**Restaging the Political: Transgender Embodiment and the Epistemology of Resistance**

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**Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to restage the political in terms of the body. It illustrates the diverse, creative, subversive, but yet heretofore unintelligible political acts of transgender people. It draws on histories, narratives, and contemporary transgender political activities to make the following point: The body is a site of political practice, of knowledge production, and a point of resistance. The political investments and policing of the body are everywhere. Speaking of the transgender body of how the state invests its own power, Riki Anne Wilchins argues “[the government] ID that she carries—her body—will be continually subjected to being displayed, stamped and judged” (Wilchins, 2006, p. 549). Noting the perils of recognition in a world built upon cisgender notions of gendered selfhood, Wilchins adds “Since her status and legitimacy as a woman will always be at risk, always be determined by and dependent upon others, she may find that her lack of contact with sensation grows along with a nagging sense of disorientation” (Ibid.; see Aultman, 2014). To have an identity, or construct oneself as a self, is without question a fundamental aspect (and right) of the human condition.

This paper will focus on a form of politics, and hence its consideration of transgender politics, as one that “breaks with the tangible configuration” of a social body that is organized around cisgenderism (for cisgenderism, see Lennon & Mistler, 2014; for politics, see Ranciere, 1999, p. 30). The politics needed is, rather, “whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a places’ destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there only place for noise. It makes understood as discourse what was only once heard as noise” (Ibid.). When the “noise” of transsexualism is *still* “deeply mired in the unknown”; whereby the agency of those who have remained mere noise are still iterating “subjective evaluations” of their experiences that see things as “they would like to be but not as they are”; who speaks, and thus makes discursive, the narrative of transgender politics (cf. Drake, 1974)? How can one “be read correctly” if the text of their bodies is denied legibility—their voices, and experiences, considered mere noise lacks discernable discourse? The answer to this broad question, sketched below, is motivated by a call from C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn: “The discursive construction of the transgender body…as unnatural creates the precise moment where we as scholars, critics, and activists might apprehend a biopolitics of everyday life….” (Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013, p. 68).

**A Note on Method**

This paper relies heavily on the personal accounts of transgender people available at the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, BC, Canada. The testimony, short stories, poems, and un/published manuscripts range decades and are date-marked accordingly. For its epistemic claims, it begins with the assumption, to be systematically worked out through various literatures on “the political” and politics in the following section, that the body is not only a locus of politics. It is its very source. It argues that when it comes to knowledge, the political is the ethical—that is, the political is itself present in the production of knowledge (the who, the “we”, the common resources and collective points of reference to which knowing subjects can make their claims). As such, this paper sketches not just the various ways the transgender body has been isolated, reduced, and systematically erased from our everyday conception of gendered knowledges. It illustrates how transgender knowledges are necessary toward a political ethics beyond the realm of abstract individualism. It is an ethics of embodied knowing that Miranda Fricker (2007) has called “epistemic justice” in its most social sense.

In defining transgender politics and experiences, scholars run risk of reification—of defining normative, out-of-context observations about perceived transgender identities and ways of being. Thus, transgender politics it is not a politics of clothing for parody, i.e., drag. Nor is it a politics solely related to surgical transition. It is a politics both separate and interconnected to each. The transgender political narrative is more than “statements” made by clothing and appearance (Holland, 1976). It involves survival, self-definition, and gendered agency (Currah, 2006). In a similar vein, scholars also run the risk of over-emphasizing the oppressiveness of certain subjects, of disallowing transgender voices to speak in their own varying degrees of emotional tenor. In one respect, scholars discipline these voices to fit a theoretical paradigm. Cisgender scholars, myself included, run this risk. As A. Finn Enke notes “the concept of cisgender privilege provides a necessary critique of structural hierarchies built around binary sex/gender….[But] when cis- is taken up as an admission of privileged identity, it is cis-privilege itself that reifies trans as most oppressed—so oppressed, in fact, that it cannot speak out of character” (2013, p. 240). Indeed, “Many trans folks who resist the ‘tragic trans narrative’ or who do not have a definitive ‘endpoint’ in gender in mind, but who nonetheless seek masculinization or feminization…[do so] by authentically presenting our own stories in the manner that fits us, using terms that we choose for ourselves, not altering our histories and understanding of our genders…. (Sarkisova, 2014, p. 292). I attempt to avoid reifying such tragic narratives into a transnormative subject of terror.

**On Politics**

Defining the relationship among the political, politics, and the state is neither straightforward nor easy. In contemporary political theory, that is to say “liberal” political theory, the “state” has always implicated politics and the political in some form. Borrowing from Max Weber’s series of foundational notions on the topic of the state and politics, Raymond Geuss argues “The ‘narrower’ notion understands politics as that which has to do with the acquisition, distribution, and exercise of state power. The wider notion sees politics as having to do with any set relations of subordination, that is of command on the one side and obedience on the other, even if these do not take place in the framework of a state or draw on the resources of the state” (2001, p. 14). The problem, however, is that the modern state “is one of the most important features of the space within which politics in all senses now takes place in the modern world” (Ibid., p. 15).

