2010 television season for "the quality and diversity of its many LGBT impressions" (GLAAD, 2010). In particular, the transgender community made a strong showing in the 2009-2010 lineup. MTV's *Making the Band*, a reality singing competition, featured a transgender contestant, the documentary series *True Life* featured two individuals undergoing gender transition, *Randy Jackson Presents: America's Best Dance Crew* featured a dance

troupe with a transgender performer. In its twenty-first season, MTV's signature reality hit *The Real World: Brooklyn* introduced a diverse cast of eight young adults, three of whom identified as queer. One *Time Out New York* writer referred to the group as a "confident queer army" that would "show the country just how mainstream "gay" has become" (Jackson, 2009). In addition to JD, a gay dolphin trainer from Miami, Florida, and Sarah, the tattooed San Franciscan and former lesbian, the show featured its first transgender housemate Katelynn, a twenty four year old computer whiz from West Palm Beach, Florida, with a black belt in martial arts.

As the series unfolds, Katelynn is revealed to be a complicated individual: incredibly smart and skillfully articulate, passionate, altruistic, very flirtatious, and at times immature and irresponsible. Notably, the show provides a platform for Katelynn to emerge as an "ordinary girl." In the premiere episode, viewers first see Katelynn engaged in ordinary, everyday activities like relaxing at a coffee shop and flirting with her boyfriend. Staring into the camera with a smile she introduces herself, "I guess I'm your everyday, ordinary, average girl next door." Nonetheless, Katelynn's identity and body are the subject of cruel jokes, mockery, and blatant disrespect, particularly in the beginning of the season. For example, Ryan refers to her as an "it," and housemate Scott jokes "Does she have her stuff in a pickle jar?" At the same time, through the show's editing practices (choice of background music, camera angle, and sequencing of shots) these expressions of ignorance become visible as such, depicted as the function of a problematic and immature masculinity. The male housemates' views are typically counterbalanced by the female

housemates' more sensitive and sophisticated understanding and acceptance of Katelynn. Interestingly, later in the season some of the male housemates abandon these kinds of masculine scripts giving way to more tolerant, inclusive modalities. For example, Katelynn eventually develops a close and supportive friendship with one of the male housemates Scott, an aspiring model, who assures viewers, "[Katelynn] has friends who are going to be there for her." Toward the end of the season, when Katelynn experiences financial difficulty, Scott lends her \$1,500.

Another reality show, *America's Next Top Model* is home to one of the more compelling gender bending characters on television, J Alexander, a judge on the series and runway expert. As Rayanne explained, "*Miss J is fabulous. I love Miss J. I don't know whether to refer to her with female or male pronouns and I would love to one day just meet her and ask, just so I don't get it wrong. She outshines Tyra.*" Known by everyone on the show as "Miss J," Alexander self-presents as a male embodied person who prefers being identified by female pronouns. Sometimes self-presenting as masculine, sometimes feminine, and sometimes both, Miss J may be considered a transgender figure whose gender is never truly fixed. According to Devin, Ms. J's performance of gender is unsurprising for the San Francisco Bay area where he lives. It is this matter of factness with which the show treats Miss J that interests Ethan, "*I think it showcases people we see in the Bay Area everyday and aren't alarmed by them. When I watch it, I can get to a place where Miss J's gender is not even on my radar. I don't really like that show actually, but by the end of the show I can get to a place where that kind of language falls off my radar. But the context is of it though is still in the entertainment industry, and that's the context of all kinds of*

more queer accepted media. Even if that is the context it can still show acceptance. Then people may feel the pressure that they need to get on board with that, 'Oh I need to be comfortable with that too.'"

As Devin emphasizes, within the context of the show, Miss J's gender ambiguity is an ordinary state of affairs, accepted and embraced as common sense by *ANTM* regulars and insiders such as host Tyra Banks, the modeling judges and mentors, and weekly guest photographers and judges. In each season, Miss J selects a signature accessory, such as a bow or hairpiece, to wear during the judging portion of the show. As the weeks progress, the accessory grows in size, and by the season's end, the bold and conspicuous fashion statement reaches levels of the absurd. This expression of a camp sensibility is a clear wink and nod to the gay community, a population that understands the codes and significance of campiness. Yet contestants are sometimes confused by this gender play and fumble over gender pronouns when referring to Miss J. As a result, they are framed as foreigners and outsiders. This insider-outsider dichotomy creates a situation where LGBT knowledge and sensibility constitute part of the show's center.

These moments of inclusion highlight faint silver linings, as fictional and real transgender figures are slowly and unevenly being articulated in increasingly complex ways and appreciating roles as lovers, family, and friends. However, within the domain of popular transgender portrayals, there are noticeable absences including transgender men, transgender folks of color, working class individuals, and the gender ambiguous who reject male or female identities. The media's preoccupation with a select group of transgender archetypes results in the exclusion

of other transgender lives. For example, the prominence of transsexuality leaves little room for more amorphous forms of gender variance. Overwhelmingly focusing attention on the physical body as a source of identity, popular depictions of sex change can often lead to a medicalization of gender variance and a social expectation of surgery. In reifying gender binaries, the physical and surgical crossing from one sex to another emerges as a hardened norm in popular transgender portrayals. As Steve, a White middle aged, married cross-dresser, emphasizes: *“It is the post ops who get the attention in the media. And so transgender gets equated with transsexual. The vast majority of what you see is them, and yet, they’re not speaking for us. We don’t all want surgery.”*

Many participants express concern that a specific kind of transgender subjectivity, one with particular race, class, gender and age biases, was becoming representational convention. The emergence of a sort of “transnormativity” worried Remi, as she summarizes: *“They [media professionals] consciously reject transwomen who don’t fit traditionally feminine stereotypes. So you don’t see butch transwomen, tomboyish transwomen. You don’t see many 20 year-old transwomen. You see middle-aged hags who are obsessed with a very particular kind of straight femininity. Straight, White, middle class femininity.”* Josh discloses similar frustrations: *“It would be nice to show someone who is not middle class white trans person. Show diversity of transness, like trans person with disability or a different ethnicity, or like older and younger. Not like mid thirties, white and middle class.”* Consequently, while there is evidence of silver linings and subtle shifts toward more diverse representations, within contemporary popular media transgender figures

currently, and will most likely continue to, occupy a conflicted, contested and precarious space. Importantly, transgender audiences navigate this complex and often contentious representational climate with resilience, creatively excavating resources for self and identity work. The next chapter explores this complicated process of self-work and negotiation, a practice I term “resilient reception.”

Chapter 3: Resilient Reception: Media and the (Im)Possibility of Self

“I had a friend once. We would go to lunch, happy hours, shopping. Over drinks one night I told her about myself. She stood up, left the table, and never spoke to me again. I used to feel those things made me stronger, more sure of who I was. These days I spend three hours putting on my face before I dare go outside. Plucking and waxing and even then, someone always notices. I can see by the look in their eyes. The disgust. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I am disgusting.” – Ms. Carlton (character in *ER* episode, “ER Confidential”)

During a poignant scene in the *ER* episode titled “ER Confidential” (11/17/1994), Ms. Carlton, an aging Black transgender woman, recites the above story to Dr. Carter, the show’s well-meaning protagonist, as he treats her minor injuries. Noticeably uncomfortable with his patient’s gender identity, Dr. Carter is a captive audience to his patient’s stories of anguish and struggle in attempting to pass as female in everyday life. Although his facial expressions communicate concern, Dr. Carter is unable and ill equipped to console her, and says very little. As a perceptive individual, Ms. Carlton picks up on the doctor’s discomfort, which represents yet another experience to add to her growing list of difficult, uncomfortable and somewhat insulting personal encounters. By the episode’s end, it becomes evident that Ms. Carlton is no longer able to endure a body that refuses to conform to the feminine ideal mandated by society. Crushed by the unbearable weight of constant social injustices, affronts, and personal loss, Ms. Carlton commits suicide, jumping from the hospital’s rooftop. In commenting on media portrayals of

this kind that depict transgender life as a lonely and tragic struggle, one participant, Wren, explains, *“It’s [transgender] represented as being something that people have to endure, not something that they want to be. That’s an overarching problem with trans representation. You’re this ‘other’ person and you have to endure it.”*

The articulation of transgender identity in terms of the sensational, tragic or comedic (as discussed in the previous chapter) presents significant challenges with respect to the consumption and enjoyment of popular culture for the participants in my study. For many, the act of meaning-making with and against media presents a form of emotionally taxing labor, which can increase feelings of marginality, isolation and self-doubt. Although many participants recall seeking out media in their everyday lives for escape and pleasure, they also articulated words such as *‘hurt,’ ‘angry,’ ‘tired,’ ‘frustrated,’ ‘worn out’* and *‘fed up’* to describe their interactions with media. Unable to let their guard down – to suspend their disbelief - during periods of media reception, participants lack the luxury of emotionally detaching from the symbolic world, for each media encounter is a potential test of one’s self-concept. In testifying to the direct connection between media and personal disruption, one participant, Ethan, explains, *“There are a lot of people who I think are the victim of how our media has portrayed and continues to portray trans people. It doesn’t provide other perspectives and they become marginalized and disowned. And I think they go down a really tragic path. That’s the reality for a lot of people, and maybe it would happen to them if they didn’t see these things, I don’t know. But it’s out there and you have to be really strong to not let these things get to you.”* Ethan’s

sobering evaluation speaks to the storyline advanced by ER, for Ms. Carlton certainly travels a “*tragic path.*”

However, unlike the *ER* episode, this chapter illuminates transgender resilience and practices of affirmative identity work within and against the contemporary media environment and in the face of widespread adversity. I ground participant meaning making within the nexus between media power and authority and audience agency, taking care to avoid uncritically celebrating the “over active reader” (Bennett, 1996, p. 156). That is, not praising or placing emphasis on audiences “for reading practices conducted in the name of resistance” (Bennett, 1996, p. 156). First, this chapter apportions space to participant accounts that delineate the continuous pain, anguish and anxiety of media reception. I examine how certain forms of media narratives and engagements advance the *impossibility* of self, frustrating self-development and discouraging the adoption of a transgender identity. These media experiences underscore the need for practices of resilience.

Next, I deploy the term “resilient reception,” a concept grounded in participant data, which describes the act of continuously (re)claiming self in the face of media’s disempowering effects. ‘Resilient reception’ confirms that representations often make negative demands on one’s emotional and cognitive life, requiring an ability to rebound, re-center, and rebuild. Informed by de Certeau’s (1984) theory of everyday “tactics,” I highlight strategies of creative adaptation, methodologies of survival and “ways of making do” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29) study participants employ in navigating a conflicting and often hostile media environment. I offer an analytical optic to the ‘tactical’ ways transgender individuals creatively

mine the media in search of resources for self, identity work and belonging. Finally, I argue the media is particularly crucial in representing “possible selves” or “the ideal selves that we would very much like to become, the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986; p. 954).

Media and the Development of Self

Media engagements afford the opportunity to create individual and collective identities, helping to demonstrate what it means to occupy a certain subject position. Media scholar Stuart Hall (1990) argues that identity is a dynamic process of both ‘being,’ in which identity is connected to an established set of attributes and histories, and ‘becoming,’ in which this past is socially constructed and ever changing, “a ‘production,’ which is never complete” (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Importantly, identity is constructed via the symbolic for it is “always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Rather than a stable “essence,” identity is a process of “positioning” or “suturing” the self “within the discourses of history and culture” (Hall, 1990, p. 226). As pervasive cultural forces, the products and discourses of media provide the common and widely available raw materials (the needle and thread) for the work of suturing identity. In other words, the media operates multidimensionally “in between the social sphere – as a ground for both the representation and the determination of social systems’ interactions – and the individual sphere- as an extension of individuals’ experience” (Aguado, p. 579, 2006). For LGBT audiences in particular, media often create spaces of recognition, identity play and self-work where individuals appreciate “escape and

affirmation” (Gross, 1998, p. 94). As many LGBT individuals must cultivate their identities in clandestine due to fears of stigmatization and discrimination, media representations and engagements are particularly significant for having the ability be experienced in private. This privacy offers a protective shield and the freedom to explore one’s identity outside the monitoring gaze of others. As Rayanne explains, *“I watched Tootsie as often as I could. But I always wanted to keep it in secret. You didn’t want to show too much interest in front of other people, in case they caught on that my interest was more than that. That sort of secret behavior persisted until college for me... I sought information out on the sly. I went to video stores, movies, cable television especially as cable become more and more prevalent, I went looking for all forms of gender bending. I had several VHS tapes where I taped documentaries that I had found, which of course I kept secret.”*

Finding refuge in safe, private spaces to engage in identity work, LGBT individuals like Rayanne begin the process of reconciling self and other. As Aguado (2006) maintains, “the socially contextualized construction of self requires a parallel socially contextualized construction of the other, and vice versa, by means of experiential mediation” (p. 570). The ‘other,’ and by extension mediated representations of the other, both facilitate and constrict how individuals encounter and know themselves. In this way, the media act as a cultural ‘looking glass.’ CH Cooley (1902) proposed that individuals develop a sense of self and subjectivity through interaction and messages received by others. Thus, we learn to understand ourselves as we imagine others do. With the development of advanced communications technologies, the media have become ‘the looking glass,’ reflecting

a kaleidoscope of potential selves (in the form of media figures) back to us asking for identification.

This diverse population of media personalities and characters facilitate the work of identity as “selfobjects” (Kohut, 1980) and “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Heinz Kohut (1980), personal identity develops, in part, through “selfobjects,” important, sympathetic others who help to mirror and support the work of the self. Noting the ubiquity and importance of these individuals he explains

“man lives in a matrix of self-objects from birth to death. He needs selfobjects for his psychological survival, just as he needs oxygen in his environment throughout his life for physiological survival... so long as he feels that he is surrounded by selfobjects and feels reassured by their presence... even conflict, failure and defeat will not destroy his self, however great his suffering may be ... And while we certainly do not ignore man’s greed and lust and his destructive rage, we see them not as primary given but as disturbances in the self-selfobject unit” (Kohut, 1980, p. 478-479).

We can understand characters in the mass media as important selfobjects that help to promote the development of self, and other. Kohut also noted that although these selfobjects are most crucial during childhood, and the lack of these individuals as one grows older could be psychologically damaging. In addition to selfobjects, the media generate and circulate “possible selves” or “the ideal selves that we would very much like to become, the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves represent one’s life options and potential. One’s collection and range of possible selves indicates “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats,”

and provide “the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954).

Crucially, possible selves motivate individuals to perform the work of identity. In this way, the formation of self is a process of attaining, accomplishing and/or rejecting specific possible selves, which suggests that individuals are “active producers of their own development” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). In addition to incentivizing, possible selves offer “an evaluative and interpretive context for the now self,” a frame of reference for understanding and giving meaning to one’s identity, value and potential at the current moment (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 962). Possible selves are “distinctly social,” in that, they emerge through both mediated and unmediated interpersonal interaction and communication. The possible self is often the result of social comparison (Markus & Nurius, p. 954, 1986). Social comparisons allow individuals to engage in and develop self-understanding and knowledge, in that, through comparing ourselves with others, we learn about our own skills, abilities, feelings and subjectivities (Festinger, 1954). In contemporary society, social comparison has become increasingly done with mediated images and others.

The below participant stories reveal that media discourses and messages influence the ways in which participants develop their interpersonal lives and carve out their own identity paths. Their constructions expose the dynamics of media power and authority at play in audience reception, underscoring the potential for media texts to *do things to* the cognitive and emotional life of study participants.

Informed by her fieldwork work in cultural anthropology and J.L. Austin’s notion of

speech acts, Bakewell (1998) theorizes the work of cultural images in terms of “image acts.” Bakewell (1998) argues that images “do,” they generate concrete social, political and cultural effects and have the ability to penetrate our mental and emotional world. They transcend “the description of an alleged authenticity that is external to them... images do things, and they do things to us, to our interlocutors, and to our passersby” (Bakewell, 1998, p. 30). Echoing Bakewell (1998), W.J.T. Mitchell (1996) explains that within visual culture, “pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively” (p. 72). Although the authority of media images and narratives was often experienced as demanding and repressive, study participants remained resilient, effectively managing the consequences of social stigma and the self-eroding messages imparted by a media environment experienced as dissonant and conflicted.

Media and the Impossibility of Self

One of the most common themes among study participants was the central role media discourses played in discouraging, delaying and frustrating one’s acceptance of a possible transgender self. Media screened what Markus and Nurius (1986) term “feared” possible selves, negatively codified selves that function symbolically as “reminders of bleak, sad, or tragic futures that are to be avoided” (p. 960). One participant, Alex, recalls seeing a feared transgender self before he decided to undergo gender transition, “*What gets represented, not only in media, but also in the Bay area, is a certain kind of trans guy who is so incomplete and not complex. There was this fear of, “I am going to become this.” I*

didn't want to do that." Feared possible selves possess the ability to obstruct and inhibit one's journey toward self-realization and fulfillment. They become "powerfully imprisoning because their associated affect and expectations may stifle attempts to change or develop (Markus & Nurius, p. 963, 1986). Interfacing with figures of "*incomplete*" transgender men discouraged and significantly delayed Alex in coming to terms with his transgender identity. Another participant, Kate, recalls the toxic state of transgender representation she experienced as a young person and the influence of feared possible selves the media circulated, "*Most of the memories I have are just a general bad feeling. Whenever I think of what I've seen it's always a typical man in a dress archetype. They're on TV as freaks or perverts. It's just lots of negative imagery that comes to mind.*" Kate feared being reduced to stereotype, becoming the 'man in a dress' archetype. This fear caused her to delay developing a feminine self until she reached college, a space that offered opportunities to explore and experiment with identity.

Like Kate, the identity work Jess conducted via engagements with television and Internet – the selfobject - during her late teenage years presented a dizzying and frustrating experience, fraught with misrecognition and alienation over her possible self. "*What I saw on TV shows was excessively feminine transwomen getting makeovers, often conflated with drag queens. It was all in the same boat of a gender weirdness that was very Barbie influenced, not on a 'dude wearing a skirt' spectrum. To be a woman is to be ultra perfect and to be in control of every aspect of your appearance, not one hair is out of place. It was not where I was at ... For years and*

years and years and years I had been looking up trans stuff. I'd be looking it up and thinking 'Is this me? Is this me? Is this me? I started going online to do that at about 18, maybe 17, at the end of high school and into college.' These experiences of searching for self via media culture interrupted and deferred her development of a feminine self. *"It turned me away. I had all these blind alleys and dead ends. I would find things and be like 'that's not me.' That's not what's going on with me. I kept looking for myself and wondering where the person like me is so I can be like 'that's me, that's what's going on with me.'"* In surfing the Internet, Jess continually encountered websites that hyper-sexualized and fetishized the transgender body, *"I had encounters with transgender erotica sites, which are fucking weird. There's all kinds of weird shit going on. First of all, eroticizing the transformation. I ran into a lot of those. It was weird. I remember the first transgender erotica thing I found involved someone being forcibly turned into a woman and kept in a birdcage in heels. There was creepy BDSM things going on."* The picture of transgender subjectivity being painted by these online images appeared strange and alarming to Jess. Transgender soon constituted a feared self, something to be actively avoided.

Aside from the eroticization of the transgender body, the websites she encountered focused heavily on the pragmatics of sexual reassignment surgery. While this information is useful for many transgender persons, it was not the kind of knowledge Jess desired. *"In addition to erotica, I found websites like 'What does it mean to be transgender?'" It was more like "What does it mean to be transsexual?" It was very surgery oriented. You feel that something is wrong with your body. That wasn't really what was going on with me."* Jess could not identify with the 'born in

the wrong body' trope that populated online discourse about the transgender self. Transgender was so often conflated with 'transsexual.' Jess sought out media to facilitate a different kind of possible self, a self that simultaneously identifies as transgender and embraces one's body. Notably, Jess appreciates and values her body as is: *"It's my body and I care about it. I wouldn't want to switch to somebody else's body. For me it is much more about making my body into what I want it to be. So it's about desire. My body before I started transitioning and now, in both states, is really beautiful. I'm fortunate in that respect. I've never looked at my body and thought this is a disgusting pile of shit. So this phrase being 'born into the wrong body'... well whose body should I have been born into?"* While these media encounters did not fully disconfirm Jess's sense of self, they nonetheless challenged it. However, Jess's desire for transgender subjectivity transcended her fear of it, and she began to experiment with self-identity, crafting a transgender self on her own terms. Like Kate, Jess deferred the start of her transition until she finally reached a sense of place and belonging at the second college she attended. It is here that she started to publicly perform new forms of embodiment, working in drag shows at a local venue. *"That is where I started doing drag. I had been working on stuff before that but there was nowhere to go. At the university, there was at least a drag venue, it was kind of rinky-dink, but it was something."*

Similar to Jess, the transgender-themed media Margie encountered presented 'feared selves' in the form of highly sexualized and fetishized images of transgender subjectivity. Now a middle-aged woman, Margie's experiences with transgender relevant media growing up in the suburban Midwest were limited to

the local drug store magazine stand. She explains, *"I think probably in the 70s magazines were important because we didn't have the Internet. I'd search through magazines sometimes. But the things I found in magazines were always from a pornographic point of view because there wasn't anything else. That was not me. I did search, but there just weren't any options. It was not very satisfying."* For Margie, the sexualized images of transgender women in pornography coupled with the lack of visibility of what she calls *"real trans women"* frustrated her development of self. She remembers, *"I know I had a very hard time coping and just didn't know what I was going to do. It [transgender identity] just seemed like a farfetched dream."*

The possible selves circulated by media that Sebastian encountered were also pornographic. Moreover, they were typically feminine, and as a masculine identifying person, Sebastian found these depictions discouraging. Although he would use digital media such as the Internet for identity work, the lack of male transgender images and resources constructed a limited range of possible transgender selves. He explains, *"I think something particular happens to transmen ... if you Google transgender on the Internet, most of the images would be porn and it would be of transwomen. There are far fewer representations of transmen. Even if I knew what transgender was, or who transgender people were, I thought they were men who dressed as women."* Even with the expansive possibilities of the Internet, media discourses still advanced the impossibility of self for Sebastian, constraining what the category "transgender" meant. Until he was able to "unlearn" his previous assumptions about transgender as exotic, sexualized and feminine, he avoided identifying with the category.

Other participants also engaged in a practice of “unlearning” as a result of the media’s socio-cultural authority and the constricted range of messages about gender variance it circulated. According to participants, “unlearning” is a process whereby individuals shed the ideologies, schemas and frames imparted by the media and popular culture, which are adopted in part or in whole. It is a practice of re-teaching and refashioning internalized common sense understandings about gender and self imparted through the media, popular culture, and important others like family and friends. For Ethan, this decisive process of unlearning was an essential step in self-development and realization. His gender transition compelled him to participate in three stages of unlearning. In the first stage, Ethan himself had to unlearn lessons taught to him regarding transgender life and subjectivity via the media, “[Media] *characters were mentally unstable and villanized. Even if the character themselves weren’t characterized as mentally unstable, somebody else was, and they became the victim of that. And those frames stayed with me for a very long time. And then I had personal experiences that, because I had the frames, allowed my personal experiences to become more concrete. Instead of thinking it was just isolated to the incident or isolated to the person, those images I had seen became more truthful for me... What it did, is that years later it required me to do much more unlearning. I think it actually had a pretty direct impact in my own journey, in my own realization, in my own willingness to answer myself honestly.*” In the second stage of unlearning, Ethan had to shed feelings of second class citizenship he experienced within gay and lesbian communities, which were supposed to be welcoming: “*Transpeople I think sometimes have to go*

through that stage of unlearning twice because the gay and lesbian community isn't as accepting and doesn't embrace trans people the way the mission statements of the gay community say they do. They don't."

