Introduction

I Felt Like I Was Going to Explode

“I don’t know what drew me to the cover of the book, but I looked at it and went, ‘Oh my god!’ I’m like this! Everything changed after that,” explained Margie. Etched into her memory, Margie recalled that pivotal moment she first encountered a transgender representation in popular media. As a teenager strolling through the aisles of her local drugstore, the book that caught her eye chronicled the life of Christine Jorgensen. Jorgensen was a former American soldier who had undergone a sex change in the 1950s, and whose story garnered international attention. When Margie came across Jorgensen’s story in paperback, she experienced a jolt of self-recognition. “I was a teenager, and I was at a local drugstore that had magazines and paperbacks. I saw the Christine Jorgensen story . . . I took it home and I read it. I was just flabbergasted. I was like, this is me. I knew, ‘hey there’s one other person in the world like me.’ Reading those pages gave me comfort.” For Margie, that book served as a kind of mirror. She saw herself in Jorgensen’s life story, and the act of reading helped her realize that gender transformation was possible, and even more, that changing sex did not mean foregoing a successful and fulfilling life. Feelings of solace and encouragement washed over her. She no longer felt so alone.

Margie is a 59-year-old white transgender woman and a small-business owner who lives in the Detroit suburbs. She is a grandmother, a Detroit Tigers fan, and an avid viewer of Fox News. Raised as a boy in a close, conservative Michigan community, Margie grew up in a media and information environment that had little to offer in terms of transgender visibility and discourse. “I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and there just wasn’t anything,” she explained, “I think probably in the 1970s magazines were important because we didn’t have the Internet. I’d search through magazines sometimes. But the things I found in magazines
were always from a pornographic point of view because there wasn’t anything else. I did search, but there just weren’t any options.” Margie remembers feeling alienated in the suburbs and facing unrelenting pressure from family, friends, and teachers to fit in and to convincingly portray masculinity. Despite this she recalled, “I knew I was different . . . I felt that I should be a girl.” As a young person, even though she lacked the self-awareness, vocabulary, and social support to fully come to terms with what she called “her situation,” Margie cross-dressed in private. In her bedroom, she cautiously experimented with her identity, because, as she admitted, “My parents had very specific ideas about what you were going to be and about what roles you were allowed to be in. My parents were strict. Very loving, but I tried very hard to please them.” So, as a teenager Margie kept that drugstore paperback about Christine Jorgensen, her precious resource, hidden from sight in her room, reading it every chance she could get beyond her parents’ watchful eyes. Armed with the new and liberating perspective she gleaned from the book, Margie imagined becoming a girl, daydreaming with delight. But she was at a point in her life where the possibility of gender transition “just seemed like a farfetched dream.”

As Margie became a young adult, she continued on the predetermined course paved for men growing up in the postwar era: get a job, get married, move to the suburbs, and have kids. After marrying in 1971 and following the birth of her first child in 1972, Margie told her wife she “liked to dress up,” and for years continued to secretly cross-dress at home. Yet, the burdens of a restricted self became unbearable. She had to stop hiding. “I struggled with it like everybody else for all those years until I got to the point where I felt like I was going to explode, and either do something about it, or kill myself.”

This turning point occurred in 2005, the result of changes in Margie’s life circumstances and her media environment. “I started getting truly involved on the Internet . . . Being able to access other people through chat or websites opened up everything. Being able to create an identity that I wanted but that I couldn’t quite have and live helped. Knowing there was a possibility that transgender existed. It also was that my children were grown and didn’t have to answer to their peers.” With her children out of the house, her business stable and profitable, and the Internet at her fingertips, Margie began to consider gender transition. Exploding was no longer necessary.
In 2010, Margie initiated her gender transition. She was ecstatic and immediately changed her name and the gender marker on her driver’s license. Nevertheless, transitioning generated new challenges. Margie struggled to maintain the relationships she had long established with family, friends, and business colleagues. Although many were supportive, some did not understand her decision to transition and distanced themselves from her. Moreover, her marriage was at stake. Margie and her wife were best friends and wanted to remain together. But what would this new relationship look like? In answering this question, they turned to media for guidance. Together, Margie and her wife watched as many transgender-themed films and documentaries as they could find. “The movies,” Margie explained, “make it easier to talk about this stuff, which is very hard sometimes.” Their media journey took them from movies to transgender novels, works of nonfiction, and advocacy websites. All the while, they talked openly about what they read. They took notes and shared insights. Sometimes they fought. Laboring to live as the couple they were before while managing new challenges was difficult, but they ultimately stayed married.

***

I first met Margie at “Trans Chat”—a transgender discussion and support group in the Midwest—while I was conducting fieldwork for this book between 2008 and 2012. She was one of the group’s more senior and vocal participants, and playfully referred to herself as its “yenta.” When I told her I was writing a book and asked her for an interview, she accepted without hesitation.

During our first sit-down together, we discussed Margie’s thoughts on media and transgender representation. She emphatically reiterated the following conviction. “The general public needs to see we’re just ordinary people.” Knowing I was going to be writing about the transgender community for a larger audience, Margie wanted to ensure that I comprehended the everyday ordinariness of transgender life—a perspective she felt was largely absent from media and popular discourse. Transgender ordinariness was paramount for her because since transitioning, Margie has strived to create her own version of an ordinary life, and even more, a seemingly conservative and traditional one. She has been married since she was in her twenties, has raised two children, and spends much of her
free time spoiling her several grandchildren. She resides in a suburban middle-class neighborhood of manicured lawns and minivans. She voted for Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election and identifies as a political conservative. Her favorite TV channel is Fox News, although she admittedly takes issue with some of its commentators’ political views.

