STANDPOINT JOURNALISM: EMPLOYING REFLEXIVITY AND AWARENESS IN REPORTING ON DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

by

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(Under the Direction of Valerie Boyd)

ABSTRACT

The theory of standpoint epistemology asserts that each of us construct and interpret our realities based on our own experiences. Reflexivity invites us to bring an increased awareness to our daily lives. Taken together, these concepts frame the foundation of standpoint journalism. Using the method of autoethnography I expound upon Durham's model of standpoint journalism and present it as a plausible solution for improving the coverage of communities that have been historically marginalized by society and the press. By integrating standpoint journalism, reflexivity, and autoethnography, an emphasis is placed on the location where theory intersects with practice–or praxis– and narrates my experiences reporting on the transgender community.

INDEX WORDS: Journalism, Reflexivity, Standpoint epistemology, Activism, Black feminism, Transgender, Autoethnography, Praxis, Qualitative research

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those individuals who took a chance and shared their stories with me as a journalist and scholar.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After purchasing the *Oakland Tribune* in 1983, Robert C. Maynard became the first African American to own a mainstream American newspaper. He began his career at a small Pennsylvania daily in 1961, joining the staff of *The Washington Post* after completing a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard University. Maynard would become one of the *Post's* national correspondents for the growing unrest and conflict during the civil rights movement. One of Maynard's lasting legacies is developing a model of understanding diversity that he called "fault lines." He likened the tensions created by diversity to how shifting tectonic plates sent quakes through his home city, outlining five fault lines: race, class, gender, generation, and geography.[i] As journalists, these fault lines also impact the way we frame news coverage. When presented with a story, journalists frame stories in a way that foregrounds what lies on their side of the fault line.

Scholars challenge the notion of journalists as objective observers of society. When attempting objectivity they become inauthentic, John Merrill suggests.[1] It is not realistic to envision someone existing in the absence of a value system. Therefore, the most authentic view of a journalist is one who does, indeed, have a value system and writes with the clearest sense of how that value system can impact their writing. The goal then is not to minimize subjectivity, but to become attentive to its effects. With this in mind, only then can journalists begin to cross fault

[i] Gender includes sexual identity, geography includes region as well as urban, rural, or suburban. Race is also inclusive of ethnicity.

lines and learn to compose multiple interpretations.[2] The theories of reflexivity and standpoint epistemology facilitate this goal.

Reflexivity requires a constant internal dialogue and a thorough scrutiny of what you know, or what you think you know, and more importantly, how you know it. "To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment."[3] Processes that are unconscious in the construction of knowledge must be illuminated. Through reflexivity, one becomes more conscious of the ideology that determines how events are interpreted. Laurel Richardson recommended that we "seriously and self-reflexively 'deconstruct' our practices so we can 'reconstruct' them with fewer negative consequences."[4] Without reflexivity, one is bound to perpetuate dominant ideology and existing misrepresentations. "All of the kinds of objectivity-maximizing procedures focused on the nature and/or social situations that are the direct object of observation and reflection must also be focused on the observers and reflectors," Sandra Harding asserted.[5] In other words, just as extensively as one scrutinizes the observed, the focus must be turned inward on the observer.

Standpoint epistemology originates from feminist theory and the field of sociology, contending that women's experiences cannot be understood using the antiquated " 'truth claims' of positivist research methods," but instead only through a consideration of the position of women in a patriarchal society.[6] Extended more broadly, standpoint epistemology requires that we are aware of the position from which we construct our knowledge. The standpoint from which a Hispanic American male journalist constructs his understanding of an event is likely to be different from where a Caucasian American male journalist will construct his. The theory reaches beyond race, and includes other factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.[7] Our knowledge is "socially located in a gender/class/race matrix," wrote Harding.[8] Through the

act of reflexivity, it is the journalist's responsibility to locate it. Once journalists do so, they are able to narrate the lives of others with a new level of consciousness. Similarly, Richardson held:

> The postfoundational sensibility locates the constructions of knowledge in humanly situated practices. One's practices reflect biographical, historical, and particularized social locations. Accordingly, each of us sees from "somewhere." No one can be "nowhere" or "everywhere." There is no Archimedean point for determining "truth." We are always on some corner somewhere. And, because we are standing somewhere, each of us harbors some ideological preference and political program.[9]

Regardless of who we are, we understand the world from a particular location– our very own street corner. Since there is no avoiding this, all that is left is to accept and transcend this standpoint by recognizing the intricacies– both content and process– that go into constructing our knowledge.

In a qualitative analysis of a 1994 *New York Times* series about a Harlem neighborhood, Peter Parisi found that despite the appearance of in-depth minority coverage, the series remained "well within the conception of African Americans as a 'problem people' solidly ensconced in an 'underclass'."[10] The discussion continued:

> The story subjects seem selected to document dysfunctional social roles and behaviors – drug dealers, unwed mothers dependent on welfare and drinkers and drug users. . . accounts of extravagant spending, lack of personal focus or ambition, and irresponsibility, all strongly linked to stereotypical categories.[11]

Although the journalist spent at least six months immersed in the community, an unusual length of time for such daily reporting, hegemonic narrative was still produced. As a result, the series

reinforced harmful stereotypes, further oppressing the Harlem neighborhood. One resident lamented, "I am so tired of being called the 'underclass'."[12]

The reporter was an African American journalist. Parisi advised that "black journalists are amply qualified to use their backgrounds and perspectives to encourage mutual social understanding, but such a benefit does not accrue automatically from racial identity (or even social class)."[13] If the reporter had considered more carefully the matrix of subjugating societal factors, such as the interaction of race and poverty in the Harlem neighborhood, a more enlightened series may have resulted. The absence of standpoint epistemology is exemplified by the fact that important factors were overlooked:

> There is no reference to U.S. history, especially as it regards segregation, racism, urban migration, or the evolution of Harlem. No 'outside experts' of any sort– sociologists, political scientists, economists, social workers, anthropologists– are brought in, nor is any of the *Times'* other reporting on race and urban policy ever mentioned.[14]

The reporter did not practice reflexivity, asking herself: "How do I know what I know?" Nor did she take steps to socially locate the knowledge for herself, or for her readers, as standpoint epistemology entails. Consequently, she upheld dominant ideology. If we understand that as a black reporter she may have had a class standpoint different from those reported on, can we not expect such results? Reflexivity and standpoint epistemology are just as important for reporters and media covering their own racial communities– in this case, a black reporter covering a black community, because even nuances such as class differences are profound enough to skew reporting. The practice of reflexivity and standpoint epistemology by reporters may be countered by the fact that newsroom diversity is most often reflected in the number of reporters of color, with few employees of color found in editorial and supervisory positions, according to annual

reports by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE). It is therefore possible that the stereotypical nature of the *Times'* Harlem series is indicative of a combination of the collaborative nature of newsrooms, a lack of diversity in top managing positions, and the failure to employ reflexivity and standpoint epistemology at all levels of the editorial process.

For my thesis project, I sought to design a study that focused on improving the coverage of marginalized communities based on a framework of standpoint epistemology and reflexivity. The result is both a tangible product of standpoint epistemology and reflexivity as much as it is guided and grounded by it. The intimate nature of the theoretical framework required an intimate look into the research subject. A fitting method seemed to be one of autoethnography in which I would use myself and my own experiences as my research text. In effect, my thesis is a snapshot of one journalist's journey to engage in the process of standpoint epistemology and reflexivity. The fact that it is my own journey illustrates how it is both guided by and a physical representation of the theories of standpoint epistemology and reflexivity.

My thesis is divided into two sections. The first seeks to capture my epistemological standpoint. I ask and answer the question: "What are the underlying values that drive my work as an individual and as a journalist?" I outline the specific values that ground me as an individual, far deeper than my career title of journalist. As Martin Rosen puts it: "Journalists need ideas and convictions to guide their search for news; these form the common sense of the profession, or, to put it another way, its soul. But the soul of the craft can itself be crafted."[15] I discuss the concepts of the activist journalist and black feminist journalist as the soul that guides my search for what makes news.

The first section of the thesis might be surprising in its lack of focus on anecdotes, and its emphasis on theoretical models, but I would not be true to who I am if it was not written as such.

I am a self-proclaimed theory junkie. I approach my understanding of society as a theorist– based on how things should theoretically be– or as others like to say, as an idealist. I function under the belief that if the press purports to represent the public, but instead only draws upon the voices of a select group of the dominant elite, then the most commonsensical reaction is for journalists to work persistently to ensure that it actually does represent the public. I believe a media that only gives voice to a select few and either exclude the masses or sensationalizes them is a form of injustice, and such injustice is not in line with a nation that calls itself a democracy or a press that is supposedly a keeper of democracy. The "theorist" in me holds onto these ideals and concludes the most appropriate solution is working tirelessly to ensure the theoretical model our nation and media proudly proclaim represents reality.

The second section of my thesis focuses largely on the process of reflexivity while on the job. In particular it explores the space in which standpoint epistemology and journalistic practice meet, as I reflect on my experiences covering a marginalized community. It strays from both the traditional research and journalistic tradition as well as my own first section in that it repeatedly invokes first person and places me throughout. It is meant to illustrate what I, the reflexive journalist, thought and experienced. I end my thesis with yet another act of reflexivity, and discuss my final reflections on my research experience as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY: ELUCIDATING THE FOUNDATION

It is often argued that media reflect culture. Not surprisingly, media situated in a society cemented in unequal power structures are reflective of this very phenomenon. Research continually illuminates journalistic trends where the most marginalized groups in society remain so in media coverage. The relationship between media and culture is not one-way, but rather it is a dialogical relationship where culture informs what is represented in the media as much as media disseminates cultural values. "To the extent the media are perceived as purveyors of truth, journalistic discourse enjoys a persuasive power which can influence the structure of ideas circulating in a given society," notes Brain McNair.[16] Further, "the journalistic media are defined as part of the ideological apparatus of the capitalist state, reinforcing the values of the dominant groups within that state and ensuring their reproduction." The values of dominant cultural groups are often revealed through the choice of what is represented in journalistic coverage. This notion of representation has implications for both "the meanings ascribed to people and things" and "in determining who speaks for whom, or who has voice."[17]

Media representations of marginalized groups have a significant effect on how the group is perceived by the public. In his 1996 study, "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media," Martin Gilens found that newspapers depicted the poor as predominantly more black than statistics actually support. "This distorted portrait of the American poor cannot help but reinforce negative stereotypes of blacks as mired in poverty and contribute to the belief that poverty is primarily a 'black problem,' " Gilens wrote.[18]

The complete absence of voice is another way in which media may affect the portrayal of a group. Marian Meyers contended the profiles and anecdotes presented in a 1998 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* series titled "Growing Up with Crack" establish a relationship between the "addict" and the "hero" that, when viewed through the lens of race, gender, and class, become a narrative of "a white, professional middle-class attempting to save women and children of the black underclass. . . "[19] Noting the journalist's intensive focus on the mothers and a failure to mention the fathers, among other stakeholders, Meyers concluded the series reinforced "stereotypes of African American men as criminals and sexual predators while simultaneously not holding them accountable for their actions."[20] The lack of voice given to these black male characters left the reader's impression to be determined solely by the mothers and the white journalist's perspective.

Similarly, quotation patterns when attributing sources may also deny or grant voice to marginalized groups. Direct quotes add strength to statements. "In this way, the use of quotation becomes a gate-keeping device that admits only those in positions of power and influence while shutting out the opinions and perspectives of those deemed by society to be powerless," Peter Teo argued.[21] Quoting few or no minorities, directly or indirectly, systematically silences them. Patterns of attributing "experts" through direct or indirect quotes and not giving voice to minorities contributes to the "othering" and marginalization of nonmajority groups.[22]

Along with this power to misrepresent or silence marginalized groups comes the authority to be deliberate about representation and give voice to marginalized communities. Despite the accessibility of media production brought on by the popularity of citizen journalism such as blogging, participation in the production of the most powerful media, like *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, remains elusive to the everyday individual and a privilege of a

staff of elite reporters and editors. Further, this elite group of reporters and editors is not representative of society. According the American Society of News Editors' annual newsroom census, racial and ethnic minorities make up less than 14 percent of the newsroom workforce and only a little over one-third are women, in contrast to population estimates that 30 percent of all Americans are of color and a little over 50 percent female.