Crucially for Ethan, media discourses also influence the perceptions and understandings of his familial and social network. This burdened him with helping important others through the unlearning process, the third and final stage. *"It also doesn't just affect the individual going through it. It affects their families, it affects their friends, and if you're growing up in a household that's exposed to the same images your parents and siblings are you all have the same association. So you've done the work to unlearn that, and now you have to help this group of people unlearn that as well."* In this third stage of unlearning, although popular media is a driving factor that necessitates the process of unlearning, it also often supplies the remedy. In the support group I observed, participants often traded titles of books, movies, teledocumentaries and websites for purposes of sharing with family and friends in need of unlearning. These recommended media texts were used to triangulate and furnish credibility and authority to the identity narratives study participants told to others. While unlearning is an important tactic employed by study participants, it represents only one strategy in a series of strategies I call "resilient reception."

Resilient Reception

'Resilient reception' confers that cultural representations often make demands on one's emotional and cognitive life, requiring the ability to enact creative strategies of self-preservation and practices of rebounding, re-centering and rebuilding. In short, it is the act of (re)claiming self in the face of media's

disempowering messages. Although audience's ability to recover from these messages is not always the same, they nonetheless persevere, creatively using resources within and outside the media to survive and achieve everyday life. Similar to Halls' (1980b) notion of oppositional and negotiated readings or Fiske's (1987) conception of resistant readings, resilient reception considers how mediated messages are encountered and interpreted in complicated ways that evade and negotiate dominant ideologies. However, it moves beyond Hall's (1980) triad of preferred-negotiated-oppositional readings and Fiske's (1987) binary of resistance/acquiescence. It delineates the strategies and "tactics" of adaptation and survival employed by study participants in responding to their media environment. Resilient reception highlights the emotional labor required to resist, to read against, or simply to endure messages that run counter to and erode one's self concept. Moreover, it moves beyond the 'moment of reception' towards considering how media images are integrated and negotiated within the temporal flow of everyday life. Audiences do not simply consciously oppose or resist ideology within the context of a single viewing moment, but continuously struggle with and counter the messages of media culture, contending with its influence over their self-worth and integrity daily. In this way, resilient reception is more about persistence and endurance than mere resistance.

Resilient reception is indebted to, informed by, and extends the work of scholars such as Radway (1991), Douglas (1995), Munoz (1999), and Gray (2009) who examine the contradictory nature of reading strategies, the complicated ways audiences engage with texts, and the creative strategies used in negotiating with the

products and discourses of media. For example, I consider Munoz's (1999) theorization of "disidentification," a strategy in which individuals work on, with and against the mandates and discourses of dominant ideologies, to be one practice in an ensemble of practices I call 'resilient reception.' According to Munoz (1999), disidentification "is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject" (p. 12). It is a process of "reworking" (Munoz, 1999, p. 12). As with resilient reception, disidentification is a practice of survival, one Munoz sees manifested in live queer performances. Resilient reception, however, takes root in media audiences and consists of a broader set of practices including forms of coping, adaptation, and rebounding. In disidentification the focus is specifically on transformation, in which "a disidentifying subject works to hold onto this [cultural] object and invest it with new life" (Munoz, 1999, p. 12). While practices of resilient reception may involve the transformation of and investment into a cultural object, they can also include strategies of divestment, of shedding and letting go (as was the case for Ethan and his practice of unlearning). Moreover, the ultimate aim of disidentification is " queer world making," or the making of queer "worlds of transformative politics and possibilities" (Munoz, 1999, p. 195). Rather than 'queering,' resilient reception is a practice of 'coping,' of making habitable worlds where queer politics, possibilities and space *may* materialize, but are not the ultimate objective or destination.

Although the concept of resilience has not acquired currency within communication and media studies, there is a considerable body of scholarship on

resilience in psychology. In reviewing resilience as a psychological construct, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) summarize “resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 543), an achievement of “competence despite adversity” (p.554). In other words, resilience is something one does. For example, during one night of the transgender support/discussion group I observed, a younger participant arrived to the session noticeably upset. She was saddened and frustrated after viewing a TV episode in which a transgender person was ridiculed and physically harmed. Fellow participants validated her feelings, critiqued the hackneyed portrayal, and suggested titles of media texts that presented more complicated and engaging transgender narratives. By sharing her thoughts and feelings, and looking to the group for help, this participant’s burden was diffused amongst the group. The moment represented a ‘positive adaptation,’ a social process in which stress was shared, deliberated and, in many ways, resolved. In this way, resilience is “a process and not a personality trait” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 546).

As unforeseen challenges, vulnerabilities and strengths manifest throughout the unpredictable course of one’s life, resilience is characteristically dynamic and relative, not fixed in time or degree (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Thus, individuals are more or less resilient at different points in time. In his work on gay teenagers, Savin-Williams (2005) argues that resilience is a ubiquitous yet often over-looked process that defines minority life. He notes that academics, mental health professionals and social service workers too often employ ‘deficit models’ in accounting for young gay experience. These frameworks “portray young gay people

as weak and defenseless in the face of a troubled and violent world,” overemphasizing gay hardship and loss, and ignoring instances of success (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 179). As a result, gay strife becomes a normative, overarching paradigm for understanding young gay life, a theorization that carries the potential to ‘repathologize’ homosexuality through the constant marking of gay youth as “exceptionally vulnerable individuals leading high risk lives” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 183). Instead, he suggests more attention be paid to resiliency, to the “life-affirming individuals capable of effectively coping with the stresses of life,” and to the “outcomes that are better than one would expect given the amount of risk factors they have” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 183). In accord with Savin-Williams’ (2005) theorizing of resilience, resilient reception acknowledges the strife, hardship and loss of media engagements, and it equally emphasizes audience life outcomes that are surprisingly hopeful given the relative vulnerability of the transgender community and the powerful normative work of media representations. In this way, it resists re-pathologizing the transgender community and proffers a more fully realized paradigm for understanding the practices and consequences of media engagement.

In delineating resilient reception, I now return to Sebastian. During our interview, he narrates a story about attending a transgender themed film with friends, one of many media encounters that required him to rebound and rebuild. Although he expected an enjoyable evening, the night transformed into a test of his strength and patience. *“I saw a really terrible film... It was a story about an*

intersexed¹² girl. She was being raised as female. She is introduced to a guy her same age. She is also introduced to younger men in her community. Eventually there's this horrifying rape scene. When I got out of this movie I was so upset. I'm tired, tired, tired, of seeing movies that I feel have done violence against me by making me sit there and watch this scene over and over and over again! I'm tired of feeling violated. I feel like I am getting assaulted every time I have to sit in a room with 300 people and watch another trans body be destroyed and violated for everyone to watch. I'm tired of it. I had a total meltdown after that movie. I almost had to leave to take a walk by myself. I was so pissed I couldn't even be around anybody." Sebastian was unable to find comfort in his cis gender friends, for they implied he was being overly sensitive and hyperbolic. "I'm tired of non-trans people representing me, telling me it's not a big deal, there's nothing really to be upset about, that I should be more reasonable about it and not take it personally. I'm just like "Shut the fuck up!" I was pissed that I put it out there, that I felt like it was really violating, and that nobody either felt that also, or people wanted to argue with me about it how it wasn't violating. And I was like "Fuck you.""

Immediately after viewing the film, in the short term, Sebastian needed a minute to take a breather, to briefly collect his emotions in order to continue engaging socially with his friends. Concerning the long term, Sebastian expressed that his ability to rebound, to *"deal with it and move on,"* was a result of three things. First was his integration within a larger transgender and queer community. He

¹² Although Sebastian includes intersex under the transgender umbrella, this is not a universal designation. These categorizations of 'transgender' and 'intersex' are contested and highly personal matters. Nonetheless, for Sebastian this film was a transgender representation, and it came to mean through that lens.

actively cultivates a sense of connection and support through meaningful interpersonal relationships with transgender and queer friends, along with cis gender friends and allies. Sebastian also secures a sense of self and belonging by engaging in service to the LGBT and queer community. For example, he works with homeless queer youth in San Francisco, serving as an advocate for those less fortunate. He also sat on a local governmental committee that assessed the needs of transgender men. Finally, for Sebastian, actively learning about transgender identity and politics through reading transgender themed books, websites, blogs, etc. helped build a sense of self-assuredness. As he builds his vocabulary and knowledge base regarding queer subjectivity and politics, he better fortifies himself from popular discourses that challenge or disconfirm his transgender identity.

Another participant, Remi, also employed strategies of resilient reception to preserve and reclaim self in the face of media power, which operated intersectionally along the two fronts of gender and race. Growing up in Southern California, Remi talks about the messages she encountered from the media and information environment. She explains, *"All your life you learn that it's sort of a crazy thing if you want to change gender. It's just crazy."* At the same time, her multi-racial identity intersected with her gender identity, making her feel doubly "alienated" from mainstream culture and discourse. *"I just started feeling more and more alienated. So just as far as race is concerned, and gender."* Nonetheless, Remi developed a strong sense of transgender identity and self-awareness. In attempting to attenuate the alienating impact of popular media reception, she asserts *"I developed that thing where I expected to be disappointed."* Like Sebastian, Remi's

practices of resilient reception included finding a home in certain communities of choice. She spent some of her young adult years living within driving distance of San Francisco, and had the opportunity to take advantage of the city's queer organizations and communities. *"There was this thing where queer writers would come to this coffee house. So there was this scene, the writer scene that I was really into."* As with Sebastian, community is an integral part of Remi's life, as she continually seeks out groups that reflect her values, sensibilities and ideologies. After being diagnosed with clinical depression, Remi actively researched information and resources via the Internet to help her understand her condition. She found an online depression support group that simultaneously served as a portal into online trans-communities: *"So I found a depression support groups online. It was random because there was a connection between the depression support groups and the trans support groups. Some people were in both... Internet support groups were really important to me as far as realizing I was trans. In that way I felt like I belonged to there more so than in other Internet settings that aren't sexual or gendered specific."*

In addition to joining self-confirming communities, Remi decided to pursue a PhD in the humanities. In directing part of her doctoral research towards the politics of representation, she turned a critical eye towards the media, endeavoring to better understand it. Through the pursuit of critical knowledge, Jae decided to secure a feeling of empowerment and control over that which challenged and disconfirmed her, *"I decided to make my life's work, at least for now, resisting and*

critiquing that (media and popular culture). So I am channeling my anger everyday through my work."

In seeking self-confirmation, Remi also immersed herself in transgender themed entertainment and queer culture. *"I actually had this moment where I stopped consuming any media that wasn't queer. And I think that has persisted, or that it actually persisted for quite a while. It wasn't until a couple of years later that I thought I could handle media that wasn't queer. So I made a conscious decision that this was just pissing me off, I didn't relate to it."* Protecting herself from certain media texts, Remi pursued self-preservation by actively trying to avoid mass media's normative discourses. At the same time, she worked to consolidate her identity through specific media choices, explaining *"I became very selective."* For example, Remi voraciously read lesbian fiction, viewed independent LGBT films, and frequently traveled to San Francisco to watch queer theatre. Remi had to seek out media that was not easily or locally accessible in order to experience pleasure, community, and identification.

However, although she switched to consuming primarily LGBT themed media, the decision presented a new set of challenges and complications. *"I eventually found that I didn't relate to all queer media either. I had hopes that if I consumed different types of media that I would connect to it and I would feel connected with it... But when I eased into it I realized I didn't connect either and in some ways it was harder... I've been disillusioned with the mainstream media so I wasn't prepared to be disillusioned by this other thing."* Although constructing a

personalized queer media environment was a strategy meant to adapt to and negotiate the more mainstream media culture, this proved challenging.

Like Remi, Avery recites a life story in which media reception demands practices of resilient reception. Avery is a politically conscious and socially aware college student who prefers the gender ambiguous term 'trans' instead of trans woman or trans man: *"So right now, the way that it works where I live is that people who know me well in the house will use the pronoun that people don't expect for me. They'll use he when certain people are in the house, and make a point out of it especially when I am in a skirt. What I need is to find a way to rupture a sort of stagnant self-concept and say what works for you doesn't work for me. And that's ok."* Avery brings this sophisticated critical consciousness to interactions with media: *"So much of what I see in media, mainly films, is enforced gender normativity and a lot of abusive family and partner dynamics. That has really turned me off. That is why it takes a lot of energy to see these things. They can be triggering."* Because of the energy required to maintain one's self-integrity and of the potential for media engagements to trigger negative emotions and associations, Avery has engaged in several practices of resilient reception. Avery's first strategy was to withdraw: *"Every time I would hear that 'this is better, this is something that would appeal to you,' I was consistently disappointed. Like the Crying Game, where it's like 'Look we're making progress.'" And I would be continually disillusioned. And so it grew into an eventual withdraw. It takes a lot of energy to convince myself to go see a movie."* However, this withdrawal resulted in feelings of social isolation. Unable to exchange

talkative bits of popular culture with others, Avery lost an important form of common communicative currency. *"With some people, I had nothing to talk about."*

In order to remedy this deficit, Avery has somewhat reluctantly decided to reengage with media, but in doing so, mindfully maintains a critical distance. *"I'm really trying to get up the 'umph' (oomf) to sort of engage with popular culture so I have something to talk about with people. Rather than taking on the moral tone of 'I know I am not going to like what I see so why bother.' So right now it's kind of at a distance."* In addition, Avery affirms self and talks back to popular culture via blogging on the website Live Journal. The activity is both a critical and social exercise, as it connects Avery to like-minded others within the queer community and provides the opportunity to articulate counter discourses to mainstream, dominant ideologies on race, sexuality and gender. *"I keep a live journal blog. I use it to keep in contact with friends since I transferred here from another school. It is very much social critique. I write a lot about social identity. I also belong to this online community that looks at racial politics, a lot of identity politics work. It really makes a commitment to get rid of racism and a lot of other 'isms.' And there is a large trans community actually on that blog."* Blogging reinforces Avery's politics, for most in the online community share similar political ideologies. It allows Avery to author counter discourses to dominant ideas on race, sexuality and gender. Blogging also helps fortify a 'trans' sense of self, for Avery finds belonging in a community of politically oriented transgender writers. *"Some people I blog with care about this stuff and others clearly don't give a flying fuck. Largely the people I am connected to are queer in some way through Live Journal, but in varying degrees of visibility. So I*

often write about visibility." As a practice of self-articulation, blogging counters feelings of disillusionment and disappointment often generated by encounters with popular media. The ability to write about social and political issues concerning visibility in particular helps Avery better navigate and negotiate the complex dynamics of visibility at play in everyday life.

Avery's blogging practices, Sebastian's participation in communities of choice, and Remi's avoidance and reclamation of media are examples of resilient reception that are 'tactical' (de Certeau, 1984) deployments of agency in everyday life. They use, appropriate and take advantage of structures within the existing social order - in the form of media infrastructures, communication technology platforms, social organizations, educational institutions - to (re)claim, affirm, and preserve a sense of self and belonging. According to de Certeau (1984), everyday life is defined by a human agency that works within the limits of social, political and economic power structures; it is an act of improvisation with the found materials and preexisting conditions of modern life. He identifies these practices of agency within limits as "tactics." Tactics work on and against power. To maintain and reinforce a dominant order, the powerful impose "strategies" or "actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 38). Strategies control, measure, delimit, transform, and define via the purposeful deployment of knowledge, in which "*a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge* and not merely its effect or its attribute" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36).

Strategies are characteristically visible, spectacular and totalizing. In many ways, mainstream American media may be considered 'strategic.' As instruments of power, they author a discursively spectacular space, a 'totalizing discourse,' via the encoding and marketing of media texts. They define domains of their own, as well as those that comprise an exterior (audiences) or those "targets or threats" that must be "managed" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36).

In negotiating and resisting the disciplinary logic of strategies, individuals employ an ensemble of "tactics," which "use, manipulate, and divert" the imposed order (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30). de Certeau (1984) elaborates,

"A tactic is a calculated action, determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (p. 36-37).

As "an art of the weak" (p. 37), a tactic "creates surprises" within "cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers" (p. 37). Tactics are creative, local and surreptitious "ways of making do" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29) within structures. When compared to the spectacle of the strategy, tactics represent "silent itineraries" (p. 47), everyday practices and discourses unrecorded by history and authority. As a result, scholars are tasked with unearthing these silent itineraries, providing the backlighting for the tactical in everyday life. Returning to the study participants, their search for and development of self is in many ways a tactical engagement with the products and discourses of media culture. In practicing resilient reception, participants not only endure and make do, they also actively engage with media to find resources allowing them to claim and

reclaim self. In engaging with the popular, participants mobilize personalized media ensembles, collections of media texts that become integrated into their daily lives and identity narratives. This identity work is a creative, local and often secret practice of appropriation and composition within and against power that facilitates the possibility of self.

Media and the Possibility of Self

Through the use of tactical strategies of resilient reception, study participants engaged with media culture to facilitate identity work and the construction of possible selves. In writing about the process of self-discovery for transsexuals (an identity falling under the transgender umbrella) Prosser (1998) argues:

“For the transsexual even to discover the possibility of transsexuality- to transform it from private fantasy to realizable identity plot- takes place “in” narrative. To learn of transsexuality is to uncover transsexuality as a story and to refigure one’s own life within the frame of that story” (p. 124).

For many participants, the ability to acknowledge and articulate a possible transgender self emerged through meaningful interactions with media narratives. These texts generated the ability to imagine new trajectories of self-identity and to author plausible stories of self-transformation.

Growing up in the suburbs of the American Midwest, Jess loved reading comic books. Hidden in her bedroom was a ‘secret stash’ of issues that featured gender ambiguous characters, which she collected over the years and repeatedly read. Comic books were fantastical texts that presented worlds of possibility in

which gender variance was quite common. Jess explains, *“There are all kinds of gender transformations in comics, and it happens all the time. It’s so frequent that it’s really meaningful.”* One specific comic book series was especially significant for Jess’s self-understanding and development, *“My very favorite superhero comic of all time, and very important to my life, was this comic called “Legionnaires. In “Legionnaires Number 13,” the main character “Matter Eater Lad” gets transformed into a woman and works with a group of female space pirates to defend the universe. On the front cover is this guy called Matter Eater Lad and his power is that he can eat anything. He can bite right through a table, or steel. The front cover is him looking in the mirror as he is about to brush his teeth, and he sees himself transform into a woman”* (see Figure 4 below).



Figure 4: Cover of Legionnaires Comic, Number 13

Legionnaires Number 13 was particularly central in the development of her transgender identity during this period in Jess's life, her teenage years, since interaction with like-minded others in unmediated, everyday life was simply impossible. She did not feel comfortable talking to her parents about her gender identity, and her father imposed masculine ideals onto her. *"I was very lonely... My dad tried to encourage me to do social things, but they were things that were social as if I was a country kid."* Jess was definitely not a 'country kid' in the way her father imagined. Growing up as a male, but feeling feminine identified, Jess felt drawn to the female space pirates and even more to her favorite character Matter Eater Lad as a transformed female space pirate. As her voice swells with enthusiasm, she testifies, *"I was just like "yes!," this is it... I was like, that's the kind of woman I want to be. I want that transformation. I want to be like a really bad-ass lady."* These "bad ass" female characters were a welcomed departure from the hyper feminine, passive and more traditional women Jess remembers encountering during engagements with popular media. They were self-assured, feminine symbols of strength and nerve. Jess is queer identified, and appreciates non-normative expressions of sex and gender from herself and others, *"I'm queer. I'm queer in a big way. I like boys, I like girls and people who are neither and both."* The gender nonconforming space pirates agreed with Jess's sensibilities, and served as important 'selfobjects' (Kohut, 1980) that motivated her to pursue a female identity and supported the identity work she performed in private. Jess kept this comic close at hand, *"I kept this issue by my bed and I would read it all the time. I read it so many times that I had to buy a second copy. That was my favorite! Nothing even really compares now, like "that's it,*

that's me." Often times 'selfobjects' are close family members and friends, but for Jess, because of the social stigma surrounding her feelings, she found a 'safe' source within a fictional narrative.

In being absorbed by and emotionally invested in *Legionnaires Number 13*, Jess 'transported' into its fictional world of space pirates and androgynous heroes. Transportation theory posits that when engaging with media texts, audiences are often swept away from the mundane world they inhabit to compelling and vivid story worlds, which provide "alternative personalities, realities, and actions without any real cost to the individual" (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 318). Transportation is a sense of immersion within a fictional narrative, and this experience offers the ability to imagine the self and its potential in new ways. Importantly, transporting into the world of *Legionnaires Number 13* allowed Jess to imagine a future 'possible self' that deviated from the gender to which she was assigned at birth and took her beyond the imaginative confines of her present life situation.

Like Jess, Jen tactically employed popular media for identity work and the development of possible selves. However, in reciting her experiences she explains that although the media presented a transgender self as possible, it was not necessarily desirable. "*Until I got to about sixteen years old, the media was teaching me that, first, it was possible. Second, that people will make fun of you and possibly even commit hate crimes against you.*" In addition to seeing tragic representations in film and movies, various transgender and transsexual themed websites on the Internet reaffirmed her fears. "*I went to a site called Transsexual.org or*

Transsexuality.org. I was kind of terrified at first. There were all these nasty stories of what happens to transsexuals on there. The lady who runs the site explained her whole life story and I read it and I was like "My gosh! What am I going to do about this?" All the stories were horrible and so painful to read. I was really afraid to come out for a while, especially after reading all these things online."

Although these experiences advanced the impossibility of self, delaying Jen's decision to come out as transgender, she persevered. Employing strategies of resilient reception, she creatively adapted to a negative representational environment and excavated resources for self. Jen's experience watching daytime television talk shows serves as an example of how - even when possible selves are situated within a problematic media context- they can still facilitate identity work. *"I was flipping through the TV stations and I saw Jerry Springer. I saw transsexual women on the show. They weren't really treated that great. But I remember thinking, "Whoah! People can actually kind of do that!" Then I went downstairs and I talked to my grandpa. I asked him, "Wow. People can really change genders and sexes?" And he said, "Yeah." Now I was already dressing before I saw these people on TV, but when I saw them I was like, "Wow. I want to do that!" They looked so good and I wanted to look like that too. I didn't dare mention anything because as the show was going on my grandpa was making crude and mean comments."* Jen's identity work here is 'tactical,' in that within the sanctioned discourses of television talk that trivialized and exoticized gender variance, Jen was able to locate resources for self. Not only did the talk show representations articulate the possibility of transgender life for Jen, they motivated and inspired her. Despite her Grandpa's hurtful comments,

which she experienced as a force of resistance, Jen persisted in the work of identity, appreciating a renewed energy and resourcefulness with respect to cross-dressing and the cultivation of a feminine identity.

In addition to television, video games provided a space for experimenting with a possible transgender self. Like Jess's engagements with comic books, Jen played these games outside the gaze of others. *"Since I can remember I escaped playing video games and once they started making games where you can make or choose your own characters, I always was the girl. I'd play the girl character and change my outfit. I would play the 'Polly Pockets' online thing. It was a toy back then and they had an online version where you could make a Polly Pocket and go through their world. Also, in the game Final Fantasy 7 there's a part where you get to dress up in the girl's clothes and go around and pass and no one knows anything. I got such a kick out of that. It was great because it was online and I could do it in hiding, and no one could ever know anything."* Jen's language also suggests that, like Jess, these digital media environments facilitated the ability for "transportation" where immersion within fictional worlds support identity play and self-work within private and safe contexts (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004).