Others already shared Geuss’ assertions that, at least in the modern age, the state and politics are to be treated coextensively. “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political,” Carl Schmitt argues (1996, p. 19). It is the terrain in which political meaning is meted out, where “the state is the political status of an organized people in an enclosed territorial unit” (Ibid.). In one sense, the state creates the conditions for the legibility for certain kinds of political action. But Schmitt has his own grievances against the organized (liberal) state and its failures. It blends society and state, and creates the conditions for its own kind of tyranny. Indeed, “liberalism negated the political…thus killed not the political but only understand of the political, sincerity regarding the political” (1996, p. 84).

Even before Schmitt, critics had already noted the theoretical limitations of the state, or rather illusory nature of state-situated claims. Marx, in *The German Ideology*, expresses his concern for believers in the state and its politics, namely “It follows from this that all struggles with in the State, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of different classes are fought out among one another…” (1978, pp. 160-161). The illusion, of course, is that the fight is legitimate, and that the contents of the fight itself are legible. Nietzsche wrote in the first part of *Zarathustra* that the “We” common to modern constitutions in liberal democracies, the “We” that subsumes all the various diverse “I’s” is a lie. Indeed, this “new idol” possessed ill-intentions: “A state, is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: "I, the state, am the people’” (PORTABLE NIEZSCHE CITATION). This distrust of the state runs deep in modern critical theory. Conditioning legibility inherently means carving out spheres of new illegibility (CITE BUTLER’S NEW TEXT). And these conditions of legible politics, solidified in the shared culture of a people, illustrate a growing lacuna in whose politics are taken up—that is to say, whose claims win?

To define politics and the political, therefore, is dangerous. One’s definition of politics through the apparatus of the state, one encounters exclusivity. Thus, the room for error is quite expansive. That is, the “narrower” the view becomes, the more likely its exclusionary conclusions—that humans and their everyday problems are discounted from a highly bureaucratized apparatus of the modern state. The less narrow construction would seem to posit an “everything is political.”

Reframing politics through the lens of everyday action, Ranciere offers a view toward a more capacious conception of the political. “Politics is not the exercise of power,” Ranciere argues. “Politics ought to be defined in its own terms as a specific mode of action that is enacted by a specific subject that has its own proper rationality. It is the political relationship that makes it possible to conceive of the subject of politics, not the other way around” (2015, p. 35). Indeed, “the difference specific to politics, that which makes it possible to think its subject must be sought in the form of its relation” (Ibid., p. 36). Ranciere moves beyond the limited scope of the state to describe political engagements. “Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation of consent of collectives is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places, and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name I prose to call it the police” (1999, p. 28). The police, in this case, is not the “petty police” of Althusser, who hails individuals on the street, who embodies and exercises state-sanctioned authority. On the contrary, the police is/are the mechanism/s by which distributions of legibility (the “linking” of discourses such as “medicine, welfare, and culture”) becomes manifest. The police is coextensive with social bodies. It is “first and order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task” (Ibid., 29).

Where there is a break between that order, among communities that seek to disrupt the police, politics happens. The theoretical concept used to describe the action of these “disagreements” is “dissensus.” It is, in one radical sense, “not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself” (Ranciere, 2015, p. 46). He argues that “The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself” (2015, p. 50). He goes on to claim that “The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one” (Ibid., p. 45). In this way, the capaciousness of the words “political” and “politics” isn’t that “everything is political” but that *everything is subject to being politicized*, the re-negotiation of legibility through an active destabilization of discourse.

*Embodying Politics*

**“**The process of throwing off the shackles of masculinity to become a woman…”[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is an inherent epistemological dimension to politics. How does one know of, let alone participate in the creation of, these sensible rifts? How does one make sense of difference and situate their knowledge in some common “we”? Feminist epistemologies have included a provisional view toward the contentiousness of the epistemic domain of politics. Alcoff and Potter urge that “feminist epistemologies must be tested by their effects on the practical political struggles occurring in a wider frame of reference than the academy” (1993, p. 14). As Kathryn Addelson note, who Alcoff and Potter echo, “The social worlds relevant to public problems consist of group knower/doers whose collective action involves creating and struggling over public problems” (Ibid., p. 281). They consist of the active knower/doer, of a situated set of knowledges that de-link, or uncouple what is discursively “known” to be true from a so-called reality. Following Ranciere and Alcoff, collective political engagement is subject to an epistemology of resistance—the generation of new knolwedges that create new cleavages within the sensible, new ways of being, new modes of acting.

This reassertion of knowledge as a means of reevaluating our political commitments means that the traditional “knower” should be repositioned as well. “Traditionally, theories of knowledge tend to be derived from the experiences of uniformly educated, articulate, epistemically “positioned” adults who introspect retrospectively to review what the must once have known most simply and clearly” (Code, 1993, p. 33). In short, there is an isomorphism that has plagued epistemology, of the knowing subject, as well as that of the political subject of rights. Opening up the “geography of the epistemic terrain: one that is no longer primarily a physical geography, but a population geography that develops qualitative analyses of subjective positions and identities and the sociopolitical structures that produce them” is one of many goals to feminist accounts knowledge production (Ibid., p. 39). Knowledge is in itself social. And the reassertion of knowledge means the reassertion of the body, or of embodiment, into this social and epistemic terrain. Nelson argues for a more “empirical role than the ‘abstract individuals’ of foundationalist epistemologies” (Nelson, 1993, p. 125). In Marx’s parlance, there are “actually existing” people in real and definite conditions. The realization of the body as a site not only of external cultural investment but that of knowledge-producing power led Wilchins to proclaim “My body, like hers, heretofore just a place to put food, carry out certain operations of pleasure, ad get me from point A to point B, had overnight become an armed camp which I surveyed at my peril. It hurt to be me, and it hurt to see me” (2006, p. 548).