Though the expansion of participatory journalism and the impact made by the rapid growth of the Internet have significantly reduced the media's power over the years, McNair maintains that journalism continues to serve as "a moral and ideological force as well as a source of cognitive data."[23] Media joins the ranks of institutions like education or government as a major agent of socialization. The autonomy afforded to the media by the First Amendment and the resulting jurisprudence situates media as a unique agent of socialization. Unlike other institutions governed by legal policy that reflect cultural values, the media in many ways is able to escape legal mandates for equality and does not have to provide coverage of marginalized groups. This same autonomy leaves media in a position to herald change. For example, the abolitionist press, by some accounts, predates the Civil War by nearly 90 years with the publication of Thomas Paine's 1775 article, "African Slavery in America," in *The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*.[24] A more contemporary example is the role the mainstream and black press played in drawing attention to the inequality of racial segregation and the resulting civil unrest, catapulting stories like Freedom Rides and the integration of the University of Alabama into the national spotlight.[25] "[O]nly journalism has the combination of complete freedom and potential power to define its roles, to set its own goal, to act–within reason– as it wishes," writes Davis Merritt.[26] For these reasons, journalism is potentially one of the most profound arenas to combat a longstanding history of marginalization.

In a 1986 essay, Clifford Christians poetically articulated his view of the media's social responsibility, writing "I hold the news media's feet to the fires of injustice and suffering." He posed the question, "In our day of persistent inequalities, do the most vulnerable receive priority or not?"[27] I emphatically answer yes. The most vulnerable– those that the media continues to sensationalize, malign, or simply ignore– deserve the same priority and comprehensive coverage as we give to what public officials do in the stalls of bathrooms. In the next section, I discuss my interpretation of what it means to be a journalist standing at the edge of Christians' symbolic fire.

The Activist Journalist

To some the terms activist and journalist might be mutually exclusive, yet one of my first struggles is to resolve how a journalist and activist can be one in the same. Various scholars comment on the importance of action as a part of the journalist's role. Merritt believes the media's constitutional protection of freedom implies a moral obligation to act.[28] Similarly, Martin Rosen conceptualizes the media "as a player in politics, an influential actor that could alter its actions without abandoning its role as truth teller."[29] Meenakshi Gigi Durham goes further and asserts that the action of centering and foregrounding socially marginalized groups is a form of community activism. However, she takes great care to note that in "the journalist context, action is best construed in terms of reportorial methods of destabilizing hegemonic discourses in the news."[30] For Durham, the activist journalist is someone whose activism manifests itself in their sensitivity to cover those who the media has not done justice to in the past.

Subgenres of journalism like civic and advocacy journalism offer precedence where direct action is expected from the journalist. Both clearly articulate an understanding of the journalist's role being in part a responsibility to enhance public life and promote democratic

ideals. Civic, or public, journalism is premised on the understanding that journalists have "a fundamental responsibility for *strengthening* civic culture" (emphasis in the original).[31] To do so civic journalists strive to reconnect the people to the community by actively provoking discussion. News coverage is traditionally reactive in the sense that journalists' involvement occurs most often after an event occurs. Rosen suggests that journalists can engage the public in the question of "what do we do now?" in two different ways: "It can be covered as news, if it happens. But it can also be suggested, modeled, coaxed to life by journalists who say: this is important and we need to talk about it." [32]

For advocates of civic journalism, the journalist's role is in effect opening a door for its citizens and urging them to walk through, but there it stops. Each citizen is then left to sift through and reflect on the ideas initiated by journalists, but brought fully to life by the public. Merely telling the news is not enough; "civic journalists are people who believe that the press should take a far more assertive role in trying to make democracy work than they have in the past."[33] All too frequently the media only give voice to a select group of individuals, ignoring those on the margins, simultaneously mirroring and reinforcing the tendency for society to be selectively inclusive. Isabel Molina Guzmán laments this tendency: "[T]he slippage caused by the presumption that the word *Our* in daily discourse– our media, our society, our history– assumes to describe the experiences of all women, people of color, gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals" (emphasis in original).[34] The practice of selective representation precludes the media from deserving titles like the people's press or the keeper of democracy when in truth only those who are part of the dominant group are represented.

Advocacy journalism goes further than civic journalism in the freedom it gives journalists to serve as activists. It is also highly contested by journalists holding onto the more conventional

codes of journalism. However, an understanding of the nuances characterizing mainstream journalism reduces the overstated differentiation between advocacy journalism and what are considered to be more "traditional" forms of journalism. The entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* comments that the "term [advocacy journalism] is potentially meaningful only in opposition to a category of journalism that does not engage in advocacy, so-called objective journalism."[35] This creates a superficial binary between objective and advocacy journalism, inaccurately assuming that those who do not profess to be non-advocacy journalists are actually objective. Arguably, based on this objective versus non-objective dichotomy, the only difference between non-advocacy journalism and traditional journalism is that advocacy journalists and media declare their biases. "Advocacy journals— sometimes called alternative publications—have a declared bias, a publicly acknowledged editorial point of view. They are upfront about their editorial position even on their masthead," observes Sue Careless. "Mass media— sometimes called mainstream media—have biases which are often hidden or implicit. Because their editorial viewpoint supposedly reflects what the majority values, no one thinks much about it. Everyone seems to agree, so there is no apparent bias."[36] Simply because the bias goes unnoticed, does not mean it ceases to exist. There is and will always be a bias in any reporting produced by a human journalist. The questions that we ask to elicit facts, the people that we choose to gather these facts from, and the ways in which we go about determining the verity of our facts, are all examples of where bias might enter, and why three reporters working on the same story could quite possibly produce three different articles. To argue that advocacy journalism simply differs from traditional journalism because it is nonobjective oversimplifies the relationship of journalists to the stories they produce.

Rejecting the view that objectivity is a defining characteristic of traditional journalism and nonobjectivity of advocacy journalism is not meant to counter the idea that advocacy journalism is a distinctive form of journalism. Advocacy journalism is unique in its unabashed quest to use media as a tool to promote social causes. However, it is largely set apart by the resulting journalistic product and not the battle over objectivity. A product of advocacy journalism is an article constructed with a clear message. In response to the negative response CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour faced after her 1994 criticism of former President Bill Clinton during an on-air worldwide forum held for journalists covering the Balkan war, Amanpour said, "An element of morality has to be woven into these kinds of stories." She continued: "I don't think it has anything do with an agenda, simply it has everything to do with what is going on in front of your eyes."[37] This type of journalism may advocate a clear moral standpoint, but as Amanpour reminds us it is often absolutely necessary.

Though there may be a difference in the journalist's layering and integration of the gathered facts, the reporting methods that the advocacy journalist uses are not incongruent with the methods used in more traditional journalism. In fact, Careless believes there should be no difference at all. In instructing journalists how to undertake advocacy journalism, she remarks:

> A journalist writing for the advocacy press should practice the same skills as any journalist. You don't fabricate or falsify. If you do you will destroy the credibility of both yourself as a working journalist and the cause you care so much about. News should never be propaganda. You don't fudge or suppress vital facts or present half-truths. You shouldn't take something wildly out of context or treat an extremely nuanced subject as a sound bite. There must be a general fairness and thoroughness. Verify your facts and quotes. Use multiple sources and try to cite neutral sources for statistics.[38]

It is in the best interest of the social cause to engage in reporting methods that result in accuracy. Veteran journalist Amy Alexander told me in an interview: "The biggest manifestation of your agenda, so to speak, is what you choose to cover. In the covering of these individuals or these issues you still are required to be fair and accurate. It's in your selections maybe that you are indicating perhaps where your passions lie."[39] The best way to convey a message, whether you claim the title of advocacy journalist or not, is to give the reader content that is high quality. Fudging or suppressing facts or ignoring alternative perspectives surrounding the issues only weakens your ability to disseminate your message.

One last characteristic of advocacy journalism important to highlight is its existence on a continuum. In other words, all advocacy journalism is not identical. At one end, some interpret advocacy journalism as "replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and opposition practices." [40] At this end of the continuum the advocacy journalist may focus less on journalistic coverage as a manifestation of activism, and instead use journalism to overtly champion, as Sherry Ricchiardi writes, "an ideological stance and argue a point of view based on their personal beliefs."[41] Some forms of alternative media, such as religious or partisan publications, are known for this. Lying at the other end of the continuum is a type of advocacy journalism less overt in its messaging. Here advocacy journalism reveals itself in the subtlest of ways, and the distinctions between advocacy journalism and traditional journalism become indiscernible. Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies comments: "When a journalist presents layers in a story that builds evidence to prove a point, some may interpret this as advocacy when, really, it is good solid reporting" (*sic*). For most, the mention of advocacy journalism evokes the first extreme of the continuum. By rejecting the notion that traditional journalism maintains elevated status because of a supposed ability to attain objective results and

by placing emphasis on advocacy journalism along its entire continuum, more journalists may begin to proudly wear the title of advocacy journalist, or at minimum, be more willing to work alongside them. Still some will continue to view the words activist and journalist as mutually exclusive, and label journalists who identify as both as sub par and relegate their work to alternative media.

The Black Feminist Journalist

In their introduction to *Feminist Communication Theory,* Lana Rakow and Laura Wackwitz draw a distinction between mainstream communication theory and one that is grounded in feminist theory: "unlike most of our field, which presumes the continuation of the social order it examines, feminist communication theory begins with an assumption that we are in need of deep structural change to produce new social relations and just societies."[42] I would be remiss if I did not discuss a feminist approach to journalism when peeling back the layers that construct my own epistemological standpoint. Much as I need to integrate an activist journalist persona, I also have to piece together an identity that honors myself as both a feminist and a journalist. Again I ask the question, are feminist and journalist mutually exclusive? Should there exist a space where one may proudly claim the role of being a black feminist journalist? Or might other journalists and editors see it, according to Guzmán, "as a dangerous marker of difference that would jeopardize the newspaper's journalistic integrity. . .[seeing] my work as special-interest coverage, as non-objective, and as non-important"?[43]

Black feminist perspectives allow for the recognition of gender and race and how they intricately inform the experiences of black women. As with any theoretical field, the perspectives

of a black feminist may differ in shape and form. One in particular is Womanism[ii], as first coined by Alice Walker and later articulated by black feminist scholar Layli Phillips. In her introduction to *A Womanist Reader,* presently the only existing anthology of Womanist research, Phillips lays out five powerful themes characterizing Womanism: antioppressionist, communitarian, vernacular, nonidealogical, and spiritualized. I discuss the first four here as grounding my own journalistic identity.

First, to be a Womanist is to be *antioppressionist*. "'*Antioppressionist*' supersedes and organizes all labels that reference specific forms of oppression, such as antiracist, antiheterosexist, antihomophobic, antixenophobic, and the like, extending the reach of Womanism into zones of oppression that may not be related to labelable identities and for which there is not even yet language," writes Phillips (emphasis in original).[44] While such an overly broad conceptualization differs from other black feminist perspectives such as Black Feminism, I find it quite useful in framing my work as a journalist. Rakow and Wackwitz write, "It is a political act to treat gendered, sexual, racial and ethnic cultures and their experiences as serious and important."[45] The work of an activist journalist grounded by a black Womanist perspective is to engage in journalistic coverage centering any class-based, gender, sexually, or ethnically marginalized community. My search for news is driven by the goal of balancing who the media gives voice. My "cultural anime,"[46] as journalist Wil Haygood puts it, may lead me to stories that give voice to black women, but a journalistic identity grounded in Womanism implores that I take a broader approach to searching for diverse marginalized communities to cover.

[ii] I use capital letters to denote Black Feminism and Womanism as separate schools of thought as opposed to the lower case usage of terms like black feminism in reference to a woman who is both black and feminist. Scholars such as Alice Walker and Layli Phillips maintain there are slight differences between Womanist and Black Feminist theory.

