Getting to Be Seen: Visibility as Erasure
in Media Economies of Transgender Youth

by

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ABSTRACT

There is currently a proliferation of images of transgender youth in popular discourse, many of which reflect the threat to capitalist heteronormativity that transgender young people pose to contemporary U.S. society. This veritable explosion in media visibility of transgender youth must be critically examined. This dissertation explores media economies of transgender youth visibility by examining media and self-represented narratives by and about transgender young people in contemporary U.S. popular discourse to uncover where, and how, certain young transgender bodies become endowed with value in the service of the neoliberal multicultural U.S. nation-state. As normative transgender youth become increasingly visible as signifiers of the progress of the tolerant U.S. nation, transgender youth who are positioned further from the intelligible field of U.S. citizenship are erased.

Utilizing frameworks from critical transgender studies, youth studies, and media studies, this project illustrates how value is distributed, and at the expense of whom this process of assigning value occurs, in media economies of transgender youth visibility. Discursive analyses of online self-representations, as well as of online representations of media narratives, facilitate this investigation into how transgender youth negotiate the terms of those narratives circulating about them in U.S. contemporary media. This project demonstrates that increases in visibility do not always translate into political power; at best, they distract from the need for political interventions for marginalized groups, and at worst, they erase those stories already far from view in popular discourse: of non-normative transgender youth who are already positioned outside the realm of intelligibility to a national body structured by a heteronormative binary gender system.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Media Economies of Transgender Youth Visibility

“In this moment of violence and visibility, I feel it’s urgent to think about what we risk losing when the state, and pop culture, seem to be inviting us in. What do we open ourselves, and our communities, up to when we seek out visibility?”


Transgender activist, filmmaker, and writer Reina Gossett posted the following statement to her Facebook page on February 23, 2016, along with a link to an article addressing the deaths of Maya Young and Vernonica Banks Cano, transgender women of color who were murdered within two days of each other that week: “The same systems that nominate the Danish Girl for an academy award are responsible for the heighten violence trans and gender non conforming people of color face today. Rest in power Maya Young, rest in power Vernonica Banks Cano. #MayaYoung #VernonicaBanksCano” (Gossett, 2016). The contradiction that Gossett highlights here, between valuing of the film The Danish Girl, a period film starring a cisgender white man playing the role of a transgender woman, alongside the ultimate devaluing of the black transgender personhoods of Maya Young and Vernonica Banks Cano, reveals how the contours of contemporary media economies of transgender subjectivity function.

Specifically, these economies allow “respectable” transgender subjects to be deemed worthy of visibility, while others, positioned farther from the regulatory norms of respectability, are relegated to death. In other words, only those legible within a white,
middle class, heterosexual normative lens, are deemed worthy of a “livable life”—and subsequently, a “grievable death” (Butler, 2004, xiv-xv). Ultimately, media economies within a neoliberal context that touts individual free market success as a pathway to citizenship for all subjects, contribute to who can be considered normatively human, which necessarily dehumanizes non-normative subjectivities. Gossett’s observations invigorate my own research into political economies of transgender youth visibility.

In this dissertation, I argue that media economies of visibility mobilize normative transgender youth subjectivities at the expense of relegating non-normative subjectivities further to edges of marginalization. As a way of uncovering how and where these processes of valuation and devaluation are occurring, this dissertation documents the political economies of transgender youth visibility by situating media narratives of transgender youth within the context of ideal trans youth citizenship. In situating transgender youth subjectivities within political economies of media visibility, I hope to contribute, as Neferti X. M. Tadiar and Angela Davis seek in their edited collection Beyond the Frame: Women of Color and Visual Representation, a “new way of looking” at transgender visibility in the U.S. popular discourse, particularly in terms of youth, who are often more highly surveilled as they represent the futurity of the nation (10). By providing a critical view into these media economies I am participating in “resistance reading” or “reading practices that create, support, and expand…social struggles” (Tadiar and Davis, 2005, 10).
Feminist and Transgender Theories of Youth and Media

This dissertation is framed by critical transgender theories because they offer powerful and liberatory tools for uncovering the institutionalized and systematic production of both legitimate, and disposable, people and categories of personhood (Stryker, 2006, 3-4). Transgender and feminist theories that seek to expose and disrupt normative institutions that have harmful implications for marginalized groups are particularly relevant to this project, because this theoretical perspective reveals how normative subjects are the most visible because of their proximity to a norm that is grounded in uneven systems of power, particularly in the case of transgender subjects. However gendered subjectivities are not formed in isolation from other social locations, and therefore a critical feminist perspective also encourages an intersectional approach to understanding transgender subjectivities. Acknowledging the multiplicities of oppressions and experiences that exist within marginalized groups means keeping intersectionality, a key framework of feminist theory, at the forefront my critical transgender theoretical inquiry. In addition to critical transgender and feminist theories, Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical theories of affect frame this dissertation examining media economies of trans youth subjectivities. I situate my project at the intersection of several areas of scholarship that have much to offer each other, although they are rarely brought together. Transgender studies, youth studies, and media studies as interdisciplinary fields of inquiry provide important tools and perspectives in this investigation into the media economies of young transgender subjectivities. Specifically, biopolitical critiques of gender identity from the perspective of critical transgender studies, as well as critical youth studies perspectives’
on adolescence as a regulatory construct that frames some young people in closer proximity to citizenship than others, allow me to read media representations of transgender youth as endowing certain subjects with value, a process that occurs unequally and at the expense of those deemed less valuable. Media studies’ understandings of visibility and normativity in popular discourse provide theoretical tools with which to read these representations, and because all of the representations examined in this dissertation occur online, and because transgender young people negotiate these discourses themselves in online self-representations, scholarship examining digital representations as part of the networked landscape of “Web 2.0” are also relevant to my analysis.

**Critical Transgender Studies**

As mentioned above, the liberatory foundation of transgender studies in theories, practices, and embodiments, which “disrupt” and “unsettle” conventional gender boundaries, frames this study of the discursive economy of transgender youth (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 11). In particular, transgender studies helps me understand how transgender young people are positioned differently in relation to power structures that have facilitated the emergence of transgender as categorical. The very notion of the creation of a category in the public and legal imaginary of transgender must also be interrogated insofar as its ability to be an institutionalizing force. The dynamism and complexities of transgender subjectivities are flattened in the context of institutionalization, as “transgender” becomes a collective term to describe any and all variations from hegemonic understandings of normative gender (Valentine, 2007). The
collectivity interpellated by the term “transgender” is a critique that is crucial to take into consideration as “gender identity” becomes increasingly hegemonic through legal categorization. Once such a category is named as such and mobilized in legal discourse, it creates hierarchies of subjectivities by positioning them in relation to a regulatory power structure (Currah, 2006). In other words, the notion of being “justifiably transgender” draws boundaries via legal discourse. Transgender young people are navigating the contours of these discursive—and material—spheres, which are imbued with the power asymmetries that transgender studies reveals.

*Trans- as Dynamic Process*

Transgender studies scholarship questions stable gender categories and embodiments as a primary mode of critique. Particularly relevant to the study of transgender youth is the concept of “trans-” as a dynamic and radical world-making process. Such processes allow us to shift and expand our understandings of “categorical” subjectivities (Stryker, Currah, and Moore, 2008). For example, dislodging gender identity from its categorical habitation in legal discourse has allowed transgender studies a productive critique of legal discourses more broadly as contributing to this “narrowing” of gender identity in ways that only serve to expand civil rights legislation to those citizens who already had access to it in the first place. In other words, rights and protections are only distributed to, and considered the entitlements of, those subjects who are already positioned in close proximity to state-sanctioned normative ideal citizenship. This critical understanding of “transgender” entering U.S. legal discourse as categorical has implications for discourse throughout the public sphere.
Critical transgender studies reveals the importance of critiquing how “modes of difference” are being incorporated into administrative contexts, and offers relevant understandings of contemporary public discourses wherein “transgender” is now being a delineated category within the U.S., evidenced by the extension of civil rights protections to this group (Ferguson, 2008). The entry of gender identity into legislative discourse as a legal category provides an important space in which to question how legislation that relies on this category actually crystallizes gender identity—that is, separate from “sex” and “gender”—as a category of identity that must be properly fulfilled in order to be interpellated into the heteronormative matrix of gender regulation within biopolitically regulated U.S. society. The discursive economy of gender identity in this way serves a biopolitical function as a way to maintain heteronormativity and gender norms, but it is also mobile enough to capture queer and trans populations in its discourses of “diversity” as a way of gaining access to national citizenship.

