Under Erasure: The Aesthetics of Trans Politics within America’s Historical Sensorium

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To the Workshop: The following is part of the first chapter of my dissertation on the epistemic and everyday practices of trans politics in the U.S. (I have altered “chapter” to “essay.”) This is also a longer version of an article in a forthcoming issue of Politics, Groups, and Identities on Benjamin’s redemptive critique. Please forgive the page count. The document is comprised of text and images. The images, from multiple sources both online and from the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, BC, are meant to provide a visual/affective or aesthetic basis for the arguments I am making. I hope that they enable the reader to situate themselves, through image, as emotional participants in the weave of my political and historical narrative(s). If this is not effective, please let me know. I am also concerned that the idea of the political aesthetic, drawn out of the historical sensorium, isn’t very clear throughout. I also think the last section needs a lot of TLC. Thank you for your help and critical attention!
Introduction

In 1973, at a rally commemorating the 1969 Stonewall Riots, Sylvia Rivera stood on stage before a group of hundreds of women’s liberationists and gay rights activists. Rivera, trans rights activist and founding member of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organization helping trans¹, queer, and gay communities living in poverty or incarcerated, was trying to speak on her organization’s behalf. She was being shouted down. Rivera, an open “transvestite” (an identity whose meaning in Rivera’s time is lost in the modern vernacular) was neither counted among men nor women liberationists. She was in many ways considered another “freak” who sidelined the political unity of those movements. She yelled agitatedly into the mic (and I quote at length):

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

¹ I employ “trans” to refer to the swath of embodiments that bridge “transexual” and “transgender” identities. My hope is that in doing so I do not engage in epistemically violent conflations or distortions of lived experiences as a part of some monolithic collective. I also do not separate gender from sex (employing gender/sex when necessary), accepting their co-constitutive relationship.
and to not forget [Kendry Lamore, and Dora Box, Kenny Messner] and other gay people in jail, come and see the people at STAR House [...]²

Her open call-out identifies not only the palpable contempt among many gay liberationists for trans communities. She also engages in a politics/poetics of unforgetting of her own in calling out the names of those in jail.

Figure: “What the Fuck’s Wrong with You All?” Sylvia Rivera on cultural forgetting at a gay liberation rally in 1973. Digital screenshot of online video. Public domain.

We can track, in Rivera’s speech, a relation of power that authorized such contempt by making spokespeople and community leaders like Rivera unintelligible within (growingly mainstream) notions of citizenship and political life that hinges on stable categories of rights and recognition. It would be mistake to assume that there was no “stable way” of framing Rivera’s political (and personal) identity. She was, rather, actively pushed to the margins because of her self-described disrespect for convention, respectability politics, and a growing gay and lesbian anxiety with making juridical (or rights-based) claims upon the state.

² My transcription. Audio and video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QiigzZCEtQ.
Rivera embodied the violence that many speak of in the abstract. She makes the case that her agency was lost on the “club” of a white capitalist proving ground. She is, in the words of Hortense Spillers (2002), the embodiment of a “cultural vestibularity,” or a preview of the material processes that took formative action on her marginalized flesh—a flesh that constitutes the cultural present of trans public life.3

Trans histories (such as Rivera’s) cross-cut cultural, racial, generational, and temporal boundaries. Trans politics actively makes connections that are not reducible to single points of recognition, moments of resistance, or certain kinds of everyday gendered practices since there is no one way of being trans (Currah 2006, 7-13). There is no single trans community that captures the complexities of trans life (Denny 2006, 171-173). Even the term “trans” is contested (McKinnon 2015, 419; Aultman and Currah 2017, 34). Such diversities opens a field of possible hermeneutic, or interpretive, methods for understanding the history of trans politics. Perhaps because of these many complex realities, prevailing social and political imaginaries tend to homogenize trans people and their forms of life and continue to go uninterrogated.4 This, given time, turns into a cultural erasure—an “othering” that occurs when marginal communities are considered unworthy of recognition as citizens and rights-bearers (Canaday 2013).

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3 Queer poet and scholar Claudia Rankine describes the (racialized) vestibularity of the body in this way: “Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unimimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games.” Citizen: An American Lyric (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), 12.

communities in particular have been obscured or entirely erased within stories of American political progress. From histories of political and civil rights for gay and lesbian people, all the way down to who gets to use the restroom, trans experiences are often disregarded. It is a cultural politics of forgetting.

As this essay illustrates, this kind of forgetting is no accident. The cultural politics of the United States during the last half of the 20th century did its part to relegate the experiences of these subalterns to the private zones of everyday life. As theorist Lauren Berlant (2002) has argued, the social and cultural turn to silencing marginal voices was on the back of a tidal shift in discourses on citizenship from the 70s well into the 90s. This kind of discourse placed sexed (and sexual) identity and citizenship in routine tension and that the resulting conservatism, as Berlant identifies it,

aim[s] to dilute the oppositional discourses of historically stereotyped citizens--people of color, women, gays, and lesbians [and trans people]. Against these groups are pitted the complaints of not stereotyped peoples burdened by a national history of icons who have only recently lost the protections of their iconicity (2).

Such “non-stereotyped” people include the perceptibly ordinary citizen who, often heterosexual white and male, feel as though they have been wrested from the promises of the American Dream. This group held that they, and they alone, make up the core of the American standard of civic life: namely of family, nation, and religion. The promises that hard work pays off, that jobs are for citizens, and that government ought to protect that core from outsiders were also believed to inhere in the American conception of the good life. Challenges to this shared identity were met with reactionary rhetoric. There was a cultural call for the old institutional orders of heterosexual standards of living (Bowers v. Hardwick), nuclear family life (a retrenchment in political rhetoric on anti-abortion and anti-pornography), as well as for the institutional
fethishism of state/local political and economic sovereignty (Reaganite policies).\textsuperscript{5} This shift in discourse had repressive consequences for almost all marginal groups, especially people of color and sexual minorities. By making it easier for some to assert their belongingness over others, this fugitive affect of national personhood helped to erect enduring boundaries around politics, normative forms of public and private intimacy, and access to a well-defined public sphere.