As Belle and Jen's stories about media engagement suggest, the development of self often operates on the imagistic level, wherein the visual helps to constitute and consolidate the embodied self. As Borch-Jacobsen explains, the body "is first of all an image of the body- that is, a visual image" (47). In many ways, our self-concept is "a cognitive representation of the self" (Pervin, 2002), and images help to construct, or de-construct, one's self-conceptualization. In this way, the media act as

a Lacanian mirror, screening images that invite projection and identification. According to Lacan (1977) the development of self is facilitated through a mirror phase or “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (p. 2). The mirror separates the individual into a phenomenologically experienced self and reflected self, undermining feelings of subjective unity and integrity. The sense of organic completeness and wholeness that the individual felt as a baby becomes shattered. Although Lacan was primarily concerned with the development of self and identity in childhood, throughout our life we encounter mirrors where we experience the “correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion” (Lacan, 1977, p. 3). Man completes himself via an act of projection and identification, often on the level of media images and narratives in contemporary society. Correspondingly, many study participants expressed a need to see transgender persons in the media. Regarding the movie *TransAmerica*, a film about a transgender woman who embarks on a road trip with her son, Avery explained, “*I remember ‘TransAmerica’ came out and I was really apprehensive about seeing it, but I knew I needed to do it. Trans people were in the movies! In America! I need to see this.*”

For Josh, who grew up on a small island off the coast of Spain, seeing a transgender character and narrative for the first time facilitated the development of a possible transgender self. Moreover, this experience generated the motivation to start the work of identity and self-development. “*One of the first media I saw with*

trans people in it was "Boys Don't Cry." When I saw the film, I was like, "Wow! That's me." I felt like I had never seen it in my life either and it was very intense to find somebody who I felt was very similar to who I was. I felt like "hey, that could be me." I watched it at home in my room with nobody else in my space. My parents and I were not really having good communication and I felt like I needed to see that film, and see it on my own." Not only did the film cause feelings of recognition and possibility, it served as a catalyst for action, for practices of self-development and realization. "I remember at one point, after seeing "Boys Don't Cry," I started researching things on the Internet. I started looking stuff up and I Googled transsexual... That was very, very helpful... at that point I was like I need to change my body, I hate my body, and that helped me to look stuff up like photos of trans people. Those online photos showed me what I could do and I started doing it."

Like Josh, seeing compelling transgender images motivated Alex to perform the work of identity, and helped him to begin his gender transition. *"Somebody called me and said you need to go and check out this site right now. It's called XX Boys. It's a photo project of all FTM boys. They were calling me to tell me to check out this site because these guys were hot. They were like, "You got to check out these hot guys." And I was like 'alright.' I went to the site and there were all these pictures of FTMs, and I was immediately like "that's me." That's when it hit me. I lost my shit, drank whiskey and wrote a novel. I looked at that site like 10 times a day. I was looking at these pictures being like 'damn, they're hot,' but then I was also looking at them being like 'I am this guy.' I want to look like that. So I drank whiskey, wrote a really*

depressing novel, moved back here and started transitioning about two and a half years ago.”

In addition to cultural images and the desire to see transgender, language played a significant role in the ability for participants to perceive transgender as possible, attainable, and desirable. When coming to terms with transgender issues and identities, one of the most difficult challenges participants faced was learning a vocabulary of self. Without this language, the personal and social construction of identity is impossible. Unable to locate a position from which to speak, transgender individuals often struggle with securing a pragmatic and accessible vocabulary for articulating their experiences and identities. This is the case for two reasons. First, transgender terminology is not part of everyday vernacular and many lack access to the kinds of spaces and communities where the language develops. Without a group of transgender friends or a local LGBT subculture or community center, one has to actively search for it. Second, the language used to talk through transgender issues and subjectivity is complex and in constant flux. The relationship between transgender and language is one of “a mutual fluidity that exceeds fixed meanings, remains always plural, and continually disrupts the marking of boundaries” (Kulick, 1999, p. 616). While this linguistic variability and fluidity may be theoretically exciting, it can be difficult for individuals to manage in everyday life.

At the transgender discussion/support group I observed, one of the most frequently discussed topics was how to tell family and friends about one’s transgender feelings, experiences and subjectivity. This conversation always led to

a delineation of terms and rhetoric suitable for the articulation of self to others. The discussion group leader and participants collectively identified terms that were both available and useful, attempting to arrive at a consensus regarding their meanings and explaining how to effectively employ them in everyday life. One of the primary roles of the discussion group leader was to serve as an educator and arbiter, articulating and circulating the identity labels agreed upon by opinion leaders and influencers in the transgender community. For example, during one session the discussion group leader clarified the reasons behind the general acceptance of the word “queer,” explaining that over time it has been resignified and embraced from within the LGBT community, primarily by political organizers, social service workers, and intellectuals. At another session, she articulated the difference between “transgender” (more of an umbrella term to describe a variety of gender nonconforming expressions) and “transsexual” (a specific identity under the transgender umbrella wherein someone wants to change their sex). In the same session, she noted the rationale behind repudiating the term “tranny.” Likening it to the word “fag,” she argued the term is pejorative, originates from outside the transgender community, and historically has been employed to belittle and demean.

In addition to support/discussion groups, participants acknowledge that one of the greatest engines generating the development and circulation of transgender language is the Internet, and more specifically transgender themed Internet communities. The Internet was so important to participant’s self-realization that many talked about their lives and identities in terms of “pre” and “post” Internet. According to Remi, the ability to have an accessible and practical transgender

vocabulary, which she largely acquired from the online trans community, helped her transition at a much earlier age than most. She was able to develop a transgender sense of self in her later teenage years, *“Because I had the language. The language has developed historically over several decades. And the Internet as a tool to disseminate the language has also developed. I had the language to describe myself and know what I was and to get to people who spoke the same language and the Internet made that possible. Part of it was the historical moment I was in, but also I am one of those people who is very introspective and internally focused, as opposed to externally focused. So I had to sort a lot of stuff out in my head and I wanted to do that as soon as possible. And I knew that something was wrong and I couldn’t delay it.”*

Importantly, the Internet was close at hand and since Remi wanted to act *“as soon as possible,”* she sought out online communities to perform the work of self.

Brady was able to develop the language of transgender identity through his explorations online. Via linking and traveling between websites, blogs and social networks, his elliptical travels in cyberspace helped to acclimate him to the language of self. His experiences are a blend offline and online worlds. *“A long time ago I had a friend from school who told me about this site, Gaia online, like Mother Earth Gaia... because you were able to build a little anime avatar. You could dress the up, buy clothes for them, walk around in little towns. I made some friends through this site. I looked at one of my friends’ profiles that said he was a transgender and it said he had his own blog. I clicked the link and went to the blog and read all about his experience. I mean I don’t know him in real life. He was just a friend on the site. And so a few days later when I was searching around the website, I stumbled on a transgender group.*

They have support groups and things for all kinds of lifestyles. It's a forum. They had a bunch of information right on the front page like definitions and about what things were and the differences between transgender labels. A lot of the definitions seemed like they were about me. The site helps you converse with other transgenders. It's helpful because I have a hard time finding people like me where I live."

The Internet allowed Linda to do what she calls "research." When compared to Jae, she was 40 years old when she acquired Internet access, and as a result started to transition much later in life. She remembers, *"In about 2000, I was 40 years old at this time, I got Internet. I had a lot of curiosities at that time. I got on the Internet and "oh my goodness!" Hey, there are other people out there who feel the same way I do. I'm not alone. I'm not a weirdo. And of course now I started doing research."* Yet when she started conducting her research she was frustrated by the pervasiveness of the term "she-male." However, although she disapproved of the term "she-male" it acted as a portal for learning more about transgender identities and communities. *"I think I started searching for "she-male." That was the only term that came to mind since it was all over the Internet. Now in this day and age, I hate that term because I've learned since then that it is pretty much a porn industry term. But that term got me to stumble across certain websites by accident... I met some people online. I started talking with them on Instant Messenger and things like that. I went to anything I could find on Yahoo: groups, you name it. Those groups were so helpful to me. I learned all the terms and how to talk about myself there."* By first actively searching, and then creatively appropriating the language and visual discourses from popular media culture to establish a vocabulary for self, Linda's

identity work is essentially “tactical.” As de Certeau (1984) argues, tactics “use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established languages” and “remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes,” yet successfully “sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires” (p. 34).

Although the Internet facilitated the tactical work of resilient reception for many participants by furnishing the images and language for adapting, preserving and (re)building self, others expressed how its technical and social affordances are fundamentally limited, restricting their resources and sense of agency. For example, Blake prefers face-to-face communication for the cultivation of self and belonging. Although he visited transgender online communities and at times participated in them, he experienced feelings of lack and inadequacy. He never truly felt “connected,” and for those transgender individuals who suffer from social stigma and loneliness, there is a palpable and powerful desire for connectedness. *“There is online community, but I don’t really connect well with online communities. It’s not personal. It’s all typing, typing and you don’t have the human connection. I don’t feel connected with people in that way.”* Moreover, Blake explains the ways in which digital media interact with other important life variables, such as one’s family, social world, and other systems of knowing such as religion, culture, and education, in daily meaning-making practices. For example, Blake’s close relationship with his mother influenced the degree to which he put stock in media messages. *“Even though I did the whole online thing, and watched trans movies from Netflix and all that, at the same time, my mom kind of raised me to be like not relying on the media so much. She made me think for myself. I’d see these images and these people and it was*

life changing I'll say yes, but it wasn't shaping. It definitely made me think, and it made me go "hmmm, is that who I am? Is that my path? Is that what I am going to end up like?". But I would always step back and say this is a movie, this is not reality."

While Blake recognized the Internet's technological and social limitations, others highlighted the role of digital technologies and class, identifying the Internet as a luxury they cannot afford. Unemployed and living in a state suffering economically, Sandy cannot afford a computer with Internet service, and is unable to virtually network and connect with other transgender individuals. Her home is also a far drive from an urban center populated with LGBT oriented bars, clubs and spaces. As a result, developing a social life is one of her most frustrating struggles. Her sense of loneliness is more present than other participants in better financial standing who can afford home Internet service, or those who live in or near a larger city. In order to find friendship, Sandy joined a weekly transgender support/discussion group recommended by her therapist. Her social life and sense of belonging strongly revolve around the support group. *"I have a couple of transgender friends now from the group who I talk to every single day. We talk EVERY SINGLE DAY, but in terms of the outside world, I feel I can only be Sandy on Tuesdays or when I'm with my friends. But most other times I feel like I'm alone."* Sandy wishes she had the means to afford a computer with Internet access *"for just talking and hanging out. Not so much for a dating thing, just like a meeting place to be friends and find out where they are and meet to be friends."* Within the context of everyday life, Blake and Sandy's experiences speak to media's embeddedness: the way communications technologies are integrated within social, cultural, economic and

familial networks that shape individual practices and possibilities. For example, Blake's experiences with media were influenced by a strong relationship with his mother, whereas for Sandy, class was a constraining variable that restricted possibilities for digital communication. In this way, practices of resilient reception are contingent on one's life circumstances, social position and access to resources and support.

As participants testify, media power and authority are muscular and influential, making taxing demands on one's emotional and cognitive life. By circulating stereotypes, tragic narratives and discourses that trivialize and exoticize gender variance, they frustrate the work of identity and delay the possibility of self. Yet in struggling to achieve an everyday life and a sense of the ordinary, participants are "tactical," and their stories lie in the intersection between media power and personal agency. What I term "resilient reception" refers to a tactical process of acknowledging, coping, and rebuilding during and after the reception of potentially self-eroding media discourses. Some embarked on trajectories of unlearning, shedding the residue of media engagements that disconfirm self, while others actively pursue self-affirmative media encounters. These practices of creative adaptation, perseverance, and affirmative identity work occur within the context of the contemporary media environment and widespread social adversity. Study participants' work with and against the symbolic world helps them realize a transgender self is possible, and it motivates them to pursue an identity consonant with their hopes and desires.

While their pathways of identity are often road-blocked, detoured and/or constrained by variables such as class, access to resources, and life circumstances, study participants nonetheless keep traveling, remaining resilient and fighting for self-integrity. While this chapter examined this fight within the context of individuals' everyday life, the next chapter examines how the fight to define the transgender self is screened on the television talk show genre for millions to watch. Through textual analysis, I illustrate how the contradictory and competing discourses from talk show hosts, invited experts, transgender guests, and promotional segments reproduce transgender subjectivity as "queerly ordinary."

Chapter 4: Staging the Queerly Ordinary: Transgender Visibility and Issue Oriented Talk Shows

“Talk shows can go both ways... Too often we have seen Maury shows with “Is it a man or a woman.” Depictions have changed to a degree over time... You may see Oprah do a sympathetic portrayal of a trans person, but it often involves a lot of sensationalism.”

~ Arie, study participant

Talk shows have long offered a (very) public platform for non-normative displays of sexuality and gender. In *Freaks Talk Back*, Gamson (1999) argues that daytime talk shows offer accessible first person accounts in which difference is given a human face. According to Gamson (1999), “they [talk shows] throw open little cultural openings that, compared with the rest of commercial mass-mediated popular culture, look huge” (p. 141). At the same time, talk shows are highly polysemic, and Arie’s observations (participant quote, above), regarding at least two talk shows’ treatment of transgender identity, speak to the variable and contradictory nature of the genre’s discourses. In addition to humanizing difference, talk shows furnish a theater of sexual and gender variance with the potential to advance “cliché-mongering entertainment,” carnivalesque freak shows that present queer people as problematic disruptions to public space (Gamson, 1999, p. 141). As highly formulaic texts that rely on the routine production of Otherness, spectacle, confession, and raw emotional excess, talk show dynamics can potentially exploit and further marginalize minority guests. However, even within a contentious and antagonistic atmosphere, the talk genre has the ability to ‘go both ways,’ as Arie noted, and stage an affirmative ‘mediated performance’ of identity

(Thornborrow, 2001). In particular, the genre can provide “a rich discursive resource for talk show participants to present their personal experiences, construct their positions within a debate, and argue their points of view” (Thornborrow, 2001, p. 117).

Consequently, many media scholars have concluded that talk shows are strikingly complicated public texts capable of raising politically and socially alive topics for debate, while at the same time harboring the ability to close socio-political dialogue down (Carpignano, P., Anderson, R., Aronowitz, S. & DiFazio, W., 1990; Gamson, 1999; Gill, 2007; Grindstaff, 2002; Illouz, 2003; Manga, 2003; Quail, Razzano, & Skalli, 2005; Shattuc, 1997). In accounting for the complexity of the genre, Gamson (1999) describes the talk show as a ‘monster with two heads’ (p. 29-65), in which a raucous circus is joined with a ‘respectable’ public forum of examination. While *The Jerry Springer Show* for example leans heavily towards the contentious freak show, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* presents itself as advocating insightful conversation, most daytime talk shows are impure hybrids, integrating circus-like formats that marginalize difference with a public forum that normalizes difference.

As with Arie, other study participants discerned the dual nature of daytime talk, commenting that talk shows simultaneously present transgender individuals as freaks and as ordinary people. Many discussed the mixed feelings they encountered while watching these shows. Wren explains, “*So there are these normalized representations that are like, “See how were just like you?” And on the other end of it there is this total Jerry Springer spectacle of like, “Guess which person up here is a man*

and you don't really know it!" So there are these two extremes of normalizing on the one hand and then something that's weird to the general public on the other."

Brandon identifies the *Oprah Winfrey Show* as a site of representational progress that is nonetheless attenuated, at times, by the more questionable of talk show genre conventions. As a young person watching talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s, Brandon remembers the more freakishly carnival depictions of gender variance, the kind of *"Is it a man or a woman"* topicality that Arie mentioned. Before tuning into a 2007 transgender themed episode, Brandon worried whether Oprah would echo the approach of being *"really disrespectful"* and *"mean and spiteful"* toward her transgender guests he saw talk show hosts adopt when he was growing up. However, Brandon explains that although the show relied on *some* production routines that marginalized guests, *"I was pleasantly surprised. Oprah was really respectful. As far as I could tell, the audience responded warmly, and Oprah was very open and welcoming. She didn't really sensationalize."* Moreover, Brandon was pleased with the ways in which the show presented transgender guests as *'ordinary people.'*

In this chapter, I argue that talk shows present a cultural site in which discourses of normalization and marginalization collide and coalesce to produce the *'queerly ordinary.'* Through their complex stories of gender variance and transition, talk show guests challenge and transcend the binaries of queer/normal and sameness/difference. The *queerly ordinary* accounts for the ways talk show guests, as well as the participants in my study, often envision themselves in the everyday world: as a little bit queer and a little bit ordinary, as similar and different, as

extraordinary and ordinary, and as marginal and assimilated. Their lives and subjectivities are unpredictable, motley mixtures of these concepts. The queerly ordinary presents a lived resistance against Goffman's (1963) observation about the process of categorization in which people are divided into identity positions of the normal and the abnormal, or stigmatized. Rather, the queerly ordinary represents the messy, complicated and at times contradictory way individuals tactfully live their everyday lives as sometimes outsiders/sometimes insiders in constant conversation and negotiation with mainstream culture. Moreover, I illustrate the ways in which transgender guests are positioned and position themselves as queerly ordinary on talk shows, and the ways in which this subjectivity emerges from the productive tension between a media text's structure and the agency of its guests.

In particular, I chose the talk show genre for analysis because more than any other media form, it consistently produces representations of the queerly ordinary. Even though talk shows are highly structured by industrial and production routines, they inevitably bump up against the voice and agency of 'real' people. When compared to fictional characters in film and television, for example, talk show guests have the agency to break with rote characterization and script, commonly offering unpredictable, multidimensional and contradictory articulations of worldview and self. Since Gamson and others have effectively and considerably explored the cultural representation of gender variance in 1980's and 1990's daytime talk, I specifically examine texts from the start of the twenty first century. Furthermore,

since the late 1990s there is some evidence¹³ that transgender individuals are entering the media and public sphere in larger numbers and in more self-affirming ways, and there is an even stronger current towards transgender normalization in contemporary talk show culture that warrants analysis. Engaging in a critical textual analysis in which I draw on theories of talk show representation (Wilson, 2003; Illouz, 2003; Gamson, 2001; Shattuc, 1997), normalization and queerness (as discussed in chapter 1) and everyday life (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1963), I examine 'issue oriented' talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *the Dr. Oz Show*, *Anderson*, *The Montel Williams Show*, *The Dr. Phil Show*, and *The Tyra Banks Show*. Shattuc (1997) delineates issue oriented daytime talk as a specific genre that presents public and personal matters in socially relevant terms. These shows are structured around moral and expert authority and knowledge, are made for a female audience, and produced outside of networks for affiliates (Shattuc, 1997).

Issue oriented daytime talk will typically "mix sensationalism with a liberal political agenda that champions the rights of the disenfranchised" (Shattuc, 1997, p. 9). As a site of multiple and conflicting communicative practices and messages, issue oriented talks shows reveal "an opening for the empowerment of an alternative discursive practice" (Carpignano et al., 1990, p. 52). For example, in discussing the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, Illouz (2003) highlights the ways it "celebrates ordinary morality and gives voice to what the democratic, middle-class subject cannot contain: emotions, the grotesque, sexuality, the violence of nuclear families and of repressed desire" (p. 75). In offering a platform for "standing up and 'being

¹³ See Stryker, 2008; Hollar, 2007; Rosenberg, 2007

counted” (Wilson, 2003, p. 126), issue oriented talk shows screen the inevitable existence of ‘others’ in everyday life, others who struggle with and challenge the constitution and ethos of the ‘American Dream.’

In many ways, issue oriented talk shows are conversations about the limits of permissibility, tolerance and the normal. Generally, the production routines of talk shows align the host and audience with mainstream, middle class mainly heterosexual values and ideologies, securing a sense of normality for the studio and at home audience. This typically comes at the expense of the guest, who is positioned as an aberration or failure – a stigmatized body. Although transgender talk show guests are always presented as an aberration or ‘queer,’ in negotiating gender variance, the issue oriented talk genre also positions transgender guests within discourses of the normal, thereby moving the culturally marginal into the center. The shows’ discursive structure continually asserts how transgender individuals are generally ‘normal’ or just like everyone else. In thinking through this process, I argue that contemporary daytime talk works to produce transgender identity as ‘normal’ via: (1) its association with social class markers, (2) its articulation within the nuclear family, (3) its alignment with biological essentialism and gender norms, (4) comparison with extremely extraordinary others, and (5) “narratives of completion” (Wilson, 2003), or a universal struggle for coherent selfhood. These five dynamics wield the disciplinary power of normativity, which permits the conditions for social agency and action. However, the production of the ‘normal’ on talk shows is only partial, for the conditioning is rendered incomplete by

queer counter-discourses that arise within these media and collide with the force of normalization.

The cultural process of normalization can only be achieved within a communicative context increasingly organized around platforms for transgender self-affirmation and tolerance, although the range of these expressions are circumscribed. For example, in summarizing the objective of his transgender themed episode, talk show host Montel Williams of *Montel* explains that transgender “is part of our fabric of our society, fabric of us as human beings. We should accept every single bit of the spectrum” (11/14/2006). Similarly, a 2011 transgender themed episode of *Anderson*, hosted by Anderson Cooper, was temporally organized to affirm transgender identity. First, self-confident and happy transgender children and their supportive parents are interviewed. In the next segment, Anderson interviews Domaine Javier, expelled from her university and stripped of her scholarships for being transgender. Her story is framed as an injustice, and Javier is presented as a beacon of strength and resilience for moving on with her life and enrolling in a nursing program (“I just really want to be a nurse and to be able to help people.”) Finally, Anderson concludes the show by interviewing, Kye Allums, the first openly transgender male to play on a division one college basketball team who has become a role model in the transgender community and a minor celebrity the world of collegiate sports. Kye’s short interview serves as the punctuation to the show, an example of transgender fearlessness and accomplishment. When Anderson asks, “Why share your story?” Kye explains, “I was sick of not being myself... I wanted to come out and be myself.” Even Dr. Phil, who is by no means a

champion for the transgender community as evidence by his conceptualization of transgender identity as 'confused' and 'troubled,' explains that schools and communities have a responsibility to facilitate "a spirit of inclusion for those who walk a different path" (1/17/2007).

Importantly, while transgender guests and allies welcome these gestures of tolerance and inclusion, they simultaneously negotiate, resist and challenge normalization, engaging the normal on their own terms and challenging its parameters. They maintain a hold over their difference, and assert their uniqueness. As a result, amid the talk of sameness and assimilation, daytime talk produces an unexpected queer residue that renovates the norms of everyday life. This productive collision of the normal and the queer creates the necessary conditions for the emergence of the queerly ordinary - which maintains certain norms, but resists the full force of normativity.

Producing the Queerly Ordinary in Daytime Talk: Class, the Family, Gender Norms and Extraordinary Comparisons

As daytime talk shows are geared towards an audience of middle class, married women with families, Gamson (2001) suggests that one of the dominant topics of concern addressed by these shows is family. Within this representational context, LGBT individuals have historically been portrayed as potential threats to the foundation of this institution. As the 1990s progressed, however, gay and lesbians were increasingly normalized, depicted in family contexts on these shows, while transgender guests were often attacked as extreme oddities, as "too selfish and monstrous for the family" (Gamson 2001, p. 71). More recently, through the

first part of the 21st century, like their gay and lesbian counterparts, the transgender community is articulated by the talk genre within discourses of the nuclear family. As mentioned in chapter one, this integration is the result of four larger processes including the growing political organization of the transgender community, a new media environment that offers space for the circulation of transgender visibility, narratives and collective action, the rise of gay themed content during the 1990s that set the stage for the emergence of transgender in popular culture, and the increasing visibility of gender non-conforming individuals in the public sphere. As a result, like homosexuality was in the 1990s, transgender in the twenty first century has become a socially relevant and provocative topic for public discourse and debate. Of particular concern for daytime talk is transgender's place within the nuclear family, and in considering this question talk shows and guests position transgender within the queerly ordinary.