At the same time, Margie is by no means June Cleaver. As a transgender person, her ordinary is far more elastic and queer. In many ways, Margie’s gender transition ruptured her conventional worldview. It enriched her life and gave her a more nuanced perspective. “Ever since coming out as trans, and living it, my view of the world has certainly broadened.” As a queer person, she loves spending nights out dancing at gay bars, partying in Key West, and making friends in the LGBT community—something she never did before her transition. She considers sexuality and gender to be fluid concepts and laments how they are too often narrowly defined. Margie’s gender transition also queered her marriage. Recently, Margie and her wife made the decision to open up and redefine their relationship. Both have started to date men. Although they are often mistaken for a lesbian couple when they go out, they routinely check out potential male lovers together. Revealing a playful grin, Margie explained, “The funny thing is when we go shopping and she dotes on me, people perceive us as a lesbian couple. That bothers her a little bit. I love her and I grab her and give her a big kiss, but she doesn’t want to be perceived as a lesbian. That’s fine. I’d rather have the guys hitting on me anyways.”

***

Margie’s story speaks to the central themes and concerns of this book, namely, the many influences of media and technologies of communication on the everyday lives of transgender individuals. In her life narrative, media were leading protagonists. They both structured the norms that limited her life possibilities and offered avenues of agency and self-authorship. From reading the Christine Jorgensen paperback to experimenting with transgender identity in Internet chat rooms, Margie’s media use influenced and interacted with the dynamics and contexts of her life situation to transform how she performed gender, understood sexual subjectivity, and lived her everyday life. Media were used as resources for information and self-exploration, and helped her facilitate difficult interpersonal conversations. They were also ambassadors to the
outside world, as she looked to and relied on them to explain transgender experience to broader audiences. Media were also affective engines, as they stirred and moved her. They generated powerful resonances, provoking a spectrum of emotions ranging from disappointment and discomfort to excitement and hope. They reinforced feelings of loneliness, while simultaneously introducing horizons of possibility. Finally, throughout her gender transition, media made a sense of ordinary life more or less within reach.

In chronicling the experiences of people like Margie, this book offers a portrait of how transgender individuals lived with media toward the latter part of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. This was a time before the recent wave of transgender visibility in our culture, before what *Time* magazine called the “Transgender Tipping Point” (Steinmetz 2014). It was before Caitlyn Jenner and her reality TV show, before Netflix’s *Orange Is the New Black*, Amazon’s *Transparent*, and the current transgender reality television boom. It was before the celebrity of Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, and before transgender male models graced the cover of *Men’s Health* magazine. Situated during this historic moment, during a time of growing but uneven and scattered access to transgender representation and communication networks, this book offers a snapshot of how transgender audiences made their way toward identity and ordinary life. It explores how they integrated the available media discourses into their emotional, cognitive, and everyday experiences. It investigates the media practices transgender individuals employed to achieve and preserve what Butler (2004) calls a “livable life” (225), that is to say, a life that consists of “what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability” (226).

Preliminary research into these issues has furnished important insights confirming, for example, that media help transgender communities politically organize, find information and resources, share life stories, perform identity work, and feel less alone.¹ These studies are important first steps, but have only begun to scratch the surface. As Margie’s life situation illustrates, the story is far more layered, complicated, mundane, and entrenched in the everyday than this work reveals. This book’s objective then is to offer an empirically grounded and deeply contextualized analysis of the intersection between media, transgender experience, and everyday life.
Media Audiences and Everyday Life

This book foregrounds transgender individuals as media audiences and users of technology. It spotlights their thoughts and experiences, allowing them to speak on their own behalf. Aligning itself with their point of view, it privileges an “emic” (Fetterman 1989) or insider’s perspective, seeking to understand transgender individuals and communities on their own terms. This approach emerges from a rich tradition in the qualitative, ethnographic study of media reception and use. Broadly speaking, audience ethnographies focus on the interpretive work of audiences (Livingstone 2003), or the meanings they bring to and take away from encounters with media and technology. Audience ethnographies situate audiences within the complexities of living in the everyday world, trying to “get a grasp of our contemporary ‘media culture,’ particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life” (Alasuutari 1999, 6).

This book’s inquiry is anchored in everyday life—that intuitive and familiar yet ultimately nebulous concept. While we all have an everyday life, and harbor a sense of what it is, its exact definition is elusive, multiple, and contested. In this book, I approach everyday life in line with Lefebvre (1991), as a kind of “fertile soil” (87), a generative ground beneath our feet from which all human activity grows. It is our home base, our domus, an utterly known place defined by repetition, habit, and order (Bonner 2003; Felski 1999; Highmore 2002). In this way, everyday life is “the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds” (Felski 1999, 15). At the same time, everyday life is elastic and ripe for incursion by the queer and the uncanny. As Creed (2005) suggests, “the supposedly stable nature of the everyday, its regulatory laws, are easily undermined,” and its character engenders a “strange alliance of familiar and unfamiliar” (485).

The taken-for-granted continuum of everyday life, one always poised for metamorphosis, is a site of competing power relations and a relentless struggle between structure and agency. For scholars such as Lefebvre (1991, 2002), everyday life was fundamentally exploitative: governed by capitalist elites, colonized by the logic of the commodity, and plagued with unequal power relations. Others such as Michel de Certeau (1984) argued...
that even as everyday life is constrained by a “grid of discipline” (xiv),
human agency and creativity ultimately lie at its core. In the everyday, de
Certeau (1984) argued, “users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiii–xiv).