*Intersectional, Normative, and Capitalist Critiques*

Privileging an ideal, static subject of analysis has been historically problematized within both queer and transgender studies (Cohen, 1997). As Cathy Cohen has argued, and transgender scholars have drawn on, queer politics is “coded with class, gender, and race privilege” and assumes a “uniform heteronormativity from which all heterosexuals benefit” (1997, 449-452). The danger of universalizing politics that do not remain attuned to the specificities of differently positioned subjects within larger movements is not being able to acknowledge the privileged subject around which such a movement has been organized. Following such critiques, transgender studies emphasizes the capabilities of
“trans-” as dynamic and process-oriented; that is, to not assume a universal trans subject to whom life chances are doled out accordingly in the context of globalized capitalism and neoliberal multicultural political economies (Spade, 2011). These critiques are demonstrated by many trans scholars who engage with intersectionality and argue the visibility and intelligibility of trans subjects are necessarily sutured to the racialized and classed bodies to whom “transsexuality” has been attached throughout historical and geopolitical locations (Aizura, 2006; Roen, 2001; Skidmore, 2011).

Another aspect of critical transgender studies that has particular relevance to this project is the understanding of normativity that was fostered under the critical lens of queer theory, and dialogues with transgender theory in productive ways. Toby Beauchamp’s theorizations, in particular, of the reliance of perceived gender normativity on “race, class, sexuality, and nationality” for transgender subjects, frames my investigation of the unequal valuing of trans youth in popular discourse (2009, 360). Beauchamp’s arguments that any gains in transgender visibility cannot be examined without accounting for “their dependence on regulatory norms of race, class and sexuality,” are crucial to understanding how media economies function in terms of transgender youth visibility, and keeping this relationship in mind informs my analysis throughout this dissertation (2009, 363).

Critical transgender studies also theorizes transgender subject formations as inextricable from the productive relations of capitalism—the contours of which mediate “transgender” as categorical (Irving, 2008). Discourses of “productivity”—that the primary duty of citizens seeking inclusion into the nation occurs through their ability to contribute to the nation’s economy—that appear in and strengthen capitalist regimes have
also influenced the development of “constructions of transsexuals as viable social
subjects,” which critical transgender studies argues must be taken into consideration in
analyses of these subject positions (Irving, 40, 2008). The exploitative labor relationship
that is intrinsic to capitalist logics, Irving argues, impacts transgender subjects in ways
that must be more extensively analyzed. His arguments that “hegemonic capitalism’s
socioeconomic and political relations are reproduced vis-à-vis the transsexual body” is
evident throughout the media economies I examine, and his contributions to capitalist
analyses in transgender studies frames my understanding of the unequal valuing of
transgender subject positions based on their capacities for capitalist productivity (Irving,
2008, 38).

Youth Studies: Adolescence and Citizenship

Understanding normative adolescence as a project of surveillance structures my
eexamination of transgender youth as non-normative, or positioned further from ideal
youth citizenship. Youth—specifically, adolescents1—have been historically and
culturally constructed as the future for modern societies, resulting in increased amount of
anxiety, surveillance, and instruction directed toward young people by adults (Lesko,
2001). These feelings of unease, and their connections to the modern nation-state, are
often masked by the idea that adults inherently know what is best for youth—particularly

1 Drawing on Nancy Lesko’s theorizations, I understand adolescence as a regulatory mode of
modernity, historicized as “a social space in which to talk about the characteristics of people in
modernity, to worry about the possibilities of these social changes, and to establish policies and
programs that would help create the modern social order and citizenry” (2001, 6). As such,
adolescence “was and is simultaneously a construction of whiteness and masculinity as central to
the citizen,” which shapes the contours of its regulatory power (Lesko, 2001, 11).
those positioned further from the norm of ideal U.S. citizenship. As a result, both academic and public discourses can be seen to presume to know more about young people than young people themselves. Demonstrated by the scrutiny of certain youth, these presumed knowledges are highly contingent on the raced, gendered, classed, and otherwise situated ideals that have inflected adolescence as a modern concept so often throughout late capitalism (Robinson and Davies, 2008; Egan and Hawkes, 2009).

As one way of alleviating anxiety about the precarity of its future citizenry, modern societies looked to schooling, which has been theorized in terms of its compulsory and disciplinary status as an apparatus of the state for capitalizing on docile bodies in order to create “heteronormative moral subjects” (Robinson and Davies, 2008). However, schools are not the only places where such knowledge of ideal citizenship are produced. By way of cultural and social norms, “normal adolescence” was not only state-sanctioned but became known to subjects as a “sensibility” of what young people should (or should not) be doing (Lesko 2001). In this way, adolescents were prime targets of biopolitical self-regulation, and the gendered, racialized, and nationalized aspects of “normal” youth became further obscured. The individualizing rhetoric of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on privatization and personal responsibility, maintains these divisive modes, and the political economy of adolescence remains a space of anxiety for the future of societies, embodied in both adults and young people themselves (Duggan, 2003).
Youth and Citizenship

One discourse of adolescence wherein these anxieties are played out is through the notion of young people needing to be primed to take on the responsibilities of good citizenship, which is often articulated through regulation of knowledge. Theorizations of “sexual citizenship” particularly in the context of youth make this regulation particularly evident and also demonstrate how that concept becomes increasingly gendered (Egan and Hawkes, 2009; Payne and Smith, 2014). Specifically, sexual knowledge has been constructed as oppositional to the purity and innocence of adolescence, with the result being a proliferation of regulatory discourse that sees children constituted and governed as good (heteronormative) adult citizen subjects (Robinson and Davies, 2008; Buckley, 2014). Protections that serve to maintain youth innocence and purity favor the more powerful interests at hand—those of adults and the state—which are highly invested in maintaining normal adolescence as a pathway to good citizenship. The contradictory status of protection may often be framed as what is best for the child, but is actually revealed to be a mode of individual and social control (Robinson 2012). We can see then how the child who is perceived as knowing too much about sexuality (or, I would argue, gender more broadly) is interpreted as corrupted or no longer innocent (Egan and Hawkes, 2009).

Neoliberal capitalist expansion is shifting notions of youth citizenship, as Anita Harris has argued of ideal girl citizens. Within neoliberal capitalism, young people today “are supposed to become unique, successful individuals, making their own choices and plans to accomplish autonomy” (Harris, 2004, 6). Adolescence is imagined as a project compelling youth to “be free to be themselves,” which Harris explains is “a freedom best
expressed through the display of one’s choices and projects of the self” (Harris, 2004, 6). Discourses of freedom and individuality obscure the racialized, gendered, and classed norms of ideal youth citizenship. As connected to the project of an already gendered, racialized, and classed modern society, then, anxieties about normative youth are perhaps unsurprising. These anxieties are often publicly demonstrated by increased attention being paid to young people whose embodiments are easily distinguishable as outside of hegemonic adolescence. It is at this point that young people whose subjectivities are perceived as non-normatively gendered enter the discourse of adolescence asymmetrically. Particularly in light of recent efforts to utilize “gender identity” as a normalizing category of difference across legal discourses, young people who do not fit into normative (gendered) understandings of adolescence stand out (Currah, 2006; Spade 2011).

**Media Studies: Visibility and Online Media**

My understandings of the media economies of transgender youth visibility are informed by the many queer media scholars who have critically theorized visibility in terms of queer subjectivities. The work of these scholars reminds us how marginalized subjectivities who get to “be seen” must always be read the context of “capital’s insidious and relentless expansion,” rather than as straightforward gains in political visibility or power (Hennessey, 1994). As Rosemary Hennessy argues, “for those of us caught up in the circuits of late capitalist consumption, the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others” (1994, 31). Though referring to queer sexual identity, Hennessy’s linking of
visibility to labor, here, and particularly the labor of “invisible others,” informs my understanding of the ways marginalized subjectivities gain visibility by approximating norms, as well as the labor necessary for that approximation.