Another related characteristic of Womanism that drives my search for what communities to cover is that of *communitarianism.* By definition communitarian refers to a collectivist society or community. Phillips outlines the tiers of community for the black woman as beginning with other black women (or women of color) in the center, followed by the black community, then other oppressed people, and ending at all of humanity. Phillips' diagram of Womanism as a series of overlapping tiers is a model for centering the reality of black women, while simultaneously placing emphasis on other marginalized people. Where the breadth of antioppressionism may be too inclusive for some, communitarianism recenters the black woman's reality, as well as the skills sharpened by this reality. She writes:

> Black women and other women have come to understand what it means to live in the margins of multiple communities simultaneously and function, even thrive, in the 'in between,' interstitial spaces of other people's structures. They have developed the ability to think and reason using multiple perspectives simultaneously, moving in and out of different cognitive, ideological, cultural, emotional, social, or spiritual frames with relative ease– the ability to harmonize and coordinate a variety of forms and methods of social movements to respond synthetically and with specificity to an ever-changing variety of social problems and conditions.[47]

I have often been cognizant of how these finely tuned sets of skills, developed from living in the "interstitial spaces," benefit me as a reporter. Patricia Hill Collins, whose book *Black Feminist Thought* is often cited as one of the primary foundational texts of Black Feminist theory, also highlights how black women navigate the margins when she speaks of "outsider-within" status. In the context of sociological work, Hill Collins suggests, "Outsiders within occupy a special place– they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be

more difficult for established sociological insiders to see."[48] This is also similar to what Haygood refers to as his "antenna," or how his "earned and learned knowledge" comes to bear on his reporting.[49] Haygood insists that good journalistic skills are of the utmost importance, but he also recognizes that his identity as an African American gives him "more sensitivity [and] more curiosity for stories that aren't covered enough."[50]

Journalist Charisse Jones and clinical psychologist Dr. Kumea Shorter-Gooden use first-hand interviews to illustrate the daily "shifting" behaviors that black women often demonstrate. The authors describe shifting as the act of changing to accommodate differences as a means of surviving in a society where a black woman faces oppression based on gender and race. "From one moment to the next, [black women] change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting "White," then shifting "Black" again, shifting "corporate," shifting "cool," write the authors.[51] In my own reporting work, I find myself benefiting by the act of "shifting" mainly in my ability to traverse diverse communities. I have developed the skills required to enter communities where nobody looks like me or where there is the subtle feeling of being unwelcomed, simply because skills that some journalists only learn through reporting are crucial to my survival and success as a black woman in nearly every academic and professional community I am part of. Jones and Gooden, however, note that this "internal, invisible" shifting can have a profound psychological impact on black women: "It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness–often a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias."[52] So it is that I am both fortunate and unfortunate to be intimately familiar with the art of shifting, and am a stronger, more effective journalist because of it. Because of the psychological consequences noted by Jones and Gooden, it is even more crucial that I integrate the elements of my black womanhood and my journalist-self and ignore those who imply that the titles of black feminist

and journalist are mutually exclusive. I cannot truly honor the journalistic skills that are considered exceptional for a newbie journalist such as myself, without paying tribute to being black and female.

I also draw upon my grounding in Womanism's communitarianism when I am confronted with the job of covering a community that is not my own. Media has been exceptionally harsh on black women who find themselves at the bottom of both the gender hierarchy and the racial hierarchy, as well as at the bottom of the class ladder according to the prevailing "triple oppression" framework for studying black women. Journalistic coverage often heavily portrays black women as criminals, bad mothers, or drug addicts[53] while entertainment media play off of contemporary forms of the jezebel, matriarch, or mammy.[54] [iii] When I find myself on story assignments about marginalized communities not my own, I must admit to myself that whatever I produce is not a contribution to the centering of the experiences of myself or other black women. But as a journalist, I know that not every story I find myself on will be nor should be about black women. Nevertheless, this perpetual fight to be visible and to be heard is authentic to my experiences as a black woman, so it is not surprising that it might manifest itself in my work as a journalist. The Womanist call for communitarianism and the notion that even when I am not writing about black women I may use the skills that stem from my unique experiences as a black woman, provide me with the needed comfort.

Womanism is also characterized by *vernacular*. By vernacular, Phillips means a focus on the everyday lives of individuals. This Womanist element informs my journalistic work in two important ways. First, the everyday focus supports the notion that social justice can be engaged

[iii] According to scholars, the mammy image is characterized by obedience and faithfulness in domestic servitude, the matriarch by an overdomineering and emasculating nature, and the jezebel by hypersexuality and promiscuity.

in throughout our everyday activities. "'Start where you are' might be the womanist credo, and 'one step forward' is the standard for progress," Phillips sums up.[55] In my everyday practices of being a journalist, I am able to claim a black feminist perspective such as Womanism. And the very act of reporting on marginalized communities is, according to Womanist theory, a form of activism in itself. Hill Collins criticizes prevailing conceptualizations of the term "activism." "[I]f Black women simultaneously use all resources available to them – their roles as mothers, their participation in churches, their support of one another in black female networks, their creative expression. . . then Black women's everyday behavior itself is a form of activism."[56] As Hill Collins' quote illustrates, activism takes on all forms. It can be grand or it can be simple, and formal or informal. In the case of the black feminist journalist, it can be in the very act of doing her job.

Vernacular is also an entreaty to write stories about the everyday lives of people. By portraying characters as they engage in the mundane activities of everyday life, journalists allow their audience to relate to them. Capturing the hearts of readers is imperative when writing about marginalized communities, particularly those whose minority status is both numeric and in the realm of social power. According to Clifford Christians, this type of journalism "is to be seen as a narrative art form in which the aim is telling worthy stories strongly so that the audience's conscience can be engaged. [57] Good journalism will engage even the reader whose life experience reveals itself to be wholly different from the story's character. "I believe that fair, accurate, in-depth, sophisticated, narrative reporting of everyday life is prima facie for readers. They read it. They like it. They respond to it," writes Walt Harrington, who refers to this type of journalism as intimate journalism. "I believe the reporting of everyday life is prima facie good for newspapers. It expands their mission. It touches their readers in the heart, as well as the

head."[58] Engaging the heart of the reader is the primary means through which journalists can provoke discussion and action without coming off as preaching or taking moral stances. By writing engaging stories about individuals from marginalized communities or about issues relating to those communities, a journalist counteracts past traditions of ignoring the experiences of non-dominant groups.

Phillips proposes another unifying theme of Womanism as *nonideological*. "Womanism is not about creating lines of demarcation," she points out. "Rather, it is about building structures of inclusiveness and positive interrelationships from anywhere in its network."[59] This nonideological nature is largely why a Womanist perspective fits so easily with the role of journalist. Specific beliefs are not prescribed and there are no actions required to attain the status of Womanist, because in contrast to other "established ideological perspectives. . . womanist activism does not focus on the confrontation of institutional structures so much as on the shaping of thought processes and relationships." [60] It is best described as a collection of values that is supple or pervading as opposed to rigid or paramount. The black feminist journalist ascribing to a Womanist perspective is no different from any other journalist who comes to work with her own values, life experiences, and opinions. The only difference lies in the fact that the former owns up to her epistemological standpoint, while the journalist who holds steadfast to the notion of objectivity does not.

Answering the Call for Objectivity

I dismiss any criticism of the nonobjective nature of methods such as advocacy journalism or labeling oneself as a black feminist journalist, because put most simply, there is no authenticity to the notion of being objective. Every human being interprets reality through his or her own subjective lens of life experiences. However, I do believe an important question

undergirds the call for objectivity. That is: what process should journalists engage in order to keep their values and perspectives from overwhelming their journalistic sensibilities? Durham observes that, "although journalistic objectivity has been critically examined by various scholars, alternative models of reportage are few and far between."[61] Civic and advocacy journalism, for example, are both product-oriented and pay little attention to the internal process involved in being a journalist. While the perspective of Womanist for the black feminist journalist may do justice in capturing a set of values, it also fails to address the internal processes required to be a good journalist.

Durham's model of standpoint journalist potentially addresses both these criticisms of process vs. product-oriented methods as well as responding to the archaic call for objectivity. The model is most useful in recognizing the importance of engaging in reflexivity and responding to how our backgrounds inform our work as journalists. At first look, one might see the model of standpoint journalism as teetering dangerously close to the world of the intangible– into the overly theoretical. This is the genesis of the second part of my thesis, which demonstrates what it looks like to be a journalist engaging in reflexivity. What I articulate in this section are the struggles I confronted as I reflexively engaged my values while on the job as a journalist covering a marginalized community. In contrast to the first part of my thesis, which represents a more theory-laden, thinking by the light of candle style, the second part focuses more specifically on capturing the actual experiences of my work as a freelance journalist. It is an undertaking of the point at which theory meets practice, or praxis.[62]

For a period of about four months I created a beat focusing on the transgender community in Athens, Ga. I spent anywhere from 10 to 15 hours per week doing in depth interviews with transgender-identified individuals or related experts, observing contacts, writing

and pitching stories, reading past newspaper coverage, and researching best practices for covering the transgender community. As I explain further in the next section, gaining a true immersion experience in the transgender community was considerably difficult given that there are no definitive boundaries to the community itself. Instead, I opted to attend weekly gatherings or events where I found those who were transgender or their allies coming together around a common cause. In these various environments, I actively participated, such as asking questions, or at other times, was minimally engaged and spent most of the time observing. I approached all my contacts as a journalist, explaining that I was hoping to write stories on the transgender community. Many of my one-on-one interviews were recorded, while for some I elected to only take notes because of a desire to maintain informality.

Although I have described my method in journalistic lingo, I can just as easily translate it into a more research-oriented vocabulary by referring to participant-observation, field notes, or ethnographic interviews. But because the intent of the praxis section was to write from the perspective of a journalist, I chose to describe it as I did above. In practicing standpoint journalism, the one major revision I made to my journalistic process was staying attune to my thoughts and emotions, including any biases, discomfort, or successes I had while reporting on the transgender community. The addition of this internal effort reveals itself in my use of a journal, allowing me to reflect on the personal aspect of working as a journalist throughout the months I reported on the transgender community.

Selecting the transgender community was deliberate, fulfilling two important criteria. First, it was both a marginalized community and second, it was a community I was unfamiliar with. In reporting on transgender issues, I placed myself in an environment primed with situations that would force me to manage both my role as a journalist, as well as my underlying

values and identity. I was both Marona the black feminist activist and Marona the journalist. On interviews my contacts constantly reminded me how they felt their marginalized status in mainstream culture and even in reportedly supportive environments like lesbian and gay organizations. My lack of previous exposure to transgender-identified individuals facilitated forced reflection by adding a layer of discomfort to the experience. Imagine the feeling of stepping into a funhouse exhibit deliberately meant to shake up your world. In the beginning there is the illusion that the funhouse is in stark contrast to the real world and you become hypersensitive to everything. But the longer you stay the more the novelty fades. When it becomes familiar, very little stands out. In the transgender community, my awareness was heightened as I found myself constantly barraged with the unfamiliarity of bodies in gender flux, new vocabulary terms such as the gender neutral pronouns *cie* and *hir*,[iv] and a host of issues and concerns I had no previous personal or professional experience grappling with.

[iv] Cie is also written as zie or ze.

CHAPTER 3

PRAXIS: AN EXPERIMENT IN REFLEXIVITY

I was fresh on my beat when I met Dr. Stephanie Dykes, a male to female transsexual[v] activist from Illinois. I was at a Women's Studies conference in Atlanta and thought it would be helpful for gathering background information if I attended a few of the panels on transgender issues. Having slipped out of another panel, I arrived in the middle of Stephanie's presentation. At the front of the room, Stephanie stood well over 6 feet tall in a purple shirt and fitted gray slacks. Every few minutes she would pull her hand through her dirty blond, shoulder-length curls, tucking one side behind her ears. Her daintiness lay mostly in her hand movements, with every other gesture ending with a hand poised in front of her chest.

Stephanie is a large woman with a loud personality, to the say the least. To demonstrate the absurdity she felt towards people who questioned her or someone else's gender, she quickly sat down in a chair, pulled two more in front of her and propped her legs up, stirrup style, commenting on the IBVI, the mythological International Bureau of Vagina Investigation. She modulated her voice from light and breathy to deep and gravelly, explaining that she forced a lightness to her voice to help with her ability to "pass" as a woman. I was looking forward to meeting her after the close of the presentation, even if her sarcasm had rubbed me the wrong way. She was too overly fond of cursing, using a curt tone, and rolling her eyes for my tastes. But she was a potentially valuable contact, so I went up after Q&A and stood in line to have my

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[v] Transsexual refers to a person who has undergone surgery and other treatments to take on the physical characteristics of the opposite gender. Transgender refers to someone who identifies with the opposite gender unrelated to physical appearance, and therefore is inclusive of transsexuality.

turn at networking. Since Stephanie mentioned she would be at the University of Georgia next week for Transgender Remembrance Day, I used this as my hook.

"Hi, my name is Marona and I'm a graduate student in the journalism program at the University of Georgia," I remember saying.

I stuck my hand out for a handshake to formalize my introduction, or at least that's what I thought I did. Instead of shaking my hand, Stephanie curled her fingers in for what appeared to be in expectation of a fist-bump. When she saw my hand out waiting for the standard professional greeting, she said with a slight chuckle, "Or we can do that," and proceeded to shake my hand.

"What the hell was that?" I thought, but I finished what I had walked up to do. I explained to Stephanie how I would be covering the transgender community in Athens next semester and how I would love to talk more with her about her experiences if she was willing. After we exchanged business cards, I hurried out, feeling my mind slip back to thinking about why anyone would think to fist-bump me in a setting as formal as a major academic conference.

That moment made itself onto the list I've kept since I was a child, the one called: "Did that have anything to do with the fact that I'm black?" The list is reserved for the moments that sit uneasy, but I can't figure out why. The moments that I replay in my mind and wonder what I could have been doing to elicit such a response.