I adopt the point of view that everyday life is not fully constituted by structure or by agency. Rather, it is a dialectical relationship between macro-level forces and micro-level individual practices. Following Kaplan and Ross (2002), the everyday exists somewhere in the rift opened up between the subjective, phenomenological, sensory apparatus of the individual and reified institutions . . . Institutions, codes, and paradigms are not abstract constructs confronting us in some official “out there.” Nor do we come to institutions alone. We live in them in historically specific ways, and we live them. (79)

Everyday life is exactly this space of living: living with, living in, living in-between, and living against power. Yet, the everyday is remarkably more than the calculated workings of power, more than a field upon which market forces or politics play out. Even Lefebvre (1991) conceded that everyday life “has a secret life and a richness of its own” (87).

Following in the ethnographic tradition, this book delves deeply into everyday experience to draw out its secret life. It investigates the large and small challenges, triumphs, and contradictions of being transgender and living in a world increasingly organized around communications technologies. As Carey (1992) argues, “modern communications have drastically altered the ordinary terms of experience and consciousness, the ordinary structures of interest and feeling, the normal sense of being alive, of having a social relation” (1–2). This book interrogates the relationship between these media developments and transgender life. In other words, it delineates the “media life” of my participants; a life lived “in” media and one made possible through the “interdependency of humanity and technology” (Deuze 2012, xii). Its inquiry does not limit its focus to one particular media form, genre, or narrative. Rather, it examines the “media environments” of transgender individuals, or the ensemble of communications technologies available to them and utilized in the everyday. Cutting across historic space and time, the book examines the
media environments of both older and younger transgender people. It addresses what it was like to be transgender in a world when it was generally unseen and unknowable—before cable TV, Netflix, and the Internet. It highlights the realities of living in a more traditional, less diverse media environment, defined by scarcity and technological differentiation. At the same time, it also reveals the social impact of technological change as media have become increasingly ubiquitous, accessible, interactive, and defined by “convergence” (Jenkins 2006), a process in which “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3).

In exploring how transgender individuals use media across time (across historic time and across the span of their individual lifetimes), I draw out the similarities among and differences between “old” and “new” technology, emphasizing what they make (and fail to make) possible for users. In this way, I adopt a “practice theory” of media (Couldry 2012), conceptualizing media and technology within the context of their everyday use. Such a “practice” approach understands media in terms of “actions that are directly oriented to media; actions that involve media without necessarily having media as their aim or object; and actions whose possibility is conditioned by the prior existence, presence, or functioning of media” (Couldry 2012, 35; emphasis in original). I situate transgender individuals’ everyday media use alongside other life experiences and practices, and at the juncture of various micro- and macroeconomic, political, and social forces that shape their world. In doing so, I aim to generate a theoretical architecture for considering those quieter, less heroic, and less politically conspicuous forms of media use, which typically go unnoticed by researchers.

“He Knows the Ground Rules”

“This is Andre Cavalcante. He is a scholar researching media and transgender issues. I’ve allowed him to observe our group,” explained Reese to the members of Trans Chat, a transgender support and discussion group that met weekly in a small Midwestern city. Reese was the lead facilitator of the group and one of its founders. A member of the working poor, she had little in terms of material wealth but devoted her life to helping transgender and queer communities. Week after week, as I observed the group, Reese offered me the same introduction, always concluding with, “He will
be taking notes, but he knows the ground rules.” In order for Trans Chat to be a safe and welcoming space, ground rules were essential: everything discussed during the group meeting was confidential, everyone had a right to talk and share their experience, members would treat each other with respect and kindness, and talking over others or having side conversations was forbidden. As an outsider and observer, I also had my own ground rules. Under no circumstance could I record meetings with my digital voice recorder, and I was restricted from documenting the proper names or identifying information about individual group members in my notes. I was, however, allowed to notate recurring themes, general topics of concern, and the gist of individual conversations that emerged.

For two years, I observed and at times participated in Trans Chat’s meetings, which were held at a Midwestern LGBT community center and typically lasted two hours. For those who attended, Trans Chat was a sacred space. It reliably and routinely provided feelings of safety, belonging, and affirmation to its members, who were all along the transgender spectrum. Some identified as transsexual, and had or desired sexual reassignment surgery. Others had just begun experimenting with cross-dressing. A few claimed gender-fluid and non-binary identities. Members gathered to discuss a wide range of topics, from the mechanics of gender transition to political activism and interpersonal relationships. Mainly, they shared stories and explored strategies about managing everyday life as a transgender person. In this way, Trans Chat was a kind of naturally occurring focus group. Observing it allowed me to encounter a plurality of voices, themes, and opinions about transgender life through the medium of everyday talk (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). I was able to observe when, how, and if topics pertaining to media organically arose during conversation.

However, when I first began observing the group, many looked upon me with curiosity, even suspicion. Week after week, I walked into the conference room of the LGBT community center wondering how I was going to be received. As a cisgender, or non–transgender identifying person, I was an outsider. Each time I sat at the table, removed my black legal notebook from my bag, and began taking notes, I communicated my authority as a researcher and my outsider status. Indeed, the transgender community has a tenuous relationship with outsiders like me attempting to write about their lives. This is rooted in a history of writings and reportage that suffer from gross misrepresentation, sensationalism,
and reductionism. However, I am not completely an outsider. As a gay man, I am familiar with and sensitive to struggles around gender expression and the pressures of conformity. Moreover, as a result of the political mobilizing of LGBT communities, I consider myself a transgender ally. As I became a more regular figure at the Trans Chat meetings, I began to share my own experiences and challenges. In doing so, I moved from “passive observer” to “participant observer,” and members became increasingly trusting of and comfortable with my presence. Nevertheless, my status as an outsider never fully evaporated.