As a cultural touchstone and a ratings powerhouse, *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* treatment of transgender represents the frontlines in the push towards transgender normalization. In the episode, "Transgender Families" (10/12/07), Oprah interviews two families, each with three children, who experienced a husband's transition into womanhood. In introducing the episode, Oprah explains that her *raison d'etat* originated in a letter she received from Zachary, the teenaged son of transgender author Jenny Boylan, who wrote:

"Sometimes it's hard to have a family that is different, but most of the time, I think I'm the luckiest kid on earth. I know people from lots of different kinds of families, but no matter how different they are, they really are all just people. My goal is that someday everybody will be treated with love."

Zachary understands his family as ‘queerly ordinary:’ as “different” and valuable for its difference, yet ultimately quite similar to other family constellations, for they are “just people” who deserve love. This tension between the normal and the queer and between the dynamics of sameness and difference, which generate the queerly ordinary, is produced by Oprah Winfrey, her show’s editing practices and her transgender guests throughout the episode. In introducing the first family, Oprah employs normative identifiers of class and kinship, labeling the Brunners as an “all-American couple,” “high school sweet hearts” that live on a “tree-lined suburban street.” As Henderson (2007) acknowledges, social class “appears in the service of pulling queerness toward a normative middle” (215). Via (middle) class and family markers, talk shows present transgender guests as ‘good queers’ who are “modest, kind, hardworking,” and who “long for family even where they can’t have it and are thus readily integrated into existing family formations rather than estranged” (Henderson, 2007, p. 205). Notably, Fran and Denise Brunner’s marriage remained intact after Denise transitioned, and according to Denise, it became stronger, “You ask me today, did I marry my soul mate? And I will absolutely, positively, say yes... we’ve gotten on such a higher plane of a relationship than I think we’ve ever been.” Keeping her marriage in tact, Fran embraces her move from good straight to ‘good queer.’

In addition to love between spouses, ordinariness is also generated through the expressions of love and concern from parent to child, as Denise explains, “I love my kids no matter how I am... My love for all of them has never changed.” A similar

strategy of normalization through family and class markers is applied to Oprah's second guests on the show, Joan and Sydney. During the couple's introduction, Joan explains how their courtship "was that storybook romance that you hear about." Soon after, Oprah informs the audience that Joan and Sydney are "both doctors," (hence, appropriately classed) and well suited for each other (and to us). Oprah ends the interview segment by addressing how the children responded to and processed their parent's gender transition. Denise and Sydney's ordinariness is produced through the ways in which their children have adapted to make ordinary their parent's identity. The children talk about their initial shock, their struggle to come to terms with the familial changes, and their eventual acceptance of their transgender parent. Notably, Oprah and the studio audience - thanks to Oprah's scripting of the couple - responded to warmly and enthusiastically to these expressions of familial love and unity. These affirmations of love are important since many study participants expressed anxiety about the possibility of starting families and finding romantic and sexual partnerships, concerns amplified by media depictions of transgender individuals as unlovable. At the same time, queer love is refracted through a celebration of traditional marriage, leaving other forms of connection and kinship absent.

Importantly, however, although Denise and Fran, and Joan and Sydney identify as 'ordinary,' their families are quintessentially 'queerly ordinary' and refashion the parameters of the heterosexual family. For example, Sydney's nine-year-old daughter addresses her as *mada*, a combination of the words mother or mama, and father or dada. This articulation acknowledges Sydney's complex

position in terms of gender and kinship, and incorporates her history as male and father while retaining her chosen gender identity. As a heterosexual woman, Fran underwent her own transition, switching from a relationship with a husband to one with a wife, and being publicly perceived as a lesbian. While she initially struggled with this, she now accepts her queerness, "I was a little leery about it—about people marking me as a lesbian—and of people staring and getting the looks, the disgusted looks... You just come to the realization that, you know, that's their problem. Not mine."

The nuclear family, and specifically the desire to have children, served as the mechanism through which transgender becomes ordinary in another *Oprah* episode, "The First TV Interview: The Pregnant Man" (4/3/2008). In 2008, Thomas Beatie, a transgender man, became pregnant through artificial insemination, a decision that soon attracted global attention. In addition to appearances on *Good Morning America*, a *Barbara Walters Exclusive*, *The View*, *Larry King Live*, and *FOX: Good Day NY*, he and his wife appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Although the episode is marked by 'freak show' dynamics such as episode promotion segments that promise shocking, unusual and uncomfortable talk about sex organ surgeries and sexual practices, the show settles into a structure that foregrounds the ordinary. Similar to the couples on the episode "Transgender Families," Thomas and Nancy are identified in terms of normative class and kinship markers, introduced as a happily married family who run a small business and live in a typical suburban neighborhood. Throughout the episode, the couple discusses their struggle in finding a doctor to treat Thomas and the complications of carrying the pregnancy to

term. It is the couple's devotion to starting a family and their ordinary talk about the process that works to normalize and humanize their experience. For example, Thomas argues, "Love makes a family... And that's all that matters." Similarly, Thomas explains his decision to become pregnant in humanist terms, "It's not a male or female desire to want to have a child...it's a human desire... I'm a person, and I have the right to have my own biological child." The couple's ordinariness is further attested to by Nancy's daughter from her previous marriage, Amber, "we're just regular, boring people and a regular family." Amber looks to Thomas and Nancy's relationship as a source of inspiration, "they've been role models for my husband and I. We definitely look up to their marriage and model our lives after theirs." Moreover, as a medical authority, the family's obstetrician confirms the ordinariness of the pregnancy itself, "Once you meet Thomas and Nancy, you can see that they are very devoted and that they deserve quality medical care just like everybody else... People say, 'Is this baby going to be abnormal or anything like that?' This baby's totally healthy... I consider it an average pregnancy."

Notably, although Thomas is integrated into discourses of the normal, a discursive suturing he welcomes, he simultaneously challenges and queers this positioning. When asked by Oprah about feeling 'born in the wrong body,' he rejects such clichéd terminology. Beatie's storytelling also challenges the parameters of the category 'male,' breaking open the male/female binary. Even though socially, legally and emotionally he is recognized as male, he chose to keep his reproductive organs. While his pregnancy socially locates him within the domain of the feminine, he confidently asserts his maleness to Oprah when she

questions it, “I have a very stable male gender identity. I see pregnancy as a process, and it doesn't define who I am... Ironically, being pregnant doesn't make me feel any more female or feminine.”

Like *Oprah*, the *Montel Williams Show* (1/24/2006) employs the discourse of family and love to normalize the transgender identity of Gwen Araujo, a transgender woman murdered in October 2002, in the episode “The Murder of a Boy Named Gwen.” While the show normalizes Gwen, her queerness is preserved through the show's editing practices and dialogue with the Araujo family, who paint a portrait of a self-assured queer individual. In introducing the episode, Montel declares the show will present the story of “a heartbroken family,” and for the duration of the episode, Gwen's bereaved family works to highlight Gwen's ordinariness amid the extremely extraordinary and tragic circumstances surrounding her death and its aftermath. Throughout the episode, Montel and Gwen's family accomplish this through juxtaposing Gwen and her murderers. Whereas Gwen's murderers are presented as ignorant, monstrous, and damaged, Gwen, according to her mother Sylvia, “was human. My kid deserved to live her life.” Montel echoes this sentiment, “Gwen used a little drugs, or she drank... but just like a typical teenager. That's exactly who she was.” Lawyer for the family Gloria Allred mobilizes the discourse of kinship to humanize Gwen. In addressing Gwen's relationship to her murderers, Allred maintains:

“if the defendant had seen Gwen as a--as the loving daughter of Sylvia, as the much-loved sister or sibling of Pearl and— and Michael and Brandon, as the loving niece of 13 aunts and uncles, as a real human being, as something more than just the sum of bodily parts... as someone with a heart and a brain and a soul, perhaps they would not have killed.”

These statements foreground Gwen as 'sister,' 'sibling,' and 'niece,' a list of familiar social roles that work to attenuate Gwen's queerness. Further, Allred directs attention away from Gwen's body, as symbol of difference, and towards the more elusive, universal human heart and soul.

However, the episode also underscores Gwen's difference, her queerness, which resulted in her murder, and in her story being newsworthy and provocative enough for talk show topicality. Gwen's family presents the story of a 'normal' girl, who nonetheless embraced queer embodiment and failed to fit into conventional gender modalities. Gwen's mother speaks to her daughter's gender variance as 'queerly ordinary,' "I think I'm lucky that I had a little girl and a little boy all in one. As she grew up, she loved fishing, played Little League. To me, a normal kid." Gwen's aunt echoes Sylvia's positioning of Gwen as queerly ordinary, as a typical kid who experienced the burden generated by the social stigma of queer subjectivity, "She was a teenager just like any other teenager, but with this, you know, 30 times larger issues and problems she had to deal with." When articulated via Montel and his show, Gwen's queerness emerges as a complicated brew: a selling point as well as a political rallying call. Gwen's queer identity provided the raw material for the mandates of the talk show to present unusual narratives. For example, the title of the episode "The Murder of a Boy Named Gwen" signals Gwen's queerness, highlighting her trans-gender identity via the juxtaposition of the masculine term "boy" with the feminine "Gwen." Moreover, the show opens with a discussion about Gwen's physical transformation. Montel questions Gwen's family about her cross-

gendered behavior and feelings as a child, and her desire for sexual reassignment surgery.

The show also positions queerness as a political nucleus. After the details of Gwen's murder and court case are revealed, Montel gives voice to the outrage surrounding Gwen's death, and to the relative weak sentencing of 15 years-to-life for the defendants. Montel makes an overt political shift by addressing racial politics and questioning the social and legal forces and institutions that failed Gwen, an unexpected move particularly for a genre that typically avoids the critique of systematic oppression and wider social injustice. According to Williams, "had this been any normal (emphasis mine) white girl in Southern California, raped and then beaten to death, we'd have four boys right now facing death penalty." In another moment of transparency, Williams conjectures, "I think if the jury would have looked at her as a "who she was" rather than "what she was." Because if it was a "who she was" there would be first-degree murder convictions that had come down for at least four people in that jail. I'm sorry. I can say that." Williams' show also addresses some of the more pressing social and political realities faced by the transgender community such as the troubling frequency of suicide, high rates of HIV, crippling social ignorance, the need for more support groups, and even the prejudice directed towards transgender individuals within the larger LGBT community. Consequently, the show's discourse illustrates the ways in which, when compared to the "normal" white woman, the security and affordances of everyday life are unequally available to a stigmatized or queered one, and thus never fully in reach for Gwen. While the show steers away from lengthy expositions into

systematic and structural inequality, or conversations about race, it nonetheless utilizes Gwen's death as a springboard into brief but meaningful conversations addressing injustice, intolerance and social prejudice.

Like the *Montel Williams* and *Oprah Winfrey* shows, the *Tyra Banks Show's* transgender themed episodes also attempts to locate the ordinary within the extraordinary by focusing on family and asking for mainstream tolerance. Two episodes in 2008 and 2009 feature Isis Tsunami, a transgender woman who was a contestant on Bank's reality modeling contest *America's Next Top Model*. As *Top Model's* first transgender contestant who has since appreciated LGBT iconicity and the benefits of celebrity, Isis Tsunami is in many ways an extraordinary figure. For example, toward the 2008 show's beginning Tyra notifies Isis, "When you type on your name and top model almost a half a million search results come up." In response to Tyra's comment, Isis establishes herself as an ordinary girl with the dream of becoming a model. Goffman (1963) refers to this process as 'normification,' or "the effort on the part of a stigmatized individual to present himself as an ordinary person, although not necessarily making a secret of his failing" (p. 31). In an attempt to normalize her experience and identity, Isis explains to Tyra, "I went into this experience and I really thought or kept out of my head transgender. I really came here wanting the opportunity like everyone else." The construction of Isis as 'ordinary girl,' the process of normalization runs through the show as an undercurrent, and Tyra encourages this positioning. With a target audience of primarily younger female viewers, Tyra 'plays it cool' with respect to transgender, which functions as a symbol of cosmopolitan edginess and coolness. In

this way, the interaction between Tyra and Isis is presented as 'girl talk,' as free-flowing gossip populated with high fives, laughter, personal self-disclosures and spirited conversational levity. Beyond this performance, Isis's ordinariness is illustrated through discourses of family and kinship. During the 2008 show, Tyra interviews Isis's mother, Sharray. The two fawn over baby pictures of Isis, and Tyra pointedly celebrates Sharray's "unconditional love" for her daughter. On the 2009 show, Tyra invites Isis's boyfriend on stage, who asks for her hand in marriage. Through this performative gesture, the ultimate normative expression of heterosexual intimacy, Isis, as elated 'bride-to-be,' joins the status of the married mainstream watching the episode.

Through their interaction, Isis emerges as a queerly ordinary figure. With her status as a public queer figure firmly established, Tyra attempts to normalize Isis through talk about her childhood. As a 'real' woman, Tyra attempts to liken Isis's experiences as a young girl to her own, thereby seeking to de-queer or normalize Isis, "When I was a tiny thing, I felt like a girl, but when you were a tiny boy..." Isis interjects, "I felt like a girl." Tyra, laughing warmly remarks, "you felt like a girl. I love it." This exchange presents Isis as an almost, but not quite normal little girl, a queerly ordinary figure whose status as 'ordinary' is sanctioned by Banks. Tyra also attempts to close the distance between Isis and 'ordinary girls,' for example, by associating transgender with essentialized notions of sex and gender, connecting Isis's childhood behavior to stereotypically gendered activities, such as playing with dolls. However, by doing so, she reifies the category female and perpetuates clichéd gender roles. Tyra employs a similar strategy of normalization

in a 2010 show dealing with transgender issues. In responding to a transgender teen, Chris, who effortlessly passes for a male, Tyra theorizes:

“If you never came on the Tyra show, I would never have known you were born a girl... This really goes to show this is truly something biological. This is not something that is just psychological. Because I don’t care how many hormones I could take, I would not look like Chris. I would look like a girl with just some hair on her face.”

While this process of normalization rescues transgender identity from the marginal outskirts of social life, in attempting to achieve this Tyra advances a confusing biological and medicalized conceptualization of gender variance. Recent scholarship (see Stryker 2006b; Butler 1993, 2004) on transgender challenges theoretical models based solely in biological and medical discourses, arguing that sex and gender should be understood as a complex ‘materialization’ informed by biological, social, psychological, historical and cultural factors.

Isis’s ordinariness, the construction of her as likeable and (almost) heterosexual, is further accomplished through juxtaposition with another contestant, Clark, from the same season of *Top Model*. Often framed as *Top Model*’s villain, Clark continually criticized and berated Isis during her tenure on the show. During the *Tyra* episode’s second segment, Clark and Isis confront each other. Before Clark is brought onto the show, clips from *Top Model* depict Clark calling Isis a “he/she,” exclaiming “if it comes between me and my goal I will stomp that man right out of the competition.” Clark is positioned as the ignorant Southerner, the close-minded girl from a small town incapable of dealing with everyday life’s complexities. In confronting Isis on *Tyra* she explains, “I love you as a person, I just

don't agree with your choices." Clark defends her sensibility, "Growing up in the South, I'm Southern Baptist and I'm a strong Christian... we don't come in contact with things like this daily." Tyra takes over, adopting a 'as one heterosexual to another' stance, and overtly challenges Clark's reasoning, "Most of my gay friends are from small towns, the transgender ones too." The episode's problematic dual message is what produces the queerly ordinary: while Clark is brought onto the show to reinforce Isis's queerness and to deny her affiliation with ordinariness and authenticity, Isis and Tyra defend Isis's subjectivity as ordinary girl, and challenge Clark's reasoning. Subsequently, it is through the show's organization, that Isis's queerness/ordinariness is simultaneously raised, challenged and (re)affirmed.

Producing the Queerly Ordinary in Daytime Talk: Narratives of Completion and the Performance of Ontological Security

Talk shows present transgender identity as a paradox defined by both confusion and complete certainty, reinscribing and challenging a pervasive cultural myth that diagnoses transgender individuals as confused and misguided (Human Rights Campaign C, 2009). The question of 'certainty' frequently arises on transgender themed talk shows, particularly those addressing transgender youth. In responding to transgender guests' articulations of self, various others such as experts, relatives, talk show hosts and audiences discuss and debate the credibility, reliability and validity of transgender identity claims. Talk show titles like the *Dr. Oz* episode "Transgender Kids: Too Young to Decide?" (2/18/2010) and the *Dr. Phil Show's* "Little Boy Lost" (1/13/2009) and 'Gender Confused Kids' (10/29/2008)

place the issue of transgender epistemology on center stage. Talk show hosts question transgender guests about how and when they knew for certain about their gender identity, and confront parents of transgender kids with queries like Dr. Phil's, "Are you concerned that an 8-year-old child doesn't know, and that you're turning the steering wheel over to an 8-year-old child?" ('Gender Confused Kids', 10/29/2008).

This question of 'knowing self' emerges as a fundamental element on the *Tyra* episode "We're 7 and 8 Years Old and Know We are Transgender." Although the title of the episode affirms transgender certainty and Banks presents herself as an advocate (if under-informed) for the transgender community, a three- person panel is invited onto the show to debate the question posed by Banks, "Can a child really know they are transgender?" The members of the panel were chosen in order to fuel a combative debate, and the segment was promoted as a must see controversy. Kim Pearson, executive director of Trans Youth Family Allies, a transgender advocacy group, and Dr. Marci Bowers, surgeon and transgender spokesperson, argued in favor of children's decision to change gender, asserting that they have a strong and credible sense of self. Michael Brown, a literature professor and minister who works with the Evangelical organization Focus on the Family, argued that children's sense of self can be wrong, and that transgender youth suffer from "body identity disorder." He questioned, "are you going to chop off their penis and put them on drugs for the rest of their lives?" Outnumbered two-to-one, and seemingly out of touch, Brown's credibility suffered and his argument failed to win favor. While the show ultimately carefully crafts a predictable and favorable case

for transgender awareness in children, it nonetheless poses this case as a remaining open question.

In responding to and countering these larger cultural frames linking gender variance with confusion, transgender guests, their allies, and at times even talk show hosts, present the transgender self in terms of (1) self-completion and (2) an unwavering ontological self-security. Self-completion is a process of becoming in which we move from self-uncertainty and lack to self-certainty and integration (Wilson, 2003). Ontological self-security is a cognitive modality defined by a sense of security and continuity with respect to one's life and life course (Giddens, 1991). On talk shows, self-completion and ontological security are constructed as desirable states wanted for by everyone, and transgender guests and their allies must prove they have achieved both. In this way, gender and sexual transition are situated within a more universal human narrative of self-transformation and coherence. However, while the search for and expression of self may be universally shared as an ordinary feature of human existence, transgender guests are expected to deliver, and often do deliver, an extraordinarily confident and assured performance of identity, an extreme manifestation of self-certainty. As a result, their search for and performance of self becomes queerly (extra)ordinary, similar enough to but qualitatively different from the self-making processes of ordinary persons.

In the episode "The High School Quarter Back Who Became a Lesbian," (2/11/2010) Oprah interviews Kimberly Reed, transgender woman, filmmaker, and ex-high school football star. In introducing the episode, Oprah universalizes her transgender guest's story as a search for self-completion and realization:

“Right off the bat I know so many of you are thinking you can’t relate to Kimberly’s story but think of it this way, there’s another way of looking at things. Most of us can admit there’s something perhaps holding you back from being all that you can be... as you hear more about Kimberly’s story think about how great your life could be if you could just find the courage to live your own truth.”

Similar language is repeated towards the end of the episode as Oprah offers her final thoughts and goals for her viewers: “dig in and find out what’s keeping you from being the best that you can be because that’s really what we are all here to do.”

Employing a therapeutic discourse, talk shows display “the ordinary work of having a self”, and work to “recenter the scattered and fragmented subjectivity of late capitalism” (Illouz, 2003, p. 241; 238). Kimberly’s gender transformation and larger life story are made ordinary through their integration into a ‘narrative of completion’ (Wilson, 2003). According to Wilson (2003), completion stories are:

“of a process, are the claim of selfhood through a move from difficulty to resolution, from powerlessness to empowerment and are underpinned by agency and action which ultimately prevent the individual from collapsing into fragmentation and even death” (p. 125).

Narratives of completion reflect a journey toward self-reclamation, and “work to configure a self that is removed from victim status, is active, and is located within meaningful social networks” (Wilson, 2003, p. 147). They are achieved through the process of ‘testimony,’ or a self-affirmative declaration that operates as “a mode for the articulation of self-esteem and self-realisation” (Wilson, 2003, p. 126). Issue oriented talk like Oprah aim to “recenter the scattered and fragmented subjectivity of late capitalism” (Illouz, 2003, p. 238), and as a result, the transgender subject is presented as the radical fulfillment of a transition toward self-completion. Parents

on the *Dr. Oz Show* talk about how their transgender kids “blossom” and “can’t stop smiling and giggling” after transitioning. Similarly, toward the end of an interview with Chaz Bono, Oprah summarizes, “what you’re saying is that everybody – your soul comes here to be and do what your soul came to do. And you have to honor that and if you don’t its like little deaths everyday.” Chaz agrees, adding, “This isn’t really about transition. This is about overcoming your fears, triumphing and doing whatever it takes to be your authentic self.”

More than simply ‘complete,’ transgender individuals like Chris are celebrated for their performance of what Giddens (1991) refers to as “ontological security” (p. 37), or a strong sense of continuity and confidence regarding one’s life course and self-identity. Where as the fulfillment of self-completion places transgender guests within the ordinary, for this is something everyone seeks, they are simultaneously extraordinary in the degree to which they have to perform self-certainty and ontological self-security in order to be believably, authentically transgender without reproach. As such, transgender talk show guests function as exemplary role models for self-certainty and coherence in the service of a target audience of middle class women within the context of a contemporary everyday life defined by uncertainty, risk and doubt. According to Giddens, doubt and uncertainty constitute the “background phenomenon” (1991, p. 181) of everyday life, caused by the competing claims of expert and professional knowledges and systems. In the late-modern/postmodern era, no particular institution or discourse holds a monopoly over ‘truth,’ rather ‘truth’ is wrapped in a hegemonic struggle between various powerful social, cultural, religious, and political factions.

Consequently, everyday life assumes “a general climate of uncertainty” (Giddens, 1991, p. 185). According to Wilson (2003), talk shows can be understood within such a context of uncertainty, “uncertainty fostered by the ever changing cultural landscape wrought by the advance of capitalism, the attendant increase of the use of technology... and the apparent collapse of any meaningful metanarrative” (p. 57). Moreover, advanced communications technology reproduces “the generalization of anxiety as a common result of the combination of uncertainty and informational overload in the individual’s interactions with a highly complex social environment” (Aguado, 2006, p. 572). As Giddens (1991) summarizes,

“On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganization, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons” (36)

Within the chaos, individuals struggle to establish ontological security, or a “coherent sense of ‘being in the world’” (Giddens, 1991, p. 37), a “stable disposition derived from a sense of continuity and order” (Aguado, 2006, p. 571). Additionally, ontological security implies the achievement of self-coherence, a trust in self, and in one’s life narrative, “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). It is manifested in the ability “to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses” (Giddens, 1991, p. 47).