The stakes of these politics are evident in transgender theorizing of media narratives, particularly in the case of cinematic trans representations. As scholars such as J. Halberstam (2005), Melissa Rigney (2008), Julia Serano (2013), and Cael Keegan (2013) demonstrate, representations of transgender adults can hardly be characterized as “positive,” but rather draw on common tropes that serve to generalize and universalize transgender embodiment and experience. Therefore, what little representation transgender subjectivities are allotted in media often result in further marginalization of these groups. Representations of transgender youth have not been analyzed to such an extent thus far, so these analyses of adult transgender representation serves as my jumping off point for understanding how transgender young people are represented in mainstream media discourse.

*Labor and the Digital Media Archive*

In order to understand how transgender young people are situated in media economies, I look to the Internet as a space where youth citizenship is engaged (boyd 2006; Gray, 2009; Coté and Pybus, 2011). Late modern capitalism has been increasingly characterized as “networked,” and this project is situated within explorations of subjectivity formation and the immaterial labor that has been performed in the context of scholarship on “Web 2.0.” (Terranova, 2004; Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Digital media scholars have characterized this online space as one where cultural consumption and
exploitation become difficult to distinguish. Specifically, networked society is built on free labor, and the digital media economy in particular is “a field of experimentation with free/cultural affective labor” (Terranova, 2004, 131). These assertions characterize the labor performed in digital locales as not only free, cultural, and affective, but also immaterial. This labor occurs both on cultural levels, perpetuating representational regimes of transgender subjects, as well as biopolitical levels, wherein those regimes bolster the regulatory discourses of neoliberal multicultural political economies. These analyses reveal how digital videos are situated as productive within broader developments of online spaces.

An understanding of the various ways that digital media representations are constituted as, and require, affective and immaterial labor, structures my interrogations into digital media economies in this dissertation. The construction of subjectivities online, such as in trans youth’s YouTube self-representations and in digital representations of trans youth used in advertising campaigns, occurs by way of “immaterial labor”: that which is not tangible (though very well may be corporeal in its process) but economically productive, and crucial to contemporary global capitalism (Coté and Pybus, 2011, 3). The immaterial labor performed in digital representations and self-representations of transgender youth is also often affective, or what Michael Hardt characterizes as that which produces “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community,” which is particularly relevant to the corporatized representations of transgender youth examined in this dissertation (1999, 96).
In addition to the labor performed in these digital media, I also closely analyze these videos in terms their connection to a “digital archive” of transgender youth subjects being created online. Jennifer Pybus argues, “the digital archive has a subjectivizing role, particularly via the affective circuits that get built up and nurtured as sociality increasingly circulates within these networked spaces” (2015, 145). Therefore the “stickiness” of digital artifacts—their affectively generative capacities for viewers—determines their value within digital media economies, and contribute to public discourse on transnormativity that promises trans youth entry into the “national body” so long as they can approximate the regulatory ideals of youth citizenship. This dissertation demonstrates how digital artifacts, specifically YouTube videos created by and about transgender youth, contribute to the “digital archive” of transgender youth subjectivities that is dynamically created and engaged with online. Within this dynamic online archive, affect “accumulates, sediments, and provides additional cultural significance to that which gets circulated” (Pybus, 2015, 239). Therefore reading these representations of trans youth in terms of their connection to a digital archive is a particularly salient way to understand the dynamic potential of social networks, and how they allow us to trace the many and varied lived experiences of transgender youth that are continuously being documented in these outlets.

Methodologies: Affect and Discourse in Media Economies

This project locates where and how transgender youth subjectivities are mobilized by discursive economies of popular media. Because of the role of discourse in the process of subjectification in late modern capitalist societies, these media narratives actively
constrain the conditions of possibility for trans youth subjectivities. Parsing out the
workings of these narratives reveals the political stakes of identifying how transgender
youth as are represented as part of a marginalized group. Specifically, I document media
narratives of transgender youth in order to see where and how they work in the service of
the U.S. nation-state, as well as how they ultimately limit the subjective potentialities for
transgender young people immersed in such restrictive discursive economies.

Both symbolic and literal embodiments of the future in modernity, young people’s
representations are highly mediated, as they play important roles in public perceptions of
national projects of “security” (Edelman, 2004). In addition to Ahmed’s documentation
of affective economies, my observations draw on a framework of Foucaudian
understandings of discourse that are also situated within the context of neoliberal
consumer citizenship. The narratives of transgender youth that are produced in U.S.
media contexts reflect the disciplinary functions of media texts, and reveal the labor such
texts perform within affective circuits of U.S. popular media.

Affective Economies

The representations examined in this dissertation also function as part of the
affective economies that uphold late modern capitalism (Ahmed 2004). Media
representations attempting to dictate who transgender young people are, are then
negotiated in complex ways by transgender youth themselves. Assigning value to
particular subjects in these representations is a mode of demonstrating (as well as
bolstering a broader system of) normative subjects in a given society. Therefore where
and how these discourses are being circulated for the purposes of assigning value can be
determined by situating them within affective economies, or spaces where emotions are exchanged (Ahmed, 2004). The complex power of emotionality in these discourses’ circulations is highly reliant on power relations. Ahmed argues we need to consider “how emotions operate to ‘make’ and ‘shape’ bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others” (2004, 4). The process of circulating stories of transgender young people in particular media outlets allows some bodies to be characterized as “like us” or “not like us.” In this way, I see the ways in which transgender youth are talked about as powerfully mediated by the idea of emotions as capital, wherein “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed, 2004, 45).

Through “sticky” words and rhetoric that produce particular effects and “impressions of others,” which adhere to particular transgender youth subject positions, affective economies generate investment in particular (visible) transgender youth subjects (Ahmed, 2004, 48). However, a complex negotiation of these words and ideas are also being engaged in alternate affective economies in online spaces. The overlaps, slippages, and tensions in these fields of representation is framed by the idea that the “movement” of affect across these spaces mediates transgender youth subjectivities in complex ways. Undergirding Ahmed’s theorizations of affective economies are the discursive formations that circulate in said economies.

Discursive Media Economies

I read media economies as discursive in terms theorized by Michel Foucault. Discourse functions as a disciplinary mode in Foucault’s view, working on “docile”
bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, 180, 1984).

Ultimately the function of discourse as disciplinary, then, is as a “general formula of domination,” wherein the state can maintain control over its subjects (Foucault, 181, 1984). Discourses can therefore shape subjectivities, even as individual and collective resistances are incorporated into new discursive articulations that domesticate those resistances. The discursive production, and resistance, of subjectivities emphasizes the importance of analyzing media narratives at the discursive level, in order to determine their contours. Doing so reveals where fissures in disciplinary discourses show through. In the case of transgender youth representation—and queer representation more broadly—it is also important to frame these discursive economies in terms of their normalizing capabilities.

I understand “discourse,” broadly, as systems of representation (Hall, 2013). More specifically, these systems are understood as those statements that “provide a language for talking about—a way of representing knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Foucault qtd. in Hall, 2013, 29). The importance of analyzing representations at the level of discourse, then, is because discourses produce knowledge through language and power (Foucault qtd. in Hall, 2013, 29). Further, media images “gain in meaning when they are in context, against or in connection one another” (Hall, 2013, 222). Such understandings of representations as always in tension with other representations as they “accumulate meaning” and create “regimes of representation,” informs my intertextual analysis of normative discursive formations circulating about transgender young people (Hall, 2013, 222).
In order to understand how “transgender youth” becomes constructed as hegemonic, and to map spaces of rupture within those regimes of representation, this dissertation documents where and how young transgender subjectivities are (re)presented, questioned, and worked on in public discourse. Tracing the affective capital that circulates in these discourses reveals how particular transgender subjectivities are valued. I look to online news media reports of transgender youth, short videos circulated online by corporations about transgender young people, and transgender young people’s YouTube videos to interrogate how these representations function as disciplinary and regulatory discourses by (re)presenting trends, tropes, and generalizations about transgender young people’s lives. These examinations are framed by an understanding that media representations are functioning as part of discursive formations, within which affect circulates to value some subject positions more, and at the expense of, others.