Observing Trans Chat was one of the qualitative methods I employed during my extensive fieldwork with transgender individuals and communities in the American Midwest from 2008 to 2012. In addition to this observational fieldwork, I also conducted 35 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of self-identified transgender people. Interviews were semi-structured and many participants were interviewed several times over the course of a few weeks or months. My data collection was not bound by these formal interview moments. Study participants invited me into their social worlds, connecting me with their friends, lovers, spouses, and families. With some, I went out to eat, visited their workplaces, tagged along on shopping sprees, and attended dinner parties. We often emailed back and forth, trading thoughts and insights, sharing news articles and web links. One participant mailed a handwritten three-page letter to my office expressing her appreciation for having the opportunity to share her experiences. These multi-sited and multi-media research moments created a fuller awareness of participants’ daily lives, their local communities, and interpersonal networks.

To perform a more immersive inquiry, I traversed across the Northern Midwest to consult with transgender activists, community leaders, social workers, and therapists specializing in gender identity. I attended transgender social events, film screenings, and “clothes swap” parties. I observed Transgender Pride events, political fund-raisers, and public lectures. I went to transgender friendly nightclubs, restaurants, bars, and church services, and joined transgender social networking sites, mailing lists, and newsgroups.

For purposes of comparison, I supplemented my primary fieldwork in the Midwest with secondary fieldwork and interviews in San Francisco, a city with a sizable and highly visible transgender community.
In addition to one-on-one interviews, I spoke with transgender activists and observed community events, attending, for example, a “Sexual Reassignment Fundraiser Party” for a young transgender woman in the Castro neighborhood of the city.

Originating from the Midwest and San Francisco, the participants in this study highlight the diversity of transgender individuals and communities. They vary across age, economic class, relationship status, race, profession, religion, and education. They are social workers, scientists, teachers, political activists, students, web designers, and cosmetologists. Some enjoy middle-class lifestyles, whereas many were struggling to survive during a severe economic recession in the industrial Midwest, where the once plentiful manufacturing and automotive jobs were rapidly disappearing. Some have crossed from one side of the gender binary to another—from male-to-female or female-to-male. A few were gender-fluid and non-binary. Some chose to live “in stealth,” concealing their transgender status through passing as a man or woman to avoid stigma and violence. Others refused to pass, publicly affirming their transgender and gender-nonconforming identities, or simply could not, unable to conform to society’s strict standards of appearance for men and women.

Nevertheless, the thread that weaves together the participants in my study is their self-identification as transgender people. In its everyday usage, the word “transgender” functions as an umbrella term that signifies a wide spectrum of gender-variant and gender-marginalized identifications including, but not limited to, transsexuals (who wish to change their sexual morphology), cross-dressers (who wear gender atypical clothing), drag queens and drag kings (who impersonate men and women as entertainment), and gender-queer, gender-fluid, and non-binary persons (whose gender identity fluctuates or rests in between or beyond the gender binary). As Valentine (2006) noted about transgender, “the power of the category is that it is actively seen as a collective term to gather in all non-normative expressions of gender . . . transgender experiences are seen to emanate from the experience of ‘gender,’ not ‘sexuality’” (409). In this book, I employ the word transgender as a way of speaking to a person’s actual gender, the gender that holds truth for them, which typically deviates from the one they were assigned at birth and/or falls outside normative social expectations and cultural scripts.
Even as all the participants in this study identified as transgender or “trans” (the shorthand version), they use the category and interpret its meaning in deeply personal ways. For example, one participant explained she is a “trans woman.” Continuing, “I am a trans woman. Two words not one word. One word suggests that we’re apart from women. Trans separated from it says we’re women and we have this qualifier.” Another participant identified as a “woman,” clarifying, “I’m a very particular kind of woman. I’m the kind that has a penis.” Some used transgender as a device to express a multilayered identity, as one participant said, “I would say I’m trans and I am a woman, and I am also a boy, and I’m sometimes gender queer, and I’m definitely queer. That’s how I would identify. I like to be called with female pronouns.” Other participants ignored the language of gender entirely in defining transgender. “There are so many differences in transgender. For me it is just expressing myself the way I truly am. Living my life in a way that feels comfortable to me.”

As these definitions suggest, the category “transgender” is unsettled and variable. It cuts across lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, nationality, ability, sexuality, religion, and age. Importantly, while this book introduces a broad range of voices and experiences, it is not intended to be representative of all transgender people. My research sites were restricted to the northern Midwest and San Francisco. Although trans people of color are represented in the study, my sample skews white. My sample also consists of those who answered my research call and felt comfortable enough talking about themselves in detail and allowing me to observe their world. Moreover, as anthropologist David Valentine (2007) illuminated in his ethnography, the category “transgender” hails certain kinds of individuals and, like all social categories, includes and excludes. His work showed that the working class, people of color, and those with limited education are less likely to be familiar with the language of transgender and may not identify with the category. Despite these conditions, “transgender” has mobilized an array of gender differences under its umbrella, and the term’s gravitational center, its connective tissue, “is the defense of the right of each individual to define themselves” (Feinberg 1996, xi). This act of self-definition, however, first requires the realization that transgender identity is possible.
Possible Self, Possible Life