I present an aesthetic way to draw out these repressive consequences for trans subalterns and their politics by reasserting their redemptive historical power in the political present. Making the relationship between trans history and trans memory more explicit develops a poetics built within trans political history pushes the frontiers imposed by the cultural politics of forgetting. In Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s \textquotesingle{}(1996) words, a poetics of unforgetting wonders \textquoteleft\textquoteleft how to arrest the progress of transcendent critique long enough to recognize the practices of concealment and forgetting inherent in all modes of explanation, description, and analysis\textquoteright\textquoteright (71). The \textquoteleft\textquoteleft immanent critique\textquoteright\textquoteright of real relations of power and human actors in the ordinary of everyday life is the only alternative. I argue that history and memory are interactive forces that continuously imprint themselves on everyday life and politics and are especially important for understanding \textquoteleft\textquoteleft how we got here\textquoteright\textquoteright trans political practices. History, one might argue, is the force that orders the so-called pre-existing facts of our cultural worlds. Although I’m critical of that conception of history, I do argue that memory engages with the larger sensorium in which citizens experience their own social and political realities of the good life. History constitutes the very conditions and possibility of intelligible feelings, so-called structures of feelings,

\textsuperscript{5} For Roberto Mangabeira Unger, “institutional fetishism [is] the belief that abstract institutional conceptions, like political democracy, the market economy, and a free civil society, have a single natural and necessary institutional expression” in \textit{What Should Legal Analysis Become?} (New York: Verso, 1996), 7.
expressible in present public culture. This is the historical sensorium. The method of its narration is everything.

It is possible to track those silences, or those erasures, from one time to another. Entering the history of trans politics obliquely offers a way to to do this regardless of how loudly, or agitatedly, or repeatedly they are projected through time and history. Doing so helps consider what affects (or what things coordinate feelings, or allow certain feelings to stick) have made their print on historical sensations of politics. Stewart (1996) suggests that such a “[methodological] question, then, is how to dwell in such a ‘system’ long enough to track its moves and cultural politics. How to picture its ‘structures of feelings,’ its ‘force’” (21). Consider another scene of transwomen trying to speak and how trans identities are narrated from an external cultural formation, namely a scientific preoccupation with the body and its sexed authenticity, that “shouts down” their own narratives of life-building. More than forty years after Rivera challenged the crowd at Washington Square Park, Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera (both celebrity transwomen) appeared as guests on Katie Couric’s daytime television show, “Katie.” The theme was “Transgender Trailblazers” and aired on January 6th, 2014. When Couric began the segment with Carmen Carrera, Couric introduced Carrera as having been “born a man” and repeatedly framed her in this way throughout the interview. There was an obvious assumption on Couric’s part that all trans people must experience “that moment” of identity formation. Couric eventually asked the question(s): “Was the whole process [of surgical transition] painful, physically, for you? [Pause] Your private parts are different now aren’t they?” Carrera hushed Couric during part of the inquiry. Carrera said it’s not something she’s comfortable talking about.
So before she could begin giving an account of herself on her own terms (that she was always a woman and did not “become” a woman) the plot of her story, in effect, had already been delimited. She had been shuttled between a tradition of sexed bodies “matching” their reproductive organs and the modernizing discourses of surgery and prosthetics that authenticate such a match. Carrera’s follow up, that she “still had a life to live” after transition, was still caught between these forces. She had to defend her concrete experiences as a woman and, by extension, her rightful place within those cultural fields that authenticate gender/sex practices.

Figure: Carmen Carrera. Digital Screenshot of digitized video. Public Domain.

Figure: Laverne Cox responds to Couric. Digital Screenshot of digitized video. Public Domain.

Couric then turned to Laverne Cox. “[Carmen said] people who are not educated about this or familiar with transgenders [sic] are preoccupied with the genitalia question, and I’m wondering if
you think that’s true and if you have the same feelings about that as Carmen does.” Laverne, in a short monologue, argues that “I do feel like there’s a preoccupation with [genitalia] and I think that the preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people and then we don’t get to really deal with the real, lived experiences.” She then identifies the (very real) disproportionate conditions of poverty, bias-motivated homicide, and transphobic abuse that trans people (and particularly transwomen of color) experience. She discusses Islan Nettles, a young transwoman of color beaten to death by a would-be lover. Cox emphasizes at the end of her interview that “by focusing on bodies we don’t focus on [these] lived realities of [trans] oppression and [trans] discrimination.” Such a sustained focus on bodies leads to an outright erasure of what it means to lead a trans life—exemplified on daytime television. I take for granted that Cox has the opportunity to respond, making these important problems in current discourses on trans communities known to a larger audience. But the fact that she needed to engage in this pushback is what motivates my underlying interest throughout the essay.

Outline of the Essay

The first section engages with the Marxist concept of history as an explanatory framework of how trans life became an obscure and marginal part our nation’s political narrative about sex and citizenship. Following this trajectory, I illustrate how representations of trans identities in history were often rendered as inventions of scientific discourses. The second section shows that the past can be linked to the present in subversive ways through memory. This kind of subversive relationship constitutes a “redemptive critique” of trans history where memory is the bulwark against erasure. I read the historical sensorium of trans testimony for oppositional memories. I look at how the trans people (the “others of sexed history”) have
narrated their own strategies for making do in the otherwise toxic space of public life and historical sensibility. These strategies include the aesthetic politics of everyday self-presencing. The final section examines how representing the common theme of trans life as one composed entirely out of conditions violence empties the content of their ordinary existence as citizens. Trans voices must be actively retrieved from this framework. Doing so is to unforget and reconstruct the structures of feeling that have long denied trans people a place in American discourse on public life.  