"What was I wearing?" I wonder. Khakis.

"Did my hand look like it was curled in?" No, otherwise Stephanie wouldn't have felt the need to say, "or we can do a handshake."

"Does she fist-bump everyone in greeting?" No, she doesn't. No other fist-bumping occurred that afternoon.

When I'm done replaying a scene, after hours, days, sometimes weeks, I add it to the list. It's my way of releasing responsibility, of giving myself permission to stop wondering exactly why something happened, while simultaneously acknowledging that it probably shouldn't have. Though I may not be 100% confident that it was racist, I'm 99.9% sure it was racial, race-related, or whatever other watered down words I can find that give me the space to label how insulted I felt.

Except this time, my brain's not satisfied in accepting the addition of another incident to my list. I see myself screaming at Stephanie, "From my footing in the margins to yours, I need you to do a better job! I'm trying to do my part to pull you in towards the center and you just made it that much harder for me."

The representation of the transgender community lags behind what currently stands as a more Lesbian and Gay focused movement to improve coverage under the catchall term 'lgbt'.[vi] In a chapter on transgender images in the media, activist and writer Willow Arune comments, "To those in the transgendered community, media coverage is often seen as insensitive and prejudicial. Although media has slowly learned to cover gay men, lesbians, and even swingers in neutral terms, coverage of the transsexual and transgendered often remains a source of humor and sensationalism."[63] In focusing specifically on the transgender community, I was attempting to produce coverage from a perspective that was educated and informed. I read everything I could get my hands on and spoke to as many transgender individuals who would open up to me, both on and off the record. All in hopes of improving the coverage, or at times merely making transgender people more visible. Stephanie's actions were an unnecessary and frustratingly hurtful distraction from my focus on transgender issues.

[vi] The acronym lgbt stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

In an interview for Echelon Magazine, an online lgbt business magazine, Stephanie said, "As someone who was born a white male, experiencing any kind of discrimination, let alone thinking I would ever face discrimination, was an alien concept."[64] Stephanie speaks openly about how she is not always successful in "passing" for a woman and why others are able to identify her as transgender. In her research, Stephanie developed a three-tiered theoretical model predicting whether someone will successfully pass for female.[65] At the first level, the primary question is: Does the person look the part? Next, does the individual sound the part? And lastly: Does the person act the part? At each level an answer of no can prevent the individual in question from proceeding to the next level and affect whether their gender is attributed as transgender or cisgender.[vii] The model illustrates the precarious nature of gender attribution for male to female transgender individuals and how it can be jeopardized at a more than one marker. Well over six feet with a full, more masculine facial bone structure and unable to maintain the lightness and high decibel of her voice when tired or frustrated, Stephanie explained how others sometimes perceive her as transgender. When visibly identified as transgender, Stephanie becomes vulnerable to experiencing transphobia and transprejudice. In a literature review on the experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals, Emilia Lombardi found 60 percent had experienced some sort of harassment and/or violence. The number was even higher for a study defining the type of harassment, with 80 percent reporting experiencing verbal harassment, specifically. Another study found half their sample had faced employment discrimination, with nearly a third reporting they had been fired from a job. Lombardi also noted frequent housing discrimination and denied access to healthcare.[66] Even though she is well into her transition

[vii] Cisgender is defined as the opposite adjective to transgender and refers to a match between an individual's biological, psychological, and socially expressed gender. Accordingly, someone who has undergone gender reassignment surgery may elect to reject the term transgender and choose to identify as cisgender.

process, Stephanie must still worry about some of these same issues. With her female and transgender status, Stephanie experiences prejudice firsthand, unlike her pre-transition days living as a white male. But in her interactions with me, she revealed the complexities of prejudice and how it would impact my experiences as a black journalist.

I had fallen prey to thinking Stephanie's experiences with discrimination might somehow make her more sensitive to an issue such as race. As journalist and author Keith Boykin addressed in his book, *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*, I wasn't alone in my thinking. "We often expect that oppressed people, including blacks and gays, will not oppress other people," Boykin writes. "Victims should know better than anyone else the sting of prejudice, we reason." But it is a mistake, Boykin continues, to assume "that anyone's minority status translates into greater sensitivity about issues beyond their own status."[67] Just as my status as a journalist was qualified with being black, Stephanie's status was qualified too. She was not simply MTF transgender, she was a WMTWF– a white man to white female. No matter how I might try to separate my personal life from my professional life, there was no pulling apart the threads of my identity of being black and a journalist. Even with a topic that was seemingly unrelated, race crept into our interactions.

Despite their own experiences with discrimination, individuals in the white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community engage in some of the same racist and exclusionary behaviors as the general white public. Much of the research into overtly discriminatory acts occurs at the intersection of the lgbt community and communities of color. An often-cited racist act targeting lgbt individuals of color is the requiring of extra photo identification at predominantly white gay venues. Sometimes potential lgbt patrons of color are simply turned away, while other times they face poor service if granted admittance. One well-publicized

example is San Francisco businessman Les Natali, who owned several bars and clubs in The Castro, a popular gay neighborhood. On April 26, 2005, after an intensive investigation, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission announced that Natali had violated the civil rights code criminalizing discrimination on the basis of race in employment and public accommodation. The Commission reported that Natali's bar, Badlands, enforced an illegal policy requiring black patrons to present multiple forms of identification, as well as selectively reinforcing other policies like dress codes, in order to block admittance to black patrons. The Commission also found Natali utilized discriminatory hiring practices. Unfortunately, this was not the first incident of its kind in the San Francisco area. Scholar Chong-suk Han refers to multiple-carding practices during the mid-1970's at another local Castro bar.[68] Han also asserts that such practices are not unique to San Francisco, with reports of similar discriminatory behavior in other major cities including Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York, and Boston.

Allan Bérubé suggests bars use exclusionary practices to prevent them from "turning," "a process by which a 'generically gay' bar (meaning a predominantly white bar) changes into a bar that loses status and income (meaning gay white men with money won't go there) because it has been 'taken over' by black, Latino, or Asian [patrons]."[69] He also speculated that the advent of such exclusionary practices in the white lgbt community stems from early political strategy. "To gain recognition and credibility," Bérubé wrote, "some gay organizations and media began to aggressively promote the so-called positive image of a generic gay community that is an upscale, mostly male, and mostly white consumer market . . ." [70] The goal of the white lgbt community may have been to validate the ensuing struggle for their own civil rights, but the resulting effect were oppressive practices targeting an already marginalized group.

Considering the historical context of the advent of the lgbt movement further elucidates Bérubé's theory. The lgbt movement began, most historians agree, in the late 1960s, with the Stonewall Riots considered to be one of the major defining events. Unrivaled by any other decade, the 60's were saturated with revolutionary politics such as the black Nationalist, feminist, and anti-war movements. Though each of these movements came of age alongside other libratory groups espousing overlapping goals of equality, it was not uncommon for them to narrowly define who that equality was for. For example, in the early years of the mainstream feminist movement, women of color frequently reported facing racism inside of predominantly white organizations and being discouraged to speak of the nuanced experiences that result from being marginalized based on both race and gender. Applying Bérubé's analysis, one would interpret ignoring race as a deliberate attempt to maintain credibility in a society where white– even for female or lgbt persons– functions as a privilege. Not surprisingly, the enduring effects resulting from exclusionary and racist behaviors that grew out of misguided attempts to gain credibility continue to manifest in such practices as multiple-carding or selectively enforcing dress codes in order to turn black patrons away.

The lgbt movement continues to be portrayed as largely white and noninclusive of lgbt individuals of color. The absence of lgbt people of color from mainstream gay media is another source of tension between the white lgbt community and lgbt communities of color. "Media images now popular in television and film such as *Will and Grace*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *In and Out*, *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, etc., promote a monolithic image of the gay community as being overwhelmingly upper-middle class– if not simply rich– and white," writes Han.[71] Recent statistics released by Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, an organization dedicated to promoting accurate and inclusive representation of lgbt

people and events in the media, drew the same conclusion. In their annual 2009-2010 study of media representation, GLAAD found only 4 of the 17 regular lgbt characters on mainstream broadcast networks were of color, with three being Latino, including Dr. Callie Torres on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC), Oscar Martinez on *The Office* (NBC) and Angel Garcia on *Mercy* (NBC). The fourth character of color, Angela on *Bones*, is identified as an Asian-Pacific Islander; however, other sources identify her as being the child of a Chinese mother and a white-American father. There is no regular black lgbt character currently appearing on a primetime broadcast series. "This past year, we've seen real progress from many networks toward making their scripted programming more LGBT inclusive," GLAAD President Jarrett Barrios said in the report. "At the same time, we continue to advocate that other networks follow suit and better reflect the diversity of the LGBT community."[72] Cable series fare a little better with 13 of the 27 series with a lgbt character being one of color. The count does not include daytime or late-night programming.

Racism is not always as blatant as the noninclusion of lgbt people of color in the media or requiring multiple forms of identification. Contemporary research indicates that racism has not declined over the years, but has merely changed into more subtle forms.[73] In the absence of overtly racist legally-sanctioned policies, such as segregation or other types of institutionalized racism, research on prejudice and discrimination emphasizes the interpersonal nature of racism. Interpersonal racism encompasses the unpleasant and demeaning encounters individuals of color experience on a daily basis when interacting with whites, akin to what Ellis Cose refers to in his book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, as "soul-destroying slights." [74] In my fist-bump/handshake interaction with Stephanie I felt genuinely slighted. I was not protected by my professional persona and despite my own desires, the professional had just become personal. As a result, I

was left to manage my job as a journalist and my identity as a black woman.

One of the greatest aspects of privilege accompanying the dominant status of maleness or whiteness is the ability to dodge the consequences. Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh writes about her own experiences, "I have also realized that white identity and status … give me considerable power to choose whether to broach this subject and its trouble." "Being white," McIntosh continues, "I am given considerable power to escape many kinds of danger or penalty as well as to choose which risks I want to take."[75] McIntosh also draws analogies to male power, noting that she has "met very few men who are truly distressed about systematic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance," and "[t]hey simply have the power to decide whether to commit themselves to more equitable distributions of power." Similarly, social psychologists Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis point out how inherent in a system privileging some over others is the option for the privileged to ignore it: "Depending on the number of privileges someone has, she or he may experience the power of choosing the types of struggles in which to engage. . . The holder of privilege may enjoy deference, special knowledge, or a higher comfort level to guide societal interaction."[76]

Even as a white transgender female, Stephanie maintains the privilege of whiteness and may choose whether or not to consciously work against racism. But as someone who unquestionably and comfortably identifies as female, I also enjoy a certain level of cisgender privilege. When I am in the bathroom, I do not have to worry that a woman will look up from where she stands washing her hands at the sink and be startled by my presence in a women's bathroom because she questions my gender. An even more basic privilege I possess is the ease I experience in choosing which bathroom to enter. For me, a binary construction of gender as male or female has never presented any difficulty. In her memoir *Whipping Girl,* transgender activist

Julia Serano wrote, "[a]ccording to this model, gender-variant people are oppressed by a system that forces everyone to identify and be easily recognizable as either a woman or man."[77] Cisgender status privileges both those who "cite discrepancy between their subconscious sex and physical sex," as well as those who reject a binary conceptualization of gender, instead seeking out spaces that are affirming for varied expressions of gender. Referring to the process of transitioning, Ali Taylor, a male to female transgender woman said to me during an interview, "Unfortunately, when you are transgender, no matter what else you may be, it becomes your life. You're not a doctor. You're not a scientist or not a whatever. You're a transgender x and transgender always comes first." Even though my female gender forces me to confront sexism regularly, I am nevertheless privileged in a way that Stephanie and Ali are not because I easily and comfortably conform to the societal norms of gender.

Though my cisgendered privilege may give me the choice, as Wildman and Davis put it, "to avoid objecting to oppression," my choice of a transgender beat was a deliberate choice to do otherwise. By covering the transgender community I was actively combating the media's role in reinforcing current systems of privilege when they completely ignored or sensationalized transgender issues. In meeting Stephanie I had to be conscious of the manner in which I approached her. To appear as though I was disapproving of her would not allow me the access I needed. It's almost a type of acting. I must appear approachable, so I smiled at Stephanie and remained pleasant. I did what I could to ensure that I was responding to her as a female. The primary goal was to be disarming, but after the fact, I wonder if my successful act with Stephanie as an approachable, disarming freelance journalist consciously objecting to cisgendered privilege, left me vulnerable. Did approaching her as my equal result in my becoming less than her equal when she responded to me from the privileged place of a white woman who was rarely

forced to confront the privilege of her race? Stephanie's whiteness trumped my femaleness. Was it because of my attempt to create a norm of equality between us or because of a societal ranking of privileges that deems whiteness as the ultimate privilege? Such questions only further complicate the issue. In the end, I responded in the most journalistically appropriate way I knew how, which was to ignore Stephanie's racist gesture, push aside my opinions, and complete the task I had set out to do, leaving with a beneficial contact. She was an out transgender woman and because she was also a researcher with a PhD, she was also an expert source.