One of the first themes to emerge as I began my fieldwork, and one that would recur throughout, was the question of possibility. At some point in their life, every participant in my study questioned whether trans life and identity was possible, and if so, how. Although they searched, they typically failed to find transgender people in their local community, in their religious organizations, shopping malls, and social events. In their immediate, everyday world, transgender was largely defined in and through invisibility and erasure.⁷

Moreover, participants were also aware of the structural challenges and systematic disenfranchisement that come with living openly as a trans person. For example, the 2009 “National Transgender Discrimination Survey” concluded that the transgender community experiences twice the rate of unemployment as the general population, endures almost universal harassment on the job, and experiences a homeless rate of about one in five.⁸ Violence against transgender people is also alarmingly high. Studies conducted by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) conclude that violence disproportionately impacts transgender individuals—particularly transgender women and transgender people of color. In 2013, 72% of all LGBTQ homicides were trans women and 67% were trans women of color. Transgender individuals were also seven times more likely to experience physical violence when dealing with law enforcement than the general population.⁹

It is no surprise then that the participants in my study struggled against an ideology of transgender impossibility, an entrenched perception that transgender is essentially abject, undesirable, and untenable. This dilemma of possibility—the question of being “real” and viable—lies at the core of queer experience. According to Judith Butler (2004), “the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (219). Possibility must loom on the horizon before individuals can take the first steps toward transgender life and subjectivity. My research reveals that media and communications technologies can both impede and/or support this stride.

Media are arbiters of possibility. As instruments of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980), they franchise what is and is not possible. They borrow
from the architecture of daily life and, according to Silverstone (1994), furnish the “metaphors and myths of the stuff of everyday experience and discourse” (167). Media help determine the extent to which identities are legitimate, sanctioned, and “real.” They set the parameters of everyday life and suggest who is (and is not) deserving of one. Importantly, media and technology are not the only arbiters of everyday possibilities. Educational institutions, medical authorities, religious organizations, market logics, and the state, for example, are equally important forces. Each mobilizes power and exhibits its own force relations in structuring the normative patterns of the world. However, in this book my focus is on media and the ways their publicity, accessibility, and everydayness set the terms for transgender possibilities.

Throughout contemporary Western history, popular media have overwhelmingly constructed being trans and having an everyday life as a binary opposition. In traditional media such as film and television, transgender figures bear the burden of hyperbole and can only live extraordinary lives punctuated with extreme violence, loneliness, or martyrdom. Even with greater diversification, the same often holds true for newer, emergent media. Consider, for instance, the short-lived 2010 iPhone photo application “Peek-A-Boo Tranny.” The Apple Store’s description of the product read: “Girlfriend, you may think that picture you’re taking is super cute, but wait until one of our fierce tranny gals jumps in and makes it a party!” The application altered digital photos by embedding a clownish picture of a transgender woman—typically holding a lollipop with a frothy expression on her face—into the background. “Peek-A-Boo Tranny” staged a kind of gender minstrelsy, turning transgender identity into a cartoonish caricature. Infantilizing and trivializing, the application was a troubling appropriation of the transgender body for non-transgender audiences. Faced with pressure from LGBT organizations such as GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and the Bilerico Project, Apple eventually removed the application from its iTunes store (Simon 2010). Sprung from the dark underbelly of digital media culture, “Peek-A-Boo Tranny” is exactly the kind of imagery that undergirds the ideology of transgender impossibility.

At the same time and equally as important, media are more than engines of impossibility. They are also precious resources of self and life-affirmation. For the participants in my study, encounters with media
culture cultivated deep aspirations and feelings of hope and possibility. In looking to become possible and in imagining transgender futures, they turned toward media, securing comfort, communion, and glimmers of self-recognition. Across “old” and “new” technologies, and even in the most unlikely of places such as The Jerry Springer Show or comic books, their media use showed them that trans subjectivity was viable and available.

Indeed, since the early twentieth century, the products of popular media have been the most widely available platforms of queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming visibility (Doty 1993). Although they have often relied on well-worn clichés and stereotypes, these representations have been accessible features of a commonly shared cultural landscape. Queer audiences have, for example, reveled in Marlene Dietrich’s cross-gender performance in the 1930 film Morocco; delighted in the gay-male melodrama of the 1970 film The Boys in the Band; became captivated by the shocking drag of Divine in John Waters’s 1972 film Pink Flamingos; heralded Julie Andrews playing a woman disguised as a

Figure I.1. Image of the “Peek-A-Boo Tranny” app.
man working as a female impersonator in the 1982 film *Victor/Victoria*; and howled at the campy absurdity of TV personality Pee Wee Herman throughout the 1980s. As MTV became a cultural lightning rod, they relished the androgyny of Boy George, Grace Jones, Prince, and Annie Lenox. They cheered when Ellen DeGeneres announced her lesbianism on network television in the 1990s; laughed at the antics of the openly gay character Jack in the sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998–2006); and ached from the pain and suffering depicted in the transgender themed film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999). As cable television became increasingly competitive and boundary pushing in the 1990s, queer audiences watched the gay-casted makeover show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007), and tuned into Showtime’s queer-themed dramatic series *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009). In recent years, they have rooted for their favorite drag queen contestant on *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* (2009–present) and took to streaming video to follow lesbian and transgender characters on Netflix’s *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–present) and transgender parenting on Amazon’s *Transparent* (2014–present).