On shows such as *Tyra, Anderson* and *Oprah*, transgender guests are presented as individuals having faced an ontological crisis of self and certainty, and have emerged victorious and ready to share it with the world. In overcoming ubiquitous forms of prejudice, ignorance and resistance from both outsiders and at times family and friends in order to gender transition, and by displaying such intimate self-knowledge and confidence, many talk shows present transgender youth in particular as ontologically secure spokespersons. Whether or not transgender guests, and transgender children in particular, are ‘really’ ontologically secure is unknowable. Rather, media articulates transgender themed episodes in terms of ontological security, and in many ways, mandates the performance of ontological security from its transgender guests and their advocates. The successful performance of ontological security is rewarded: guests are invited onto national television and receive a discursive platform to express themselves, and talk show hosts and audiences applaud them.

A 2008 episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* aptly titled “Transgender Triumphs” presents a celebration of transgender identity and self-completion. The show follows up with former transgender guests, and explores how their life changed after appearing on the program. Tyra’s second guest, Chris, is a confident and attractive young musician with a shining white smile. Chris is queerly ordinary in two ways. First, he leads a both ‘ordinary’ and ‘queer’ lifestyle; second, while he is engaged in a common struggle for self-certainty, he must perform this to an exaggerated degree via a sense of ‘coolness’ to be convincing to a mainstream public. The episode presents Chris as the transgender triumphant, a flourishing and

self-complete individual who has achieved relationship and professional success living in 'mainstream America.' During the episode, it is revealed that Chris will be premiering a music video on the LGBT cable network LOGO. We also meet Chris's equally attractive girlfriend, who is noticeably taken by him. The two sit comfortably on Tyra's couch with their arms wrapped around each other. However, while he is seemingly integrated into a dominant social order, he retains part of his queer sensibility. As a musician and former guest on the Tyra show, Chris claims to have acquired "a big gay male following," and his beaming self-congratulatory smile indicates this is an achievement about which he is very proud. Chris's coolness crescendos when a gay male from the studio audience hits on him in the middle of his interview with Tyra, much to her surprise. Chris responds favorably to this advance, laughing and reveling in the attention. Thus, as an 'out' transgender male who invites and embraces the homosexual gaze, yet dates women, Chris retains a queer sensibility, and his sexuality crosses heteronormative formations.

During the episode "Trans Kids on Anderson" (12-15-2011) on the *Anderson* daytime talk show, host Anderson Cooper interviews transgender youth and their parents. One of the most striking themes of the episode was the continual stream of confident assertions of self-knowledge and self-awareness from both the parents and the transgender-identifying children. For example, without hesitation, Jackie, an elementary school aged trans girl, answers Anderson Cooper's question, ("What do you want other kids to know about who you are?"), with "I'm Jackie" as she gazes straight into the camera wearing a grin. Dannan, a smiley and outspoken eight year old, insists, "I am who I want to be," while her mother confirms, "from the age of two

she insisted she was a girl.” Similarly Tyler, a 22 year old, pronounces, “I know who I am... I am a man... what’s in my pants is irrelevant.” Even though Tyler’s testimony challenges traditional biologically based conceptions of sex and gender, his declaration of self along with the others, is greeted with thunderous applause from the studio audience.

Importantly, the parents echo their children’s declarations of certainty. One explains, “We *knew* around two, two and a half and three,” another maintains “this is not letting my child do whatever she wants because that’s just fine, this is who she is!” Impressed with the youth’s strong sense of self, Anderson exclaims “it’s amazing to me that at that young age these kids are identifying.” Joining the discourse, the show’s expert guest, Dr. McGinn, a plastic surgeon specializing in gender reassignment surgery, reaffirms the youth’s identity claims. Highlighting their strength, he explains that their decision to come out as transgender early in life, and more, to appear on television is “an incredibly brave thing to do and to discuss.”

The *Oprah* episode “Born in the Wrong Body” (9/28/2007) features two transgender youth, Angelika and Jake, who discuss their experiences growing up with a transgender sense of self. Angelika explains, “When I was younger, I used to just lie in bed, and I prayed and I prayed and I prayed for God to somehow immaculately change me into a girl.” For Oprah, these self-aware transgender youth represent the defining theme of her brand, the courage to affirm one’s true self. In framing the program’s focus at the beginning of the episode, Oprah admits, “Would I have the courage to do what these people are getting ready to do today? I doubt if I would.” For Angelika and Jake, courage is a necessary component in successfully

navigating a daily life punctuated with discrimination and cruelty. Sitting next to Oprah, the youth are given space to narrate their experiences from within the everyday. Angelika explains that school was “a constant place of torment just because I was different. Just because I was more feminine than the other boys.” Likewise, Jake details the daily injuries he suffered, “Everybody would pick on me... they'd follow me to class and they'd beat me up like four at a time.” Surrounded by this kind of resistance and violence, the youth nonetheless established a strong sense of self-identity. Jake explains that at the age of fourteen he realized, “It's not that I just want to be someone's girlfriend. I want to be their husband. I wanted to be the dad. I wanted to be a positive male role model in someone's life.” In responding to and universalizing her guest's stories, Oprah again implies that their courage and self-confidence serves as a lesson for all:

"Not everybody watching here is going to believe it, relate to it or understand it, but at some point in your life, I'm sure, you will have to stand up and say who you are, in one form or another ... What you will want is for the people to accept whatever that is. So we thank you."

Similarly, the transgender youth on *The Tyra Banks Show's* “We're 7 and 8 Years Old and Know we are Transgender” (1/27/2010) are celebrated for knowing and being ‘themselves.’ Banks presents the episode's first segment as “Children in elementary school bravely living in the opposite gender.” The children's parents testify to the self-knowing and sophisticated self-awareness of their children. One mother explains, “Aside from the fact that Josie is transgender, she is not all that different... She is very sure of who she is.” Throughout the rest of the episode, Tyra introduces a group of well adjusted, articulate, self-assured and likeable transgender youth:

Kennedy, an elementary school child who just wants “to do boy stuff,” fifteen year old Ryan who explains how a monthly period is experienced as “devastating,” and Chris, a teenager who happily displays his recently grown chest hair to the audience and gossips with Tyra about his experiences with dating. In this way, the transgender children are presented as model minorities, for their success, ordinariness and life satisfaction attenuate their difference. Importantly, these glimpses into the youth’s everyday life illustrate the ways in which they struggle for the ordinary, and fight to simply “do boy stuff.” At the same time, as disrupting figures who challenge the norms of childhood development and the possibilities of embodiment, they retain their extraordinariness.

While the self-complete, ontologically secure transgender guest is in many ways an affirmative role model for the transgender community, the portrayal reveals a consolidation of transgender life and subjectivity within media culture, and runs the risk of limiting transgender possibility and agency. The focus on radical transgender success ignores and/or further marginalizes those transgender individuals who locate identity outside of biology and the internal, those who cannot or refuse to pass, single individuals, the poor and working class, and those who live outside the nuclear family. Moreover, ‘successful’ and worthy transgender individuals must be in total control of self and body at all times. For example, Dr. Oz presents one of his guests as making the decision to “take control of his body.” According to Henderson (2007), an individual’s status as ‘good queer’ requires that “practices of bodily control are maximized” (p. 200). In other words, queer worth depends on individuals’ ability to secure control over the physical self and tame

bodily excess. Of considerable import are the ways by which talk show hosts, experts and transgender guests root the ontology of self and the essence of self-completion within the body, as an essential, biological component of one's make-up. In interviewing Chaz Bono, Oprah questions, "Do you feel like Lady Gaga's song applies to you, that you were born this way?" to which Chaz replies, "I don't have a doubt that I was born this way" (5/9/2011). This impulse to identify self-certainty as innate and essential is even more apparent in interviews with transgender youth. In responding to a parent's comment that her transgender daughter played with dolls at 15 months, Montel Williams ruminates, "But as we were talking about it, it's like nature/nurture. Nature/nurture. Well, 15 months old, that's nature" (11/14/2006). In this way, transgender finds its validity in biology, and secures its right of existence within the body. Moreover, the transgender self is validated as ontological only as a function of 'always knowing,' and must be located within childhood and one's early developmental history.

Finally, the transgender self must be completely resolved, successful in its coherence and integrity, for there is little room for self-doubt, indeterminacy or selves in process. The communicative environment of daytime talk prevents transgender individuals who are currently transitioning, in-between transitioning, or transitioning toward an indeterminate or more queer gender expression. The journey must be concluded in order for the self to emerge as completed, ontologically secure and self-realized. Unrealistically, particularly for transgender children, the self and external world must be figured out. Importantly, the performance of ontological security is rewarded, both on talk shows and in

everyday life. Successful performances give the transgender community access to hormone therapy, sexual reassignment surgery and the television talk show circuit. Through its repetition in media, the script is in danger of becoming dominant, even expected, and may emerge as a requirement in order to receive support services, medical help, and social acceptance and understanding.

Queerly Ordinary on Their Own Terms

Increasingly organized around the logic of normalization, talk shows generate a variety of complex implications and socio-political dilemmas. Richardson (2005) argues that discourses of “equal entitlement and “integration”” (p. 524), evident on daytime talk shows, depend too heavily on constructing sameness, which in turn erases important differences and silences inequalities along the lines of class, race, ability, gender, etc. As a result “a particular version of what it is to be lesbian or gay (as well as heterosexual) is privileged in demands for “equality” (Richardson, 2005, p. 520). However, normalization is only one dynamic at play. By simultaneously mobilizing discourses of extraordinariness, difference and queerness, in addition to the normal and the socially sanctioned, talk shows ultimately reproduce the ‘queerly ordinary.’ Notably, the queerly ordinary acknowledges that performances of everyday life are always negotiations. They are never zero sum games, and as such, cannot be pure expressions of queer resistance, or assimilated normality. In screening the queerly ordinary, talk shows open up the low, common and familiar, rendering visible the ordinary side of queer life, offering small glimpses into the everyday world of transgender individuals. This attention

paid to the ordinary gives space to discuss a variety of everyday issues affecting the transgender community, illustrating the ways in which everyday life for transgender individuals is problematic and differently available. These cultural conversations even sometimes evolve into larger politically inflected discussions about prejudice, injustice, social acceptance and understanding.

Importantly, as transgender individuals travel the path towards the ordinary, they do so often on their own terms, challenging and critiquing it along the way, and transform its possibilities. For example, transgender individuals discuss how they create queer family formations, romantic arrangements, modes of embodiment and community within the parameters of ordinary life. Transgender individuals change the terms of family, challenging what it means to be 'husband' or 'daughter.' Queer married couples get 'straightened.' 'Normal' families become normally queer or queerly normal families. Daughters become sons, sons become daughters-to-be, and loyal husbands get pregnant. In other words, transgender still retains its extraordinariness, and some of its queerness. Yet, talk show performances of self and belonging are accomplished with a problematic performance of confidence, self-certainty and ontological security. Again, the dynamics of the ordinary and extraordinary play out. For although transgender individuals embark upon the universal search for self-awareness and completion, the degree to which this must be achieved and performed is extraordinary, and the often scripted performance risks limiting transgender agency. In this way, daytime talk illuminates the complex and contradictory process of discursive humanization and normalization within popular culture, a process in which transgender is simultaneously presented as

extraordinary/ordinary, uncertain/certain and assimilated/marginal. This dilemma is a reflection of queer visibility's fundamental condition as a paradox, "a true contradiction, which asserts its opposite within itself and has no resolution" (Barnhurst, 2007, p. 17).

While this chapter focused on how the talk show genre stages the queerly ordinary, the next chapter shifts to the theater of everyday life. I continue to investigate the theme of the ordinary introduced in this chapter by exploring transgender individuals' *struggle for the ordinary*, or the constant and deliberate work devoted to achieving the common and routine inclusions and affordances of everyday life. I delineate the methodologies and strategies participants employ in order to achieve a sense of ordinary life and articulate the ways in which media culture figures into this struggle.

Chapter 5: “*We’re just living life*”: The Struggle for the Ordinary and the Accomplishment of Everyday Life

During my four years of fieldwork, I observed a Midwest transgender support and discussion group. The group met once a week in the evening for two hours at a community center, and was open to anyone who identified as transgender, along with their friends and family. At the beginning of each meeting, the discussion leader would open with announcements about local transgender events, organizations and news, after which each person present would introduce them self. Some came to the group to socialize, others to solve everyday life problems, and a few harbored hopes that more experienced transgender individuals would pass on the knowledge they acquired through their life experiences. Most of all, the group served as a safe and supportive space for queer association, collaboration, and cooperation, where one’s individual, often private, experiences were collectively acknowledged, validated and vindicated.

There, I met Margie, a 59 year-old transgender woman and small business owner from the suburbs. Married with two children and several grandchildren, she was one of the more senior members of the group, and one of its most vocal participants. In many ways, she acted as a mentor to less experienced participants, counseling them on a range of topics from where to (safely) shop for clothes in the area to how to maintain lifelong friendships during one’s gender transition. Before the group meeting one night, Margie and I sat down in the lounge at the community

center where the group was held. Several times throughout my interview with her, Margie emphatically reiterated the following conviction: “*The general public needs to see we’re just ordinary people. I don’t think any of us are living a **lifestyle**. We’re just living life. We’re all individuals.*” Knowing I was going to be writing about the transgender community for a larger audience, Margie repeatedly communicated this argument. She wanted her experiences to encourage my readers to apprehend the everyday ordinariness of transgender life, a perspective she felt was absent from most cultural discourses.

Margie was not the only study participant to convey the theme of the ordinary and ordinary life, as it arose in almost every interview I conducted and emerged frequently in conversations at the transgender support/discussion group I observed. At times, the ordinary emerged as a primary theme, directly confronted and discussed by study participants. However, the ordinary also materialized as an apparition, and although it was invisible and unacknowledged, it emitted a powerful and unavoidable presence. What does it mean to be ordinary? Why is it such a salient theme for participants? Furthermore, what methodologies and strategies do participants employ (with and without media) in accomplishing the ordinary? In this chapter, I argue that *the struggle for the ordinary* is a defining feature of my participants’ daily lives. Rooted in participant meaning making and life stories, I theorize the ordinary as (1) located and manifested within the everyday (2) characterized by a “hybridity” (Bhabha, 1994) of identifications where individuals productively engage with culturally defined binaries and (3) a practical accomplishment often made in and through media culture.

For my participants, the ordinary is meaningful and seductive because the transgender community is so frequently marginalized, reduced to stereotype, and represented on the cultural outskirts. Like so many other participants, Margie objected to the repeated portrayal of transgender individuals in terms of the “*flamboyant*” and the “*controversial*,” portrayals she believes can “*reinforce negative thoughts and feelings about trans people... There are lots of people that don’t accept us, and they always shout the loudest. And the loud ones usually get their way.*” For Margie, “the ordinary” offers humanity and complexity to the transgender experience, and can potentially disrupt narratives that seek to dehumanize, trivialize and reduce. Importantly, Margie considers herself “ordinary.” In delineating the concept, she roots her definition in the dynamics of individual lives, offering the following character sketches: “[*the ordinary means*] *professional people who function in everyday life... warm and caring people, family people... the women who come to this group, one is the lead attorney for the county circuit court ... the person who works on the [assembly] line at Ford.*” As her list reveals, the ordinary is a humanistic concept, rooted in everyday lived experiences of work, family and kindness.

Margie’s life experiences also speak to my conceptualization of the ordinary as hybridity, a creative and productive act of improvisation and negotiation with seemingly opposed cultural categories. A self-identified conservative, Margie’s favorite television show is Fox News’ *O’Reilly Factor*: “*I watch a lot of Fox News and politically I suppose I am conservative, I guess because I’ve always been a businesswoman.*” In addition to her conservative politics, she presents herself in line

with the more traditional aesthetic of the classic feminine: long dresses, silk blouses and soft, shoulder length hair. Although she identifies as a conservative woman, Margie acknowledges her own hybridity: *“Socially however I am pretty progressive... Ever since coming out as trans, and living it, my view of the world certainly has broadened. It has become extremely enriched.”* In many ways, Margie lives a queer lifestyle. She identifies as a transgender woman, and underwent sexual reassignment surgery two months after our first interview. While she typically passes as female in public, she is ‘out’ as transgender to her family, friends, business associates and clients. Margie is also in a decidedly queer relationship. Even though she is married, Margie and her wife have consensually agreed to date and have sex with men and are often perceived as a lesbian couple in daily life. While their relationship is intimate and loving, Margie’s gender transition has resulted in a change and redefinition of the partnership. Margie explains, *“We still kiss but it’s different. It’s a peck on the cheek. The funny thing is when we go shopping and she dotes on me, people perceive us as a lesbian couple. That bothers her a little bit. I love her and I grab her and give her a big kiss. She’s conscious of that in public, but she doesn’t want to be perceived as a lesbian. That’s fine. I’d rather have the guys hitting on me anyways.”* As with her marriage, Margie explains how hard she worked to keep her business afloat, recalling how she had to reassure clients about the soundness of her service and professionalism as she transitioned. She also managed to keep her family in tact. For example, she recounted her family’s *“struggle with the levels of acceptance,”* the hours she spent trying to explain her identity to them, and the many family meetings she had with her children, productive and supportive

meetings that resulted in “*my grandchildren just calling me grandma now.*” By effectively managing her business, redefining the terms of her marriage, and assuming a gender identity consonant with her sense of self, Margie’s life speaks to the ways in which the ordinary is a practical accomplishment. Finally, Margie’s life experiences are for the most part unexceptional and defined by the everyday, as mundane concerns and quotidian events lived within the confines, rhythms and routines of daily life.

The Ordinary as the Everydayness of Transgender

In talking about the lack of transgender cultural visibility in everyday life, Jess refers to a running joke with her girlfriend, “*My girlfriend has this skit that she never had a trans breakfast cereal. There is no trans anything.*” As a mundane and familiar object that routinely appears at breakfast each morning, the choice of cereal as cultural artifact is significant for its ordinariness. Jess’s transgender cereal anecdote speaks to the ways in which transgender life and subjectivity are generally erased and rendered invisible in the context of everyday life and within various cultural settings. In sites where transgender experience is evident, such as within the medical, psychiatric and other academic literatures, Namaste (2000) shows how it is typically subjected to over-politicization, hyper-academicism, and theoretical reduction, arguing:

“Our lives and our bodies are made up of more than gender and identity, more than a theory that justifies our existence, more than mere performance, more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works. Our lives and our bodies are much more complicated, and much less glamorous, than all that. They are forged in the details of everyday life, marked by matters

not discussed by academics or clinical researchers. Our lives and our bodies are constituted in the mundane and uneventful” (Namaste, 2000, p. 1).

In appealing for the mundane and uneventful, Namaste’s work advocates for the representation of the transgender everyday and articulates the *struggle for the ordinary*.

According to the philosopher Stanley Cavell (1984), the ordinary conveys an orientation towards the familiar, “an interpretation of the everyday, the common, the low, the near” (p. 193). It is the uneventful, and more specifically the historically uneventful. While historical “events” are primarily narratives about high moments, ‘battle stories’ concerned with the influence of a select number of elites, the ordinary is equally significant and represents the uneventful, everyday spaces in between these highs (Cavell 1984, p. 193). When compared to ‘high’ theory, ‘high’ politics, or ‘high’ art and culture, the ordinary offers a grounded theory, everyday life politics, folk art and popular culture. Located within the everyday, the ordinary encompasses the common, shared, routine, mundane, and is typically taken for granted, like breakfast cereal. Defined by regularity and predictability (Rosen, 2002), it is often invisible. As Garfinkel (1964) contends, the everyday is “the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted,” a routine of the familiar (p. 225, my emphasis).

During interviews with transgender study participants, they articulated a desire to see this ‘routine of the familiar’ within representations in media. They looked to those figures that populate the everyday world, individuals who are not as Alex describes “*professionally trans*,” as evidence of the everydayness of

transgender. In talking about media culture, Julie maintains, *“I want to see normal people who are... I don’t care if its factory workers, social workers, lawyers, psychologists, who happen to be trans. That’s what I think we need. That’s what people need to see. They need to see we are normal people doing normal things.”*

Likewise, after asking another participant, Ethan, what advice he would offer a media professional about transgender character development, he suggests, *“Get a head doctor on one of these emergency room shows who happens to be transgendered. And maybe every 15th episode you hear about it. It would just be nice to see some healthy, happy, successful, strong characters who do what they do because they like to do that.”* Likewise, Carrie wishes media culture would articulate transgender characters in terms of the multidimensional, considering the everyday features of their lives. *“Don’t just know this person in relation to the fact that they’re transgender, but who is this person, bottom line. Know what they like, dislike, what they read, what cars they like, what hairstyles they like... and then put the transgender on top of it.”*

In addition to the common, familiar and the multidimensional, another participant, Remi, insists that social relations of power are central in any understanding of transgender experiences in everyday life. Lefebvre (1991), one of the first thinkers to conceptualize the everyday, distinguishes ordinary life by what remains after ‘specialization.’ Everyday life refers to the absence of goal-oriented activities, those residual moments and doings that exist outside authorized structures and official relationships. At the same time, for Lefebvre, everyday life is fundamentally circumscribed within power. He writes, “brutally objective power holds sway over all social life; according to its different aspects, we have named it:

money, fragmented division of labour, market, capital, mystification and deprivation” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 166).

Echoing Lefebvre, Remi faults popular transgender representations for ignoring the power structures that constrain everyday life. *“I would like to see more focus on the structural rather than the personal. What happens is that representations of trans-people end up being on the personal. It’s just like being born with a disability. For instance, if you were born without legs, it’s like “Oh how did you overcome this?” Instead of thinking about it systemically, like why don’t we have accessible bathrooms or whatever. I feel like most representations focus on a personal struggle.”* While Remi acknowledges the personal can be the political, she is concerned with the lack of focused *“political critique”* in media culture with respect to transgender experience. For Remi, political critique can open space for important resistances and transformations in society and culture. Lefebvre saw a transformative potential within the structures of everyday life, for it both advances and regresses. He (1991) concludes, *“Everyday life is not unchangeable... possibilities become more apparent, more immediately perceptible, in this sphere than elsewhere”* (p. 228). In this way, everyday life is a fertile space where greater concerns and transgressive aspirations can germinate. Similarly, de Certeau (1984) theorized the everyday as a space of emancipation. His work attended to the myriad forms of resistances and creative responses to an everyday life coordinated by pervasive power structures, forces that are not entirely determinate or constitutive.

Consequently, everyday life is defined by *“an opposition and ‘contrast’ between a certain number of terms”* (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 251) such as power and

agency, and the common and exceptional. However, for Lefebvre and de Certeau, the pull of the everyday was towards regularity and routine. Both thinkers generally theorized these dynamics as fundamentally oppressive and alienating. The incessant regularity and routine of the everyday world, what Lefebvre (2000) calls “recurrences,” is primarily understood as stifling and containing human potential, agency, and creativity (p. 18).

However, while participant interviews do address the suffocating nature of daily life’s ‘recurrences,’ they also convey an alternative interpretation. Importantly, the everyday’s routine offers a sense of comfort and safety, a feeling of security that blankets the self. The everyday is characterized by a “more or less secure normality” coupled with “our capacity to manage it on a daily basis” (Silverstone 1994, p.166). As one participant, Cameron, explains, “*Ordinary life means not having to worry every time you're in a gender-restricted area such as a bathroom. It means waking up, going to work, and getting home to go to sleep like every other person. It means not being scared to ask someone on a date.*” The very ordinary things Cameron listed, which many take for granted, were in fact luxuries in his eyes. Every time he goes to the bathroom, Cameron worries about being ‘outed,’ and when asking someone on a date, he prepares for humiliation and possible physical harm.