Anticipating Miranda Fricker’s (2007) claims that justice and politics converge on embodied knowledge and practice, Saidiya Hartman writes “If through performance the enslaved ‘asserted their humanity,’ it’s is no less true that performance articulated their troubled relation to the category ‘human’…” (Hartman, 1997, p. 78). This political resistance amounted to a “politics without a proper locus” whereby subjects engaged in practices that were “fragmentary” and “transient,” not often sustained attacks on the institution of domination, but were nevertheless assertions of their sensible, human selves. (Ibid., p. 51). For both scholars, knowing and doing are creative, productive, and inherently political acts. Miranda Fricker (2007) has, in this vein, explored the ethics of knowing through her treatise on “epistemic injustice.” That knowers are denied credibility, or prevented from the common pool of knowledge to make sense of their own experiences, is in itself a problem echoing Rancerie’s criticism of policing modes of being and ways of doing. “Eradicating these injustices would ultimately take not just more virtuous hearers, but collective social political change—in matters of epistemic injustice, the ethical is political…the political depends upon the ethical” (Fricker, 2007, p. 8). Giving revolutionary ground to Fricker’s epistemological abstractions, Hartman argues that embodiment produces knowledge about the self in ways that are both emancipatory and unsettling to dominant structures. “Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility” (Ibid.). Rejecting the notions that oppressive systems merely instantiate a repressed sense of self without recourse to notions of agency, Hartman argues that former theories of power do not really take difference into account. Politics and the political consist of emergence, of the generation of new conceptions of being. Such resistances cannot be defined in legible terms because, *ipso facto*, they do not fall within the systems of that legitimize the distribution of sensibility.

**Self-Creation as Politics in Transgender Narratives**

“’Transformation’ has been a revolution in my awareness of myself and of my life, well beyond the matter of gender.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is no activism without history, no politics without context. Transgender communities and their politics consist in historical narratives of self-creation and personal discovery in a culture inimical to them. Further, transgender narratives and experiences cannot be fit into a single narrative or adequately captured in a singular “experience”. In one sense, transgender identities, and the varied political practices that spring from them, are as diverse as the social relations built to nurture and sustain them. Importantly, although there has been an empirical increase in the number of resources, community centers, social groups supporting transgender populations, and medical information on transgender identities, claiming the source of gender identity, sexual personhood, and the like, as biological or social is debatable (Lamble, 2013, p. 32-33; Meyerowitz, 2002). Narratives around the “root” of identity, of a biological “born this way” versus a socially constructed “sense” of selfhood, vary widely. My point is to move beyond this debate, focusing on the networks, histories, and localized contexts affect the emergence of transgender ways of being and their politics.

Institutions such as medicine and law, as well as the gendered norms built into everyday life, have historically carved out a space for transgender people as “other”—pathologized with a disorder, subjected to the law as deviant, or misrecognized as frauds or freaks. As Farmer argues “Transsexuals may have problems with the law because despite all evidence governments usually refuse to acknowledge their plight” (1993, p. v). Indeed, medicine and its discourses have a controversial history with transgender communities (Beauchamp, 2013, p. 47). Although medical practices offered the first means of “professional” and safe sexual reassignment surgeries, it “relies on a standardized, normative gender presentation, monitoring trans individuals’ ability to pass seamlessly as non-trans” (Ibid.). Historically, it has encouraged a pathological grammar for transsexual women (and men) to adopt (Meyerowitz, 2002). This suggests that an aggrieved, tragic narrative inhabits transgender identities. “Paradoxically, you are required to present your trans narrative as if it is an unbearable burden and admit that your gender identity is a mental illness” (Sarkisova, 2014, p. 292). Medical professionals and writers commenting at the beginning of “boom” of transsexual surgeries seemed glib about the prospect of “realizing” such gendered identities. Donald Drake, a medical writer in the 70s, comments, “Transsexualism is deeply mired in the unknown. Doctors are not even sure what, precisely, happens to patients when they treat them” (Drake, 1974, p. 49). He writes that support networks and organizations created by other transgender people, such as the Erickson Institute, Conversion Our Goal, the National Transsexual Counseling Unit, and others, “support *unorthodox* medical research” (Ibid., p. 48, emphasis added). Speaking of Christine Jorgenson’s coming out as transsexual in 1952 as “scandalous and sensational,” he altogether casts doubt on the entire set of procedures that make up sexual reassignment surgery. His views were unfortunately widely shared.

Drake and others, like radical “feminist” Janice Raymond (1979), are unconvinced by the potential of a new gendered self and personhood. “These are subjective evaluations from persons who have reason to see things as they would like them to be rather than they are” (Drake, 1974., p. 56). For them, transsexual identity is a dream, not a realizable and self-creating practice. Although great strides have been taken to be more inclusive of transgender identities (to the extent that the American Psychiatric Association changed its entry on Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria in its DSM-V) that pathologization of transgender identities leads to a ”tragic trans narrative” that normalizes, violently, transgender experiences. In short, relying on medical narratives on transgender identities runs the risk of reifying psychic pain and denies a degree of self-creative agency in the construction of personal self-hood.