Even in times of representational drought, audiences have actively queered media texts by recoding the dominant meanings embedded in them to fit their own sensibilities. In their imaginations, they turned straight characters gay and bisexual (Jenkins 1992), and transformed men into women. Despite periods of censorship, for example during the years of the Hollywood Production Code, queer and gender variant images still routinely slipped through the cracks of the film industry’s institutional matrix (Lugowski 1999). Indeed, according to Doty (1993), queerness is not peripheral to media and popular culture, but endures as one of its defining elements.

Importantly, for those living on the margins of society, queer media presence offers a knowing wink and a nod of assurance that they are a part of a larger world, that they matter, and that queer life is possible. As with Margie, transgender writer and activist, Leslie Feinberg, recalled the affirmation she felt encountering the Christine Jorgensen story in news media growing up. “In all the years of my childhood, I had only heard of one person who seemed similarly ‘different,’” notes Feinberg (1992). “I had no other adult role model who crossed the boundaries of sex or gender. Christine Jorgensen’s struggle became a message to me that I wasn’t alone” (6–7).
Offering the promise of queer and transgender possibility, media representations can be profoundly transformative as an outlet for self-discovery. As Stuart Hall (1990) maintains, identity is created “within, not outside, representation” (222). It is an ongoing process of suturing the self to historical and cultural discourses (Hall 1990), and media provide the raw materials (the needle and thread) for its construction. For instance, film theorists have long maintained that characters on the “big screen”—as they perform for us and gaze in our direction—invite opportunities for audiences to participate in fantasy, desire, and identity play. Interfacing with figures on screen, queer audiences strategically adopt multiple subject positions, formulate attractions, and engage in various identifications. Beyond film, media such as television, magazines, websites, books, comics, online video, mobile technologies, and social networking platforms all function as nerve centers for “queer identity work” (Gray 2009), for the process of experimenting with, formulating, and extending the limits of queer and transgender identities. Media are ideal tools for queer identity work because they can be consumed secretly and confidentially, in safe spaces, and during times of one’s choosing. They can be collected, saved, and archived in personal media libraries. They can be appreciated over and over again and easily shared and circulated within communities.

Media and communications technologies lend themselves to “tactical” practices of self and life-making. According to social theorist Michel de Certeau (1984), in navigating the structures, organizations, and power relations of everyday life, individuals employ an ensemble of tactics. Tactics are those creative, local, and surreptitious “ways of making do” that work with and against an imposed order (29). As “an art of the weak” (37), they are devices and maneuvers intended to circumvent, challenge, and creatively refashion the world, allowing individuals to carve out their own trajectory through the everyday.

The people who shared their stories with me used media and technology in tactical ways. They turned to digital technologies to cultivate an understanding of their identities and to achieve the common inclusions and routine affordances of everyday life from which they were often excluded. They used mobile applications to help locate gender-neutral bathrooms and visited websites to learn how to talk about themselves. They participated in discussion forums to vent and let off steam.
Leveraging the dialectical tensions of everyday life, the participants in my study utilized media to close the distance between transgender and everydayness that same media helped establish.

Struggling for Ordinary

“I’m not transgender and I’m not gay. Those were alternative lifestyles,” explained Lisa. “But after coming to the support group and learning about what it means to be queer, and getting involved with the transgender community, I realized I actually was those things.” Lisa is a white trans woman in her late fifties from the Midwest who volunteers every week at the LGBT community center where Trans Chat meets. Before she began attending the group, Lisa felt lost. She identified as what she called “the typical woman trapped in a man’s body,” and struggled with social isolation. Yet, in volunteering at the community center, attending the weekly Trans Chat meetings, and exploring transgender and queer identities online, she eventually adopted a new vision of herself and forged a new life trajectory, a queer life trajectory. “I now live how I want to live . . . I’m not trapped in anything. I’m a transgender woman and I’m queer . . . My wife was also trans, she was non-operable and I was post-op. This is my big queer life.”

As Lisa’s words underscore, one of queer thought’s leading contributions has been its ability to help individuals creatively imagine and boldly practice a “different way to be human” (Wilchins 2004, 4). Queer discourse augments our vision and shines light onto previously unseen identity possibilities. It “cranes like an approaching wave of potentiality” (Muñoz 2009, 185). It complicates borders and unsettles divisions between gay and straight, male and female, and masculine and feminine. It endorses an unsettled and fluid model of identity, undermining the notion of a unified and stable self. More broadly, queerness offers an interpretive frame and a strategic posture that stands against what a culture conceives of as “normal” (Epstein 1996; Halperin 1995). According to Michel Foucault (1995), normalization is pernicious in that it creates stringent rules; differentiates individuals according to dominant norms and averages; hierarchizes individual traits, abilities, and bodies; offers a “constraint of a conformity that must be achieved” (183); and marks rigid boundaries of social acceptability and worth.
In the everyday world, normalization works against LGBTQ individuals in the form of violence, discrimination, and systematic oppression. But it also works on them, absorbing and assimilating them into its value systems. Duggan (2003) refers to this as homonormativity, charging that it generates a “demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture” (50). Echoing this critique, Warner (1999) argues the trouble with normal is that rather than taking up the mantle of cultural difference, political liberation, and social disruption, it compels queer people to “stay at home and make dinner for our boyfriends” (70).