Overview of Chapters

As a whole, this project interrogates where, and how, transgender young people are seen in U.S. popular discourse. By situating media narratives of transgender young people within neoliberal capitalist economies of visibility, wherein certain bodies are mobilized for particular political, cultural, and social means depending on their proximity to ideal citizenship, we can see how, as Reina Gossett makes clear in her post, the same systems that uplift certain images of transgender subjectivity simultaneously push those already marginalized subjectivities even further from view. A primary way in which this distribution of value occurs is through affective exchange, which is increasingly prevalent online. Therefore, the following chapters take digital artifacts as their objects of analysis.
In Chapter Two, “Predators, Passing, and Privacy: Transgender Youth Negotiate the ‘Bathroom Problem’ Online,” I examine the popular discourse surrounding transgender young people’s access to gendered bathroom facilities and how transgender youth negotiate these discourses online by posting videos on YouTube in response to the bathroom issue. As this chapter demonstrates, mainstream news media reports surrounding bathroom legislation often position transgender young people as either “threats” (to cisgender privacy) or “victories” (for assimilative transgender rights movements). In addition to documenting these discourses, this chapter situates the YouTube videos of transgender young people as evidence for the refusal of transgender young people to neatly fit into narratives of “victory” or “loss” regarding gender identity-based bathroom legislation that are circulated in mainstream media.

Reading these negotiations through Kuntsman’s idea of “reverberation,” I see the rhetoric of mainstream media narratives reverberate through transgender youth’s videos, and I also understand the videos themselves as reverberations of the discourse surrounding transgender youth in the U.S. Ultimately, these online self-representations both rely on, and resist, popular media narratives that circulate regarding transgender youth’s bathroom usage. In so doing, this chapter reveals the fraught place that transgender young people occupy in popular discourse, complicating ideas of transgender visibility, adolescence, and trans youth’s articulations of their subjectivities.

Chapter Three, “America’s Transgender Homecoming Queen: Transnormativity, Affective Happiness, and National Sentimentality,” examines where and how a particular representation of transgender youth—the transgender homecoming queen—is affectively circulated in mainstream media discourse in the service of the U.S. nation-state. In this
chapter I look specifically to one digital video, entitled “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen,” that (re)presents the story of Landon Patterson, a transgender student who was elected homecoming queen of her Missouri high school in September 2015. Popular online content aggregator BuzzFeed created and circulated this video, and it received thousands of likes and shares, making this video a particularly relevant demonstration of the media economies of transgender youth visibility.

Specifically, I understand the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video as mobilizing the transgender homecoming queen to evoke “national sentimentality” in Berlant’s theorization, which I argue effectively produces an ideal transgender youth citizen (2000, 35). As my analysis demonstrates, the discourse of national sentimentality that mobilizes (certain) transgender youth further delineates U.S. citizenship for transgender youth along the lines of transnormativity, or those trans subjectivities in closest proximity to the regulatory norms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality (Keegan, 2013; Beauchamp, 2009).

In Chapter Four, “‘Just having fun being one of the girls’: Affective Labor and Ideal Trans Girl Citizen Subjects in Clean and Clear’s ‘See The Real Me’ Campaign,” I turn my attention to the mobilization of transgender youth subjectivities in the context of corporatized neoliberal consumer capitalism. Specifically, I examine young transgender celebrity Jazz Jennings and her participation in Clean and Clear’s 2015 digital marketing campaign entitled “See the Real Me.” This campaign, centered on a series of digital videos featuring girls who have overcome obstacles and gained personal confidence, mobilizes Jennings’ story as branded content for Clean and Clear.
This chapter closely examines the popular discourse surrounding Jennings’ involvement with the campaign and Jennings’ representation within the campaign through a close reading of her short video feature entitled, “Jazz Jennings: Being Your True Self.” These analyses reveal how Jennings’ transgender subjectivity provides what Hardt and others have theorized as affective labor (1999) for her mobilization as an ideal neoliberal consumer citizens for the purposes of Clean and Clear’s “commodity activism” ad campaign, according to Banet-Weiser’s theorizations (2012a). Ultimately, this chapter provides a framework for understanding the ambiguous place that transgender girlhood occupies in the media economy of neoliberal capitalism.

By examining how YouTube videos posted by transgender youth both comply with and resist normative media narratives of the trans youth “bathroom problem” currently being debated in popular and legal discourse, how the image of the transgender homecoming queen functions as an object of national sentimentality, and how Jazz Jennings’ transnormative girlhood subjectivity occupies a particular position within neoliberal brand culture, these chapters provide small glimpses into a larger landscape of the functioning of affect within media economies of transgender visibility and reveal how transgender youth subjectivities are mobilized, in different contexts, to the same ends: delineating ideal trans youth citizenship within neoliberal capitalism. Mobilizing ideal transgender youth in this way ultimately works to further devalue non-normative trans youth whose subjectivities are already positioned far from “visibility” in mainstream U.S. discourse, and far outside the sphere of ideal youth citizenship.
Chapter 2
Passing, Predators, and Privacy: Transgender Youth Negotiate

The “Bathroom Problem” Online

In September 2015, 17-year-old transgender girl Lila Perry made headlines for what was already an incredibly divisive issue in public schools: the bathroom usage of transgender youth. 150 of Perry’s fellow classmates staged a walk-out protest of her use of the girls’ locker room to change for gym class. Though Perry was not the first transgender student at a U.S. high school to gain national attention for using gendered facilities, these circumstances caught the attention of those in the public seeking to understand the “bathroom issue.” After the protest, Perry staged her own counterprotest, and her story was reported by the likes of CNN, Gawker, People Magazine, and MTV. She appeared on the daytime talk show The View, and recordings of her appearance were repeatedly circulated in these same media outlets, often highlighting the fact that a co-host of the show questioned Lila based on the fact that the host has an 8-year-old daughter, and she as a mother would be uncomfortable if her daughter was in the same locker room as Lila (“WATCH,” 2015). This concern over cisgender children’s safety in public schools has become one side of the knee-jerk reaction in public discourse when transgender children receive attention for using gendered facilites that align with their gender identity.

This particular incident, and its subsequent circulation in online news media outlets, illuminates how the experiences of transgender young people are mobilized in popular discourse and how the incident fits into broader narratives of transgender visibility. The narrative of transgender children presenting a threat to cisgender children
for using bathroom facilities that do not align with their so-called “anatomical sex,” demonstrates both the threat that transgender youth pose toward a binary system of gender more broadly, and attempts to fit them back into that system (“Bill,” 2013). Because of its emphasis on gender-separated bathrooms as foundational to a working society, as well as a particular uneasiness with children being the subjects of this bill, responses to bathroom laws reflect biopolitical anxieties in U.S. popular and legislative discourse toward transgender young people. This discourse is situated within a broader history of segregating public bathrooms by gender that is racialized and classed, and disguised within rhetoric of safety, privacy, and “hygiene” (Cavanagh, 2010).

The way these narratives take shape is by circulation in media outlets, where they “accumulate affect” in the service of their respective message (Pybus, 2013). For instance, reports of Lila Perry’s presence in the girls’ locker room making cisgender girls “uncomfortable” bolstered the conservative view that transgender young people should not be allowed in gender segregated spaces (Grinberg, 2015). However, the same reports of Lila Perry circulated in liberal media, such as LGBT news outlet The Advocate, championed her as a “hero” for standing up to students who threatened her ability to comfortably live as her “authentic” self (Abeni, 2015). Both of these narratives have rhetorical sticking points that reflect the speakers’ investments in adhering transgender young people to particular ideals; transgender youth are discursively constructed as either “threats” (to the privacy of cisgender youth) or “victories” (for the assimilative transgender rights movement), rather than as young people.

However, the stories of transgender youth appearing outside of these mainstream circuits represent more nuanced discussions about transgender young people in U.S.
popular discourse. This chapter also examines 15 videos posted by transgender youth on YouTube that address the bathroom problem; some of these videos identify with Lila Perry’s experience in their discussions, and all express fear, anxiety, and joy about their experiences in public bathrooms. In these videos, trans youth speak directly to the reactions of their schools, their struggles with their parents, and health problems experienced or avoided as a direct result of using or not being able to use a public bathroom. These conversations often go hand-in-hand with complex discussions of passing, or being successfully perceived as “correctly” embodying normative gender,\(^2\) and complicate ideas of “predators” and “privacy” perceived to exist in bathrooms. The worries, desires, and complex emotions involved with the daily traversing of the fraught spaces of public restrooms is often much less straightforward when it is articulated by transgender youth on YouTube. The embodied virtual space of transgender young people’s online self-representations of the “bathroom issue” both relies on, and resists, popular media narratives circulating regarding transgender youth and bathroom legislation.