Successfully obtaining a lead did not help me in processing how slighted I felt. Yes, I was frustrated with Stephanie's behavior, but it went further than that. I also was frustrated with my own decision not to speak up. My journalistic instinct told me to continue creating a platform where my source would be entirely comfortable with me and encouraged to share her stories, despite my own discomfort and feeling like I was biting my tongue. This is the nature of the journalistic relationship, one-sided. My job is to listen, gather information, and take notes, not to point out how my sources are being ignorant and hypocritical. On the other hand, the instinct I had developed to survive as a black woman told me something different. I knew walking away that day without addressing Stephanie's behavior meant I would be able to replay the moment with remarkable detail while Stephanie would simply remember meeting me at the conference, if that. With one more addition to my list and one more contact for my Rolodex, I walked away.

What I remember most when I went to see Stephanie later that week when she arrived on campus was that she didn't fist-bump me. Thankfully. Two additions to my list in a span of only a week might have been too much. Stephanie's visit at UGA would also be the day I officially met Maria[viii], who would in the end give me virtually exclusive access to her experiences

[viii] Name has been changed. All others in the thesis remain unchanged, unless otherwise noted.

transitioning as a woman. Stephanie traveled to the University as part of the events leading up to Transgender Remembrance Day, a day set aside to memorialize those who had died from anti-transgender violence since the previous year. When Maria reminded me that she had attended the conference where I first met Stephanie, I was able to distinctively place her as the woman who had been sitting in the front of the room wearing a brunette wig and a gaudy, sequined black suit, and who had slowed my speedy exit by introducing herself after I finished talking with Stephanie.

Because I first met Maria within transgender safe spaces and her public transition would not occur until the end of December, I would know the new Maria even before most of her colleagues, family, and friends did. A tenured professor, Maria would reportedly be the first at the University to transition while on faculty. On the last day of the semester, I went in to observe Maria. It would be her final day appearing as Martin— marking the end of her life as a man.

Although he was expecting me, I slipped in unnoticed, just as the rush of students arrived. Seated behind him in the mini-amphitheatre classroom, I had a perfect view of Martin, as he sat in the front talking with his students during their last presentations. He was folded in on himself, a finger delicately placed on his lip and sweating profusely. The sweat could have been because of the coffee he occasionally sipped or a side effect from the intense hormone regimen of testosterone blockers and estrogen. There was so much of it, he had to repeatedly blot his forehead with a hand towel and you could see where the darkened area of red cotton stuck to his back. The classroom was a cacophony of overhead projector buzzing, unengaged students having side conversations, and snatches of Spanish language floating from down the hall through the open door. When the class came to an end, most of the students barreled out of the door, high school-style. Only a few hung around. After a couple of female students thanked him, Martin

reached out and embraced them each in an individual hug. When I look back in my notes, I see where I jotted down, “Funny. Men don’t usually hug female students.”

That day, Martin was a man. She, or Maria, would not appear officially to her students until January of the next semester. Having first met Martin as Maria at the conference, I barely recognized him when I walked into the classroom. But the familiarity of the distinct, high-pitched giggle and characteristic barrage of questions told me it was Maria. I also noted the awkwardness with which the students seemed to respond to the hug, seemingly comfortable, but just as caught off guard as I was. I thought it was odd that he would hug his students, crossing a professional line that many professors, particularly male, set for themselves. As I sat there continuing to observe him, I noticed how calm he seemed then and throughout the entire class period. Was he unmoved by how chaotic his classroom felt? Oblivious to the students’ smirks? What about the student sitting next to me who, when prompted to put down his newspaper because class had begun, mumbled with irritation under his breath, “Class is started? Speak up.” It was such obvious anger, even if passive, that part of my time spent observing that day included watching how this student reacted to him, wondering if the slouched body language and apparent tuning out had anything to do with dealing with the physical changes Martin presented with throughout the semester, as he prepared to live his life as Maria. Looking over at the student and recognizing how clearly irritated he was, I admitted to myself that the swinging breasts, untethered by a bra beneath the cotton shirt worn by someone who looked like a man, was enough to make even me experience a little bit of discomfort with one significant difference; I knew what was going on while the students would not have the chance to ask questions until the start of the new semester. Yet, Maria did seem oblivious, and in my notebook I recorded “euphoric state?” In the face of having a soon to be ex-wife, children who refused to return calls,

and the loss of friends, Maria maintained an undying optimism. But what seemed to me excessive cheerfulness, might have been for Maria authentic happiness in finally being able to be who she always knew she was. As Maria would refer to it, finally "altering my body to reflect my reality." However the peculiarity of Maria's behavior left me reflecting on what was underlying it.

Similar to the process of accepting one's lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, the process of acknowledging to oneself and transitioning as transgender is referred to as "coming-out." Walter Bockting and Eli Coleman found that most researchers utilize a developmental stage model, ranging anywhere from 4 to 14 developmental stages.[78] Their own model consists of the following five developmental stages: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, intimacy, and identity integration. Bockting and Coleman stress that organization of the developmental process around a stage model does not imply nonlinear progression cannot occur.

Throughout my reporting, I met contacts at all stages of the transition process. At a minimum, my sources all claimed a transgender identity[ix], which according to Bockting and Coleman's developmental model places them beyond the pre-coming out stage characterized by a "time that the individual experiences cross-gender or transgender feelings, but has not named [the] feelings as such."[79] Most of my contacts were out among their close friends. Having gained many of my contacts by word of mouth, they were often part of a well-established transgender community and most of these friends were other transgender-identified individuals. Only a few were out at work or school and living openly as their psychologically-identified genders.

The more time I spent time with Maria, the more I questioned how much the way she responded to me and others related to where she fell within the developmental stages. Maria

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[ix] This includes those who identified as transgender male, transgender female, or other terms indicative of gender variance, such as gender-queer.

always tried to hug me when she saw me. Sometimes I was able to avoid it, but at other times I was not. It could have been because I was failing to set professional limits. It was also possible my discomfort in Maria– who was white and Jewish– hugging me was simply due to cultural difference. Or it could have been an even simpler explanation, one of personal preference. But when I heard Maria explain to a friend the "rules" for how and when a man could touch a woman other than his wife and what the most appropriate way of greeting her was now that she was living as a woman, I realized Maria's hugging was not about my own professional limits, cultural difference, nor personal preferences. In her efforts to do everything she could to pass as a woman, she had embraced hugging as the most feminine expression of greeting.

By January, Maria would be out to a supportive transgender community, her children, ex-wife, and much of her extended family, and her colleagues and students at the University. During most if not all of the time I was interviewing and observing her, she was likely in the exploration stage defined as "the stage of learning as much as possible about expressing one's transgender identity now that the secret has been revealed."[80] The stage of exploration includes experimenting with gender expression. One of the major goals of this stage being, "how can I best actualize or express my gender identity"?[81] While progressing through this stage, it is not unusual for transgender individuals to "adopt highly stereotyped sex role behaviors of the other gender" in order to counteract "natal sex characteristics," Bockting and Coleman observe.[82] Though she occasionally hugged males, Maria would hug virtually every single female that she came into contact with for a second time. It appeared to be automatic, although compulsory is probably a better description. "In the initial stages, 'passing' is of utmost concern; she is terrified of being read," writes Claudine Griggs in *S/he*. "The resulting consequence may be that she's a transsexual, a transvestite, or drag queen, but that is not essentially important; the emotional

consequence lies in the fact that she is not discerned as a woman." In *S/he*, Griggs uses research and her own experiences to explore how visible expressions of gender affect the transition process. Reflecting on her own transition process as a male to female transgender woman, Griggs recalled, "I know that I was compulsively passive early in my sex change, and the aim was conscious and specific– to be perceived as a woman."[83] Much like Griggs' forced embodiment of passivity, Maria's hugging seemed to be an example of "idealized, hyperfeminine presentation" often engaged in by newly transitioned male to female transgender individuals. Griggs also described speaking softly to the point of whispering, overdressing at casual events, and excessive politeness as other examples of hyperfeminine presentation.

On the one hand I felt I should treat Maria like any other source I had worked with, but her state of being in the middle of a gender transition made her unique, and hugging was quite possibly a result of her attempt at conveying her womanhood. Certainly, I could declare, "Maria, I'm not comfortable greeting by hugging," but I questioned the necessity of it. My only concern was in whether Maria was clear about my role in her life, and there was no other evidence that Maria misunderstood the nature of our relationship. She was not calling me at inappropriate hours nor did our relationship extend beyond discussions of her experiences transitioning. She simply insisted upon greeting me by hugging me.

Former *New York Times* journalist Isabel Wilkerson wrote, "Good journalism and empathy can go hand in hand. Empathy helps me understand my subjects better and immerse myself in their worlds."[84] Though I might not have fully understood why, I felt it important to be sensitive to Maria's desire to do whatever she could to pass as a woman. Financially, she was not able to afford some of the more expensive aspects of the transition process such as facial feminization surgery, and a receding male hairline caused Maria to wear a wig. She often

revealed how conscious she was of whether or not she was behaving like a woman. In one instance, she placed a small candy in her mouth, paused, and muttered aloud, "that was so guy of me to eat the whole thing." For Maria, demonstrating empathy meant recognizing how her behavior was indicative of where she fell within the coming out process. Wilkerson writes, the journalists' "job is to make our presence in our subjects' lives as comfortable and as normal as possible as quickly as we can. We must learn the subtle rules and hierarchy of the world we have stepped into, adjusting ourselves to it and finding a place in it by responding in natural human ways." [85] In being a part of Maria's world I accepted her interpretation of hugging as an embodiment of femininity.

I sought to enter the world of the transgender community. As with most niche communities, there are no clear lines of demarcation. No borders mark where the transgender community begins and where it ends. Even when your community is defined as a physical location such as a neighborhood, the journalist often finds herself outside of the boundaries of that neighborhood following contacts as they go through their daily lives. The places these contacts go must be considered an extension of their community, because assuming or using language that implies otherwise further marginalizes them.

I was lucky enough to find what in many ways was a defined transgender community. Each week at the University LGBT Resource Center, a group of transgender individuals gathered for meetings of Engender. Engender members were a mix of individuals from both the University community and the surrounding city. If you attended Engender meetings you likely identified as transgender, but if not you were at minimum a committed trans-ally and often a significant other or best friend of someone who did. The members shared the common interest of seeking out a place where gender was a nonissue. At Engender they feel comfortable to laugh,

vent, or simply sit surrounded by people who are guaranteed not to be wondering whether they are a boy or girl. Trying to find the answer to that question would be useless anyway. There were chests on bodies where you might predict flat silhouettes and stubble disrupting the expectation of smoothness. In this room full of transgender individuals at various stages, you couldn't always tell if those chests were coming or going, or if the stubble was welcomed or despised. The bathroom at the center is labeled the "transformation room," pun intended. It is for the transman or transwoman who is not yet out, and must lead two separate lives. One life as the gender they identify as and the other as the gender they were socialized into. On some evenings there is evidence of one life– loose slacks, shirts, long hair pulled back. On others there is pantyhose, makeup, and flowing hair. The members have successfully created a community, however temporal, where there are no clear gender lines, one where using gender social cues are haphazard.

Engender gave me the opportunity to expand my contacts and observe, fly-on-the-wall style. Talking individually with Maria or Stephanie left me playing a more obvious role of journalist. The time I spent with Maria doing one-on-one interviews was invaluable, and she shared her experiences openly and willingly with me. During other times when I was observing her in her everyday life, there was often still a level of blending and performing, depending on how comfortable she was in the given environment. In contrast to the mainstream environments in which I observed Maria or Stephanie, Engender was a place where there were no worries about passing. Jokes surrounding cutting edge research on the hormonal effects of dropping testicles in rats and cisgender fear of "evil tg cooties" and "trans virus" sent fits of laughter around the room. I was able to observe individuals where they were their most relaxed selves and gather information without having to ask questions.

The weekly meetings were a prime place to pick up story ideas. What doctors in the Athens community were transgender friendly? Which were not? What are the experiences of transgender individuals who transition without insurance? Were they as smooth as Maria's, whose security of tenure deferred some of the costs of transitioning, like the numerous visits to doctors for lab visits or counseling? Most of Engender welcomed me, but this might have had to do with my decision to use Engender as a place for contacts and story ideas and less for the content of the meetings themselves. I introduced myself as a journalist and alerted them that I would specifically approach people to see if they were interested in talking with me about specific stories I was working on. I felt it was important to acknowledge the safe space the weekly meetings provided the members and give up a bit of that journalistic freedom to write whatever I was moved to write about after gaining entry into the community.