Outside medical and legal forums, transgender “social transitions” take on multiple contexts with interconnected depths: from pronoun choices, name selections, physical appearances, the physical manifestation of “voice,” clothing, hair, makeup, non-medical body modification such as breast-binding, “standing-to-pee” devices, penis-tucking, and hair removal (Reynolds & Goldstein, 2014, pp. 124-136). “Being read correctly,” or “going stealth” becomes personal acts of survival—and in this sense political acts against social policing. Given this (non-exhaustive range) of activities, a single narrative, an unfortunate linguistic slip that describes the “transgender experience” in the singular or a “trans-ness” as essence, commits an epistemic wrong, an injustice, to the representative voice of these political communities (Fricker, 2007). More to the point, “Mainstream cultural beliefs about ‘transness’ are so far off the mark that some of us want to be out and visible everywhere we go, to put a face on what ‘trans does and does not mean’” (Reynolds & Goldstein, 2014, p. 144). Each person defines identities and self-creates, carves out selves in private and public places, in different ways.

The decision to live privately as a trans person is different for each of us. For most of us, every use of the right pronoun and name is an affirmation of our identity. If we choose not to tell people how we got there, that does not necessarily mean we are ashamed of being trans….For some of us, living stealth may be motivated by the desire for privacy, job or family security, or physical safety (Reynolds & Goldstein, 2014, p. 144).

When “[Helen] ran up against all the medical, social, and legal problems of actually becoming Helen, [she] didn’t know where to turn” (Dumanoski, 1975, p. 17), Helen turned to social networks at her disposal.[[3]](#footnote-3) Organizations like Fantasia Fair, Gender Identity Service, The Outreach Initiative, and others, erected a small but supportive edifice for social connectivity.

In constructing the self, transgender men and women engage in the revelatory practice of embodied change that is marked by the “language and cultural forms at hand” (Meyerowitz, 2002). Sexual characteristics, gender expression(s), the conflation of gender(s) altogether become the critical responses to a (cis)gendered system of that accords individuals with a this-or-that gendered legibility, and the private/public norms it prescribes. This individual legibility marks the realm of the personal. But the political is and always has been more than the personal. It exceeds the conceptual confines of such a closed sphere. As Farmer remarked,

The process of throwing off the shackles of masculinity to become a woman, I call ‘Transition’. ‘Transformation’ has been a revolution in my awareness of myself and of my life, well beyond the matter of gender” (1993, p. v).

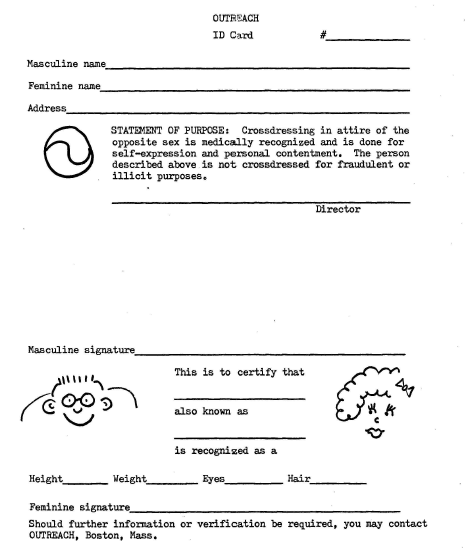
Farmer revels in the emancipatory and self-creative acts that transformed her in spite of an otherwise cisgenderism that obviated her body’s legibility—her very source of social recognition. In a letter addressed to “Dear,” the author, Nancy, writes

At age 46 (an unlikely age to re-start!) I am embarking on an entirely new lifestyle and, in fact, life. Each of you is unaware of a massive burden I have been carrying for most of my known life. I have, alternatively, over the years, capped, repressed, depressed, and what-ever other word is available in our language to convey the idea of pushing down a gnawing and persistent theme….Briefly, Bill Griglak is Nancy Ledins—the name I have chosen to be known by in this preoperative stage and, within due time, postoperatively (Ledins, c. 1960, pp. 1-2).

Nancy, like many transgender people (she identifying as transsexual) exclaims that “Surgery is not the final answer—not the end-all—not the magical answer” (Ibid., p. 3). Transgender people undergoing surgeries have exclaimed: “I feel like I have been let out of a prison” (Drake, 1974, p. 56). Another proclaimed that, following surgery, “It’s like being given a second chance at life” (Ibid.). The rest is recognition. “What of the future,” she asks. “I am now in the pre-operative stage—basically it means a period of living full-time in the female role, trying to bring together sexual and gender issues into an integrated life” (Ibid., p. 4). Nancy exclaims, through all this process that is, in one sense, out of her own hands, “I am me—and I am becoming” (Ledins, c. 1960, p. 4.).