**The Bathroom Problem: Contextualizing Trans Youth in the Space of the Bathroom**

The socially and culturally constructed gender regulatory system has produced, and is constantly (re)produced by, a gender-separated public restroom system (Halberstam, 1998). As J. Halberstam (1998) argues, “the bathroom, as we know it,

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\(^2\) Passing is a complicated idea that many transgender, feminist, and critical race theorists have problematized. As Halberstam has theorized, in transgender biographies “there are no true accounts of ‘passing lives’ but only fictions, and the whole story turns on the production of counterfeit realities that are so convincing that they replace and subsume the real” (2005, 45). See also Sanchez and Schlossberg, eds. (2001). The concept of passing for the transgender youth whose self representations are examined here will be addressed in more detail in later sections.
represents the crumbling edifice of gender in the twentieth century” (1998, 24). However, as the public discourse surrounding gender identity-based bathroom legislation indicates, the desire for bathrooms as a gendered edifice—particularly those used by young people—is still standing strong in the U.S. In the post-9/11 U.S., Toby Beauchamp argues, “transgender and gender-nonconforming bodies are bound up in surveillance practices that are intimately tied to state security, nationalism and the ‘us/them,’ ‘either/or’ rhetoric that underpins U.S. military and government constructions of safety” (2009, 356-357). This same rhetoric can be found in the discourse surrounding bathroom legislation that allows young people to use facilities that align with their gender identity. In debates about such gender identity-based bathroom legislation, the discourse of safety circulates arguments both for and against this legislation. In so doing, transgender young people become incorporeal, interpellated into discourse as either “threats” or “victories.” The corporeality of their experiences navigating gendered systems of regulation is sidestepped in favor of a focus on what is best for the “majority”—whether that means trans advocates or transphobic opposition.

Bathrooms are discursive political sites for young transgender people, as the following analysis will show, but they are also sites of violence. In their lived experiences of using gendered bathrooms, visibility is marked and often disputed, as many transgender youth explain in the videos analyzed in this chapter. The very designation of bathrooms as gendered, particularly within school settings, already invokes violence on transgender subjectivities. Further, the experiences of transgender youth within and around these bathrooms are often violent. I understand bathrooms as a necessary site to examine on multiple levels, for as Laura J. Shepherd and Laura Sjoberg argue, the
violence endured in these spaces “is produced by and productive of cisprivilege, which functions to position transbodies as different, deviant and dangerous and simultaneously as vulnerable and in need of protection” (2012, 13). The perpetuation of cissexist violence in these ways is evident in the narratives presented by transgender youth on YouTube. Examining the self-representations that trans youth post online re-focuses the discussion on transgender young people’s embodied experiences of the contested space of the gendered bathroom.

Therefore this chapter situates the YouTube videos of transgender young people as evidence for the refusal of transgender young people to neatly fit into narratives of “victory” or “loss” regarding gender identity-based bathroom legislation that are circulated in mainstream media. I read these negotiations through Adi Kuntsman’s idea of “reverberation,” which “invites us to think not only about the movement of emotions and feelings in and out of cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts and machines, but also about the multiplicity of effects such movements might entail” (2012, 1-2). We can see the rhetoric of mainstream media narratives “reverberate” through transgender youth’s videos, and we can also understand the videos themselves as “reverberations” of the discourse surrounding transgender youth in the U.S. The study of transgender vlogging, in particular, provides a framework for understanding these reverberations.

Scholars have begun to pay more attention to transgender vlogs, specifically those of youth, in recent years (Raun, 2012; O’Neill, 2014; Berliner, 2015). This attention builds on the idea that media has the potential to “connect” and “give voice to marginalized subjects,” which has been theorized by many researchers of queer media (Berliner, 131, 2015). This chapter draws upon that research to center the self-
representations of transgender youth as complex, corporeal narrations of those discourses circulating about transgender youth in mainstream media. I align this argument with the work of Tobias Raun, who argues that transgender people’s online vlogs “[enact] a kind of bio-digital politics through the publicized bodies and onscreen self-disclosure of feelings attached to this body” (2012, 179). Ultimately these public self disclosures work to “[reconfigure] the discursive space within which one can speak of and be visible as trans” (Raun, 2012, 179). In so doing, transgender youth shift the conversation happening about them in mainstream media outlets by creating their own discursive spaces online.

**Legislative Discourse of the Bathroom Problem: California’s Assembly Bill 1266**

As an example of bathroom legislation that was prevalent in mainstream media, I look to California’s Assembly Bill 1266, what has now become known as the “School Success and Opportunity Act,” and is regarded as landmark legislation for transgender students’ bathroom rights. The bill is an amendment to Section 221.5 of the Education Code of California state law relating to pupil rights. This amendment consists of an addendum to the existing law that establishes precedence for discrimination based on gender identity in sex-segregated school programs and activities within California public schools. The bill was approved and signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown on August 12, 2013. According to California Legislative Information, Section 221.5 as it existed prior to the passage of AB 1266 “prohibit[ed] public schools from discriminating on the basis of specified characteristics…[and] specific[ed] various statements of legislative intent and the policies of the state in that regard” (AB 1266, 2013). Drawing on the already determined areas of non-discrimination in terms of gender, the authors of AB
1266 proposed the addition of a final provision to this list that sought to support transgender students using bathrooms and locker rooms, joining sports teams, and participating in physical activity programs that align with their gender identity. By specifying such a condition, the authors hoped to make individualized experiences of discrimination based on gender identity illegal in the context of California public school system. The specification reads:

(f) A pupil shall be permitted to participate in sex-segregated school programs and activities, including athletic teams and competitions, and use facilities consistent with his or her gender identity, irrespective of the gender listed on the pupil’s records.

Brian Brown, president of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM), the group responsible for the Proposition 8 campaign in California, spoke out about against the bill when it was initially passed, condemning the bill’s creators for “forcing our school children to be exposed in showers and bathrooms to members of the opposite sex who claim a ‘gender identity’ with that sex. […] It is not about protecting kids; it damages kids” (Garcia, 2013). Brown’s statement rejects the use of the term “gender identity,” in favor of the more brash “forcing exposure” on naïve “school children.” Brown often invokes the rhetoric of “protecting the innocent” in public statements regarding AB 1266—thereby casting those advocating for trans students in terms characteristic of Edelman’s theorization that “those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (2004, 3).
Affective Disgust and The “Sticky” Bodies of Trans Youth

On October 24, 2013, NOM president Brian Brown released a message to the Organization’s supporters that was entitled “Bathroom Backlash.” Sara Ahmed’s theorizing of disgust as a mode of boundary-making norms provides a productive way of reading this discourse. In the beginning of the post, Brown attempts to downplay the “slippery slope” argument while simultaneously invoking its very implications. Seeking fundraising support for the referendum on AB 1266, Brown writes:

I know it sounds like the end of a ‘slippery slope’ scenario: ‘If we don’t do this or that, then we will have boys in the girls’ locker rooms’. But it is true. California’s legislature approved it and Governor Brown signed it into law. It will take effect on January 1, 2014. Starting on that day, any boy can claim to identify as a girl and start using the girls’ bathrooms, showers and locker rooms. And girls can claim to identify as boys and use the boys’ facilities (Brown, 2013).

Brown’s insistence on gendered nouns regardless of gender identity is a disciplinary mechanism with which to reinforce control of youth through a binary gender system based on biological essentialism. However, the following section of Brown’s post reveals vestiges of “disgust,” which according to Ahmed’s characterization, can be read as a rejection of trans youth’s bodies as they become particularly “sticky” in this discourse of nakedness. Brown goes on:

It will be an absolute right. There is no check or safeguard to assure that the claim of gender identity is sincere. But let me be clear, even if there were safeguards to assure that the claim of gender identity is sincere, I would still object to forcing boys and girls to share bathrooms, showers and locker rooms. Why? Because nakedness trumps sincerity. I do not want a naked boy in front of a young girl in the shower or bathroom even if he sincerely identifies as a girl (Brown, 2013).