Inside Engender I wanted to be as human as possible. I laughed at the amusing jokes about the transgender experience and I typically jotted notes post-meeting, all in deliberate recognition that this was a launching ground, not the actual site of my story. I made the choice to be a member of the community, build rapport, and follow up on any stories that were provoked by my observations. "We spend so much time with our subjects, and we are almost never prosecutorial in our interviewing of them. We want to be genuinely human to our subjects, because we want them to become genuinely human to us," writes Walt Harrington, a former staff writer for *Washington Post Magazine*.[86] This element of humanness and building rapport is particularly important when covering communities that have experienced a history of being covered poorly in the media.

One of the earliest widely known cases of a transgender person in the media was Christine Jorgenson. In December 1952, George Jorgenson, Jr. underwent hormone therapy and

surgery, becoming Christine Jorgenson. Before Jorgenson left the hospital a friend leaked a personal letter to the media. Within two weeks after the *New York Daily News* broke the story, *Newsweek* reported that the wire services had carried over 50,000 words about Jorgenson– all before Jorgenson returned home from Europe to New York City.[87] Although stories on transgender issues have become less sensationalized as the topic has become more prevalent, the sensationalized coverage that persists and certain journalistic practices continue to deter the transgender community from the media. In her memoir, *Confessions of a Gender Defender: A Psychologist's Reflections on Life Among the Transgendered*, Dr. Randi Ettner wrote about her experiences as a cisgender psychologist specializing in transgender issues. She shared the following anecdote: "A reporter from a local paper has arranged to interview my husband and me about a column we write on pregnancy and childbirth. She arrives, but she isn't interested in talking about pregnancy. She wants exotica. We try to steer her back to the topic at hand. She writes a story about transsexualism."[88]

Similarly, Maria was approached by a reporter from the local college paper about sharing her experiences in the lgbt community. Maria agreed, but when the paper's photographer contacted her to take pictures, he inadvertently mentioned the word profile. To her dismay, Maria realized that the reporter had not been completely honest with her upfront, and quickly cancelled the interview. Maria told me afterwards that she genuinely thought the reporter intended to talk with her about her involvement in the lgbt community, and during that same conversation we eventually came to the agreement that I would pitch articles to any media outlets that approached her in the near future. The rapport I built with Maria and the members of Engender benefited me significantly.

Becoming human to your contacts helps tremendously when working with marginalized communities. During an interview with the Poynter Institute, *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Lane DeGregory shared how she was able to connect with Donna Stanton, the wife of Steve Stanton, a city manager from Tampa Bay who was fired in late February 2007 after announcing his plans to undergo surgery to become a woman. Leading up to the interview, DeGregory tried everything from calling Donna 10 times, sending her a handwritten note, including past stories that she wrote to show Donna how she had dealt with other people's personal lives. Still, Donna refused to talk to her, finally agreeing only two days before the story was due. In a four-hour conversation, DeGregory was able to achieve a remarkable level of intimacy with Donna Stanton. When asked how she was able to get Donna to talk about such personal details of her life, DeGregory answered, "I also shared a lot of details about my own life with her, as a wife and mother. We talked about my own marital struggles and worries about my sons, and sharing that let her feel more comfortable."[89] DeGregory's technique illustrates how a conversational tone and a nontraditional method involving sharing some of her own life helped Donna feel more comfortable. The lack of mutuality and brevity in the journalistic relationship—or, as Wilkerson describes it, the tendency for the journalist to "show up, mine them for information, and leave fifteen minutes later"[90]—is not always conducive to building enough rapport to encourage people who are hesitant to share. The journalist is conceivably there to do a job and not interact with the source on a level that includes sharing a part of themselves, but as DeGregory shows us, reworking this definition can be beneficial in the long run.

Unlike DeGregory I did not share personal details of my life with Maria, but I did break away from the traditional format of the interview. I spent a tremendous amount of time with Maria, in places like her office, a restaurant, or at university events. In one instance, I remember

standing in the new unisex bathroom in Maria's department wondering if the fleeting awareness of being in the next stall over from someone who used to be a man was the same reason why women in her department asked to have designated a women's bathroom that would be off-limits to Maria. Having spent so much time with Maria and in uncommon places, a conversational tone easily developed, and I didn't resist. In our recorded interviews, I did more than just ask Maria to tell her story. She was a professor and loved research, so I engaged her by bringing in what I had learned through my research and other interviews to see how she would respond or how her experiences differed from others.

In the Poynter interview, DeGregory also talked about how the research she did for another article prior to writing the Stanton article was immeasurably helpful: "I knew the language, I knew the difference between transvestites and cross-dressers and transsexuals, I knew for most transgendered people it isn't about who they want to have sex with, but about who they feel they really are. So I didn't have to ask any dumb "I don't get it" questions, and I could speak with some authority on the subject." The knowledge that she brought with her to a story on transgender issues is equivalent to that of a reporter who prepares him or herself before covering another culture.

In the case of the transgender community, researching the "culture" meant familiarizing myself with such things as language or community concerns, like how many transgender individuals reject the inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).[x] Despite the absence of clearly defined borders, you are

[x] According to the DSM-IV, to be diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, the following 4 criteria must be met: (1) Long-standing and strong identification with another gender; (2) Long-standing discomfort about the sex assigned or a sense of incongruity in the gender-assigned role of that sex; (3) The absence of physical intersex characteristics; and (4) Significant clinical discomfort or impairment in work, social, or other aspects of life.

often reminded that there is an actual transgender community when you run into the same contacts within the community, and being approved by members is important. DeGregory demonstrates this when she states, “I also had interviewed Steve's therapist before, for another story about another transgendered person. And I had met his attorney during the reporting of that and another lesbian-rights story. So both of those subjects knew me, and my work, going into this story. I think they trusted me not to make fun of Steve or be judgmental in my writing.” Like DeGregory, I also became familiar with the select few therapists in the area who specialized in gender variance. As I spent more time talking to people, I learned about transgender professors at neighboring state universities or health centers where multiple members of the transgender community received services.

After nearly four months of reporting and getting to know the transgender community, I developed a substantial level of comfort. I wasn’t so comfortable that I felt at home, because I was always conscious of being the only black person, non-transgender, and a working journalist. But I did develop ease in avoiding gender-specific pronouns or when I chose my gender on paperwork, the restricted choices of male or female stood out. Before I began my thesis, I was able to say someone was male or female without the slightest bit of hesitation. The stories of all of the individuals I met throughout my reporting have taught me otherwise. Even with my awareness of how socially constructed gender was, I never associated the social theories with how much pain a person might experience in feeling like the terms assigned to them undermined their very identity. But the face of these theories are now each of the men and women I met and interviewed who want so badly to been seen as just that– a man or woman. In more than one way, my thesis has been the act of bringing theory to life. Not only have I worked at illustrating standpoint journalism and dealing with praxis, but I was also reminded how the topics that are so

removed from the majority of our experiences, like being transgender, come with a host of emotions and poignant stories.

It feels as though I have inherited a new cultural lens. It may not have the accuracy of 20/20 vision, but if I squint a little I can bring things into focus just enough to empathize with the way in which binary constructions of gender affect an often-ignored subset of our population. I will never be able to speak on what it means to feel like I was born in the wrong body or brought up as the wrong gender, but as a result of my reporting on the transgender community I can draw upon the narratives of the individuals I was exposed to and report with a new sensitivity to gender-identity in future stories.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

I began formulating my Masters thesis with a grounding in quantitative research methods. My early training taught me to support everything with numbers. In the absence of statistical tests, random sampling, or reliability checks your work would be easily dismissed. My first proposal reflects the period during which I was grappling with how to best dissect the issue of covering marginalized communities. I knew it had to be qualitative to some extent, but it maintained the tangible and procedural nature of quantitative research, relying on coding methods and questionnaires. Written as it was, it felt incomplete. It focused too much on defining what improved coverage of marginalized communities looks like and not enough on the processes a journalist might go through to do so. It may have answered the question of what, but it did not illuminate how. This question of how is at the core of my thesis project: How does one engage in the process of covering marginalized communities with sensitivity? By engage I mean how does a journalist engage her personal biases and reduce the automaticity of perceiving and writing stories based blindly on her own experiences? How does a journalist engage his own identity in a way that allows him to employ it as a unique perspective through which to interpret stories instead of allowing it to be an unspoken anchor? The concept of process goes beyond reportorial methods, such as teaching journalists to interview diverse groups of people or to include balanced viewpoints. These strategies might be more aptly referred to as external processes. Such strategies are important and lead to improvements in coverage, but they should

not take the place of the awareness that each of us writes from our own reality no matter how objective or accurate we claim to be.

The theories of standpoint epistemology and reflexivity served as the foundation out of which my work grew. As my thesis evolved, the theory remained the same, guiding and shaping the project's direction. Each time I encountered a crucial turning point in the project, it was my theory that I looked to as a guide. The first place it led me was to autoethnography, a major revision to my first proposal. Attempting to document the process a journalist goes through when covering a marginalized community called for full access to the innermost thoughts. With the only uninhibited access to feelings and thoughts being my own, autoethnography fit perfectly. But the use of autoethnography required me to move away from the methods I was most familiar with and at times is was uncomfortable. I was trained that journalists and scholars should take themselves out of their writing, avoid first person, and pose as the omniscient narrator. The danger of becoming too good at this type of writing is forgetting to reflect on the impact of perspective. Though I had to retrain myself to write about me and let people in on the frustrations I felt, I knew it was necessary and pushed through the discomfort. It required constantly reminding myself to write what I was genuinely feeling and resist the urge to filter. I struggled with muting the voice asking me what my readers would think. Ultimately, I knew the presence of feeling vulnerable meant I was maintaining the integrity of autoethnography.

Another major area of difficulty was with the structure of my thesis. I arrived at a point where I had 40 pages of work, none of which seemed to blend, all of which seemed to be integral. I initially conceived of my thesis as a set of essays, but the chapters and topics were disjointed and did not flow. The thematic element carried throughout of being about my own experiences was simply not enough. Parts of it described my experiences navigating the

transgender community using narrative form. Significant portions were also devoted to defining myself as a journalist in a broader sense, reflections going beyond the topic of transgender. Scrapping chapters and starting over was one option. But not only was the thought of moving backwards frustrating, it felt incongruent with an autoethnographic methodology. If I was thinking through how my own identity as a black woman affected my experiences as a journalist or feeling conflict about whether activism could fit with being a journalist, I needed to capture it as much as I needed to document my reporting.

I cannot remember the exact moment it all came together, but I do know it came after spending days staring at my computer with no plan to move forward and no desire to move backwards. It finally became clear that I had two sections aligning themselves along my theoretical framework. One part became the section of my thesis where I write about discerning my epistemological standpoint, and the other shaped into a section representing the practice of reflexivity while working as a journalist. Much like how my theory pointed me in the direction for my methodology, standpoint epistemology and reflexivity also led me to the resulting structure of the written product. I describe section one as placing emphasis on epistemological standpoint and section two as focusing on the act of reflexivity, but in many ways, I apply both in each section. To decipher my own epistemological standpoint, I must engage in reflexivity and when engaging in reflexivity while reporting, I am still doing so based on my own experiences. The two related yet thematically different sections combined are the only way of getting at the root of process. Taken together the sections and the set of theory demonstrate what it means to be a standpoint journalist. When I presented an excerpt of my thesis for a class, I realized how much each section was so much a part of the other. Presenting the first section by itself failed to convey how a working journalist might utilize reflexivity. Without an articulated grounding in

theory, part two was simply the act of telling a story or a well-researched journal entry. As crucial as theory is in thinking through the way society works or does not work, it means nothing when it is not applicable to the real world.

Admittedly, the praxis section of my thesis would have been stronger if I had been able to publish stories. However, my dual role as a scholar-journalist and the realities I was confronted with as a working journalist covering a niche community made this difficult. As a scholar-journalist, managing a thesis project and writing publishable articles proved to be too much, so instead I focused on interviews, gaining contacts, and carving out a beat as a demonstration of praxis. For the articles I did complete and the others I had reported on enough to write, I faced a lack of media outlets. During the course of my thesis project, three local lgbt media outlets went out of print. The Atlanta-based publications *David* and *Southern Voice* abruptly closed their doors in mid-November when their owner, Windows Media, L.L.C., folded. The Washington, D.C.-based company was the nation's largest gay and lesbian newspaper publisher and owned several other publications that are also now out of print. Both *David* and *Southern Voice* resumed publication under new ownership in March and April, respectively. The online news and social publication, GayInAthens.com, was discontinued after the editor could not find anyone to take his place as the primary content-manager. When I did pitch stories to the University paper, I received no answer. I include a sampling of my work as a journalist in Appendices A and B.