Cameron’s comments about “*not having to worry*” in public spaces or “*being scared*” to approach others also suggest that in addition to comfortable predictability, the ordinary affords the ability to move unacknowledged through one’s daily routine, and the possibility of inconspicuous mobility without threat or

personal danger. In discussing Blanchot's (1962) meditation on 'le quotidien,' Sheringham (2000) suggests that in the everyday we are conceived of as a 'nobody,' and more, "the pull of the everyday (its 'mouvement immobile'), is towards anonymity" (p. 189, my emphasis). One participant, Steve, speaks to his desire for the ordinary as quotidian, or "boring" as he articulates: *"One of our goals ought to be to become boring. That it becomes so ubiquitous that its ordinary. One of the comments I heard from someone who moved to Thailand was the large number of katoey or transgenders there that were out in public, and I think you would have the same thing here if we weren't such a confrontational society."* The comparison to Thai culture reveals Steve's desire for transgender to assimilate into the background of everyday life, to be a 'nobody.' His wife echoes these sentiments, *"the majority just want to be ignored, just part of the landscape. That would be my guess. I watch House Hunters on Home and Garden TV and you will see any number of combinations of couples, like interracial, homosexual, and they are just presented as just another couple. So I think that's probably what the transgender population want to have happen to them for the most part."*

This anonymity or 'matter of factness,' the ability to pass through everyday life without being singled out or marked by difference, is a convenience not equally experienced by all individuals. Ethan discusses the ways in which invisibility is denied to many transgender persons. *"I think there's ways in which trans people don't get to become invisible. When people think about trans people they think about the people who are not passing because those are the people who stay on the radar."*

Moreover, in continually marking gender variance and privileging it as the most

salient quality about transgender individuals, the media contribute to transgender hypervisibility. *“I don’t really see representations of ‘here’s somebody who happens to be trans and is going through life.’ It’s held at the forefront and you’re never really given an opportunity to forget about it. At all, and to be able to be like, ‘oh yeah that’s right there is this other part that exists.’ All of these things exist through the lens of transgender.”*

Alex recalls a period in his life he spent overseas where he felt “ordinary,” when his identity was not entirely filtered “through the lens of transgender” that Ethan describes. While Ethan faults dominant social structures and media culture for marginalizing and ‘Othering’ transgender individuals, which exacerbates his struggle for the ordinary, Alex perceives a similar problem with queer discourse, theory and doctrine. According to Alex, the ‘oppositional’ (Halperin, 1995) and ‘anti-social’ (Edelman, 2004) logic and politics of ‘queerness’ also come with heavy burdens and improbable expectations. As a result, Alex bears the weight of both social stigma (from dominant, ‘mainstream’ culture) and social expectation (from a queer subculture mandating radical resistance). While Alex is excited by and sympathizes with queer thought, he finds it difficult to resolve with the structures, affordances and rhythms of everyday life. If the ordinary encompasses being a ‘nobody,’ a sense of anonymity, and the familiar, then both dominant culture *and* queerness can potentially place it further out of reach.

For some time, Alex lived in San Francisco, a city with a sizeable transgender and queer community. There, he cultivated a strong queer identity and political sensibility. He committed to the queer mantras of celebrating difference, opposing

the mainstream, and embracing life on the margins. Although he believed in this ideology, he struggled with it, and the requirement for social and political resistance eventually became exhausting and often alienating. Wanting to travel abroad, Alex saved his money and moved to Thailand for five years, volunteering at an orphanage for children with HIV and AIDS. In Thailand, although he was female-bodied, he started living as a transgender man. He was publicly “out” as transgender to his community.

While Alex realized his performance of a transgender self in a Western context would have been culturally coded as non-normative and political, his everyday experiences in an urban Thai society (for a variety of social and cultural reasons) were devoid of any overt politics. He was treated as Blanchot’s (1962) ‘nobody,’ and felt invisible and apolitical. He elucidates, *“It was not a political issue, it was just who I was. People didn’t care about my politics, and there was a freedom in that. I was also in a place where I was freed up and detached from all the queer subculture in the Bay area.”* After his experiences in Thailand, Alex realized that identifying as queer or transgender in San Francisco came with a political mandate, which felt burdensome. He expressed weariness about carrying the mantle of identity politics. To his surprise, being a ‘nobody,’ unmarked by social stigma or queerness, felt liberating. Alex did not experience this feeling as a sell out position, or a renouncement of social justice, it was an appreciation for feeling free from both the othering of dominant society and the queer mandate of resistance and opposition.

(Re)visiting 'Queer Dilemmas'

Many study participants were struggling with the effects of both the outward push of social exclusion and the inward pull of joining a LGBT and queer (political) culture. Although the social mainstream's waters were often frigid, they were unsure about whether they wanted to join a politicized LGBT or queer collectivity. During my fieldwork, weariness about visibly carrying the mantle of identity politics, of having to regularly, intentionally and conspicuously transform one's life into a subversive political statement, emerged during a support/discussion group session. That night, the discussion group leader started to discuss the politics of transgender identity, and the importance of politically mobilizing and publicly demonstrating to raise awareness. In particular, she urged members to take part in a public protest against a nearby business that invited an artist to perform at its space who had questionable stances regarding LGBT rights. The protest was slated to adopt a queer politics of confrontation and disruption, answering Stone's (1991) call to "read one's self aloud" (p. 299). The discussion group leader was a local community organizer, heavily involved in LGBT politics and mobilization. Throughout my time observing the group, she had only directly invoked politics in this way a handful of times. However, this discourse upset and irritated one member of the group in particular, Scott. Scott and I spoke after the session that night, and his distaste for the discussion leader's 'call to action' was considerable. He mentioned he was "*tired*" of having to engage in the kinds of overt, disruptive, and public political actions the group leader advocated. He made sure to remind me he was not against politics per se, but he objected to the assumption that his

transgender identity mandated political activity and more specifically social confrontation and disruption. Scott disagreed with the tactics the group was employing, describing them in terms of spectacle and the outrageous.

In coming to the support/discussion group, he wanted to talk about what he called "*life*," which he identified as work, family, social life and intimate relationships. Importantly, Scott mentioned that within his everyday life, he constantly fights small battles at home, trying to change and open the minds of friends and family about the legitimacy of his transgender identity. As a result he has little energy left over to protest "*this crazy singer*," with whom he felt no connection. The invocation of the political, in the formal sense, was a disruption to the everyday themes he wanted to process and discuss with other members of the group. Like Alex, he was struggling for a sense of ordinary life – to live indistinct and unmarked within a routine of the familiar. Yet, what may be at risk in this kind of investment into the ordinary?

This question can be addressed by exploring two 'queer dilemmas' (Gamson, 1996) participants often faced. The first was about whether to self-consciously politicize, to join a political culture and actively fight for social justice. The second regarded the posture and approach their politics should embody. At stake in these decisions is what scholars such as Duggan (2002) and Richardson (2005) identify as a 'neoliberal politics of normalization' or 'homonormativity.' Richardson (2005) argues that a neoliberal politics of normalization "seeks incorporation into the mainstream" (p. 519), and articulates "the rights of individuals rather than "gay rights"... seeking "equality" with, rather than tolerance from, the mainstream" (p.

516). The logic of homonormativity minimizes the centrality and value of difference, and declares “support for and adherence to dominant cultural norms and values as key mechanisms of social inclusion” (Richardson, 2005, p. 521). Scholars argue that homonorativity comes at a price, for differences and inequalities along the lines of class, race, ability, gender, etc. may be silenced. According to Duggan (2002), homonormativity essentially communicates a “nonpolitics” (p. 177), an aversion to queer antagonism. For example, Alex’s articulation of his identity as “*not a political issue*” and the sense of “*freedom*” from politics he felt in Thailand (noted above) reflect homonormativity’s desire for “a domesticated, depoliticized privacy” (Duggan, 2002, p. 190). In summing up homonormativity, Duggan (2002) suggests it manifests as a “political sedative,” continuing “we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever” (p. 189).

As Gamson (1996) has illustrated, LGBT and queer politics and community (like all political mobilizations) are rife with their own internal divisions, tensions and conflicts regarding the significance and function of diversity, the preservation of a distinct LGBT subcultural life and sensibility, and the proper relationship to dominant societal structures and formations. In analyzing these ‘queer dilemmas,’ he identifies a particularly strong ideological divide between two related but distinct positions: queer separatists and LGBT pragmatists. Queer “border-patrolling separatists” (Gamson, 1996, p. 409) undoubtedly reject homonormativity. In line with the rallying slogan “We’re here, we’re queer. Get used to it,” the queer separatists’ politics express an “in your face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism” (Gamson, 1996, p. 402). Moreover, sexual and gender identities are

defined as unpredictably fluid and unstable – constructed through social relations of power. Within this paradigm, the transgender figure in particular is routinely marked as a source of queer cultural disruption, as homonormativity's *bête noire* (Bolin, 1998; Garber, 1992; Hale, 1996; Hausman, 2006; Stone, 1991). In particular, scholars and critics often singularly position transgender as a political entity, resting its importance on its ability to make a transgressive social or political critique.

Gender crossing is politically and culturally “radical” in that it works to “destabilize all such binaries: not only ‘male’ and ‘female,’ but also ‘gay’ and ‘straight,’ and ‘sex’ and ‘gender’” (Garber, 1992, p. 133). Transgender studies scholar, Stone (1991), urges transsexuals to use their bodies and identities in the service of politics, to “forgo passing, to be consciously “read,” to read oneself aloud” (p. 299). Stone (1991) advocates that transsexuals actively position themselves on the margins to create a counterdiscourse that exposes and undermines fundamental social and political structures, “to generate a true, effective and representative counterdiscourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender” (p. 295). She criticizes the desire of many transgender individuals to “fade into the “normal” population as soon as possible” (Stone 1991, p. 295).

By contrast, advocating a ‘working with’ approach with respect to the mainstream, an “anti-queer pragmatist” (Gamson, 1996, p. 409) stance practically and less provocatively approaches the structures and realities of the political and social world. It values and utilizes threads of similarity with other groups, embraces forms of assimilation, and proffers a more stable, collective conception of identity. Richardson (2005) argues this form of political ideology is largely homonormative

and has “become the dominant political discourse in the case of lesbian and gay movements in the USA” (p. 516). For example, one of the largest LGBT political advocacy organizations in the United States, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) captures these values in its official Mission Statement: “By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all” (Human Rights Campaign D, 2011-2013). As a form of social embrace, the organization’s language here hails and invites “all Americans,” not just the LGBT or queer community. Also, rather than seeking to structurally revolutionize or challenge the integrity of social and political formations, it simply requests that the nation “realize” and actualize its inherent “fairness” and “equality.”

In weighing both stances, Gamson (1996) concludes that the crux of the ‘queer dilemma,’ its Gordian knot, is that both have validity, and he succinctly underscores what is at stake within the logics of both camps. While the pragmatists’ efforts in expressing congruity with others and achieving legal rights has been productive, they do “little to attack the political culture that itself makes the denial of and struggle for civil rights necessary and possible” (p. 408). In seeking assimilation, LGBT pragmatists validate and legitimate modalities of oppression and discrimination deeply ingrained within social, political, cultural and economic structures. They overlook meaning systems that create social hierarchies of value and sustain sexual and gender binaries. In privileging sameness, they erase importance differences from heterosexual and cis gender society, and fail to appreciate the internal diversity of the LGBTQ community. They disregard the

rambunctious, creative and vibrant potential mobilized in and through queerness. Yet, queer separatists' suspicion of collective identity and sameness tend to uncritically equate both of these things with domination, oppression and discipline. This reductive equation also limits the productive potential of sameness, stunting opportunities for cooperation, collaboration and identification with the mainstream, with the non-queer. The queer critique also "does little to touch the institutions that make embracing normality (or building a collective around inverted abnormality) both sensible and dangerous" (Gamson, 1996, p. 409). Moreover, I argue that it fails to consider how wielding overt symbols of difference and opposition can be burdensome and hazardous, overlooking the viability, feasibility and perhaps even desirability of separatism and resistance in an everyday life defined by a struggle for the ordinary.

In accord with Gamson, my fieldwork and interviews with study participants ultimately reveal an affinity for (and a distance from) both separatist and assimilationist paradigms. For example, in talking about media representation, Alex remarks: *"I want to see people who just happen to be trans and do a million other things with their life. It obviously is a big thing, but it would be nice if the focus of the storyline or interview isn't transness. I think that would be huge!"* As Alex mentions, for him transgender identity should be both 'a big thing' (an expression of difference) and something that just 'happens to be' (an acknowledgement of similarity). Influenced by and sometimes torn between the dynamics of sameness and difference, separatism and assimilation, and queerness and normality, my investigation demonstrates how study participants struggle to come to terms with

these 'queer dilemmas.' In the process of self-making and life-making, I argue that study participants find remedies through embracing hybridity, doing so in ways that may seem contradictory, but are essentially compatible with their particular everyday lives.

The Ordinary as Hybridity

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) explores postcolonial, contemporary projects of identity as hybrids, selves that cross diverse cultural and social locations and temporalities, and forever occupy a constant state of in-betweenness. He investigates what he calls 'border lives,' which operate in the following way: "These in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Importantly, hybrid identity arises within "the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference," and as a result contemporary subjectivity presents "complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha (1994, p. 2). Potentially, the act of 'interstitial passage,' of moving back and forth between divergent identifications, "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). Hybrid identity moves beyond the confines of binary opposition, which in Structuralist thought refers to a state of mutually exclusive opposites (Innes, 2010). In a binary relationship, one of the dual components is typically privileged and

valued over the other. In defining and delimiting meaning as oppositional, binary opposition performs the work of classification, as duality represents a primary engine for constructing cultural meaning (for example good vs. evil, normal vs. aberrant, male vs. female). However, as Innes (2010) points out, scholars such as Derrida have problematized the binary relationship by illustrating that “each term of the opposition depends for its exclusivity upon the success of the operation which places the two terms in contradiction” (Innes, 2010, p. 75). This operation, the relationship between the two contrasting terms, is often culturally and socially inflected. Furthermore, rather than existing in a state of mutual exclusivity, each element can be examined “as each containing elements of the other” (Innes, 2010, p. 75). Bhabha’s (1994) conceptualization of hybridity accounts for this complexity, for cultural contradiction, and for the porous nature of binary systems.

Furthermore, hybridity is useful in understanding contemporary ordinary life, in that ordinary life is above all a paradox, “and the terms of that paradox- the found object and the created object- the imposed meanings and the selected meanings- the controlled behaviour and the free- the meaningless and the meaningful- the passive and the active- are in constant tension” (Silverstone, 1994, p. 164). As their life stories reveal, study participants lived through and beyond this paradox and tension, engaging in acts of ‘hybrid self-making,’ or the practice of mixing and matching the incongruous, of composing one’s life and subjectivity in ways that interface, recombine and integrate seemingly opposed cultural elements and dynamics. Throughout my fieldwork and participant interviews, the practice of hybrid self-making manifested in three ways, (1) as simultaneity (*I am this and that*)

(2) as a “Golden Mean” (Aristotle, 1999) (*I am in between this and that*) and (3) as opposition (*I am this not that*). In struggling for the ordinary and surviving the everyday, hybrid self-making was a necessary and routine practice for transgender participants who continually juggled the tensions of social inclusion/exclusion.

Simultaneity

During my interview with Linda, a transgender woman from a small Midwest farming community, she discusses working hard to lead a generally “ordinary” life and to land a stable job that she likes. *“I live everyday like this [as a trans woman]. I work at Home Depot. I love my job. Everybody treats me very well. I wait on customers. I don’t have any problems. If a customer realizes I’m trans and they don’t like it, usually they’ll just say “no, no thanks. I’ll find it myself.”* This kind of ordinary life is what she wants to see portrayed in media. Her favorite media are transgender themed teledocumentaries because they offer a window into the complexities of everyday life, what she calls *“the whole picture.”* In talking about transgender themed tele-documentaries on networks like ABC and MSNBC, Linda explains, *“I have about 20 hours of it recorded. Whenever I get a chance to, I watch them. They show the good, the bad, the whole picture. And I think that’s the way it should be. It should make us seem like ordinary people.”* Here, Linda articulates the ordinary as a state of simultaneity, the co-presence of *“the good”* and *“the bad.”* For Linda, tele-documentaries are also significant in that evidence the simultaneity of sameness and difference in ordinary life. *“We ’re just like everybody else. They show daily life, which is what I think we need to see more of to prove we’re no different than anybody else. We feed, we bathe, we clothe, just like everybody else does. They also show the*

different things we have to deal with on an everyday basis. I mean we are different, we dress differently, we have different needs sometimes ... but we all put our skirts on one leg at a time." With respect to sameness, Linda highlights the shared everyday rituals of eating and bathing. In establishing a connection to and affinity with other women, she mentions the universal act of stepping into a skirt *"one leg at a time."* Yet Linda also acknowledges the difference that defines *her* life and subjectivity as a transgender woman, identifying fundamentally distinct needs and alternative ways of presenting self.

Like Linda, Josh understands ordinary life as a practice of hybrid simultaneity. In evaluating media representations of transgender identity, Josh expresses a desire to see simultaneous expressions of sameness and difference: *"I don't agree with media just pointing out the difference and how we're different from everyone else. I don't think we're all the same and we have all the same pressures, but I do think that it does help for people to feel more comfortable with difference when they think we're not that different. Like, I don't want people to think they can't relate to me at all because I'm so different. You don't have to show me any kind of sympathy and respect."* Importantly for Josh, media representations of sameness serve as a sort of social thread. They allow others to grow comfortable with transgender difference, generate sympathy and respect, and thereby improve everyday social relations.

The Golden Mean

In thinking through the complexities of ordinary life, de Certeau summarizes, "Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down

its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30, my emphasis). de Certeau’s art of liminality, of creatively forging a middle way between cultural oppositions, frequently materialized during participant interviews about media and everyday life. Participants understand their lives and subjectivities in terms that transcend and travel in between conventional binaries such as sameness/difference, queer/normal, resistance/assimilation, male/female, and structure/agency. In constructing a hybrid self, they seek out a “golden mean” (Aristotle, 1999) between these oppositional terms that makes sense in terms of their own lives. According to Aristotle living a good and moral life was dependent on one’s ability to establish this ‘golden mean,’ to inhabit a space “equidistant from each of the extremes” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 26). Aristotle (1999) argues, “moral virtue is a mean ... between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions” (p. 32). Importantly, this mean is an “intermediate relatively to us” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 26), for its constitution is subjective and different for each person depending on personal preferences and life context.

One participant, Wren, expresses the desire for a ‘golden mean’ in both his gender identity and in media representations. According to Wren, his gender identity is very much a middle way, what he calls an “*in between or a liminal category.*” While he prefers to be identified with masculine pronouns, he explains, “*I’m in this space where I don’t feel like a female but I’m not sure if I want to be known*

as a guy." In his everyday life, he refashions an in-between identity from the male-female and masculine-feminine binaries that inform dominant gender ideologies. However, adopting this identity presents a challenge with respect to living in the social world, *"People have to have a specific thing to call you and it's hard to explain to people that I have this name that works for me, but a lot is still up in the air. It's something many people just don't want to deal with."*

The middle way also informs Wren's understanding of transgender visibility in media. In diagnosing the current representational condition for transgender visibility, Wren speaks to a preoccupation with the extremes of normality and marginality. He wants to see representational liminality, something in between what he calls *"very marginal characters who are not being normal"* and characters who are *"traditional"* and *"normalized."* He clarifies, *"So there are these normalized representations that are like, "See how were just like you?" And on the other end of it there is this total Jerry Springer spectacle of like, "Guess which person up here is a man and you don't really know it!" So there are these two extremes of normalizing on the one hand and then something that's weird to the general public on the other. I think that there are lots of different ways to identify as trans, and so often you only get a few limited representations."* In alignment with "the ordinary," Wren wants to see *"real people"* living *"varied lives"* with *"developed"* personalities living in-between binaries and extremes.

Similarly, another participant, Alex, affirms the importance of media depictions that resist the extremes, texts that can be *"accessible to people who wouldn't already be aware of trans issues."* As an intermediary, these kinds of texts

carve space between insider and outsider knowledge and experience. He cites the films *TransAmerica* and *Boys Don't Cry* as examples of accessible media. *"They're largely thematic pieces of media. To me that's important because you have the mainstream interfacing with something they've never seen before... Although I am largely anti-capitalist, I think there are ways that you can use the system to the advantage of a marginalized group."* For Alex, these films, as widely accessible art, offer an opportunity to bridge social distance and humanize difference: *"I think we need to create an art that is accessible and subtle, and under-spoken so that it creates a space that is inviting and eliminates imagined boundaries that exists between people. Art that enables bringing people together is much better than art that distances everyone."* His critique of the imagined social boundaries that separate people reveal an appreciation for sameness. During our interview, he offers an anecdote about how the ignored affinity between him and members of his father's church creates unnecessary distance, disrupting the potential for friendship and fellowship. *"There's an imagined boundary that exists between me and the people at my dad's church. They're thinking you're a tranny. You're so weird and I don't know how to talk to you. And I'm thinking you're an asshole and I can't believe you voted for Bush. But really those are just imagined boundaries. We could very easily have a conversation about baseball and be fine!"* For Alex, the possibility for human connection lay within a Golden Mean between sameness and difference.

Importantly, Alex is not advocating the elimination of diversity, for representational paradigms that erase transgender difference greatly frustrate him. As he discusses this paradigm his voice swells, *"The biggest trend I've seen is 'I'm just like everybody*

else. There's nothing different about me." So, they eliminate difference... The queerness is erased. Ugh!" Here, Alex expresses the importance of affirming and preserving difference. He proudly identifies as queer and is unwilling to commit to a universal sense of identity, one that depends on congruity and equivalence with others. At the same time, Alex is unwilling to embrace total difference in constructing his identity, *"I never wanted to look like I was trans. I don't want to be another kind of different. It doesn't mean I want to eliminate my difference! I just want to be 'me.'"* In this way, his identity exists as a Golden Mean, somewhere at the nexus of sameness and difference, what he calls just being "me."

Blake repeatedly commented on a sense of hybridity, of being in between with respect to the way he lives and makes sense of his life throughout our interview. As with Wren and Alex, his embrace of the middle way was evident in his thoughts on transgender media visibility. While Blake sympathizes with those who favor a more radical or what he called "bitter" approach to transgender advocacy in media, he worries about how this could influence public perception and transgender freedom. *"I don't see enough of the middle way. Yes, the whole point of media is to sell tickets, to cater to the red states, to be in the middle. But it allows people to see what the other side is like. There's not enough of people being themselves... I want to see people who aren't angry or bitter... If you come across as angry and bitter, then no one is going to want transgender rights."* For Blake, the middle way is in many ways an ideal state in which transgender legitimacy and value are affirmed without the "anger," and where gender variance took the form of fully realized individuals *"being themselves."* Consequently, as an ideal, the Golden Mean as a way of life is not

always possible or equally accessible, “for in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g., to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 32).

Opposition

Since practices of simultaneity and in betweenness are not universally attainable, as they can violate the dominant social contracts of everyday life, some participants settle on the oppositional logic of ‘either-or.’ While their identities are still essentially rooted in hybridity, they draw contrasts and ‘choose sides’ in certain contexts for a variety of reasons. For Blake, choosing sides was necessary in order to succeed outside of college life. While Blake now identifies as a trans man and has surgically altered his body to appear more masculine, he explained that for a while he felt a sense of being in between with respect to gender and sexuality: *“I was in the middle of my identity. I wasn’t identifying as trans, I wasn’t identifying as a lesbian anymore. I was sort of in the middle... There is all this gender in society. I mean even just walking around, “excuse me sir, excuse me ma’am,” and all the gendering that goes on I wasn’t comfortable with.”* He explains his transition as the following: *“I started identifying as neutral, and then I went from neutral to identifying as a guy without taking hormones or doing surgery. And then I went from there to hormones and surgery.”* However, while Blake would prefer to adopt a more gender fluid presentation of self, he had to seriously consider the realities of living in the world. In thinking about the challenges of employment, Blake had to align himself with the maleness in the male/female binary: *“There is no point in me doing something that is only going to make life harder for me... I was trying to think about where I fit in to the professional world as an adult in society. That’s really where it changed, once I started*

thinking about my professional future. People address you as male or female. You have to at least conform to one or the other in some aspects of life... In college, I could be in the middle and I could be fine. In the real world, when you're applying for jobs it's not that easy. You have to come in and say I identify closer with this gender than with that gender. You have to make that distinction."