**Marxist Critique and the Others of (Sexed) History: Trans Representation and Lived Experience**

What provides the epistemic or affective justification to jeer at trans activists like Sylvia Rivera on stage during a celebration of gay liberation just years after the movement’s birth? Or what situates transwomen like Carmen Carrera on a corporeal polarity of transition in a (progressive) decade that saw the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples, federal protections for trans employees, and increasing levels of trans representations on TV? Why should it be the case that, as sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) rightly argued, “our society prohibits willful or random movements from one sex status to the other” (125; my emphasis).

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6 Many of these themes look familiar to theorists. Social theorist Michel Foucault, for example, argued that “subjugated knowledges,” or hidden practices deemed unworthy of scientific study, form out of the massification of certain practices within knowledge-domains in “Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France. (New York: Picador, 2007), 6-8. Postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak makes this condition of voicelessness painfully clear: “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization [...] a violent aporia between subject and object status.” Quoted in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Marxism and Cultural Interpretation, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-313, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 276. Transfeminist Susan Stryker has argued that trans knowledges are emblematic of these subjugated knowledges in “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” The Transgender Studies Reader, 1-17, (New York: Routledge, 2006). My argument is that memory attends knowledge, might even supplement it, but can be rendered as separate for the critique of normative sexed history.
What characteristics of the history of gender/sex gave it such power that it enshrined this kind of human relation in the protected spheres of “natural forms” of life? This section briefly tracks this power of biological science, medicine, and psychiatry in history to illustrate how each colludes and tends to situate trans people within an alienating framework of diagnoses and surgico-medical gatekeeping. This kind of history—perhaps because it reflects the discoveries made by science (associated with reason and disciplined method)—has the enduring quality of being a carefully constructed story concerning “the way things really were” (and are).

What follows is essentially a history of the political present. Thus, I want to elaborate on two methodological caveats. First, I am dealing with a particular strand of Marxist cultural theory. I follow Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson’s (1981) concept that history “is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it [...] passes through its prior textualization, it narrativization in the political unconscious” (35). Although this section deals with how biological texts have narrated trans being, I understand them to exist within this kind of political unconscious, or cultural power of how narratives are understood. Second, Karl Marx as early as the 1850s argued that facts (as parts of the “details” of history) are not self-evident things; rather, they become facts because of social relations in history. I concur. Humans can all-too-often become mere effects of how history is told (e.g., the “free” laborer and autonomous individual subject). To overcome this, Marx argues that history ought to be understood as a material process through which only “actually existing” humans in their “concrete” social relations are brought to

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7 I am all too aware of Marx’s short shrift of “the family” and institution in the German Ideology and elsewhere (mostly attributed to Engels). But it doesn’t undermine my central point that Marx’s critiques of history lead a way out of the ideological grip of biology and medicine and their abstract representations.
bear on the analysis. History is the product of the everyday acts “of men [sic] with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men [sic] themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a ‘history’ independently of the existence of any political or religious nonsense hold[ing] men together” (Marx 1978, 157; my emphasis). Because human activities are continuously in flux, substituting a theory of relations for real relations is literally non-sense, not of the human sensorium. In this way, I agree with Jameson (1981) that “only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past which is [...] momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it” (19). There are forms of life submerged beneath the narrative waters of how things get told, by whom, and on what register.

I pursue this Marxist-inspired method as a point of departure for thinking about trans experiences and memories in the historical sensorium. Trans lives too often become abstracted medical inventions: pathologized biology, “wrong bodies,” or disorders of the mind. Their everyday practices are, in effect, reduced to discursive tropes asserted from an outside narrative power. From this point of view, trans experiences and feelings about their public belonging within the American historical sensorium were (and in many instances are) limited to the affects associated with medicine (feeling sick or born with the wrong biology, etc.); feeling is limited to that of the clinically intelligible. “Representatives” for trans communities in this kind of history,

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8Spivak critiques the function of the intellectual in deploying concepts such as concrete experience. She argues that uncritical attention to this phrase “has helped positivist empiricism--the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism--to define its own arena as ‘concrete experience’, ‘what actually happens’. Indeed, the concrete experience [of the subaltern] is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual.” Quoted in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 274. Concrete experience matters. But I am arguing, likewise, that critical attention to the way lives are narrated must avoid the reproduction of this epistemic violence.
those who speak on their behalf and give epistemic dimensions to them, are doctors and psychiatrists, social workers and psychologists. And that because these grammars of pathology were so entrenched, trans communities were often denied the capacity of participating in the writing of the cultural texts of which they were a part. From another angle, I will show how these are only trajectories for understanding trans communities and interpreting their histories. These grammars-in-time had to be seized upon and were creatively practiced and reframed within everyday practices that often get mired in the American public’s accepted history of the scientific body.

Given the long Western history of the sex binary in everyday life, social relations began to reify what science deemed biologically certain. I intend to complicate the ways that two particular discourses have pulled trans historical being together: (1) Western norms governing the cultural understanding of sexual difference (gender/sex as organizing principles of social relations) and (2) the institution of scientific inquiry, study, and elaboration of sex through the lenses of biology, medicine, and psychiatry. I by no means suggest they are mutually exclusive. They reinforce one another.

An “easy” start, I could suggest, would be to situate Western rationalizations of bodily difference within tightly bound knots of what is commonly referred to as discourse, or knowledge-domains. That sex was thought, inaugurated by the advent of anatomy around the late-second century scholar Galen, to be an issue entirely about genital difference (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 17; Laqueur 1990, 25-34). There was no “gender” as we imagine it today (it was coined in the 1950s by Dr. John Money). Thus, in a certain sense, trans was nameless within most accounts of Western history. In instances of genital ambiguity (then called hermaphroditism) “afflicted” people were nevertheless treated as outliers--already othered given that the numbers of recorded genital ambiguity were “negligible.” Yet, a particular abstraction concerning the essence of the human arose over the course of regular and unceasing study of the human organism: the bionormative, that is the biologically normal, body. Sure, all bodies had cells and internal organs. But it was also dichotomously sexed--at least if it was to be normal, capable of speaking of its own autonomous thinking, being, and acting.