Even without the tangible evidence of clips, I was able to engage in the process of reflexivity throughout the praxis portion of my thesis. I was still a reporter whether I was published or not, having immersed myself in the transgender community. In doing so, I reflected on such issues as how it felt to be a black reporter or the ways in which it was necessary to modify the role of journalist when covering marginalized communities. There were moments of

being so overwhelmed by my dual roles, that days went by without any new pages being written. I was both a journalist and a scholar. I was forcing myself to engage intimately in the experience and attain the desired level of reflexivity. I was dealing with how race impacted my professional environment. I was personally invested in my reporting and trying to think through what it meant to be an activist and journalist. I was also a student, and not to mention trying to be 25, growing, planning, and contemplating. The idea that we must manage different parts of our existences even at our jobs is not novel. We bring ourselves to our work, whether we are conscious of it our not. Because we can never stop being who we are, inevitably, we produce from a perspective shaped by our identities. For those of us who are charged with the task of translating and reflecting other people's realities, it is even more crucial to acknowledge who we are and critically reflect on how it impacts our perceptions of those realities.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE UNPUBLISHED ARTICLES

Article 1: Piece in ATHICA Exhibit Provokes Gender Discussion

The current Athens Institute of Contemporary Art (ATHICA) exhibit, "Nurture," by New Hampshire-based Amy Jenkins is a series of short videos and photographs tackling provocative issues.

In *Audrey Superhero*, the artist's 7-year-old daughter is dressed up as Superman and tells her mother she would rather be a boy. She speaks with an eloquence so astonishing it's hard to believe the video is unscripted. "I never gave her any cues," said Jenkins. "There's nothing there where I said, 'You need to say this.' Everything was coming in a natural, pure way."

Jenkins' piece reveals the internal, uncensored dialogue of a child navigating gender identity. "What I was trying to do with the piece was just to reflect her reality as best I could," Jenkins said. "I wanted to celebrate her honesty and her exploration and just her youthful vigor and desire to be whatever she really wants to be."

Responses from exhibit-goers are varied. Some have interpreted Audrey's behavior as a phase, while others think she is being used for her mother's feminist agenda, said Lizzie Zucker Saltz, founder, artistic director and curator of ATHICA.

But the 9-minute video takes on another meaning for those who were born biological males, but identify as female. A small group of transgender women gather at ATHICA for an intimate screening. They instantly identify with Audrey's desire to be a boy.

It was around age 6 that Ali Taylor realized that she felt more like a girl than a boy. Growing up, she preferred playing with dolls and dressing up, and as an only child Taylor didn't spend a lot of time around other children.

But after her father enrolled her in pee-wee baseball, Taylor became aware of feeling like she was different from other little boys. "I started to realize that what I was like was not like what boys were like," Taylor said. "I had different interests, one of them not being sports."

It's more than the simple act of a girl dressing up as a male character that is most striking about *Audrey Superhero*. "It's some of the things that she talks about that have nothing to do with dressing up as Superman," Saltz said. "That's not playing a part. They're her passionate feelings. Maybe they're temporary, but they're obviously sincere."

In the video, Audrey's mother reminds her Superman is a man. Chest puffed out, proudly displaying her red and yellow S, Audrey proclaims, "I don't like being a girl, it's embarrassing." In another scene, Audrey declares earnestly in childlike grammar, "I wanted to be borned a boy in your tummy!"

Audrey's ability to articulate her feelings doesn't go unnoticed by the group. "I was happy that she could express herself so well at a young age and not feel the need to suppress those feelings," said Janine Aronson, who was born a biological male. At age 56 this past January, Aronson has finally made the transition to living openly as a woman. "There's nothing better than knowing who you are before people start influencing you," she said.

For Taylor, who hopes to fully transition by the end of the year, lack of funds to afford new clothing, makeup, and electrolysis has impeded her transition. "The earlier you do it, the easier it's going to be, the more effective it'll be, and the more time you get to spend living life correctly instead of trying to pretend and hide," she said.

Aronson and Taylor agree that the journey to transition is difficult regardless of how early you do it. “It’s a very painful process to go through,” Aronson said. “It’s a two phase thing. It’s joy in being yourself and intense pain in other people not perceiving or rather refusing to perceive that is the true you.”

Taylor expresses similar sentiments. “I’m not denigrating anybody who is transgender. I’m not saying they shouldn’t transition. But it is a hard road no matter how young you are.”

In Jenkins’ art piece, Aronson and Taylor have found a mirror of their own childhood experiences. For the artist it was about depicting the nurturing she must do as a mother. “I was thinking about the ultimate act of nurturing that every parent has to do and that is letting go and letting your child be whoever they want to be.”

This type of support is important, Taylor said. “The only real answer for what’s going to be right for a person is what they know,” she said. “You can’t tell someone else what’s right for them.”

“Nurture” is available until February 28 at the Athens Institute of Contemporary Art (ATHICA), Athens, Ga. (706) 208-1613, www.athica.org.

Article 2: LGBT Resource Center Creates a Gender Safe Space

This semester a new group arrived on campus. Supported by the University's LGBT Resource Center, the weekly gatherings known as Engender will provide a safe space for members of the University community who identify as transgender.

Engender is an off-shoot of Rainbow Chats, a past joint initiative between Counseling and Psychological Services and the LGBT Resource Center. Rainbow Chats were weekly groups centered around various topics and facilitated by CAPS staff.

"We moved away from the Rainbow Chats entirely and revamped it to the 'Let's Talk About It' weekly discussion series that we're doing," said LGBT Resource Center director, Jennifer Miracle.

Although Engender might be seen as a replacement for the previous gender Rainbow Chat, with no Center or CAPS facilitator, Engender is uniquely different from the formats of Rainbow Chat and the 'Let's Talk About It' series.

"The purpose of [Engender] is to provide a space for people of all genders to feel affirmed and welcomed and safe on UGAs campus and creating some dialogue about gender," Miracle said.

Jaime Keeley, who prefers to use a pseudonym to protect his privacy, is one of Engender's regular attendees. "It's really important for trans-people and people of various other genders to have a space where they don't feel weird. Where they don't feel like everybody else is normal and they don't understand them," said 22-year-old Keeley, a linguistics major from Atlanta.

Over the past two years, Keeley has come out to his close friends, but others such as coworkers and professors do not know he identifies as a transgender female-to-male or that he prefers male pronouns despite currently appearing as female.

“When I was first coming out it was really important for me to have people to talk to who were like, ‘Oh, yeah. I’ve been through that. Or ‘Oh yeah, that’s not so strange,’ Keeley said.

The use of University facilities means Engender must be open to all of the University community and cannot be closed as many other off-campus safe spaces are. However, its location on campus is important in another way. “It creates a safe space because it’s an institutional space for trans and gender-queer people,” Keeley said.

“Most of the violence against transgender people happens in public spaces like bathrooms or on the streets,” said UGA professor Dr. Anneliese Singh, whose counseling research focuses on the resiliency of transgender individuals, often facing daily threats of violence and discrimination. “A lot of times they’re coming in for counseling because the world is not really built for them.”

Engender is part of the initiative to provide supportive spaces on campus for trans-identified members in the University community, Miracle said. “Even if just for an hour and half once a week to really be able to feel comfortable in your skin.”

Engender meets Thursdays at 6 pm in The LGBT Resource Center, Room 221, Memorial Hall

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Transcript 1: Jac Camp, trans health initiative coordinator at Feminist Women's Health Center, Atlanta, Ga.

MGB: What services does the center offer?

JC: The current list of services we offer are geared towards mostly trans men, trans masculine identified individuals. Mostly it's gynecological care, annual exams, pap smears, things like that. And we also do lab work and prescribe anti-testosterone [inaudible] therapy to people who want to get on hormones. We also do lab work for trans women. But our protocols are not set up to cover all of that spectrum. Right now we are just doing the trans women aspect.

As far as services, we have nurse practitioners here and a doctor oversees the whole clinic and gives feedback, and referring people out if we need to, but our background is that we are a women's clinic. So historically we've seen women and provided gynecological care, abortion services, and things like that. That's how we got started in this direction. A trans man came to us about ten years ago and just needed some treatment. There was actually a group of people, Southern Comfort. I'm not sure if you're familiar with them, the Robert Eads Health Project.

So Robert passed away in 1999 and the clinic started then and it was a yearly thing that took place during Southern Comfort Conference. They approached us just to host a Robert Eads Health Clinic, that's how we got started here. There was a need for it, so it stuck around and now we have a program just dedicated to that.

MGB: Are protocols for trans women in development?

JC: The biggest challenge right now is our capacity. The program's grown so much that we just have to update our protocol. It's a very lengthy process and you have to get doctor approval and all that stuff. It does take a while and we have been working on it and we're still headed in that direction. Hopefully, we'll be able to come to fruition soon.

MGB: Is there any resistance to expanding services to trans women?

JC: I don't think there's any resistance. The doctor that oversees our program is extremely compassionate and knowledgeable. I think it's more about health concerns and risks and making sure that all of our protocols cover everything, because that's how it has to be in a clinic environment. It just has to be really thorough and I think that's what's taking up the bulk of the time.

MGB: Would it be considered unusual to see male-appearing clients in the waiting room?

JC: We have male clients who come in with their partners. People bring their partners in with them all the time regardless of their gender identities. We welcome everybody, and I know that's really not where the issues lies. It's just that with any expansion, it's just a long process and we want to do it right, so I think that's the biggest thing. . .It's really not unusual. There are a great number of males in the waiting room and on staff too. It's really more diverse than I think they used to be.

MGB: How are people referred to you?

JC: People somehow get to me, either they call or email or I see them at a health fair or something like that. If they're interested in services, we talk about it, and I'm sort of the go-between from the client to the doctor and the nurses. I keep everything organized as much as possible and running smoothly.

We serve male clients, female clients, trans clients. The whole spectrum. Everybody's welcome. We're not a family practice, so we can't see everybody for everything, but we can do lab work for everybody. And it really just depends on what tests they need and stuff like that, as to what we can do. As far as basic blood work, we're capable of handling that. It could be fine for someone to call and give us whatever name they wanted and identify however and make an appointment.

For example, some of our lab services include testing for sexually transmitted infections of both you and your partner. So whoever your partner is whether they're male or female, it doesn't matter, they can come in with you and you both get tested. We market towards everybody and everybody's welcome. Regardless of our title we do accept all clients.

MGB: Do you require clients to bring in a letter to obtain services?

JC: There's not a specific letter that you have to have from a therapist in order to get on hormone therapy. We try to approach that with a different attitude. If people are seeing a therapist, I think it's a great idea to get a letter because they might need to go somewhere else and if they're already in that process, it's just something you might need. If you have surgery, and a lot of people elect to have surgery later on after they've started hormones, so then they end up needing this letter they never got. So I always encourage people to get that, but we don't require it. What we do require is mental health follow-up, just making sure people have resources if they need them. I don't think the letter makes a difference, but it's more about actually being able to recognize that you need help and know where to go get it and be able to get. That's the most important thing and we reinforce that will all clients.

MGB: What does client follow-up look like?

JC: Clients have to have blood work every six months so we usually talk quite often. Sometimes people call and we just catch up. It's an ongoing thing and there's a lot of follow-up. And if I don't hear from somebody in a while, I'll usually try and check in with them and see if anything's different or what's going on. People who are seemingly stable, I guess it's not our protocol to make sure someone is seeing a therapist at all times. But if someone expresses to me they need help, we'll find a way to get it for them and make sure they follow through with that.

You'd be surprised how honest people are with themselves. They're a lot more people who aren't ready when they come to us and they will admit that and just want to start the process, but they're on their own pace and their own time. And that's fine, they can take as long as they want. We're here for them.

MGB: Are there people that you have turned away in the past?

JC: Unless there is a preexisting condition of health concern that would keep someone from safely using testosterone, we haven't had to do any turning away.

MGB: How many transgender clients do you have?

JC: Around 150…It is about twice as much as it is last year. It's grown significantly and it is continuing to grow. And one of our biggest challenges is capacity. Just like any other health center where we stay booked up. The schedule stays booked for weeks and months. I know people who want to get started, but it's really hard to find space for them in a timely fashion…Word of mouth has been our biggest resource. Within the community we've just grown by word of mouth…The majority of people are from outside of Atlanta.

MGB: I have a few questions that I certainly don't mean to be offensive in asking them, but I just wanted to make sure I'm asking those tough questions. How might you respond to people who might question why an individual might need to change gender or there being a transgender identity?