Reading this passage closely, what stands out in particular is the careful placement of modifiers: the “naked boy” standing in front of the “young girl” draws on a historical perception of male predatory sexuality that inevitably violates and overcomes the
supposedly submissive and innocent female (Brown, 2013, emphasis mine). But even more striking is Brown’s juxtaposition of the notion of biological “nakedness” alongside what is read as the only legitimizing force of gender identity—“sincerity.” With this rhetorical move, Brown has in no uncertain terms conveyed disgust for such “exposure,” mitigating the power relations between those who “correctly” identify with the gender and those who do not by asserting that “nakedness trumps sincerity.”

The attempt to use the hypothetical situation of the “co-ed shower” to rhetorically condemn AB 1266 is an example of the mitigation of power relations that occurs with affective responses to the passage of the law. In order to delineate certain populations from the regulated norm, one process, Sara Ahmed argues, of doing so is by the speech act of disgust: “To be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected*” (2004, 86). As Ahmed describes, “disgust,” can be defined in a number of different ways, with subsequently different effects. For example, “The object that makes us ‘sick to the stomach’”—which is produced by naming it as disgusting—“is a substitute for the border itself, an act of substitution that protects the subject from all that is ‘not it’” (2004, 86). The very designation of something as “disgusting” generates very particular effects, most often relegating the object of disgust outside the norm.

Ahmed also describes an affect of the disgusting object being an “offence to bodily space,” which adds to this analysis of Brown’s comments in terms of the space of the bathroom, which has historically been constructed as a space of racialized and classed privacy (2004, 86). The objectification of the presumed trans body—who never appears in the rhetoric outright, but is always haunting its implications—occurs through this discourse. However, throughout all of these modes of disgust the evidence of power
relations at play in terms of which bodies become objects of disgust is evident—as well as how the designation of particular bodies as disgusting upholds systems of power. Indeed, in the case of Brown’s statement, this affect is crucial to the material campaign to gain a referendum on AB 1266, as well as the symbolic campaign to keep trans identifying students out of their “incorrect” bathrooms. Disgust, as Ahmed argues, “involves not just corporeal intensities, but speech acts,” making it an ideal lens through which to closely read Brian Brown’s October 24 “Bathroom Backlash” NOM blog posting (2004, 84).

Brown’s comments here can be read as similar to what Ahmed has described in the analysis of Darwin’s example of the ‘naked savage’: “The ‘nakedness’ of the native body becomes a sign of the risk of proximity […] disgust allows the subject to recoil, as if from an object, even given the lack of an inherent quality to the object” (2004, 88). Brown’s invocation of the “naked boy in the shower in front of a young girl” is designed to encourage “recoiling” at the idea—or even the proximity to such an idea. The body of the young trans student, whose presence in the bathroom or shower that corresponds with their gender identity, as Brown insists, should be inherently read as disgusting. However it is not merely the proximity of the naked transgender teen’s body that is read as disgusting, but its presence in the sexualized space of the bathroom itself. The specter of heterosexual sex, presented by a male gaze in the women’s bathroom, is yet another imaginary threat that Brown’s comments invoke. These threats are not unlike the rhetoric
that is found in trans-exclusive radical feminist panics about trans women in “women-only” spaces.³

The trans teen body, in the rhetorical strategies used here, is effectively “sticky.”

“When the body of another becomes an object of disgust,” Ahmed writes,

the body becomes sticky. Such bodies become ‘blockages’ in the economy of disgust: they slow down or ‘clog up’ the movement between objects, as other objects and signs stick to them...feelings of disgust stick more to some bodies than others, such that they become disgusting, as if their presence is what makes ‘us sick’ (2004, 92).

Therefore, Brown’s fixation here on nakedness of a “biologically male body” in the presence of a “biologically female body”—regardless of their “sincere gender identification”—affects his disgust towards the anonymous, inherently threatening naked body of a trans young person.

The mobilization of transgender young people in discourses opposing bathroom legislation forms a boundary between “us” (the properly gendered child, pure and primed for reproducing the nation) and “them” (transgender young people who “press against” gendered existence, and “threaten the existence” of this hetero-gendered system) (Ahmed, 2004, 51). The rhetoric surrounding the passage of this law often utilizes particular affective responses in the service of securing the borders between transgender and cisgender young people. This rhetoric, as we can see in the following close readings of transgender youth’s YouTube videos “reverberates” throughout transgender youth’s YouTube videos that address their lived experiences of navigating gendered bathrooms (Kuntsman, 2012, 1).

³ For more thorough explanation of the transphobia and trans-misogyny (re)produced in spaces of trans-exclusive radical feminism such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, see the work of T. L. Cowan in “Transfeminist Kill/Joys: Rage, Love, and Reparative Performance” (2014).
“You don’t want to make a scene”: Trans Youth and Passing in Bathrooms

Many of the videos that trans youth publish to YouTube that convey experiences of utilizing gendered bathroom facilities coincide with conversations that seek to share strategies for successful “passing” among trans youth. This type of video is so pervasive that Matthew O’Neill includes it as one of the “five common narratives of trans youth on YouTube”; in addition to such narratives as those found in celebrity transgender vlogs, and gender transition videos, the “D.I.Y. gender” video shows “a friend or the person him/herself…the best way to present as the opposite gender” (O’Neill, 2014, 41).

Because “the best way to present as the opposite gender” is often the best way to avoid harassment in the bathroom, trans youth often express these ideas as connected in their videos. As RyanJacobFlores articulates at the end of his instructional video “FTM TRANSGENDER: Public Bathrooms”: “You don’t want to make a scene, and you don’t want to draw attention to yourself because that causes problems and that’s when people start asking questions, and that’s what we’re trying to avoid here” (“FTM,” 2015).

The challenge facing young transgender people who seek a level of comfort in bathrooms that RyanJacobFlores expresses in his video is to work against the “discourse of concealment” that Beauchamp argues always “haunts transgender populations” (2009, 358). For Beauchamp, this discourse is perpetuated through “cultural representations of gender variant people [that] depend on the popular notion that with enough scrutiny, one’s ‘true’ gender can be revealed at the level of the body” (Beauchamp, 2009, 358). This discourse of concealment reflected in the narratives surrounding bathroom legislation, as well as the experiences of transgender youth that they describe in their own YouTube videos (Beauchamp, 2009, 358). However, what is often elided in these videos
is the connection between passing and the privilege to otherwise move freely throughout the world upon which “passing” hinges. As Beauchamp describes, “[t]o be classified as normatively gendered is also to adhere to norms of racial and economic privilege” (2009, 358). Not all transgender young people have access to the “concealment” provided by passing, as this process “also necessitates altering one’s gender presentation to conform to white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual understandings of normative gendering” (2009, 358). Contextualizing the concept of passing as approximating normative gender problematizes the “relief” that gender identity-based bathroom legislation seeks to provide. As the following trans young people’s YouTube videos demonstrate, using gender segregated bathrooms, even those that may align with trans youth’s gender identity, still necessitates transgender youth to pass, or be perceived as non-transgender. This imperative to pass causes anxiety, and encourages transgender youth to invoke the concept of passing as a means of policing other trans young people. Ultimately, these videos reveal how the gendered edifice of the public restroom, as well as attempts to make these spaces more accessible to transgender youth, always fall short.

Figure 1. Screenshot from RyanJacobFlores’ YouTube video “FTM TRANSGENDER: Public Bathrooms” (2015).
“I'll just hold it and get another bladder infection”: Trans Youth and the Imperative to Pass in Bathrooms

One of the most common themes to emerge from transgender youth’s YouTube discussions of the bathroom issue is fear and anxiety that many trans youth both associate with, and have experienced as a result of, deciding what bathroom to use. These anxieties are manifested in a variety of ways, as demonstrated by several videos below. Young trans YouTube users describe the frustration, inconvenience, and risk to their health and bodily wellbeing involved with using the bathroom when they are faced with the possibility of being perceived as “not passing.” For instance, in a video titled “FTM-Passing and Bathrooms~ Markus” YouTube user SuckPurpleSoda recalls, “If I’m with my parents are there’s a lot of people around, I just won’t go. I’ll just hold it and get another bladder infection like I have in the past from not going” (“FTM-Passing,” 2012). Further, YouTube user SabMartin recalls that he “failed P.E. because I got so much anxiety from being in the locker room” (“Free to pee,” 2015).