Continuing in this scientifically-focused account, trans communities had a discursive life only toward the end of the 19th century. That is, trans people had access to a certain grammar of being imposed by medical experts and experts could now “study” this newly intelligible population. This grammar was linked to diagnosis, not autonomy and individual right. Diagnoses like “eonism,” and “Sexo-Aesthetic Inversion” marked a medical itinerary to give definition to otherwise illegible biologies, that is to give them voice (Stryker 2008, 38). Yet, as early as 1887 Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld had founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee whose mission was to spearhead scientific reforms in the treatment of these sexual minorities (ibid., 39). Hirschfeld
was the first to use (and in fact coin) the term “transvestite” and would continue to focus efforts on edifying the scientific and medical communities on gender variance (ibid.). Sexed bodies would later be understood as products of discrete variables like hormones, chromosomes, and brain chemistry. These studies helped solidify biological determinism in the study of sexual difference. Sexual difference was no longer a cultural mystery rooted in myth (e.g., a contemporary fiction “Women are from Venus, Men are from Mars.” Men and women, male and female, were mapped by scientifically verifiable behaviors. Sexed identities were the products of a code discoverable only through rational scientific discovery. Biology and medicine would go on to fundamentally alter the way sexed bodies were conceived in the American legal and social imaginaries (Meyerowitz 2002, 1-14).  

Although it wasn’t until the end of the 1950s that the terms “gender” and “gender identity” would be coined, gender would fit well within the prescriptive medical practices of the day (Denny 2006). Some outside the field of medicine began to consider how the social construction of such roles betrayed the otherwise natural givenness of biological certitude (Garfinkel 1967, 116-185). For instance, sociologist Harold Garfinkel documented the transition of Agnes. Her “passing” as a woman as a strategy for life in social realities became the basis of a new trajectory of social and scientific study. The notion that gender was a part of a constructed, and perpetually ongoing, set of social processes would fashion trans communities in a new light.

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9 In 1989, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court would hold that “in saying that gender played a motivating part in an employment decision, we mean that, if we asked the employer at the moment of the decision what its reasons were and if we received a truthful response, one of those reasons would be that the applicant or employee was a woman. In the specific context of sex stereotyping, an employer who acts on the basis of a belief that a woman cannot be aggressive, or that she must not be, has acted on the basis of gender” Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins 490 U.S. 228, 251 (1989). This case would serve as the basis of adjudicating all disputes related to sex and gender, even those for transgender employees with varying levels of epistemic erasure. For a discussion on the epistemic injustices of this kind of sexed and gendered legal precedent, see my “Epistemic Injustice and the Construction of Transgender Legal Subjects,” Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies (Summer 2016), 11-34.
Everyday acts helped “constitute” humans’ sex and gender identities. But, insofar as the everyday acts were intelligible within social laws, or properly “managed,” trans communities were still borrowing from normative grammars. As Reid Vanderburgh (2014) shares, “the model that was out there was that trans people feel that they are trapped in the wrong body and have always known they were actually a different gender. I didn’t fit that model and I didn’t know anyone who identified as neither man nor woman, both butch and femme” (105). The interlocking discursive fields of normative gender/sex, medical diagnoses of “gender identity disorder,” and trans-antagonistic social phobias would create a kind of gravity, distorting living experiences in multidirectional ways (see Stone 1987).

Social movements were contemporaneously erupting in the realm of political rights during the 50s and 60s. They challenged the prevailing conditions of marginalized groups ascribed by race, class, and gender. The Civil Rights Movement and Second-Wave feminisms, for example, held that their marginal political identities and everyday lives needed more than simply legal protection. They demanded social recognition and respect. They were self-fashioning agents in a period of social flux.\(^\text{10}\) The gay liberation movement used many of these tenets to emancipate sexuality from the heteronormative mainstream. The same decades saw the growth of gay and queer networks connected by bars and clubs, secret meetings of groups like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, as well as the rise of public “queer” spaces for sexual experimentation (Berlant and Warner 1998, 556-557; Berlant 2002, 148). Queers were openly flippant to normative values, from capitalist consumerism to heteronormative intimacy (the Mattachine Society was avowedly communist). Subcultural

practices (among mostly gay men) of “drag” and “camp” became active subversions of commonplace gender/sex tropes. Bars would host drag queens for comedy and entertainment. Many of these spaces were safe for trans people, however tentative they felt about their belonging. Leslie Feinberg’s (1992) semi-autobiographical (fiction) account of the butch lesbian, Jess, illustrated the various ways that local networks of gays and lesbians would police gender variance with exclusionary practices. The central plot of the book, however, spoke to the violence that being illegibly gendered would often provoke. And although some gay bars actually banned gender-variant patrons, trans people would be a central component of the liberating riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 (i.e., Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson).

Although “gay liberation” in the 70s and early 80s brought to the fore the notions of anti-normativity and sexual liberation, it had the ironic effect of furthering the otherness of trans communities. Most accounts of gay liberation make no reference to the gender identity of its constituent actors. Drag, for example, was thought to be, singularly, a performance of a man wearing women’s clothing. These men performed a subversive rendition of heteronormative life.
This had varying consequences for the queer perception trans identities. Transvestites were split in contextual vernacular and identities. The immediate subcultural perception (among gay men in particular) was that trans communities were freaks--desiring to be something they were, in “fact,” not (Warner 2002). The larger, public sentiment stitched itself to this kind perception as well. In academia, some began to play with the notion of construction and performance that emerged from the drag scene and its growing underground popularity. Their theories argued that gender was performative, a contextualized “truth” without an essence that had meaning only in social context (most famously was queer theorist Judith Butler’s book Gender Trouble). But for many trans people, gender and sex were life and materiality, not performance and discourse. It was a strategy “to be,” not “to become.”