Blake's hybrid identity shifted in response to the changing circumstances of his life and as he set new goals. He realized that in order to live in what he calls "*the adult world*," his gender had to become more readable. Yet in pursuing a gender transition and living full time as a transgender male, he never fully abandoned his queerness. Blake chooses when and where to disclose his transgender identity, and refuses to conform to societal norms on his own terms. This modality of living is a practical compromise that allowed him to achieve both the affordances and rhythms of everyday life as well as a sense of self that feels authentic. In addition to Blake, Linda, Josh, Alex and Wren's life experiences collectively describe dynamic processes of hybrid self-making, the constant work of redefinition and negotiation with the terms and structures that circumscribe everyday life. As Highmore (2002a) contends, ordinary life is "a dynamic process" defined by "making the unfamiliar familiar," "getting accustomed to the disruption of custom," "struggling to incorporate the new," and "adjusting to different ways of living" (p. 2). This modality of living requires constant, conscientious labor, a form of everyday accomplishment explored in the next section.

Accomplishing the Ordinary

In talking about their everyday life experiences, participant stories reveal a persistent struggle for the very ordinary things that most individuals take for granted, such as using a public restroom, shopping for clothes, visiting the doctor, and making like-minded friends. Each of these tasks, while seemingly commonplace, required considerable thought, planning, and effort. Many carried the risk of personal harm and humiliation. For example, one evening before the transgender support/discussion group I observed began, two members were discussing what Halberstam (1998) identifies as “the bathroom problem” (p. 20). One member recited a troubling encounter she experienced while attempting to use the women’s restroom at a restaurant. She was ‘outed’ by a fellow customer, who quickly found the manager. Although the manager refused to take sides, and successfully diffused the situation, the incident was incredibly embarrassing and distressing. Public bathrooms are spaces where the policing of gender is active and aggressive, “zones of intense scrutiny and observation” (Halbertsam, p. 21, 1998), where gender ambiguous individuals are “routinely questioned and challenged” (Halbertsam, p. 20, 1998) about their presence. In order to help mitigate the anxiety and fear of using a public bathroom, the discussion group participant searched the Internet for resources that could help her manage this daily task. She eventually found safe2pee.org (see Figure 5 below). [Safe2pee.org](http://safe2pee.org) and a new iPhone app, [TranSquat](#) (powered by safe2pee.org’s database), allow users to identify their geographical location, after which the tool detects local gender neutral and single occupancy bathrooms. The discussion group member explained that before leaving

the house for long stretches of time, she visits the website to ensure she will have a comfortable place to use the restroom. In this way, 'Safe 2 Pee' and 'TranSquat' facilitate the accomplishment of at least one mundane and routine feature of everyday life.

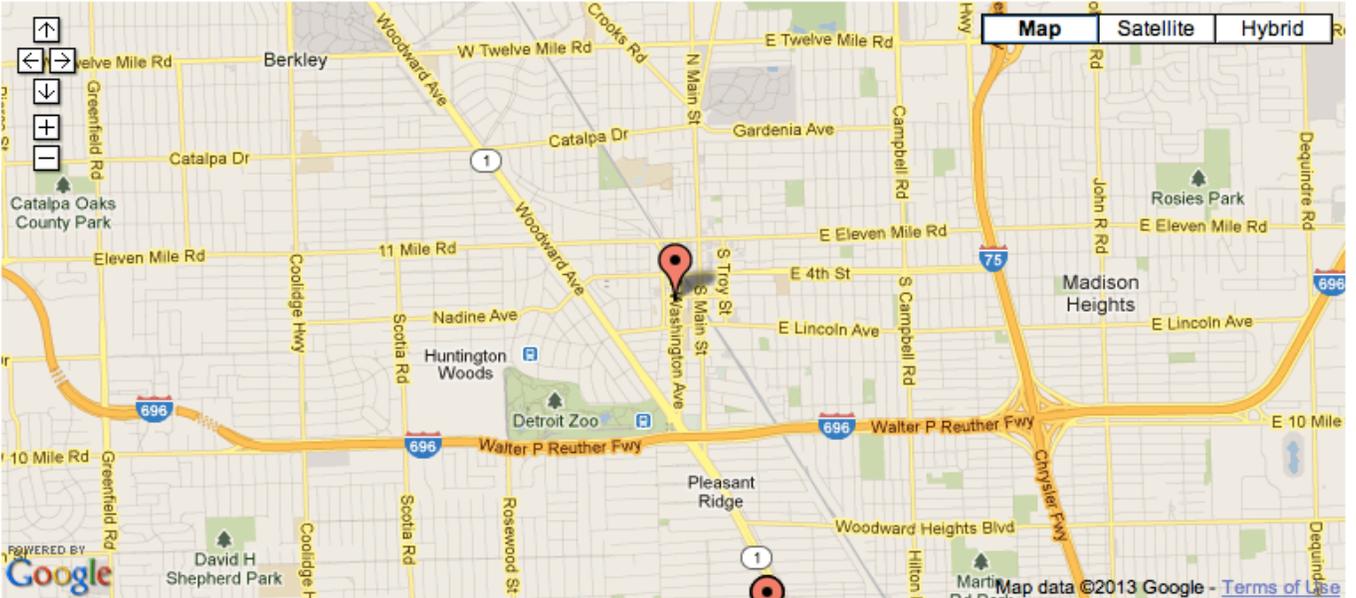
bathrooms for everyone

home browse leaderboard stats mobile about resources facebook

[Log in now](#) or [Sign up](#).

20 Results

Export: [KML](#) | [GeoRSS](#) | [TSV](#) | [JSON](#)



Name	Address	City ST	Type	Accessibility	Free/Pay?	Directions
Prontos	608 S. Washington	Royal Oak, MI	Gender Neutral	Yes	act like you're shopping	Genderfree unisex located next to manager's office. Enter in rear from Sixth. First door from street... More Info
Affirmations	290 W. Nine Mile Road	Ferndale, MI	Gender Neutral	Yes	you can stroll right in	Gender free in basement accessed by stairs or elevator. Gendered on first floor, easily accessible ... More Info

Figure 5: *SafetoPee.org identifies local gender neutral bathrooms in Royal Oak, MI, a suburb of Detroit.*

As a transgender community resource, much of Safe 2 Pee's database is generated by users. After entering a location, the application displays a Google Map. In the

above image (Figure 1), the application searches the town Royal Oak, a suburb of Detroit, MI and offers locations of 'safe' bathrooms, including the address, type of bathroom, and whether it is wheelchair accessible. The application also informs users about where to go and how to 'perform' in public space in order to successfully access the bathroom. For example, at Prontos restaurant (Figure 1), individuals should "act like you're shopping," and enter from the rear of the building to find the bathroom on the first floor.

As the bathroom problem and the website 'Safe 2 Pee' evidence, everyday society's "achieved phenomena of order" is a continuous accomplishment made possible by the perpetual work of its members in locally defined contexts (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 11). Moreover, this achievement is made in and through media culture. This work operates on both the individual and societal level, for the ordinary is "a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinately engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons" (Sacks, 1984, p. 415). On the societal level, as Garfinkel (1996) concludes, ordinary life is a "locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, naturally accountable, ongoing practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely members' work, with no time out" (p. 11). With respect to the individual, Sacks (1984) conceives of the ordinary as a "way somebody constitutes oneself" (p. 415), and in conceptualizing it as an active and on going process, he argues:

"Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not think of "an ordinary person" as some person, but as somebody having as one's job, as one's constant preoccupation, doing "being ordinary." It is not that somebody *is* ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one's business is, and it takes work, as any other business does" (p. 414).

By shifting the concept of ordinary towards “doing” and away from being, Sacks privileges its achieved status, and in drawing parallels with business, he highlights the labor and conscious effort required to access ordinary status.

One participant, Lisa, learned how to do being an “ordinary girl” by closely observing how women behaved and presented themselves in the ‘real world.’ *“I would look at women as women, but I would be scrutinizing how they carried themselves, how their hands looked, how they did their make-up.”* She also looked to other sources for doing “being ordinary.” Transitioning during a time before the Internet, she used print media as guides for presenting a feminine self. *“I would buy women’s magazines and teenage girls magazines for girls who were just starting to put make-up on. Those magazines taught me all the tricks and that’s how I learned all that stuff.”*

Two other participants received help in doing ‘being an ordinary girl’ by a company specializing in the practice. Janet’s Closet, a Michigan based retail company offering a wide range of cross dressing related products, offers a service called “Queen For a Night.” The service offers a makeover and a night out. It is intended:

“for you girls that seek an experience out in the real world. We will work with utmost attention geared to your comfort; and to help bring out the woman you see within you. We keep things as relaxed as possible for these fun evenings (outings)... The timing and whole evening is formed around you and how much you would like to do and experience” (JanetsCloset.com).

While a night out is an everyday event that most achieve with little thought, for many of my participants it is a practical accomplishment requiring planning,

strategy and support. Many of my participants discussed experiencing loneliness for fear of going out, especially when they first started to transition. As a result, the act of socializing is an activity fraught with anxiety and trepidation. Recognizing this dilemma, Janet's Closet offers "Queen For a Night." For \$200, specialists at the store will perform a makeover for transgender women, providing make-up, clothing, and shoes.

As one participant, Linda explains, the makeover portion taught her how to do the kinds of everyday things such as styling one's hair and applying make-up many individuals learn in adolescence. *"I didn't know where to go to learn about things like hair, make-up, clothes, and all that. I heard about a place, in fact I looked it up on the Internet, called Janet's Closet. I went down and got a makeover thing with Janet the first time. I was really impressed."* While the makeover helps with presenting the self, the notable component of the "Queen For a Night" service is the outing, the cultivation of a social self. As the website states, "Sometimes we need others to help share an important event" (JanetsCloset.com). The service offers individuals the very ordinary luxury of socializing with others in a supportive context. Importantly, someone from the store accompanies the client, offering mentorship, support and guidance. For Margie, the outing was transformative. It was a public declaration of self that allowed her, for the first time, to feel relaxed in a social setting. *"There is a service at Janet's Closet called "Queen for the Night." You go to her store, she dresses you up, does your makeup and takes you to a club. Having never been to a bar before, I was afraid to go and didn't want to go by myself. So I went with her and I was like "oh my god." It was a place where I really felt*

comfortable.” After going to the club as a “Queen for the Night,” Margie felt comfortable enough to return on her own in the future. In this way, the service was a steppingstone into the social world, facilitating a “doing being ordinary” (Sacks, 1984).

While we all take part in this struggle for the ordinary, focusing on the transgender community offers a unique lens, for many are what Garfinkel (1964) referred to as “a stranger to the “life as usual” character of everyday scenes” (p. 226). Since they are often excluded from it, or are tasked with working extra hard to appreciate it, transgender individuals acutely perceive the taken for granted affordances and rhythms of everyday life. Notably, one of the first ethnomethodological studies was of a transgender person named Agnes. Garfinkel’s (1984) study of Agnes uses a phenomenological approach to examine the complex strategies of passing and survival she employed in everyday life. As part of a team at UCLA in charge of determining whether Agnes would be granted the permission for sexual reassignment surgery, Garfinkel produces a highly detailed account, a rich description that illustrated Agnes’ struggle for the ordinary. He observes:

“The scrutiny she paid to appearances; her concerns for adequate motivation, relevance, evidence and demonstration; her sensitivity to devices of talk; her skill in detecting and managing “tests” were attained as part of her mastery of trivial but necessary social tasks, to secure ordinary rights to live.” (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 180).

For Agnes, everyday rituals were “disengageable attainments,” highly problematic, strategically planned and thoughtfully executed, requiring “the successful management of situations of risk and uncertainty” (Garfinkel, 1984, p.184; p. 165).

Her life vividly portrayed the deliberate and often overlooked work involved in manufacturing and maintaining sexed identities and gender roles in a world where one's gender identity has to be instantly identifiable as male or female. Since her audience of healthcare professionals had the power to grant her surgery, Agnes constructed a particular kind of biography for her life history, one "that was so consistently female as to leave us without information on many important points" (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 178). Garfinkel comments on the acute skill with which Agnes created this self-narration, a story that everyday life often demanded.

Like Agnes, participants detail the ways in which everyday rituals require planning and management, sharing similar concerns, for example, with respect to healthcare. Unlike Agnes however, transgender individuals now live in an age structured by digital media, and participants turned to communications technologies to manage everyday life. In her work *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage*, Bolin (1988) discusses the ways in which the transsexual community has developed transsexual lore, or a knowledge base generated from within the subculture about managing everyday life that gets passed down via word of mouth from experienced members. Specifically, this lore included how to talk to the medical community in order to receive what one desired, such as proper treatment, hormones or sexual reassignment surgery.

In talking with study participants, it is evident that this lore is increasingly being (re)mediated. While transgender support groups and LGBT bars, for example, are still important mechanisms for the oral transmission of transgender related knowledge and advice, transgender individuals are turning to digital technologies in

securing information and developing their identities. From therapists to support group leaders, the professional individuals I spoke with who work with the transgender community all mentioned this digital migration away from in person modalities of support and towards virtual forms of communication and assistance. As one participant, Jen, explained, *“Basically throughout my whole transition I didn’t come to one [support group] meeting. I did it all online. That’s where I got my information.”*

Another participant, Wren, chose to utilize the Internet to meet one of his most difficult challenges: finding a doctor that could meet his medical needs. He explained that he experienced *“major anxiety”* about finding medical treatment, and having to explain his gender identity during visits and exams. He was not sure how to approach the topic and how to describe his gender identity in a way that would translate. He looked to transgender websites for guidance. *“The Internet helped with finding out general information and familiarizing myself with all the different identities that there are. Certain websites would teach you how to find and negotiate with doctors... and how to acquire all these different things. There are hard questions and decision you have to make. You have to decide whether to tell them that your trans or not.”* After reading advice type literature found online, Wren’s anxiety was attenuated and he felt prepared to effectively communicate with health professionals during visits.

In addition to websites, many participants utilized online Listservs and email lists from transgender organizations with a web presence to find doctors knowledgeable about transgender issues. These online sources are dynamic sites of

a growing digital transsexual lore. Importantly, Listservs generate and circulate diverse opinions, and offer the ability for dialogue. They helped participants to engage in everyday life problem solving, helping those with specific needs network with like minded others in a safe space. During a support/discussion group session, one member recalled using the listserv to find a medical professional in his town, an area to which he recently moved. He sent an email to the list asking for help finding a doctor who would be useful for both transgender specific and general health concerns. Although the two listserv members who responded to him were unable to recommend a doctor, they quickly put him in touch with someone who lived in his area who was able to offer assistance. Another support group member used the listservs from transgender organizations to locate nightclubs and bars in her local area that were welcoming of transgender individuals. What impressed her most about the communications tool was the level of specificity and anonymity it offers. She was anonymously given a wealth of information about a local bar by listserv members, which included where to park safely, when the best time to arrive was, how to dress, and how much money to bring.

While communications technologies can help individuals better accomplish an ordinary life, they also add new challenges and complications. In particular, individuals must now effectively manage their identities in a variety of online and offline worlds and platforms. One participant's story testifies to these challenges, for it reveals the various measures she took to first develop a sense of self and then to carefully manage this identity across various social contexts. Jen is a twenty one year old trans woman from the Michigan suburbs. I met her at a discussion/support

group, and during the meeting she stood out, for she was one of the more gregarious participants. As a young person, much of her social world exists online, on social networking websites like Facebook and MySpace. However, as a trans woman trying to achieve a somewhat ordinary everyday life, she struggles with the challenges of crafting and performing her identity for various audiences. Jen's story is a testament to the accomplished nature of the ordinary, an accomplishment made especially challenging for transgender individuals who are attempting to manage stigma within a media saturated world.

As Goffman (1959) argues, the performance of self in everyday life is an active, ongoing process that must be skillfully managed in a common world where we are constantly in the presence of others. Specifically, these performances of self are enacted to deliver a specific impression to others, a process Goffman (1959) labeled "impression management." When in the presence of others, impression management is the act of an individual "expressing himself in such a way that as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan" (Goffman, 1959, p. 4). Fundamentally, impression management is about the ability to "control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him" (p. 3). As Goffman (1959) argues self performances radiate a "promissory character" (p. 2), and as a result "the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the co-operative activity that follows" (p. 12).

When Jen started to explore her gender identity, she engaged with social networking sites as a testing ground for impression management. Through social

networking engagements, Jen wanted to experience what it would feel like socializing as a woman, and whether she could successfully project and perform a feminine self. *"I made fake MySpace and Facebook pages to project myself the way I felt. At the very beginning I started with fake pictures of people I thought I should look like."* However, things became complicated when an online relationship grew more intimate. In order to keep the initial definition of herself intact, Jen attempted to assimilate her online and offline identity. *"There was one guy from Canada I talked to when I was about 16-17. I went from a fake picture to a real picture of me, and I tried to make my real picture look like the fake one. I bought color contacts, a wig, but he knew something wasn't right. He was at first determined that I was normal and there is nothing wrong. But his friend was telling him there is no way in hell it was the same person."* Although Jen changed the features of what Goffman (1959) calls one's "personal front" (p. 23-24), or the expressive equipment one uses to convey a self-image, it was not enough to assuage doubt. Jen sensed her Canadian friend's suspicion regarding her new, evolving online image. Consequently, she revealed her real appearance by sharing photos and confided in him about her transgender identity. *"I told him before I met him. He kept wanting to meet me and I kept pushing it off. I don't know how I pushed it off for almost 2 years. I told him before hand, and he said well I kind of figured but it's okay. That was neat."* To her surprise, even though the integrity of her performance was compromised, her friend decided to pursue the relationship.

For a while, the two got along well. On her visits to Canada, Jen was able to explore her identity, away from her hometown in Michigan. This freedom of

anonymity in Canada coupled with her online identity experiments facilitated the development of a female self in the 'real world.' *"When I got my license at sixteen I would sneak to Canada and started dressing. I got comfortable with it in Canada. I literally spent my summer up there with him. I'd come home for one day and then shoot back up there. I grew up and it got to the point where I wanted to go to the store and go out by myself and do this and that."* However, Jen's entrance into the real world as a transgender woman troubled her boyfriend, who was concerned with the management of his own identity. *"He didn't like that because he thought maybe someone would be able to tell. He didn't want me to meet his parents or his friends. I became this big secret."*

Although the relationship eventually dissolved, Jen learned about the dynamics of identity management both in the real and virtual world. *"I kind of try to be active, but whenever I do anything transgender related now, especially in public or even online, unfortunately I have to put a shield up. I have to be ready. I sometimes have to use an alias."* She has since cultivated what Goffman (1959) identifies as the "arts of impression management" in order to "pass" as a woman when she wants or needs to. Passing, according to Stone (1991):

*"means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a "natural" member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture. One and the same with passing is effacement of the prior gender role, or the construction of a plausible history... [passing] forecloses the possibility of a life grounded in the *intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body" (p. 296-297).*

For Stone, the erasure of one's past as a male or female, the construction of a history that leaves silent one's previous gender, and the annulment of one's trans-gender

identity produces a deletion of self. This process of expunction denies transgender subjectivity, and edits out very human and very complicated and conflicting feelings and experiences. Green (2006) identifies this problematic as the “visibility dilemma,” a complex problem where “in order to be a good – or successful- transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all” (p. 501). At the same time, announcing transgender status frequently threatens one’s desired gender identity. Transgender folks pass for a variety of reasons, as Bornstein (1995) explains, “passing by choice can be fantastic fun. Enforced passing is a joyless activity” (p. 127). Yet the cultural “the mandate of passing” (Bornstein, 1995) obligates that individuals belong to a single gender category or face severe consequences like social stigmatization, rejection, violence, even death. As a result, many transgender individuals, like Jen, hide their identity in certain contexts out of fear and choose to “pass” in order to survive daily life (Cashore & Tauson, 2009).

In order to successfully “pass,” Jen employs two specific strategies of impression management: “dramaturgical discipline” and “dramaturgical circumspection.” Dramaturgical discipline refers to an individual with “discretion,” “presence of mind,” and “self-control” who “does not give the show away by involuntarily disclosing its secrets” (Goffman, 1959, p. 216). Importantly for Jen, this skill also refers to the ability to successfully manage front stage and back stage regions of everyday life, to move seamlessly between “private places of informality to public ones of varying degrees of formality” (Goffman, 1959, p. 217) in ways that keep the performance in tact. *“I started posting YouTube videos. I am working with a speech therapist and I am being her voice model. She has me go through lessons and*

we record part of them and put them online. That's been getting a lot of attention. So I use an alias for that work. Someone wrote to me and said, "Hey. I saw a familiar face on YouTube." And I had to say, "I don't know who that could be." Dramaturgical circumspection delineates the "exercise of foresight and design in determining in advance how best to stage a show... preparing in advance for likely contingencies and exploiting the opportunities that remain" (p. 218). Jen carefully stages her performance of self on MySpace, making sure to hide transgender signifiers. In this way, Jen aims to "pass" online. According to Einwohner (2008), passing "is to be and not to be" (p. 124), a state of simultaneous duality Jen replicates on social media. "I have a MySpace page and I am not out as trans. I also hide my friends. That way I can still be friends with transgender people. However, I am going to use my transgender alias on MySpace too and completely separate the two. I don't know if some people would hate me or get mad at me. But, what's wrong with putting a different name up and using it when you do transgender things?"

In managing her identity both on and offline as a young adult now, Jen employs dramaturgical discipline and circumspection to attain professional growth and personal fulfillment. In this way, passing for Jen is a form of "strategic identity work" (Einhowe, p.124, 2008), in which adopting a certain identity, especially when faced with the threat of a "dangerous outcome" (Einhowe, p. 121, 2008), supplies "the marginalized with power and social standing" (Einhowe, p. 135, 2008). As a strategy for dealing with the stigma of transgender in everyday life, Jen maintains two identities: one as a woman and another as a transgender identifying woman. Each identity is deployed for specific life contexts. *"I run a business. I do*

computer consulting and build websites. I need the straight people too and the GLBT people. Plus too if I want to get a job somewhere I think I need to keep it separate. Anything I do I just have to be very careful. I just don't want people knowing that I have to sometimes use an alias. Some people can know, but just not everybody." Jen is constantly negotiating the dynamics of in and out, disclosure and concealment, and lives with the continual risk of being 'figured out' by clients, colleagues and peers. The successful management of her identity allows her to access the ordinary affordances and rhythms of everyday life such as employment, social intercourse, and a sense of personal security. Nonetheless during our interview, Jen expressed feeling tremendous anxiety at the thought of having to regularly maintain two identities, at not being able to "*turn it off.*" As Scannell (2007) affirms, the active management of self is "a continuing, unrelenting matter that goes on in time, for a life-time, in fact" (p. 158). However, tiring and distressing as it may be, Jen has come to terms with this process, "*In a perfect world we wouldn't have to do that, but we don't live in a perfect world.*"

Participant stories highlight the ways in which they seek to secure a sense of ordinariness living within the domain of the imperfect world Jen mentions. Although participants searched for the ordinary, they discursively constructed the concept in many ways. It emerged as a tension difficult to resolve, a delicate balance between sameness and difference, or a desire to move through life unmarked. It manifested as a liminal space between queerness and normativity. It represented a desire for connection, unity and respect. Importantly, for many it was a state not entirely available at the current moment, but it was evident on the horizon,

something they may one day achieve. Ultimately for all participants the ordinary presented a struggle, and, in order to achieve the often taken for granted rhythms and affordances of everyday life, it mandated constant work and mindful diligence.