The “prison” and “second chance” narratives indicate the presence of despair and discrimination built into certain transgender experiences. But it also indicate an historical narrative that situates transgender people within a constraining framework. Ariadne Kane—founder of the Fantasia Fair and other social networks in the 1970s and 80s for the purposes of bringing what Kane and others first called “transgenderists” together—often fought against the prevailing norms that situated men as male and women as female (see Figure 1). Dressing in an attire that is socially constrained for a particular sex was often perceived as a disguise,” of committing fraud—an outright misunderstanding. Further, Kane found that major magazines engaged in “[the] casual use of such terms as ‘transvestite, transsexual, maleness and femaleness, drag queen, etc.’ coupled with clichés about the attitude and events of the [transvestite] world serve only to confound…fundamental issues concerning sex and gender roles” (Kane, 1974).

**Figure 1: Outreach ID Card**



Note the differences of gendered names and how the performance of

signatures were also decidedly gendered.

These misconceptions, “casual” misuses of terms, and general ignorance about the “para-culture” of transgenderists no doubt contribute to an ongoing anxiety within the community. In an undated poem entitled “The Agony of the Transsexual,” the author writes:

If I told the world my one desire

Their laughter could not quench the fire

that burns this man’s soul, torn apart

for in it beats a woman’s heart” (Agony, Undated).

Discrimination is historically commonplace. In an interview, Jan Morris, a transwoman, explains her encounters with social prejudice as “inescapable” (In Her Own Words, c. 1970, p. 26). B. Fortune wrote in 1985, as an exemplary expression of a dual life, one of pain:

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

These examples indicate how the truth of transgender selfhood is distorted by the public, or social, manifestation of norms that alters a personally lived truth into a lived subversion. One must live a life for survival. The “lie” interiorizes as self-condemnation, anxiety, and the overwhelming feeling of isolation. Overcoming this seemingly insurmountable obstacle toward self-completion, many found, and still find, solace in service-oriented organizations. Helen, for example, felt “alienated from the transvestite group in which [she’d] been so actively involved. [She] felt different form the others and slowly struggled to the realization that [she] was, in fact, a transsexual” (Dumanoski, 1975, p. 16). Her turning to the Gender Identity Services created a safe space for her identity to come into clearer view. The epistemic error would be to embed the narrative of the oppressed transgender person as a non-agent—a subject of both gendered and sexed terror. Each found ways to rebel and create the self that worked best for them in an inimical cultural apparatus.

The problem, so it would seem, is social and cultural. “Many trans folks experience serious mental health issues and have histories of trauma *due to transphobia*….” (Sarkisova, 2014, p. 292, emphasis added). Thus the consequences of transphobic discourses on embodiment are many and varied. An anonymous survey of transgender youth taken in 2001 asked respondents to describe their most difficult moments in school, growing up, and coming to terms with identifying as transgender. Adjusting to a new gendered mode of existence is part of construction, often at odds with internalized normative genders. One youth in the same survey responds that their “physicality” was the issue. “Having to wear all this makeup just to hide the burning stinging redness from the obsessive shaving on my face. Also the fact that I do not have ‘normal’ sized breasts. The other body hair that I have to shave irks me to no end. The worst thing is the hair” (Ibid., pp. 15-16). Another respondent claimed that “passing most people look at me and see a dyke” (Ibid.). The mulling over of the ability to access transition-related services repeats itself. “I find it very difficult to find resources and someone to confide in because I know most people can’t wrap their heads around the whole gender-bending thing” (Ibid.). “About a couple of weeks ago I started thinking about changing my name and pronouns. I went through my baby name books and talked to some friends…Along with all that comes an extreme frustration with language. Theres [sic] only so many words to use for pronouns and genders and sometimes I feel like none of them fit me” (Ibid., pp. 17-18). Another found “finding others like myself (from baby TGs to 30 years of age), and finding our admirers” to be most challenging—that is, social connectivity (Ibid., p. 18).

Where these social contexts exist they give transgender youth “peer networks where our gender identity and expression are not considered a distraction or concerning, thus enabling us to have more typical adolescent connections” (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2015, p. 460). Where these youth centers, however, can be spread geographically. Many programs can be started in public schools, particularly in high school, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). These organizations are often student driven, and as a result put pressure on those already marginalized and bullied to come forward. “Many trans youth feel astounding pressure to prove we can fit into preexisting gender categories in our society and to prove we can live up the standard of a ‘real’ man or woman…” (Ibid., p. 456). These gender-compliances, the norms of “passing,” create particularly difficult demands on transgender youth in gender-segregated spaces such as locker rooms, sports teams, and bathrooms.

Fear and disgust (at myself). I know perfectly well that the majority of people out there at best view me with something in between revulsion and fascination. Like a circus freak on display. I’m terrified of most of the world. I feel alone and helpless and paranoid. At times it gets to the point where I can barely function. Then I become disgusted with myself: I have it so fucking GOOD**!** I eat well, I have a good house, my parents may be ashamed to be seen with me in public but at least they’re still willing to send me to college. I’m not starving or working 18 hour days in a sweatshop or prostituting myself because I was thrown out of the house at 13. I have no goddamn right to be so afraid. And I’m disgusted at myself for being a transsexual (Transgender Youth Survey, 2001, p. 15).