However obscured these modes of living were, trans people attempted to make a life and fashioned communities on their own terms. For example, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, both present at the Stonewall Riots, founded the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Survival and critical attention to space, place, and local memory were crucial to the movement. As their sixty-page manifesto/zine intimated, the founding members were “not respectable queers” (STAR N.D., 6). They were fighters who, like other queers and queer community organizations, were establishing the means through which feeling gender/sex was not just a matter of countercultural politics. Again, it was a matter of life or death--not performance.

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1 A scene from David Valentine’s ethnography of the concept “transgender,” conducted in the 90s and published in 2007, demonstrates this. Upon seeing an informant of his, Melissa, in a trans-friendly NYC bar, Valentine remarked that her new hairdo was very Barbra Streisand. Her reaction was subdued: “My biggest fear is that people will think I’m a drag queen.” Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Concept, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.
While STAR took the fight to the streets, many behind-the-scenes actors financed movements for community sensitive gender identity clinics, local forums on gender non-normativity, and trans-inclusive conferences to establish a national network. Dallas Denny (2006) has explored the various ways that trans activists like Virginia Prince, Ariadne Kane, and Reed Erickson engaged in a number of these well-resourced efforts. Prince and Kane wrote op-eds and letters to the editor of national magazines and newspapers. Prince published her nationally distributed magazine *Transvestia*. Kane established Fantasia Fairs where (mostly transwomen) were instructed in areas like voice range, feminine carriage, and courses in makeup application and clothing selection. Reed Erickson, a wealthy transman, made grants available for a number of organizations whose focus was on educating the public about the growingly visible and diverse communities of trans people. Many queer and trans communities of color in metropolitan areas had established ballroom scenes. These spaces were also home to the establishment of new...
kinship networks, known as houses, that connected otherwise homeless youth performers—most notably the House of Ninja and the House Extravaganza (as popularly exampled in the documentary “Paris is Burning” by Jennie Livingston).

By the late 80s and early 90s, feminisms had developed incisive ways of cutting through the relative stability of heteronormative notions of sexuality, Western concepts of politics, and patently racist cultural paradigms in their critiques. Their projects—inspired by the works of Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to name a few—were wide ranging and challenging. The growth of these feminist projects grew from within the internal political and cultural antinomies of American life in those decades. An open gay and lesbian public, still stigmatized by HIV/AIDS, was considered hostile to an American sensorium of heteronormative intimacy. As previously noted, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2002) argues that this reactionary conservatism—which included a movement to ban pornography through nationalized obscenity laws as well as police women’s sexuality through a
renewed rhetoric of pro-life, anti-abortion movements--fragmented civil society into “intimate publics.” These publics were governed by a national ideology “that maintains the sacredness of privacy, the virtue of the free market, and the immorality of state over regulation” but “contradicts everything it believes when it comes to issues of intimacy [and sexed identity]” (5). Trans life was caught somewhere within the interstices of cultural hegemony, political (or juridical) right, and sexual righteousness. Although feminisms invited new perspectives from trans thinkers and theorists, public pushback was still subtended by the belief that trans identities, because they were rooted in pathology, could not be afforded of the same status as “citizen,” even in its most capacious sense. Transfeminist Susan Stryker was speaking on a panel at a 1993 of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) in New York when a man suggested that trans people present at the Stonewall Riots were not part of the gay liberation movement. They were mentally ill, he argued, and automatically excluded. “I am not sick,” Stryker chastised. Ironically, Stryker’s panel concerned the expanded inclusion of trans people in LGB community organizing.

In 2006, the influential Transgender Studies Reader collated a vast collection of foundational texts and histories of now identifiable political groups. In 2011, a federal court of appeals ruled that trans people were afforded the same protections under Title IX’s nondiscrimination clause against sex-stereotyping (Glenn v. Brumby). A growing number of representatives in state and local legislatures were coming out as trans (up to 16 estimated by 2012). In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-V), used by medical professionals diagnose mental illness, had changed “gender identity disorder” to “gender dysphoria”--a platform advocated by trans activists to remove, at least in part, the stigma of
“disorder” from trans identities. But this kind of progressivism inspires a cautious (if not a version of Berlant’s cruel) optimism. By Couric’s 2014 interview with Cox and Carrera, the public’s obsession with the trans body was now awkwardly thrust to the surface. Couric’s question to Carrera and Cox was authorized in large part by an accepted history, one that subtended popular discourse, that situated natural bodies as cis (or non-trans)--of freaks who had to answer for their own non-normativity. Couric’s kind of overt (and covert) attention to the construction of the sexed body isn’t a product of surprising social conventions. It thrives in a national history defined by a conservative national core identity, an identity that scholars from Haraway to Berlant have associated with heteronormative visions of intimacy and family. This commitment to a core identity of intimacy mitigates what it might feel like to be a part of civic personhood. It also inspires heightened scrutiny to bodies that seem to complicate the continuity of that identity.

**Common Violence and Ordinary Practice**

If one argues that history orders social reality, memory is the reassertion of everyday and often resistant meaning to that reality. Memory consists of a living symbolic imaginary (often textualized in literature, autobiography, and local cultural practices) that translates history in life-making. Memory helps to constitute humans as “beings of history.” In this sense, memory is the active experience of time within history, what phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have called temporality. Memory connects the past and present. It affects the ways people carry out the projects of their ordinary life-building practices. Memory is the *lived* component of history, coordinating emotions, affects, and social relations within ordinary life.
(Berlant 2011, 52; Stewart 2006, 3). It gives meaning to the everyday. Memory is also a bulwark against erasure according to Walter Benjamin (2007), who wrote that “there is nothing lost for history [with memory]” (254). This was the contours of a “redemptive critique”: that human history and emancipation hinged on the active de-employment of life from the grip of normative history. For instance, “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger [...] In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (ibid., 255; my emphasis). A redemptive critique of America’s sexed history prizes the disruptive power of personal memory and lived experiences out of the historical sensorium that defined, limited, or erased them from our collective structures of feelings.