Indeed, queerness is anything but the desire to stay at home and make dinner for the boyfriend. This kind of quiet and ordinary domestic scene, it would appear, is its antithesis, perhaps even its nemesis. Queerness is organized around a “politics of provocation” (Epstein 1996, 153). For some, it is the fulfillment of a radical marginality, a defiant refusal to be known or make sense, an absolute negativity. It is thoroughly “oblique or off line” (Ahmed 2006a, 565). It is “anti-social,” located “outside and beyond” all forms of collective life and intelligibility (Edelman 2004, 3). For others, queerness is more hopeful, but equally radical, understood as a kind of utopia, a “forward-dawning” (Muñoz 2009, 28) stance toward the future. It is a horizon, a not-yet-here promise of perfect community, wild imagination, and human emancipation. Queerness has also been conceived of as righteous failure. As Halbertsam (2011) suggests, queerness as “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2).

But gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans individuals all make dinner. Even the “queerest of the queer” go food shopping. At times, they consciously choose to fit in and do “normal stuff.” Sometimes—for a variety of reasons—they are unable to refuse the status quo or resist the media they encounter. Sometimes they do not want to unmake or unbecome—especially when making and becoming have been so difficult. For transgender individuals, a group that typically wields less social, political, and economic power, resistance as a political practice or life strategy is not always possible, or even preferable within the context of daily, lived experience. To be honest, I have always been uncomfortable placing the responsibility of “the revolution” on the shoulders of the most marginal and disenfranchised. As trans scholar
Viviane Namaste (2000) insists, transgender people and experiences are “more than a theory that justifies our existence” and “more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works” (1). Rather, transgender life is “much less glamorous, than all that . . . forged in the details of everyday life, marked by matters not discussed by academics or clinical researchers . . . constituted in the mundane and uneventful” (ibid.).

Sympathetic to Namaste’s critique, this book turns toward transgender experiences in the everyday world and the ways queerness is lived. It considers what is unique about transgender life, but also underscores how transgender people live in common (as common) with others. It attempts to answer why Margie was so insistent that transgender people are “just ordinary people.” Critical, cultural scholarship has yet to come to terms—in any serious or sustained way—with why so many queer and transgender identifying people desire aspects of ordinary, orderly life. What exactly does the ordinary mean to them? What is attractive about it? Why the impulse to stay at home and make dinner for the boyfriend?

In this book, I use the word “ordinary” strategically to move away from the clinical, diagnostic, and deeply moralistic connotations of the word “normal.” This is not to say that “the ordinary” does not share some of its meaning with the word “normal,” as both imply a sense of order. In its earliest usage, for example, the word “ordinary” referred to an imposed order, “something done by rule or authority” (Williams 1983, 225). However, these meanings represent only half the story. The ordinary is far more capacious, more than an expression of regulatory or disciplinary power. For cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1989), the ordinary is inherently “good.” “Culture is ordinary,” he writes, “an interest in learning or the arts is simple, pleasant and natural. A desire to know what is best, and to do what is good, is the whole positive nature of man” (7). Likewise, philosopher Stanley Rosen (2002) suggests the ordinary revolves around doing “the right thing,” determining between better and worse, and striving to “respond correctly to things, experiences, events, and so on, as they actually are” (263).

Ordinariness is also about being in connection and communication with others, sharing space and time with them. It is about existing on a field of social interaction as an intelligible and recognized person. It
hinges on recognition, to be recognized in public space (and virtual space) without issue. Ordinariness is about participating in the communication and cultural rituals that allow us to feel communion with others, to feel part of something greater than ourselves. It is about being “together in fellowship,” a fellowship organized around “the celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs” (Carey 1992, 43).

At the most basic level, the ordinary was less about the “normal” (and normative) and more about “the everyday” for the participants in my study. Their desire for the ordinary was essentially an aspiration for the rhythms and affordances typically granted in everyday life. Ease, comfort, and mindlessness. Communication, ritual, and routine. The ability to be both someone—to be recognized and affirmed—and no one—to be left alone and ignored. These are some of the gifts of everyday life.

Indeed, as Felski (1999) maintains, the everyday has no “intrinsic political content,” nor is it ideologically “reactionary” (31). Rather, it is a site of potentiality, a “bloom space” (Seigworth and Greg 2010, 9). It is a deeply sensual world where our dreams, fantasies, feelings, and emotions germinate and launch. The everyday is where we experience pleasure and pain, love and loss, silence and boredom. In its spaces, we engage with technology to “extend the reach of our sympathies by bringing the world within” (Turkle 2011, 307). Even the seemingly frustrating and colorless characteristics of everyday life have an alternative side. Although the incessant and predictable routine of the everyday can feel monotonous, it can also provide comfort and pleasure. Everyday life offers simple and basic joys, luxuries, and conveniences. These are not just the purchased pleasures of consumer society, but deeply human moments: spontaneous conversations with strangers at a bar or leisurely walks down Main Street.

Perhaps the greatest gift of everyday life is the way it affords us the ability to move through it without much thought or trouble, to operate in the world in taken-for-granted ways. Indeed, an everyday life defined by constant struggle and laborious thought is essentially unworkable and unlivable. However, the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life is unequally distributed, more easily accessible to some than others. For the individuals who shared their stories with me and who defy the gender binary, battle stigma, and face systematic disenfranchisement, the rhythms and routines of the everyday are not simply granted. They are
hard-won, practical accomplishments, the end result of individual and collective labor.18 This struggle for the ordinary, a struggle increasingly being waged in and through media culture, is what this book is about.