The prevalence of cultural norms prescribing “passable” gender conformity create the conditions for an internalized fear when that “passability” isn’t realized. The “need” for passability creates very real conditions for physical threats to a non-normative body who is seen “trespassing” on an already gender-coded social space. Overcoming these anxieties, and responding to the need to build communities that are held inimical in cultural venues, many have turned to online networks (such as Facebook, YouTube, and other social media) that bridges geography and localized context. “I have a vlog where I talk about gender, and I’m subscribed to a ton of transguys and their partners. It is a nice community, very supportive” (Ibid., p 457).

These narratives, personal experiences, poems from personal places, demonstrate a certain kind of politics built into them. They each highlight the problems of legibility, of Ranciere’s distribution of the sensible. The politics of transgender people, crossing generations, have in so many ways been situated in the active destabilizing of external cultural expectations—to overcome an expectation that a person assigned a sex at birth will always be tied to that assignment. To live an authentic life under one’s own authorization, without fear of violence that misrecognition often entails. It is a politics of visibility that is deeply tied to a politics of survival. The political, as these narratives have illustrated, is grounded in the body, the everyday, and the often times missed struggle of creative survival.

**Contested Knowledges, Embodiment, and Sites of Political Resistance**

“I am me—and I am becoming.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In one strident vein of social criticism, there is no progress that underwrites liberal politics, history, or law. Liberal philosophies of the political society, from Locke onward, and even within the liberal-critic Marx, suggest that history tended toward freedom and the protections of all within a sovereign domain (Arendt, DATE, p. ?). Deeply-seated doubts for this freedom-oriented discourse entered political thought toward the end of the 19th century. Indeed, the “’evolution’ of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal” Nietzsche wrote over a century ago. This “progressus,” or trending toward, was rather a series of unanticipated introductions of thought, law, and instituted wasy of being and the resistances to them. Everything is contingent. Everything is waged in a world under continuous constructing. He wrote, “[progress] is a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, pus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions” (Nietzsche, 1989, pp. 77-78).

These successful counteractions are not, to be sure, ones that triumphantly empower the oppressed. In many instances, it is, rather, commonplace that the marginalized only ever see minor, local victories in the ways in which their views become sayable—become a part of the vernacular, other than mere “noise.” In this way Ranciere’s vision of politics becomes even more salient. In what ways can politics, thought outside the institutions that authorize certain forms of political action, be resituated for transgender populations whose voices have been, as illustrated in the previous section, treated as noise: (1) constructed within a medical discourse that makes their identities a disorder, (2) framed within the law that positions them as already-criminal, already-deviant, (3) situated socially as frauds, freaks, and monsters? I believe embodied knowledges, that is to say an epistemology of political resistance framed around what transgender “means” and what transgender people “know” in terms of their own experiences of gender oppressions, can lead in the disruptive direction that (liberal) theories of legal and political progress either cannot account for, or simply do not offer (Connolly DATE).

Given this theory of variant resistances, it seems helpful to start at a political “beginning.” During Christine Jorgenson’s coming out as transsexual in 1952, returning from Europe as an open MTF transwoman, Virginia Prince and others had already begun the creation of *Transvestia*, a newsletter and graphic pamphlet dedicated to cross-dressers and other “transgenderists” with a limited distribution (Beemyn, 2015, p. 512). Prince, considered a pioneer for transgenderists, along with Ariadne Kane (see Figure 2), was independently wealthy and authored several manuscripts on transvestitism. She draws fine lines within the community, determining what constitutes a transsexual, a transgenderist, or simply a cross-dresser (further sub-dividing the “para-culture”).

**Figure 2: Ari Kane, Pictured in Fantasia Fair’s Pamphlet**



In 1969, Prince argued “Most women have little to say about the fact of their woman-hood…I was born a male and raised as a boy and grew to be a man. Today I live as a woman by choice” (1969, p. 1). But she “hastens” to add that she is not a transsexual, that she is “still a perfectly normal male and [she] plan[s] to stay that way” (Ibid.). (Cisgender) women have never had to question their bodies. But transgender identities, however in flux or not, are nevertheless irrevocably grounded in bodies. “Transsexuals are persons who simply are not happy, comfortable, or socially and sexually effective as members of the sex to which they belong anatomically” (Ibid.). Speaking about cultural norms and their pervasiveness: **BE SURE TO CITE ROBERT HILL ‘BEFORE TRANSGENDER’**

A man is limited severely, however, in the degree to which he can move away from the accepted patterns and requirements of masculinity and toward the more permissive world of femininity…I am a woman by choice But note that I did not say female. ‘Woman’ is a gender word, not a sex word” (Ibid.).

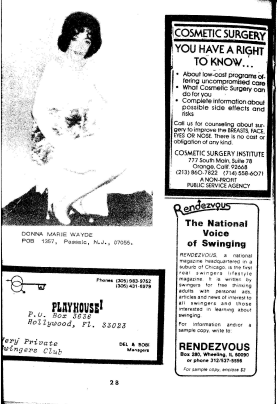
From the start, gender and sex were divorced from shared meaning. Gender had a decidedly social meaning, sex a biological meaning. However, the two were still affixed to bodies, and expressing a life “lived” as a woman, while being a “perfectly normal male” carried with it the embodied difficulties of social life, of legibility, as a gender different from the sex assigned at birth. Most of her publications, focused on defining, however narrowly, differences among and within transgender communities, were meant to spread information and thus create a language, a sub-cultural grammar of transgender being.