The stories examined below illustrate how grammars of identity, while narrowly available, were creatively disassembled and reassembled by trans communities making do in American culture. It prizes the living dimension of trans narrative in the American historical sensorium. The following “embed in [the body] a poetics of daily pains, eccentric markings, and monumental peculiarities that open onto the space of a social imaginary [...] the body becomes a collection of places that remember events, haunt people, and take on a life of their own” (Stewart 1996, 132; emphasis in text). The statements included below are taken from a large archive of letters, books, and autobiographies. They make (sometimes painfully) clear the extent to which the historically constituted and thus socially intelligible forms of embodiment render themselves

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12 For theorists like Lauren Berlant “to think about sensual matter that is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness but that has historical significance in domains of subjectivity requires following the course from what’s singular—the subject’s irreducible specificity—to the means by which the matter of the senses becomes general within a collectively lived situation.” Cruel Optimism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 53.
in ordinary life (cf. Haraway 1983 on fragmented identities). I argue that these testimonies speak more to the strategies of making do than of mere coping. They highlight the creative everyday acts that not only live within by normative fictions encode them. This section illustrates the complexity of such everyday strategies that subtend making a life livable for trans subalterns. For trans communities, the very act of being in public requires a state of vigilance:

Before you decide to go public you must consider the risks you are taking. When a man goes in public dressed as a woman, it is possible for one of three things to happen: a) to be discovered, b) to be assulted [sic], c) to be arrested. It is the extreme of foolishness to pretend that ‘it can’t happen to me’ (Lind N.D., 1).

Lind is speaking of the violence in the everyday activity of passing. Garfinkel (1967) provides an enduring academic definition of the act of passing as “the work of achieving and making secure [a subject’s] rights to live as a normal, natural [gender/sex] while having continually to provide for the possibility of detention and ruin carried on within socially structured conditions” (137). This politics of passing, of appearing normal to avoid social violence, varies experiences of normativity in the world. Max, a transgender stone-butcher identified participant in Lori Girshick’s (2008) study, Transgender Voices, argues that:

Passing must be done sometimes, in order to be safe. But I can’t imagine living a stealth life where no one knows I’m trans. I think it’s important for there to be people who are visibly challenging the gender binary. But I don’t think it’s every transperson’s responsibility to be a gender crusader (112).

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13 Judith Butler has argued that “gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences.” Trans embodiments, as a part of life-building, are likewise policed but are also forms of strategic agency. Importantly, trans embodiments are not merely performative acts. There is materiality to the body itself. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Theatre Journal, Vol. 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 522. Some theorists, like Lauren Berlant, warn against a kind of enthusiasm comprising “a growing number of scholars and activists who speak from identity movements [who] celebrate the ways U.S. subalterns develop tactics for survival from within capitalist culture.” The Queen of America Visits Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 9. But her anxiety hinges on (and perhaps overemphasizes) assimilationist strategies among some, but not all, marginalized groups. Adopting normative conceptions of the good life is not, I argue, a capitulation to capitalist culture and liberal politics, per se.
As Shannon, a genderqueer identified participant, says: “If I don’t say something, they’re just going to see me as a ‘regular old dyke,’ which I don’t want--about as much as dykes don’t want to be seen as straight. I don’t want my gender identity to be invisible” (100). Sylvia Rivera deals with this dialectic of perception this way:

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

To this, transfeminist Sandy Stone (1987) might also rejoin, “I know you feel that most of the work is behind you and that the price of invisibility is not great. But, although individual change is the foundation of all things, it is not the end of all things.”

Those whose bodies are regularly policed (socially or institutionally) have little choice but to be hypervigilant. It can be argued that this affect (of overwrought vigilance) is borne on the body through needs of passing and is common to all. Here, I want to introduce how the concepts of “common” and “ordinary” can be analytically separate. Violence (of many forms) may be common. For example, it is common that

The transvestite, transgenderist and transsexual will go to great effort to hide their way of living. Obviously because of fear of being ‘read,’ found out. Fear of being found out means someone telling friends, wives, children, employers about them. Setting off a chain of events that could destroy a human life (Alternate Lifestyle N.D., 3).

But the ordinary is the site of how human beings make do within (varying) conditions of violence. When it is argued, and rightfully so, that it is more common for trans people to face such trauma there is a risk, however, that this trauma “speaks” for their ordinary life-making and life-building strategies. The strategies trans people use to deal (or make do) with such violence
varies and becomes the ordinary in a person’s or community’s life. The ordinary is a space of creative (often political) activity, memory-making, and social engagement.

But these forms of violence, or of making do within social realities perceived as bleak, should not speak for the ways that ordinary life transpires in every trans community. “As trans people,” Willy Wilkinson (2014) argues, “we have experienced the world in different shoes, different realities, different bathrooms. We speak a different language” (30; emphasis in text). This kind of differentiation of social reality is part of what Haraway (1983) has called “our most important political construction” (page). Social realities are jointly constructed and, as Wilkinson points out above, the context of this construction must be given serious consideration. Some trans youth reflect on this linguistic lack that confounds their communicative ability to express, in public, an identity. “Along with all that [of being trans] comes the extreme frustration with language. There’s [sic] only so many words to use for pronouns and genders and sometimes I feel that none of them fit me” (Trans Youth Survey 2001, 18). Expressing a public self, of appearing in public legibly, is critical for political life and is a condition of feeling political. Thus, if words like “transition,” as Laverne Cox explains in her interview with Katie Couric, become singular points of reference for public discourse about trans bodies, they become oppressive. Indeed, transition doesn’t just mean surgical intervention. Its meanings are also variable. As Ruth Farmer (1993) remarked, “the process of throwing off the shackles of masculinity to become a woman, I call ‘Transition’. ‘Transformation’ has been a revolution in my awareness of myself and of my life” (v). What these stories of non-normative embodiments illustrate is that in light of the kind of hypervisibility policing their social worlds, trans communities have made do with creative acts that restate the terms of gendered being.
“We Tried, Marsha”: The Poetics of Unforgetting as Political Aesthetics