JC: I don't have that conversation often. But in the past, I have just tried to perhaps give the person an opportunity to think about what it might be like in somebody else's shoes and try to understand where they're coming from. Because that's really what it's all about. You may not agree with someone on their viewpoint, but you have to trust that people are making the best decision for themselves. Education is always a good place to start. I think people are often just not familiar with something therefore they don't understand it and they don't have enough knowledge about it. So usually educating people about all the many things, just different gender-variant things, like why someone would want to express themselves differently than they were raised. But that's a conversation that people usually don't bring up. If it comes up, it's so awkward I think sometimes for the person who's maybe in the dark, and that's unfortunate because they're not going to ever really be enlightened unless they speak up a little bit. But it has come up before, but that's my approach. I don't ever get upset at people for not understanding something because I think you don't ever know where they're coming from either.

MGB: Have there ever been reports of your clients experiencing hate crimes either in the waiting room or outside the clinic?

JC: No, not to my knowledge.

MGB: Is there a difference in the extent to which you can live a female life or have a female experience if you've spent the first half of your life as male? Is there a difference between living

the experience versus looking the part? Are you truly able to live the experience as a female if you didn't grow up as a female?

JC: I can't really answer that question for everyone. Each person has their own experience and their personal history in the biggest component in what they experience throughout their life I think growing up if you're socialized as a female certainly does play a big role in how you express yourself even after you transition as a male, but I think everybody's experience is so unique that it would be really hard to say did you really truly feel male ever. I work with so many people who have such different experiences it's pretty fascinating. It's a lot about socialization and sort of who your peers are and how you choose to use your personal history and move forward with that after transition. Do you disregard that personal history, I mean can you disregard it? They're so many factors at play that I don't know if there's an answer.

MGB: Do you identify as transgender?

JC: I identify as male, a trans man yes…I grew up in a very small town. I have my on own personal experience, being uncomfortable and all that. I can certainly emphasize with people.

MGB: How long have you lived openly as a male?

JC: Well, I would say my entire life. But I don't know if I have a finite period of time. Maybe ten years.

Transcript 2: Anneliese Singh, PhD, expert on counseling issues related to gender variance

MGB: How would you define gender?

AS: Gender is such a social construct it's really hard to define…For me when I think about gender I think about culturally the roles and values that come along with which gender you identify. But I also come from a culture where we have what is often called the third gender. The hijras. And hijras basically are transgender people and before colonization were actually considered to be sacred people within the culture.

So for me when I think about gender I think about a social construct but I also think about culturally. Depending on who is defining gender it's important to know what cultural context. If you're talking about European American, kind of US based, dominant culture, you're probably talking about a binary construct of gender where certain people are tagged male and female at birth, and that's really sex. And gender is kind of the roles and behaviors associated with those.

MGB: How does biology contribute to gender?

AS: Biology is made up of a lot of different things, our chromosomes or how our bodies are. I truly believe that every person who is born is a natural form of human being. They can have a mixture of different biological presentations of what we might call sex. In terms of chromosomes, what reproductive or lack of reproductive system, all that kind of stuff that's determined genetically we would probably call sex.

MGB: Can you describe any psychological components to gender identity?

AS: The psychological component is what happens at birth. I wish we said "Yay, it's a baby," but we usually say "Yay, it's a boy or a girl." So that's the binary gender system operating with sex, who's identified male and female. The psychological piece of it

comes when children are growing up based on what sex and gender they've been assigned, then we start expecting different roles from them. Girls should do this. Boys should do this. And when kids tend to step outside of their assigned gender or sex role then society sort of tries to get them to go back into that role.

Within communities of color often there is a lot of racism that people are having to navigate and surf so sometimes confirming more to a gender role is actually helpful not because that's culturally endorsed but because it's demanded by a dominant culture.

An example might be in India the hijras were very sacred transgender people and they were seen as the embodiment of the gods and goddesses, having both feminine and masculine energy in them. Which after colonization, which was British, read: white folks coming in and bringing Puritanical conceptions of religion and a worldview, the hijras are now a much more, I hate to say sullied, but they don't hold the same status in terms of being sacred. They're more treated a little more as outcasts. And so that disconnection between colonization and religion and racism has really had a detrimental impact on that group. And then the psychological component also means those negative feelings get internalized by that group and by other people in the culture because a lot of folks in India and other countries in South Asia may have forgotten the original sacred status the hijras had because they're more seen in a negative light now.

It can be more helpful to step back and look at histories of oppression and kind of interrogate why we have assigned those roles to sex and gender. Are they helping? Are they hurting? And what are the impact of different oppressions on those gender roles.

We can look at communities of color, women despite their race and ethnicity, and men for that matter. There're definitely costs according to how you are expected to act within a certain gender role.

Gender variance is something that is becoming more recognized as people realize that whether you identify as transgender or transsexual or gender queer, gender variance, we do it all the time. You do it because you're wearing pants. I'm doing it because I do scholarly research at the University of Georgia where it's mostly white guys. But I think that gender exists in so many different forms and so many different people and unfortunately, we tend to look at more closely when we locate it in transgender and transsexual people. We have so little information about what that means, that and, US culture gets very fascinated and wants to know what's in people's pants as opposed to saying, "Wow, we really need to question what we think about gender in the first place."

MGB: What can non-transgender individuals do to support individuals who are transgender?

AS: As a non-transgender person, I spend a lot of time questioning my own gender, trying to recognize my own gender privilege that I have. Trying to figure out how I can be more affirming of all different types of gender variance because we see gender variance all the time.

The first step is educating yourself. I try to think about, okay, from dad's side of the family I learned a lot about this third-gender, this third-sex, the hijras. From my mom's side of the family, she was white, and they were southern, so very strict gender roles. And so I try to figure out where did I learn about gender. And then I try to listen a lot to transgender people's stories. I read a lot.

I try to be open to what people want to be called. There's so much variance within the transgender community that some people like different pronouns. Instead of being judgmental, like I've got the last say, like I'm the gender police.

I had a mentor who told me it's really important to call people what they want to be called. I try to listen to what people's gender is. And I try to refrain from making assumptions. Right now you present as a woman, I can make a lot of assumptions, but I try not to used pronouns that gendered until someone kind of lets me know what there gender is. I try to be open and I try to listen. Once you educate yourself then you can kind of bring up the conversation in professional and personal spaces.

Most of the violence against transgender people happens in public spaces like bathrooms, on the streets. So I think the more and more we educate ourselves and our communities the more safe those public environments will become.

MGB: What are some of your research interests?

AS: We know all this oppression is out there, and a lot of times we'll start talking about transgender issues and it almost becomes depressing. There's all this violence, there's no acceptance, and yet as we know historically marginalized communities have huge amounts of resilience always. I'm really curious about what is that resilience and how we can understand that more so we can take a more strengths-based approach in counseling…I started an initiative to develop counseling competencies for transgender clients, so they're based on feminist, social justice, and multicultural principles.

MGB: What are some of the reoccurring issues that you find yourself addressing with your transgender clients?

AS: There seems to be a real knowledge of who they are and there seems to be a societal definition of what gender is that provides an unaffirming context for them. Navigating relationships is a big one, personal, family, work relationships.

Not every transgender or gender non-conforming person wants surgery or medical interventions there can be a lot of legal loop holes that you just have to jump through and things that you might have to do in terms of seeing a doctor. We still don't have universal healthcare, so a lot of transgender people go without healthcare and they're scared of their healthcare provider.

I wish those societal oppressions weren't there because I don't know how many transgender people would need therapy. A lot of times they're coming in for counseling because the world is not really built for them. But they are so resilient.

Transcript 3: Ali Taylor, transgender-identified woman from Athens, Ga.

MGB: What were your experiences growing up transgender?

AT: When I was younger I acted more in ways that are traditional for a girl to act. I liked playing with dolls. I wasn't into sports, or other boy activities. One of my earliest memories is my parents talking with my grandmother, who often babysat me, expressing concern that I acted more like a girl than like a boy. They thought it was a phase and just let me be at it.

To me I was just me and didn't really understand that other people didn't think the same way I did. For me it was just completely natural that I liked things that girls traditionally liked. I guess I wasn't told early and often enough only girls like that and boys should like trucks, guns, and things like that. They pretty much let me be my own self when I was younger. They were concerned about that, but they thought I would grow out of it.

MGB: What is your earliest memory of knowing you identified with the other gender?

AT: Age 6. Before then it never occurred to me and I never told anyone I wanted to be a girl because I didn't think of it like that…I didn't understand that other 'boys,' quote on quote didn't think like me. Since I was an only child, I wasn't socialized with other children. It wasn't until I was around 6 and 7 and my father enrolled me into sports, Pee Wee League baseball, that I started dealing with other children of my age a lot. I started to realize that what I was like was not like what boys were like. I had different interests, one of them not being sports. I didn't like them, I only participated because my father insisted I did and he was of the coaches so it's not like I could exactly skip out of it.

MGB: What has prevented you from completing your transition?

AT: I would if I could not but the simple matter of the fact is number one I can't afford it. I don't have the money to get all the clothing and the makeup and everything…I don't have the money for the electrolysis, which is a big stumbling block for me. Money has always been a big concern. Another big concern is the way I look and the way I sound. I'm still very much perceived as male no matter how much I may pass. They may think I'm a bit strange, but they think, like most of my life, that I'm a guy who acts girly, which is inaccurate…But it is my plan to fully progress and that I'm hoping I could go fulltime before the end of the year.

MGB: What are your thoughts on the film, Audrey Superhero *(see Sample Article #1)?*

AT: I think it's great that she would know that early and know for sure what she is and what she wanted to be…I think that if someone actually is transsexual or transgender I think it's best that they recognize that as early as possible and get the help that they need as early as possible so that they actually can do the transition again, as early as possible. And hopefully have an easier time at it than someone like me who spent their entire life either trying to hide it or run from it. The earlier your transition the easier it is as least physically and mentally on a person, and socially too. Though it's never going to be an easy thing to do until a lot of the changes are made. The earlier you do it, the easier it's going to be, the more effective it'll be, and the more time you get to spend living life correctly instead of trying to pretend and hide, eventually having to give up and recognize that you're not going to be happy until you actually do transition.

On the other hand being so young, I agree with what Janine said, that I almost do hope that it's just a phase and she'll grow out of it, if she's not actually really transsexual

and it's something that she'll just go through for a while and be a tomboy for a while and then eventually realize that's not what she wants to be, her life will be a lot smoother. I'm not denigrating anybody who is transgender, I'm not saying they shouldn't transition. But it is a hard road no matter how young you are. My only hope is that he will or she will, depending on how you look at it, get the help that they need to understand who and what they are as quickly as they can and proceed as appropriate from there. Because being transgender is not something I would actually wish on anybody. Unfortunately when you are transgender, no matter what else you may be it becomes your life. You're not a doctor. You're not a scientist or not a whatever. You're a transgender x and transgender always comes first.

MGB: What might Audrey Superhero *teach people about transgender issues?*

AT: I think it will show people, number one, to pay attention to your kids and listen to them talk. Because your kids, they're honest. They haven't learned yet the social necessities of lying to save face. So when your kids say something, listen to what they're saying, please, pay attention, and don't just blow it off as just being a kid thing. And support them no matter what it is. Obviously some people are not going to be accepting of this but they are your children and they're going to need your help so try to be accepting of it. Even if you think it's not something that you think is right for you or necessarily right for them. And then the only real answer for what's going to be right for a person is what they know. You can't tell someone else what's right for them.

[1] John C. Merrill, *The Dialectic in Journalism: Toward a Responsible Use of Press Freedom*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

[2] Sandra Harding, "Standpoint Epistemology (a Feminist Version): How Social Disadvantage Creates Epistemic Advantage," In *Social Theory and Sociology,* ed. Stephen P. Turner (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

[3] Rosanna Hertz, "Introduction: Reflexivity and Voice," in *Reflexivity and Voice*, ed. Rosanna Hertz (Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997): vii.

[4] Laurel Richardson, "Trash on the Corner: Ethics and Techonography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 21, no. 1 (1992): 119.

[5] Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"? in *Feminist Epistemologies,* eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, (New York: Routledge, 1993): 69.

[6] Nancy A. Naples, "Towards Comparative Analyses of Women's Political Praxis: Explicating Multiple Dimensions of Standpoint Epistemology for Feminist Ethnography," *Women & Politics* 20, no. 1 (1999): 31. Naples lists such foundational works as: feminists historical materialists perspective, Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983); analysis of situated knowledges, Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 14, 575-599; Black Feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); explication of third world feminists' oppositional consciousness, Chela Sandoval, U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World. *Genders*, 1991), 10, 1-24; everyday world sociology for women, Dorothy Smith, *Conceptual Practices of Power* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

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