In attending to questions of ordinariness, this book redresses some of queer, cultural, and critical theory’s greatest liabilities: their general lack of engagement with everyday experiences, the theoretical impasse they create through the queer/normal binary, and the reductive framework of politics-as-resistance that underpin their epistemic and methodological ground. Throughout the book I develop the notion of the ordinary by examining the quotidian side of transgender life. I focus on those lower, mundane, and quieter dimensions often overlooked or dismissed by researchers and theorists. I root my inquiry in the microphysics of participants’ everyday lives—while not losing sight of the larger questions. I also investigate what “ordinary representations of transgender people” in media culture look like and mean to the participants in my study. Over and again they expressed a desire to see people not defined by their transgender identity, but rather as people who, as they said, “happen to be” transgender. Rather than dismissing this as a desire for assimilation or normativity, I take this sentiment seriously and theorize it as aspirational, as a hunger for everyday life possibilities. I consider participants’ wish to “be” ordinary and their struggle to accomplish ordinary status.

In line with Scannell (2014), I conceive of “being ordinary” as the ability to “matter-of-factly be in a world that allows me to be about my everyday concerns, whatever that may be, in ways that are essentially unproblematic” (22; emphasis in original). Accordingly, I explore how media encounters can make a sense of the ordinary more or less out of reach for participants, and the ways they use technology in struggling for and achieving a sense of everydayness. Finally, I complicate the queer/normal binary and discuss the ways participants think about and merge the forces of queerness and normality in their everyday lives and in their interactions with media culture. I argue that they envision themselves and navigate the world in “queerly ordinary” ways.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how participants have engaged with media culture to construct identity, preserve self, and try to achieve everydayness. Underlying these practices was an essential tension, one characterized by the pull of queerness and ordinariness, sameness and difference, closeness and distance, stability and instability, and outsid-
erness and insiderness. The question about how to come to terms with these seemingly contradictory forces manifested throughout my fieldwork. Indeed, this question is so central to transgender life that it has emerged in other ethnographic work. In his study on female-to-male (FTM) transgender people living in San Francisco, Boston, and New York, Rubin (2003) found that “the tension between the ordinary and the unconventional structures every element of their lives” (3). This tension was equally a concern for me as I tried to make sense of and write about it. I wrestled with how to analyze participant data in new ways, ways that were nuanced and that refused to reduce their thoughts and experiences to false consciousness or mindless assimilation. In this way, this book highlights two struggles for the ordinary. The first concerns the work that participants in my study performed, using media to access the taken-for-granted rhythms and affordances of everyday life and to thrive in a world created without them in mind. The second struggle for the ordinary was my own as I tried to find a vocabulary suitable for talking about ordinariness and queerness in the same breath. My goal is to do justice to both.

Overview

Chaz Bono. Orange Is the New Black. Caitlyn Jenner. More than 50 gender identity options on Facebook. Transparent. “Bathroom bill” controversy. In recent years, a new trans visibility has emerged in media culture. But since the mid-twentieth century, transgender visibility proliferated across various cultural sites, albeit slowly and unevenly. This visibility was made possible through the unfolding of specific historical developments: the construction of gender as a non-binary category, the expansion of transgender discourse, and the sociopolitical mobilization of the transgender community throughout the twentieth century; the rise of gay-themed media content during the 1990s, which set the stage for transgender representations; and the growth of interactive communications technologies that provided space for transgender voices to flourish. The first chapter examines transgender visibility amid these historical developments. In doing so, it provides the macroscopic context for the book, the larger picture against which the stories of the participants in my study play out.
After establishing this context, the second chapter turns to media and the ideology of transgender impossibility they generate. It examines how participants interpreted popular media representations in terms of transgender violence, dehumanization, and delegitimization. I argue that these themes emerge in participant interviews not only because they frequently appear in media, but also because they are fundamentally at risk in the everyday lives of trans people. Remaining safe, maintaining personhood, and being taken seriously are all at stake in living a trans life. They inform the interpretive frameworks and evaluative criteria participants employ in media encounters and transform the notion of transgender everydayness into an object of desire. I analyze transgender ordinariness and everydayness as a site of hope and possibility, and maintain it is exactly the everyday that participants felt was woefully missing from media representations of transgender and what they wanted to see.

Chapter 3 moves from impossibility to possibility, exploring the active construction of self in the face of media power. It delineates how the ability to acknowledge and articulate a possible transgender self emerges through meaningful interactions with media discourses and communication technologies. According to participants, media generate the ability to imagine a trans life and to author plausible stories of self-transformation. Paying close attention to the role of images and language, the chapter reveals how the Internet provides resources that help participants think and talk about their identities and everyday experiences in new and pragmatic ways.

Chapter 4 explores the strength required to achieve trans subjectivity and the affective toll media reception can take on trans audiences. It highlights what I term “resilient reception” or the strategies of adaptation, methodologies of survival, and tactics of preserving self that study participants employ in coping with the affective disruptions and disempowering messages they encounter from media and society. This focus moves us beyond studies of audiences that singularly take into account their ideological and political interactions with media.

Chapter 5 renders visible transgender individuals’ struggle for the ordinary, or the constant and deliberate work devoted to achieving the uneventful and common inclusions and affordances of everyday, associative life. For study participants, routine daily tasks such as running errands or using a public restroom were often complicated and potentially
risky endeavors. To manage, navigate, and overcome these challenges, participants turned to media. However, while the affordances of media were helpful for participants, this chapter also explores their limitations.

The conclusion of the book advances the idea of the “queerly ordinary,” a theoretical attempt to move beyond the “normal/queer” binary. The queerly ordinary is a hybrid form of self and life-making that exists as a little bit queer and a little bit ordinary. I argue that this is how study participants think about themselves and their gender identities. The queerly ordinary is what they want to see represented in media, what they use technologies to achieve, and in the end, it is how they live their everyday lives.