Another aspect of this political present is death and the public appropriation of trans memory as “afterlife.” C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) argue that every afterlife has a politics that “provides a framework for thinking about how trans death [in particular] opens up political and social life-worlds across various times and places” (66). The trans afterlife, as a heuristic, elucidates the ways that violence against trans people enables an appropriation of that pain. Lists of names on a media report, days of remembrance, and ally narratives that claim trans of color murders as violence experienced “by all” both erase the lived experiences of certain trans communities and advance an agenda (ibid.). The afterlife becomes filled with stories that become signs of something other than what was. These are erasures in what I call national forgetting. The following examines the reports of three transwomen of color murdered in 2017. I want to imagine how oppositional memories emplotted within the narratives already explored in this essay illustrate how we might “undo” their erasures. The afterlife alters the terms for how living experiences of the political present is articulated.

India Monroe was 29 years old when she was found shot multiple times in a Virginia home. The reports of India’s death were striking and not only for the relative calm with which they conveyed the crime. India, a transwoman, was both misgendered and identified using her birth name in these initial reports. Her afterlife marked the textual erasure of her life. India’s funeral, held in January of 2017, was conducted contrary to India’s living wishes and failed to reflect her life as a woman. Her friends say that not only had she been buried with her birth name prominent at the services, but that her hair had been cut, her body was dressed in a man’s suit, and her hands had been covered so that even their feminine features were concealed. One close
friend said “[India would] want to have her nails done, hair done, look amazing, because that’s what she liked.”

India’s life was reduced to her birth-sex upon her death. This juxtaposition of a birth and a death manages to obscure her life caught somewhere in-between.

India’s memory lingers in a local world. Sadly, her part in a broader imaginary of activism exists as a name, one among many names, of the dead. Alphonza Watson’s name adds to this list. Out Magazine did not detail her life. Her mother went on record saying "she was a very caring, passionate, fun person to be around, always in a talkative and playful mood." Yet, this “caring, passionate, fun person” is narrated in the story as one death among many: “the reported murders of seven [other] transgender women of color in 2017. The names of other women killed this year are Jaquarrius Holland, Chyna Gibson, Ciara McElveen, Mesha Caldwell, Jamie Lee Wounded Arrow, Keke Collier and Jojo Striker” (Rulli 2017).

For other reports, there’s no need for a living memory. Only the death counts. For instance, we don’t know much about Mercedes Williamson from general stories. Her last moments, however, were reported in Newsweek:
Joshua Vallum murdered his former partner 17-year-old Mercedes Williamson in 2015 after a friend told him the Alabama-born teenager was a transgender woman. He was found to have planned her murder, luring her into his car. He tasered her in the chest and stabbed her multiple times with a pocket knife. As she tried to run away, he chased her and struck her with a hammer (Persio 2017).

Her death would be used as a challenge for communities to take a stand against trans-targeted violence. Even national government emploted Mercedes in its own ideological way: sentencing, criminal justice, and hate crimes legislation. “‘Today's sentencing reflects the importance of holding individuals accountable when they commit violent acts against transgender individuals,’ U.S. General Attorney Jeff Sessions said in the DOJ statement. ‘The Justice Department will continue its efforts to vindicate the rights of those individuals who are affected by bias motivated crimes’” (ibid.). Mercedes’s death was used to illustrate the social realities of violence against transwomen. But this highlights the the difference between how concepts like “the common” and “the ordinary” need to be deployed. Although it may be common that transwomen experience violence at higher rates, their ordinary lives should not become statistical narratives. Such statistics enmesh trans folks in a net of continual (almost mythic) violence, making them always already oppressed. In this way, the report of Mercedes’s death extracts value from her as being one among many reasons to end hate-based violence. (It would be more accurate to argue that such an aim ends with *incarcerating* offenders rather than ending transphobia.) It renders her life meaningful only as an element of a larger narrative that all life matters.

Signs, memories, and the politics of marginalized life are everywhere in both the American historical sensorium and its political present. The question becomes how to track such cultural politics through the morass of the everyday (see Berlant 2011, 51-52). Memories that are lost, stories of concrete experiences, and feelings/intuitions that tend to fold themselves within
ordinary life must be actively retrieved. This is a kind of political aesthetics Consider a memo rial-creche placed at the location of a transwoman’s murder. Such a creche can be understood in numerous ways. As the assemblage of affects associated with life, this memorial “speaks” to some by associating memories with a painful history of discrimination, violence, and erasure. It may also re-mind others that “this” location is unsafe and requires extra vigilance. Yet, for many others the memorial is a re-minder of the vibrancy of community life and of a personal relationship with that community’s histories and narratives. But it may have the common effect to onlookers unfamiliar with trans histories of the generalized, everydayness to violence. Or, perhaps, it may signify nothing at all.


But how can lost contexts be reaffirmed or re-placed into the scene of everyday life? I argue that a poetics can be a political tool for unforgetting. By poetics I mean the varying aesthetic forms that political strategies might take that defy the historical and hegemonic narratives that seek to constrain and constitute them. Such a poetics complicates civic/public discourse by bringing trans forms of life to bear on the fabric of “identity” talk. It may be local practices that engage with violence (such as the memorial creche). It may be national advocacy,
like the #SayHerName project, that bring local tragedies (like the death of India Monroe) back into national dialogue. Or it may be the everyday movement of bodies where “they do not belong,” so to speak. In this final section, I would like to meditate on how this poetics might be used to enable a re-memory. I will focus on the geographic transformations, and the resulting aesthetic politics of trans and queer people, of the Christopher Street Piers.