The 1960s were a time of social unrest, and transgender activists came forward. The Compton Cafeteria, a 24-hour diner in San Francisco, erupted into violence as transgender and gay patrons fought off the violent advances of police. “Patrons pelted the officers with everything at their disposal, wrecking the cafeteria in the process. Vastly outnumbered, the police ran outside to call for reinforcements, only to have the drag queens chase after them, beating the officers with their purses and kicking them with their high heels” (Beemyn, 2015, p. 515).The same year that Prince published her piece on transgenderists in 1969, the Stonewall Riots erupted in Greenwich Village, New York City, at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar. The riot was a result of an historical pattern of police brutality and raids. Raids of gay and lesbian bars were commonplace across the U.S. Stonewall served as an historical anchor point for the emerging gay liberation movement, where transgender activists of the day like Sylvia Rivera recalled that they, LGBT people, were “not taking any more of this shit” (Ibid., p. 516). The riots resulted in the initial eight police officers “barricading” themselves in the Stonewall Inn. This marked a new trend in activism—one that was grassroots, riotous, and radical.

This radicalism elicited certain discursive elements, of which the law itself, and the discriminatory frameworks of institutions, took a lower tier. The International Transgenderist Leadership Conference (c. 1970) outlined 16 “objectives” to provide a basic set of political goals. The first among them was “the establishment of a national referral service for the various groups and organizations.” Others included establishing a general outline for national education on transgenderism “and its various forms.” Only fourth was the “challenging of laws that restrict transgenderism.” Traditional political avenues are not mentioned, only national and international group cooperatives, and the development of social networks. At minimum, the political call was to educate and build community strength through accepted grammars of transgender experiences, that the creation of safe spaces in which transgender being and ways of doing could be cultivated.

Many community spaces do not emerge within an institutionalized, or non-profit, center, or social organizations like Fantasia Fairs (weekend long conferences for transgenderists in 70s and 80s). Ballroom scenes, of particular importance for transgender youth of color, emerged in the 70s as a means of bringing together communities to develop a culture of solidarity. Ballrooms, perhaps first highlighted and made more visible by documentaries such as *Paris is Burning*, is a site of varied identities and strategies of self-care, creating new spaces for family groups, and competition among members. “Because gender performance is central to self-identification and can imply a whole range of sexual identities in Ballroom culture, the system reflects how the members define themselves largely based on the categories that they walk/perform” (Bailey, 2013, p. 634). They embody the categories in which they compete. From butches, to femme-realness, to “performing” man or woman, these embodied ways of being become entrenched in the competitions that emerge within the ballroom. These spaces, community controlled and internally “policed,” defy normative kinship structures and highlights the importance of rethinking political strength through formal organization and incorporation.

**Figure 3: Fantasia Fair Outreach: Bodies and Sexuality**



Advertisements and information for transgenderists seeking

surgery and sexual freedom. Pictured: Donna Marie Wayde.

Finding transgender communities, given the vastness of experiences, the localized knowledges these experiences reflect, isn’t a self-defeating effort, but a difficult one nevertheless. Nancy Cole, commenting on her travels across the U.S. to various national, regional, and local support groups for transgenderists, finds the conditions for divisions (c. 1993, p. 1). She defines these divisions as “maladies,” many of which stem from institutional organizations that compete for that one spot as advocacy. But given the internal racial, sexed, and gendered pluralisms, that competition does little to bridge differences. Personalities, too, of “leaders” and “pioneers” who speak on behalf of communities contribute to a set of problems (consider Virginia Prince who was one of the first to define key terms, or Ari Kane who established Fantasia Fair). Language itself is problematic, as communities use what sub-cultural scripts to define themselves, borrowed from dominant discourses on gender and sex. What words do and how has access in the construction of these words in the process of identification has political consequences (cf. Fricker, 2007). Further, communities are fragmented within themselves, and as just mentioned, are created by local contexts and histories. As a gesture toward overcoming these “maladies,” Cole hearkens back to the discourses of the early U.S. colonies, overcoming internal differences for the sake of a common call for independence from an otherwise overarching oppression—here, gendered norms—asking leaders across organizations to have correspondence and get over internal drives toward being the universal representative of the transgender community.

Others see these internal divisions as symptomatic of a larger, ideological problem. In developing resistance and “counteractions” outside of the discriminatory nature of “official” channels of politics, radical transgender activists such as Dean Spade gesture toward “Building alternatives…to using the police or prison system to address harm and violence. Calling the cops or going to court often escalates or multiples violence for people and communities that are targeted for criminalization, but we need ways of dealing with harm that happens” (Spade, 2015, p. 188.). He asserts “we should prioritize the experiences of people facing the worst manifestation of transphobia rather than being tempted to try to solve problems for those who are least vulnerable. Social justice does not trickle down” (Spade, 2015, p. 188). As I have argued elsewhere, the law’s epistemological underpinnings often privilege cisgender conceptions of transgender experiences, undermining their epistemic capacities (Aultman, forthcoming). In his well known critiques of the limits of law for transgender populations, Spade insists that case law protecting the nondiscrimination rights of professional, mostly white, and middle class transgender people do not give the pressing attention needed to these subaltern transgender groups. “When people try to make change through the law, they often end up focusing on those from the group who are most likeable…who fit normative standards…” (Spade, 2014, p. 188).