Figures 2 and 3: Screenshot from SuckPurpleSoda’s YouTube video “FTM-Passing and Bathrooms~ Markus” (2012); Screenshot from SabMartin’s YouTube video “Free to Pee!” (2014).
These videos demonstrate many of the experiences that trans advocates cite as reasons that gender identity-based bathroom legislation is necessary for the safety of transgender youth. YouTube user CarterBratt’s video further contextualizes the narrative that this legislation seeks to address:

When I’m at work...I’ll have to wait until the end of my shift, you know, because of the amount of anxiety that I have to use the male bathroom. Now, I shouldn’t have anxiety to use the fucking bathroom that I identify with, that’s when you know the world is a bit fucked up. I shouldn’t have the fear to use the correct bathroom, and this needs to stop because trans kids out there have this fear that they are either going to be verbally assaulted, or physically assaulted, or anything, and I literally almost have a panic attack if I use the bathroom or I just don’t end up using it (‘Bathroom,” 2015).

The very real anxiety that CarterBratt describes here links to using the “bathroom [he identifies] with” with “almost hav[ing] a panic attack” or not going to the bathroom at all. He distances himself from other “trans kids out there [who] have this fear that they are either going to be verbally assaulted, or physically assaulted, or anything,” implying that he passes well enough to avoid those problems, but he by no means can traverse this space freely (“Bathroom,” 2015).

Figure 4: Screenshot from CarterBratt’s YouTube video “Bathroom Anxiety” (2015).
Similarly, YouTube user Finnegans describes a “bathroom phobia” that he developed as part of his gender transition in his video “FTM: 9 Weeks on T + Bathroom Anxiety.” He describes:

It’s more of a phobia that because I don’t stand to pee I feel that if other men are in the bathroom it’s like I can’t go to the bathroom then…I feel like people notice when someone’s actually sitting down to pee…so sometimes if I’ll just walk in and if I notice there’s a bunch of people in, I just wash my hands and walk back out and find a different bathroom that might be emptier (“FTM: 9,” 2014).

Including this discussion in a video describing the effects of his taking testosterone, as indicated by his video title, invokes the medico-legal discourse that works “primarily to ‘correct’ individuals whose bodies or gender presentations fall outside of the expected norm, promoting the concealment of trans status in order to reestablish that norm” (Beauchamp 2009, 358). The phobia that Finnegans describes does demonstrate a discomfort and inconvenience felt in the bathroom that aligns with his gender identity, however that discomfort and inconvenience is qualified by the fact that he is able to consider it a temporary obstacle on his transition journey that is enabled by his access to testosterone.

Figure 5: Screenshot from Caden’s YouTube video “‘Bathrooms’” (2015).
The affective experience of discomfort, or the bathroom phobia that Finnegan describes here, is echoed by YouTube user Caden. Explaining his own bathroom phobia, and how he was ultimately able to overcome it, Caden recalls:

Even though I did pass, I didn’t have the balls to use the men’s bathroom because I was just not comfortable using the men’s bathroom, you know. So, even though, like, I knew I passed decently well I didn’t have the confidence level to just walk into the men’s bathroom, do my business, and walk out (“Bathrooms,” 2014).

Caden references his own lack of “confidence” here in much the same way that Finnegan describes his bathroom phobia as a personal feeling of failure. This individualized response to an institutionalized system of gender normativity shores up neoliberal shifts toward emphasizing individual responsibility for citizens’ well being, rather than the nation-state (which is actively working to further marginalize these groups in the service of global capitalism). The anxiety that these trans youth feel when faced with the possibility of “not passing” in the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity would arguably be present regardless of the existence of gender-identity based bathroom legislation. Further, by relying on a binary system of gender identity, this “solution” actually further emphasizes the importance of passing, while simultaneously obscuring the white, middle class, able-bodied, heteronormative understanding of gender upon which this system relies.

“Act natural and own it”: Hegemonic Norms and the Neoliberal Individualism of Passing

Many transgender youth also use the concept of passing as not only anxiety-producing, but also as a way of instructing other transgender youth in the best ways to
traverse bathrooms. The discourse of passing in the following videos emerges as a way of policing other trans youth into doing the same. This conversation is one that is left out of the discourse of transgender advocacy that posits bathroom legislation as an unequivocal victory for trans youth and further elides the racial and economic privilege necessary to approximate gendered norms. Viewers of these videos are often presented specific instructions in how to “not make a scene” in the right bathroom, and these instructions always rely on proximity to gendered norms in order to function. In these videos, passing is often expressed in terms of confidence, naturalness, and not provoking suspicion.

For example, YouTube user ThatAsianKid informs viewers, “You really need to like, look natural and own it before you even think about going up to a urinal and whipping it out. Because, let’s just say that dropped dicks on the floor is a little suspicious when you go into a men’s room” (“FTM Topic,” 2009).

*Figure 6:* Screenshot from ThatAsianKid’s YouTube video “FTM Topic: Passing and Bathroom” (2009)
RyanJacobFlores echoes this sentiment in a similar assertion: “You have to walk in there like you know you are meant to be there because you are. You are a man, and that is your restroom” (“FTM,” 2015). These statements suggest that with enough “confidence,” the distance that any trans young person is from racialized, classed, and gendered norms can be overcome. However what undergirds that “confidence” is the proximity to the norm that the binary system of gendered bathrooms reinforces.

In her video “Transgender bathroom ISSUE,” YouTube user AngelaVanity uses the instance of the protest against Lila Perry to share her own thoughts about transgender youth using gendered bathrooms and locker room facilities. After spending over 11 minutes discussing how transgender women are treated differently based on whether or not they “pass,” AngelaVanity shares a different perspective the last two minutes of her video. She explains to her viewers:

> With all this being said, I do wanna say that um, you don’t just wake up in the morning, throw on a wig and say ‘I’m transgender I’m gonna use the girls’ bathroom because I have that right.’ It doesn’t work that way. Because if it was that way, then that’s the reason why people have a problem with you. Girl, you have to put in time to your transition. Before you start going full time, let your hair grow out, get your laser hair removal if you grow facial hair, get a wardrobe, start hormone therapy…People do not want a man in the women’s restroom. That’s why you have to work on your transition (“Transgender Bathroom,” 2015).

From her video, viewers get the sense that there is a “right” way to be transgender, and that takes “work.” By focusing on the work of the individual person, AngelaVanity’s assertions direct attention away from the systemic enforcement of normative gender that the notion of passing relies upon. By citing laser hair removal, a new clothing wardrobe, and hormone therapy as the elements that will prevent “people hav[ing] a problem with you,” as a trans girl in a women’s bathroom, she reinforces the economic privilege that
undergirds a proper concealment of transgender status. Access and proximity to the norms that constitute “the ability to be perceived by non-trans people as a non-trans person,” or that which Dean Spade reminds us that medical science sees as a “successful” gender transition, are asymmetrically distributed (2003, 26). However in this video, AngelaVanity appears to divert attention away from those norms by attributing the reason why a transgender woman will be seen as “a man in the women’s restroom,” is because they are not willing to put in the “work” toward a gender transition that medico-legal discourse would consider successful.

Figure 7: Screenshot from AngelaVanity’s YouTube video “Transgender bathroom ISSUE” (2015).

Trans Youth and the Burden of Concealment in Bathrooms

One of the complaints originally put forth by Lila Perry to her school administration was that the single-stall, gender-neutral restroom facility the district provided her did not alleviate the ostracism she felt by being required to use separate facilities from her cisgender peers. Speaking on daytime talk show The View following the nationally-circulated protest organized against her, she attests: “I’m a girl, and I think it’s weird to be removed from all the other girls. I feel kind of like, here are the boys, here
are the girls, and oh yeah, here’s Lila. I really don’t like that, I feel kind of separated” (“WATCH,” 2015). Lila’s complaints echo those of many transgender youth who post on YouTube about being required to use facilities other than those designated by gender at their schools.