Conclusion: Insisting on the Ordinary

This dissertation has tracked the consequences for self, belonging, and everyday life experienced by study participants in the wake of transgender's scattered and subtle move into America's cultural and media mainstream, a move that began with Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s and has recently accelerated. In chapter one, I quoted Maggie, a study participant who while discussing the cultural visibility of the transgender community asserted, "*we can no longer hide in plain sight.*" Maggie was responding to a state of transgender visibility that has been slowly and unevenly starting to change as a result of (1) the mobilization of the transgender community in the 1990s, (2) the growth of a new digital media environment, (3) the liberalization of popular culture resulting from 'the gay 90s,' and (4) the increased presence of public transgender personalities.

The cultural aftermath of these four socio-political shifts are becoming evident across media and popular culture. For example, as chapter four illustrated, television talk shows are just one popular site where the definitions of transgender are being continuously amended. Subjected to a variety of conflicting and competing cultural discourses, transgender life and subjectivity become 'queerly ordinary,' or marked by the simultaneous dynamics of sameness and difference, queerness and normativity, the familiar and the exotic, and the near and far. Beyond the talk show genre, popular films and scripted television are starting to

take seriously transgender life and subjectivity, while transgender themed websites and social networking platforms are allowing the community to communicate in new ways. At the same time, as the second chapter confirms, the historic landscape of transgender representation is replete with misinformed and reductive depictions. Dominant transgender stereotypes such as the sensational human anomaly, the tragic figure, and the comedic jester are circulated in media and provide endless opportunities for audience contention and resistance. These popular discourses have the potential to negatively influence transgender audience's sense of self, belonging, security, and interpersonal and everyday life.

As a result, when I began the fieldwork and interviewing for this dissertation, I expected, perhaps even hoped, that transgender participants would engage in highly resistant, politically charged readings of media and popular culture. I anticipated a "them" versus "us" logic to their meaning making. My scholarly background in queer theory, critical cultural studies, and the politics of identity prepared me for these expectations. However, throughout the research process (from data collection to analysis) I have tried to give space to the full range of participant voices, resisting simply imposing a set of preferred, *a priori* theoretical paradigms and interpretations onto participant interviews and media texts. My hermeneutics began by critically inspecting the audiences themselves, which then directed me towards a diverse corpus of relevant texts, literatures and theory. However, traveling this path was difficult and even frustrating, for qualitative analysis rarely generates a neat and orderly picture. My fieldwork led me into somewhat foreign land, populated by a complex entanglement of divergent life

events, attitudes, opinions, and political points of view. To my surprise, rather than waging an oppositional, queer critique against media culture, participants painted a more nuanced picture. In part, this dissertation is a story of queer resistance; as participants discuss the ways they refuse and resist dominant ideologies and cultural discourses in a variety of empowering ways. However, in addition to queer resistance, I encountered a wider than anticipated field of audience practices and strategies. In examining transgender experience within the everyday, this dissertation explored transgender resilience as a practice of constructing *inhabitable* worlds. In adapting to and make sense of media culture, participants engaged in ‘resilient reception,’ or a wide range of audience reception strategies that preserve and (re)claim self. Transgender resilience was a near universal practice among participants, a requirement for living a transgender life. In practicing resilient reception, study participants were creative and resourceful in excavating resources from daily engagements with media, often from unexpected popular texts and discourses, in the service of identity construction.

Media engagements were also central in participants’ struggle to both achieve and alter the rhythms, expectations and affordances of ordinary life. Increasingly, the ordinary is defined by, and achieved in and through, contemporary media culture. Silverstone (1994) indicates that technologies of communication furnish the raw material for the “metaphors and myths of the stuff of everyday experience and discourse” (p. 167). Cultural myths circulated by communications technologies work in sustaining ordinary, everyday life, fixing and cohering the basic, fundamental beliefs of society (Silverstone, 1994). In line with Silverstone, I

have argued that media representations set up the parameters of ordinary life and even more importantly, provide the raw material for the work of identity. This study illustrated the ways in which media as both ordinary and extraordinary result in a variety of social, cultural, political and individual consequences. Media technologies facilitate social interactions that advance and/or frustrate one's sense of self as ordinary, and serve as instruments for one's entrance into (or exit from) the routines of everyday life. Consequently, contemporary media engagements bring the ordinary more or less within reach for audiences.

Insisting on the Ordinary

In the same way that study participants requested that I leave space for the ordinary in my work, I conclude this dissertation by insisting on the ordinary across critical, cultural scholarship and modes of inquiry. Participants' *struggle for the ordinary* poses important questions for queer theory (and critical, cultural work more broadly), and encouraged me to (re)visit the queer dilemma. Their life experiences challenge as well as ground some of queerness's most fundamental assumptions and platforms regarding the importance, the politics and the feasibility of resistance, separatism, and opposition. When everyday life is such a challenge, requiring constant effort and calculation, where and how does one deploy (queer) resistance? Is the desire for ordinariness completely antithetical to queerness and politics? Can individuals both struggle for the ordinary and perform important social interventions to the normative? In other words, how do queerness and ordinariness co-exist? In interviewing transgender individuals

about media culture and the everyday, this dissertation has both raised and tried to offer insight into these questions.

Importantly, I am not arguing that study participants desired uncritical assimilation into heteronormative culture. They are proud of their many differences and courageous in the ways they speak back to and with the mainstream. They mindfully negotiated the myriad demands of LGBT visibility, identity politics, and dominant society. As the cultural environment slowly shifts and the social mainstream starts to appear on the distant yet visible horizon for the transgender community, perhaps queer resistance becomes tempered and moderated by a simultaneous dynamic, the desire for “the ordinary.” Meyerson and Scully (1995) refer to this ambivalent state as “tempered radicalism.” Writing through the lens of organizational science, Meyerson and Scully (1995) refer to “tempered radicals” as protagonists who are both committed to an organization and also to a community or identity that can be divergent from, or at odds with the dominant culture of that organization. They explain,

“These individuals do not easily fit within the dominant cultures of their organizations or professions. However, despite their lack of fit, or perhaps because of it, they can behave as committed and productive members and act as vital sources of resistance, alternative ideas, and transformation”
(Meyerson and Scully, 1995, p. 586).

If we adopt the ethnomethodological stance of the ordinary in everyday life, that it is one’s “job” requiring constant effort and cooperation, then in terms of Meyerson and Scully’s (1995) conceptualization of the tempered radical, transgender study participants are ‘professionals’ in the organizational culture of ‘everyday life.’ The tempered radical is a strategic life player, she will “cool-headedly play the game to

get ahead, but does not want to get so caught up in the game that she violates or abandons her personal identity and beliefs” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 587). They “work within” the mainstream, and simultaneously “transform” it (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586). However, as participants illustrate, this specific modality socio-political intervention into the day to day is often done matter of factly, as a requisite part of the transgender “daily round” (Goffman, 1963).

In addition to challenging social norms and embracing difference, study participants simultaneously searched for a life ‘in common’ with others. As Williams (1989) argued, “culture is ordinary,” and ordinary culture is “the finding of common meanings and direction” (p. 4, my emphasis). The ordinary “is always both traditional and creative” (Williams, 1989, p. 4). It exists within the shared and taken for granted currents and affordances of everyday life. In reaching for a life ‘in common,’ study participants articulated self and belonging as hybridity by employing discourses of the ‘queer’ and ‘ordinary,’ sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion in the same breath. Their everyday experiences can make valuable contributions to current conversations in queer theory, media studies and LGBT scholarship. In each of these fields, I insist that thinkers leave space for ordinary life.

Much to my own surprise, I am advocating for the ordinary specifically at a time when the stewards of queer theory and LGBT scholarship are venturing into exciting new territories, and contributing provocative analytical interventions and polemics – yet somewhat removed from the ordinary, everyday domain. Munoz (2009) has propelled queer theory into the future, advocating for a ‘queer futurity’

predicated on hope and utopia. Halberstam (2011) embraces 'queer failure' as an alternative and refreshing modality of evaluation that undermines capitalist notions of success. Edelman (2004) advocates queerness as eternally "outside and beyond" everyday life, locating it as "the place of the social order's death drive" (p. 3). As one of the most adventuresome and innovative fields, queer studies boldly travels into the intellectual stratosphere. This vital and exhilarating journey cultivates new modes of thinking, defamiliarizes the taken for granted, and challenges scholars across disciplines to amplify their critical imagination. The queer polemic, with its trenchant critique of the mainstream and demand for something better offers significant liberatory and revitalizing contributions to scholarship. It strives to agitate, to raise and shift consciousness, and render visible the sleepy complacency of ideological conventions. However, this scholarship should not come at the expense of losing sight over the struggle for the ordinary, and this dissertation stresses the import of keeping one foot firmly located on the ground.

I am also advocating the exigency and relevance of the ordinary at a time when queer scholars are critiquing the political disposition and mission of the larger LGBT community as conservative and assimilationist. Many have lamented the loss of a vibrant political radicalism and sense of utopianism that defined gay liberation. As Richardson (2005) attests,

"Rather than critiquing social institutions and practices that have historically excluded them, as did gay and lesbian /feminist activists in the 1960s and 1970s, over the last decade the politics of sexuality has increasingly been about seeking access into mainstream culture through demanding equal rights of citizenship" (p. 515).

For example, the fight for marriage equality, open military service, and entrance into the Boy Scouts are critiqued as retrograde, heteronormative goals, as desires to merely integrate into the heterosexual social structure. Munoz (2009) critiques what he calls “gay pragmatic thought” (p. 21), a stale and stagnant practice, caught in the drab realities of the present, which limits the potential freedoms and affordances of a queerness on the horizon. Munoz (2009) argues, “being ordinary and being married are both antiutopian wishes, desires that automatically rein themselves in, never daring to see or imagine the not-yet-conscious” (p. 21). Munoz (2009) suggests queerness is forever ‘futurity,’ a looking ahead, something for which we continually strive. As a valuable and refreshingly optimistic contribution to the queer cannon, his work admittedly and intentionally ignores the here and now. By contrast, *The Struggle for the Ordinary* aims to reignite and rally an interest into the phenomenological present of LGBT experience. Rather than examining the kind of queer life transgender individuals could have, should have, or may eventually (or never) have, this dissertation has investigated the life they do have.

While I am sympathetic to the critique of contemporary LGBT politics, imposing the conservative logic of big tent LGBT politics or of gay pragmatism onto the complex realities of everyday LGBT experience and culture is a mistaken assessment of LGBT life. Organized politics (capital “P”) are different from the (lower case “p”) ‘politics’ of the everyday in which participants engage. The critique of gay domestication, that queers are opting for apolitical lives and increasingly choosing to stay at home and cook dinner for their partners, is a worthy one that prompts important questions about LGBT politics and potential. But it is

fundamentally nearsighted. The larger, organized (capital “P”) political movement is fighting for concrete, winnable and conservative victories. Unfortunately, in the current polarized and paralyzed political climate, it is exactly these kinds of victories that are possible. However, the aims of big tent, organizational politics is the wrong barometer to discern the full nature of “the LGBT movement,” and certainly fails to offer insight into how LGBT individuals live their everyday lives. The critique of LGBT domestication and pragmatism generally disregards the myriad ways in which the LGBT community practices strategies of tactical resilience in their everyday lives – preserving and (re)claiming self within largely (hetero)normative life contexts and institutions. By refocusing on the everyday, *The Struggle for the Ordinary* confirms that the radical, the resistant and the queer do live on, but they are impure and motley expressions. They are mixed with the normative, the assimilationist and the conservative. The real transformative stuff is happening within ordinary life, on the ground, as LGBT individuals routinely perform the ‘queerly ordinary’ by authoring, expressing, and embodying unpredictable mixtures of the normative and subversive. This hybridity is ordinary life. For example, participants understand their own everyday lives and subjectivities in terms of a productive mixture, often appropriating elements of queerness and (hetero)normativity in composing their identities, social relationships and life narratives. Theorizing the ordinary as hybridity moves us beyond the binary oppositions of queer/normal, sameness/difference, assimilation/separatism that paralyze, circumscribe, and reduce critical scholarship.

I am also advocating for the ordinary at a time when, as an academic field, Media Studies devotes excessive space and energy to locating the cultural processes of normalization and heteronormativity when investigating LGBT issues in media. Scholars largely focus their attention on the hegemonic and heteronormative stripes of a cultural representation that works to misrepresent, domesticate, homogenize and placate the LGBT community (for example see Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002; Dow, 2001; Harris, 2009; Shugart, 2003; Sloop, 2000; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006). As a vital and essential voice in media studies, this scholarship advances the field by shining a critical spotlight on the many pitfalls of LGBT visibility, and the power structures that create and circulate popular culture. Yet, it frequently ignores other equally viable relationships and connections between media, LGBT subjectivity and queer life. For example, my article “Centering Transgender Identity via the Textual Periphery: *TransAmerica* and the “Double Work” of Paratexts” argued that the literature on media paratexts too often focuses on their ability to close down and quarantine controversial themes inherent in LGBT texts. Using the transgender themed film *TransAmerica* as a case study, I argue that although the film generated retrograde and heteronormative paratexts (a process I call “paratextual domestication”), its paratexts ultimately perform a complex ‘double work’ (Cavalcante, 2012). In looking outside of the primary text (the film *TransAmerica*) by examining audience discourses on Internet discussions boards, my analysis moved beyond the paratext as heteronormative anchor. In addition to disciplining the film’s queer themes, an analysis of audience discussion boards reveal that *TransAmerica’s* paratexts

simultaneously facilitate “wider discussions about gender and sexuality and open up affirming spaces of queer representation and recognition” (Cavalcante, 2012, p. 2).

The acute, lazer-like focus on normalization and heteronormativity within critical scholarship is a function of queer, LGBT, and (to a somewhat lesser extend) media studies’ privileging of a text’s authority and political ideology. This analytical orientation often ignores or undervalues two crucial components in the circuit of culture within which media texts are embedded, mainly audiences and everyday life. It also paints a distorted picture of LGBT experience, subjectivity and culture. As Martin (1997) argues, ““the focus on normalization has led some to represent [LGBT] psychic life as nothing more or less than the interiorization of a punitive outside” (p. 132). According to Martin (1997), this conviction overlooks individual agency and assumes “that the line of force operates in only one direction, from outside in, which then seems to imply either the dystopian or utopian possibility of total social control” (p. 132). Martin (1997) considers the implications for self and modes of belonging when scholarship concludes that, “to be radical is to locate oneself outside or in a transgressive relation to kinship or community because those relationships have already been so thoroughly societalized, normalized, and then internalized as self-control and discipline” (p. 133). This is simply not the case. Rather than standing on the outside, waging a queer critique of social institutions and practices that intentionally ignore and preclude them, LGBT individuals are elbowing their way into the mainstream conversation and the shared, everyday world. With them, they bring an outsider’s perspective to the inside, politicizing,

subverting and challenging the taken for granted, normative tides of the social structure.

While this dissertation focused on the transgender community, its findings also speak to how the larger LGBT community is bringing their radicalism and queer sensibilities home, into their local communities, families, university classrooms and workplaces. They are negotiating resistance and assimilation on their own terms. As study participants illustrate, they are engaging with media culture to cope with, integrate into, and disrupt the social world, for as they enter into ordinary life they simultaneously transform it. In doing so, they carve out spaces for themselves and have made subtle but meaningful alterations to the parameters and possibilities of the ordinary. Walters (2001) identifies this process as "conscious, conscientious integration," a process where minority groups are rendered "full citizens in a society that is fundamentally altered by their inclusion" and "where the play of differences helps to break down stubborn categories while at the same time enhancing substantive civil rights" (p. 24, 21). Clearly, the LGBT community is far from appreciating 'full citizenship,' yet within the context of everyday life, their integration into mainstream culture is certainly 'conscious and conscientious.' The LGBT community's 'conscious, conscientious integration' is a subtle process, often obfuscated by the discourses and aims of big tent LGBT politics, academic writing, and popular media. In order to fully perceive the LGBT community's consciousness, along with its pain, hardship, resilience, optimism, creativity and queer radicalism, we must insist on the ordinary and pay close, critical attention to the achievement of everyday life.

As a self-identified queer scholar who gravitates towards the non-normative and embraces the oppositional, I struggled greatly with conceiving, conceptualizing, and writing about the ordinary. How should I make sense of participant calls for sameness and ordinariness? To critically write about the ordinary, I felt like I had to table my own sense of queer politics, and learn a new language, the language of everyday struggle, negotiation and creativity. In light of study participants' experiences, this research argues that accomplishing the ordinary (with or without media) and fighting for space within the everyday is not a desire for the heteronormative or mindless assimilation. It is a complicated act, a struggle, and a constant compromise that is not accomplished uncritically. This endeavor causes an intense mixture of feelings for study participants including happiness, pain, fear, anxiety, and fulfillment. Many experience forms of violence, isolation and discrimination. Yet, participants continuously proclaimed that they have no other choice but to remain resilient and fight for the routine, taken for granted affordances of everyday life, to actively struggle for the ordinary.

APPENDIX: Transgender Terminology

The category **transgender** is a variegated and contested term that has been the focus of substantial academic attention and debate, and its definitional borders have not, and perhaps should not, be resolved. Before exploring the category transgender, it is important to critically explore the terms “**sex**” and “**gender**.” Sociologist Michael Kimmel (2000) defines gender in relation to sex contending that sex represents a ‘biological apparatus’ made legible by the absence or presence of certain sex organs, while gender accounts for the social and cultural meanings attached to biological sex. For Kimmel sex is constant across space and time, while gender assumes different meanings depending on historical, cultural and social context. However, recent scholarship disputes the naturalness of the category sex. For theorist Judith Butler, *both* sex and gender are powerful constructions that have been produced over time through the myriad workings of social power. For Butler, sex and gender operate as performatives or “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Sex and gender are conceptualized as normative categories that have no ‘natural’ referent, but are continually constructed through social discourse and repetition. Consequently, sexual and gendered differences are “never simply a function of material differences,” as “the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Adopting a critical feminist perspective,

Hausman (2001) asserts, “the most forceful and provocative theories of gender argue that it is an instrumental concept to analyze power relations and systems of inequality that subordinate women and those who repudiate heterosexuality... gender identity is a juridical construction, as well as the effect of reiterated performances of one's sex that make up the illusion of an identity inside that produces such expression” (p. 476). In accord with Butler, Hausman (2001) understands gender not as ontological, sociological or biological fact, but as an epistemology, a way of knowing and experiencing the world. For Wilchins (1997), transgender could not exist without *a priori* regimes of gender control and oppression and thus transgender is not simply the crossing of gender, but the violation of strictly enforced gender rules and mandates that Butler discusses. However, while gender theorists suggest that sex and gender have no internal correlate, many individuals experience their sex and gender identities as a deeply personal, innate and subjective phenomenon (Prosser, 1998).

While I acknowledge the physical and biological differences of bodies, I understand sex and gender as more complicated and heterogeneous than male/female and masculine/feminine. Importantly, sex and gender are culturally contingent constructs that come to mean through the multifarious workings of power and social relations: mass media, medical discourses, local and subcultural knowledges, and formal educational systems all contribute to the ways in which sex and gender become fixed in language, thought, and practice. While gender is widely understood as the social manifestation of an internal sex, this understanding is impoverished for sex itself is multiple, a “mash-up, a story we mix about *how* the

body means” (Stryker, 2006b, p. 9). As the intersexual body demonstrates, sex cannot be reduced to a male/female dichotomy. Moreover, sex is evident in various manifestations including chromosomal, anatomical, morphological and reproductive sex (Stryker, 2006b). For example, the recent attempt to pin down the sex of South African sprinter Caster Semenya through months of testing and analyses yielded mixed and complicated results, a story that illuminates the difficulty of understanding sex as an ontological binary. In considering this complexity, the sex-gender distinction appears to breakdown.

However, for purposes of clarity and communication, and because my research participants often deploy this language, ‘**sex**’ will be used when referring to matters of the physical body and its biological constitution. ‘**Gender**’ will be used as a descriptor for one’s social identity, and as a term that delineates “the social organization of different kinds of bodies into different categories of people” (Stryker, 2008, p. 11). “**Transition**” will be used to describe the process of journeying from one gender or sex identity towards another.

The terms ‘**transgender**’ and ‘**gender variance**’ attempt to delineate “counter-normative materializations of gender on individual bodies” through self-presentation and dress, or physical alteration (Papoulias, 2006, p. 231). According to Wilchins (2004), the categories harbor both a weak and strong version. The strong interpretation points to the realization that *all* persons negotiate gender norms and encounter the pressure of gender conformity. Its weaker version specifically refers to anyone who defies conventional gender boundaries in a certain culture. From post-operative transsexuals who completely change their sex to ultra

“butch” lesbians, the weaker iteration implies that “all people who are *visibly queer* face common political problems and make natural allies” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 26). In this way, the concept transgender pragmatically assists in the development of social associations and political coalitions making it possible to advocate for “transgender rights.” Discussing a transgender community is in many ways to speak of an imagined community, a socially constructed category contingent on the specificities of context, time and place. “Transgender” started to appreciate wide cultural currency in the 1990s within middle-class activist communities located mainly in urban areas across the United States (Valentine, 2007). The category “arose in the United States in uneven, often contested ways” and was employed to rescue ideas regarding gender diversity from the medical and mental health community “to replace an assumption of individual pathology with a series of claims about citizenship, self determination, and freedom from violence and discrimination” (Valentine, 2007, p. 33). As Valentine asserts, “speaking or writing of transgender brings into being what it presupposes” (p. 233).

In its everyday usage, transgender is a collective term that signifies a diversity of gender variant identifications including but not limited to **transsexuals**, or people who wish to change their sexual morphology, and **cross-dressers**, or those who engage in “the practice of wearing gender-atypical clothing” (Stryker, 2008, p. 17-18). The transgender umbrella also embraces drag queens and kings also known as male and female impersonators, individuals often from the gay community who cross dress for purposes of social or professional performance (Newton, 1979), and ‘**gender queers**’ or those who choose not to identify with

either male or female pronouns, or who favor gender flexibility and fluidity (Stryker, 2008). Although the transgender community is largely diverse, Feinberg (1996) clarifies, “the glue that cements these diverse communities together is the defense of the right of each individual to define themselves” (p. XI). In my dissertation, I use transgender not to:

“refer to one particular identity or way of being embodied but rather as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual’s anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, physical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions” (Stryker, 1998, p. 149).

In brief, in my research transgender refers to the agentic act of living as the gender of one’s choice, and not the sex one was assigned to by medical professionals at birth. The term functions as a declaration that opens space for individuals to exist outside of the limited categories of ‘male’ and ‘female.’ Recently the term “**trans**” has emerged as shorthand for transgender or transsexual and is widely used amongst younger people. At times I employ the word “trans” in my dissertation as an identity marker as this term is commonly used by many of my participants in describing themselves and others. I will be using the term “**cis gender**,” a word that has recently gained ground in gender studies, to refer to non-transgender individuals. As Serano (2007) explains, “**cissexuals**” are “people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned” (p. 12). Scholars also use cis sexual or cis gender more

broadly to refer to gender conformity, gender presentations that are culturally coded within the male-female binary.

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