Spade’s criticisms run deeper than just those aimed at institutional problems. The mainstream LGB(T) movement is divided by an inherently neoliberal elitism that caters to marriage licenses and economic benefits. That isn’t to say there is one good or bad strategy. He argues a radical strategy and critique “Is less about creating false dichotomies between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ approaches, and more about clarifying the actual impact that various strategies have, and recognizing that alternative approaches to the ‘official’ solutions are alive, are politically viable, and are being pursued by activists and organizations around the United States and beyond” (Bassichis, Lee, & Spade, 2013, p. 654). Offering “transformative approaches” to “big problems” that otherwise official, or mainstream, suggestions have attempted, Spade, et al., urge for the strengthening poverty programs like Medicaid and Medicare in addition to advocating for universal health care that adequately meets the medical needs of transgender patients. Instead of creating “hate crimes” legislation and increasing the size of the police state, “build community relationships and infrastructure to support the healing and transformation of people who have been impacted by interpersonal and intergenerational violence” (Ibid., p. 655). Others include a call similar to the one Nancy Cole made had made in the 90s, namely by joining other social movements, such as anti-war, anti-racist, or anti-capitalist movements toward rethinking everything from immigration policies, to localized disparities of housing, as well as prison reform and potential abolition.

These suggestions toward reform and radicalism reflect a deeply-seated embodied meaning to a politics that challenges the “sensible” lines of self-hood generated by cisgenderism. Because these calls, linked with a deconstruction of gendered rules, seek to uncouple social movements from their dependence on neoliberal paradigms of the state, some consider these suggestions unthinkable, or “impossible” (Ibid., p. 665). In one way, this radical trans politics is very much at the heart of Ranciere’s claims to re-think the lines of sensibility—since these trans politics exist at the threshold of what is say-able, thinkable, and comprehensible. They seek to bridge discourses where no such bridges existed. And, indeed, give voice to a set of tactics and strategies, as well as narratives that were at one point just “noise.” Impossibility describes the condition, or rather symptom, that a thing is at all unthinkable because the limits of our epistemic capacities have been severely limited and trained by a certain discourse of philosophical liberalism and political thought. It is a strand that places practical needs over ideal ones. It is also a strand that pushes a narrative of gradual progress through group dynamics and electoral politics over revolutionary practices of the everyday. Revolutionary practices like the generation of a new grammar to deal with inter-locking oppressions, of the interpretative pool of resources communities have to make sense of their daily lives.

**Conclusion**

*Creon*

And did you dare to disobey the law?

*Antigone*

Yes, it was not Zeus that made the proclamation; nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact such laws as that, for mankind. I did not believe your proclamation had such power to enable one who will someday die to override God’s ordinances, unwritten and secure.

(Sophocles, *Antigone*, p.178)

The epistemic question of intelligibility, of what makes the self *knowable* to itself but also to others, is one that haunts the historical narratives constructing the human condition and our politics. What defines the self is both discursive and practical, exterior and interior. There is no one trait or activity, no one theme or voice, that declares for all within the ambit of some identity a single truth. Self-truth is lived, articulated, and expressed locally. It produces social and intimate knowledge, an actually existing reality.

However defined, and in whatever narrative we seek to define it, transgender carries within it a wide array of diverse peoples and practices. The name itself invokes a relative liminality between two poles set culturally, one male the other female. Trapped within, accepting, moving, switching, traversing, rearticulating, or abolishing these poles altogether, the transgender person is neither object of medical psychosis nor tragic subject of terror. Living beings, their politics is, by necessity, an embodied one. Their bodies are policed. Their bodies are disciplined. Their bodies are, still, their own. As such, politics happens in the rupture where the disciplined body resists, overcomes or subverts the norm, and makes a new system by which to be recognized. Butler captures this theme most dramatically in her treatise on Antigone.

Antigone represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement, one that puts the reigning regimes of representation into crisis and raises the question of what the conditions of intelligibility could have been would have made her life possible, indeed, what sustaining web of relations makes our lives possible, those of us who confound kinship in the rearticulation of its terms? What new schemes of intelligibility make our lives legitimate and recognizable, our losses true losses? (Butler, 2000, p. 24).

Antigone’s deed, of burying her brother against the edict of her uncle-king, Creon, created the space in which her challenging Creon was a double movement. She defies the state through her deed, by defying her uncle’s law. But at once she must adhere to the language of the state, made legibly criminal “Yes, I confess; I will not deny my deed.” But her loss was not legible. Antigone exists in a space where she must choose between burying her brother, demonstrating her loss, on the one hand, and her citizenship on the other. In the end, she dies in order she be recognized.

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1. Ruth Farmer, 1993, [A great hope: A transsexual rebirth], The Transgender Archives, University of Victoria, BC, Canada, Box 4. p. v. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I’m using Helen instead of Phil, as the article uses the latter, in the hopes of capturing Helen’s preferred name and perceived gendered self-hood. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nancy Ledins, c. 1960, [Letter], The Transgender Archives, University of Victoria, BC, Canada, Box 3. p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)