*Political Aesthetics and Neoliberal (Dis)Identification along the Christopher Street Piers*

If the past intrudes upon the political present, it might do so most perceptibly through disrupting the aesthetic lines mapped by a politicized geography. According to political theorist David Panagia (2016), the “interface” of a political aesthetics situates an actor and object of activism within a (cultural and political) field that unsettles a coded form of the “normal” life. For him, it isn’t a simple matter of being motivated against private property and capitalist hierarchies: “to resist capitalism no longer means a resistance [to mere] structures of ownership: capitalism has already co-opted this strategy and made ownership irrelevant by making property ethereal” (36). Instead, the property of being seen at all becomes the site of powerfully new form of political struggle. This is by and large the central political activism of trans politics thus far. In what follows, I will discuss how the Christopher Street Piers (Piers 45-1), as an historically significant queer/trans space, has been and can continue to be used as a material site for this kind of poetic politics. Three resources will be used in this discussion. First, Rachel Walker’s historical, and queer, overview of the importance of the Piers to destabilizing gentrification. Second, a still unfinished documentary entitled “Pier Kids: The Life” that covers the current conditions of trans and queer youth who occupy that space. Third, a 2017 documentary, “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson,” following the activism of Victoria Cruz at the LGBTQ
advocacy group Anti Violence Project.\textsuperscript{14} Both allow for the visual and textual juxtaposition of past and present as interfacing with the material conditions of the Piers. Importantly, both resources illustrate how memory and history come to bear in the aesthetic politics of dispossession, recognition, and life-building practices.

As Rachel Walker (2011) observes, queer life on the Piers grew out of the relative wasteland that used to mark the area. During the 70s, The Piers fell into disrepair and neglect, owing in large part its obsolescence as a site of import. The space, rather than being used for commercial exchange, became a vibrant site of queer connectivity—sexual practice, experimentation, and social gathering for abject populations of the poor and homeless alike. The Piers’s former dilapidation gave rise to two city-adopted renovation projects—one in the 90s and another, the expansion of the Hudson River Park, from 2001 to 2003. Both projects had the immediate effect of removing homeless people from the area as well as relocating queer and trans populations. These trends forced the hand of local LGBTQ organization FIERCE.

Although Pier 45 is no longer at the forefront of the organization’s operations, FIERCE remains focused on the politics of space in the West Village—particularly the intersections between gentrification, displacement, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Recently, with the continuous expansion of the Hudson River Park along Manhattan’s west bank, FIERCE has focused its efforts on the development of a 24-hour LGBT youth drop-in center to be located on the neighbouring Pier 40 (91).

\textsuperscript{14} I would like to make a special note that trans activist, and woman of color, Reina Gossett has accused director David France, a white cis man, of plagiarism. The dispute follows Gossett’s extensive archival work and subsequent grant application, much of which Frank had access to. This situation has special importance. It illustrates the extent to which, even while a film seeks to excavate the tale of a transwoman’s life, it may continue to bury the voice and scholarship of another (in this case a transwoman). One should capture a sense of irony in a claim on Gossett’s website: “We are working to transform oppression through art.” At http://www.happybirthdaymarsha.com/statement/.
Taking Panagia’s theory of the interface seriously, I argue that The Piers is a site in which the contest over capitalism, rights to belonging, and feelings/expressions of outrage over structural and historical dispossession take place in non-intuitive ways requiring a critical aesthetic appreciation. Queer and trans lives merged at this newly renovated space, once a haunt
sexualized experimentation, as a place of social gathering and activism. Perhaps most crucially for many queer and trans youth, The Piers near Christopher Street were often used as a home itself. A large proportion of such youth were kicked from their homes in the city or elsewhere. “The Pier has therefore served as a hangout for queer and questioning youth for years, providing a venue for socializing, after-bar parties, the dance and performance culture that influenced New York’s drag balls” (ibid., 95).


This is a breathtaking aesthetic contradiction, i.e., between homeless queer and trans youth occupying a space on the one hand and the intended purposes of attracting new residents, shops, and economic growth on the other. In fact, so growing was the use of this space for queer socializing that the local community boards prevailed upon the city to impose a curfew. The policy was immediately opposed by FIERCE and other LGBTQ advocacy groups. Central to its policy efforts was a plan to create a LGBTQ Center for Homeless Youth on Pier 40, a measure that has yet to be enacted by municipal government. In “Pier Kids: The Life,” the space is still used as a ground for gathering together, enacting ballroom scenes (like voguing and catwalks),
and a site to find some respite within an otherwise heteronormative policing of their activities deeper in the City. This occupation recalls a scene of history, recapitulated in “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson.” Sylvia Rivera, then homeless and struggling with alcoholism after Johnson’s death in 1992, looks over the squalor of the Piers and says, “we tried, Marsha.”

![Image: “We tried, Marsha.” Sylvia Rivera, homeless, residing in a still dilapidated Pier (c. 1992). Digital screenshot from “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson.”](image-url)

Perhaps this is the critical intervention of a trans political aesthetic, one the un-forgets its past. It is practiced within the everyday interstices of what is deemed acceptable, normal, non-stereotyped, and intelligible. That gauging whether (1) a singular political project through the lens of state acquiescence, or (2) there has been a larger mobilization of disposed queers and trans people misses the point. The point, rather, revolves around the ordinary practices in everyday life. The lives studied here dwell in constant conflict with social and institutional policing. Their bodies interface with the everyday perceptions of throngs of tourists and New Yorkers as they walk through The Piers, or the city streets. Their practices un-forget the history of a space and the people who walked its length (like Johnson and Rivera). They continuously
enact a poetics that resists the impulse to oppose, singularly, the financialization of the area through neoliberalism--or to narrate even larger and duplicitous representations of a single class of trans oppression. Rather, they impose an aesthetics of embodied pain and violence--of making do while engaging and networking, socializing and (perhaps unconsciously) politicizing, through the art of life-building itself. If, indeed, we are always in history, trans aesthetics and our perceptions of them must be “grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot [...] restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried” (Jameson 1981, 20). Theirs is a politics without a proper locus, practices that complicate the American cultural predilection that erases the singularity of their lives.
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