For example, YouTube user Sab Martin echoes Lila Perry’s sentiments as he asserts with bewilderment, “I’ve never seen the inside of my schools’ bathroom other than from the background from some kids in my class’ selfies” (“Free to Pee,” 2014). Rather than using the boys’ or girls’ bathroom, Sab Martin describes using a gender neutral bathroom—the only option his school permits him. He laments being deprived of a mundane experience that cisgender students are able to have with such ease because he is not permitted in the shared restroom facilities—one consequence of school practices that necessitate transgender students use separate and isolated bathroom facilities.

Another YouTube user, Josie Kardashiyan, who was prompted by an article she read about Lila Perry, explains how a similar requirement at her school impacts her lived experience: “I have to go out of my way to use the restroom, just to pee, like I have to walk all the way down to the nurse’s office…” (“STRUGGLES,” 2015). The complex navigations of these systems required of transgender youth are evident as Josie Kardashian, who is visibly exasperated as she emphasizes the lengths she must go to “just to pee,” just as quickly backtracks to express a different feeling:

because…It’s not a bad thing, because that’s personally where I feel most comfortable, is in the nurse’s office, but I know that there are some places that do not allow trans youth at their schools to use the girls’ restroom, so it’s just things like that, you know? Like fighting for the right to pee or poop in school. (“STRUGGLES,” 2015). 

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In this video, Josie Kardashian appears to pivot away from the feelings of inequality and inconvenience that initially aligned her with Lila Perry’s sentiments expressed on *The View*, toward the feelings of comfort that the separate facilities offer her as an individual.

Other young trans YouTubers explain similar feelings of being confounded by the instruction to use separate facilities, though they interpret these feelings in different ways. For instance, YouTuber BeautyWithTrinity describes the experience of having to use a separate facility in the context of her school using a sarcastic tone. She does not characterize her experience as being ostracized, as Lila Perry does, but rather being mildly annoyed by the option of using a separate bathroom: “In the beginning of my transition, I did use the nurse’s restroom but I just felt that it wasn’t very convenient for me. So I eventually I grew enough courage to do this crazy thing, and use the closest girls’ bathroom to my classroom” (“WHICH” 2015).
BeautyWithTrinity describes using the gendered bathroom that aligns with her gender identity in such a way that it is the most obvious solution to the “bathroom problem” that many transgender young people experience at school. Instead of administrative discrimination, BeautyWithTrinity appears to be hindered only by the problem of her own “convenience,” which she overcomes with “enough courage.” She regards using the closest bathroom to her classroom, regardless of the fact that it is a shared girls’ bathroom, as “this crazy thing” with a smile and a roll of her eyes in the video, simultaneously writing off the concern that a transgender young person might have with using gendered facilities, as well as presenting using shared bathrooms as a matter of courage and convenience.

AngelaVanity, whose video documented the importance of putting the “work” into her transition before being able to utilize the bathrooms at her school, was also inspired by an article she read about Lila Perry to describe how she was met with a similar answer upon explaining to school administration her decision to come to school
as Angela: “Luckily I was told that it was going to be completely fine…but I was not
going allowed to use the women’s room or the men’s room.” AngelaVanity looks into the
camera and says as an aside, “Okay. Because that makes a lot of sense…”
(“Transgender,” 2015). AngelaVanity is visibly annoyed by this, as demonstrated by a
confused look, shrug of her shoulders, and hand gesture that implores viewers to question
with her, “huh? Why?” As if in a reply, she then explains:

All of this, because I’m transgender. Apparently, being trans is so horrifying scary
that they don’t want you around other students. They wanted to segregate me
from the other students by telling me to use the clinic-nurse-bathroom-thing, like
I’m handicapped or something, like I don’t get it… (“Transgender,” 2015).

AngelaVanity’s assertions here both echo and contradict those experiences heard from
other trans young people.

“Who do you think I am, some sick pervert?” Trans Youth Complicate the
“Predator” Argument

In Lila Perry’s now widely-circulated appearance on The View, she is forced to
respond to one of the trademark arguments of those who oppose gender identity-based
bathroom legislation. As she explains her feelings of being ostracized at school and her
desire to use the girls’ facilities, one of the show’s co-hosts questions Lila. Opening her
statement with, “First of all, can I say you’re beautiful?” and then goes on to assert,

But I have three children. I have a daughter who is eight. I need you to help me
understand, because I would be uncomfortable…I respect you…but I would be
uncomfortable if my daughter were in the same locker room as you. So I need to
you help me understand why it would be okay (“WATCH,” 2015).

The co-host’s statement here echoes that of conservative organizations, such as “Privacy
for All,” that were created to specifically forward the argument that cisgender young
people are made uncomfortable by the presence of transgender young people in gender-segregated facilities. Putting the onus entirely on Lila, the co-host is willing to compliment her looks (“can I say you’re beautiful?”) and offer Lila her “respect,” but she still sees Lila’s presence in her children’s bathroom as inherently imposing on her “comfort.” By imploring her for an explanation in this way, we can see clearly the power relations at work in distributions of “comfort,” which becomes a sticking point in discourse opposing bathroom legislation. As Ahmed argues, “[t]he availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment” (2004, 149). The comfort of the talk show’s co-host, imagining her cisgender daughter in the locker room at school, depends upon the concealment of Lila’s transgender personhood entirely, and asking Lila to explain herself in this way further exacerbates that burden; Lila is responsible for erasing her transgender subjectivity to assuage the discomfort of cisgender children’s parents.

The “comfort” of cisgender young people being threatened by the presence of transgender young people in gendered spaces such as the bathroom, locker room, or gym class is commonly drawn upon in rhetoric opposing bathroom legislation, as another iteration of the “sexual predator” argument. This concept, as Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook remind us, is “deeply gendered,” and refers to the argument “against any bodies perceived as male having a legal right to enter a woman-only space because they imagine such bodies to present a sexual danger to women and children” (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009, 27). Reading this argument through Ahmed’s theorizations of comfort as “the effect of bodies being able to ‘sink’ into spaces that have already taken their shape,” we can understand transgender youth (Lila Perry in this case), affectively
disorient the “impression” of comfort that the gender binary has created in the public space of the restroom and, ultimately, exposes the “cisprivilege inherent in the notion that the categories of ‘M’ and ‘F’ can be assumed stable” (Shepherd and Sjoberg, 2012, 12).

Transgender young people who reflect upon their experiences of being prohibited from utilizing either the girls’ or boys’ facilities at school often draw on the logic of trans people as sexual predators in their complaints about the gendered system that asymmetrically distributes “comfort” in bathroom facilities. In the same AngelaVanity video I discuss above, AngelaVanity draws on the predatory in an attempt to clarify her confusion at not being allowed to use either the girls’ restroom or the boys’ restroom. “Like, I don’t get it,” she says. “Like who do you think I am, some sick pervert? Honey, I have better things to do with my life” (“Transgender,” 2015). Similarly, MariaAshley asserts her angry confusion at the experience she had in high school of not being able to use shared restroom facilities. “…I have so much to deal with, why does someone in the bathroom have to fucking make it harder?” she questions, “I’m not trying to fucking rape anyone in the fucking bathroom. I don’t get it. I really don’t” (“TRANSGENDER TEEN,” 2015). The assertions in these videos demonstrate the pervasiveness of the argument that a binary gendered bathroom system “protects” cisgender young people from the “threat” of transgender deviance—that is, a specifically sexually perverse deviance that could potentially also be contagious.

“But I mean, it works”: Comfort and the Labor of Trans Youth’s Concealment

Transgender youth’s experiences of being perceived in this way—as threatening, predatory, or a “risk”—also comes across in YouTube self-representations that seek to
inform and share with viewers their understandings of bathroom difficulties. Videos presenting transgender young people recounting their navigations of gendered bathrooms complicate the idea of “comfort” in any bathroom, including how a particular bathroom becomes known as “right” or “wrong” according to the experiences of trans youth themselves. For instance, YouTube user CreatingKristoff structures his video, “FtM Gym and Locker Rooms,” as his seeking to give advice to other trans youth. He describes the experience of going to his school counselor to determine what locker room he should use to change for P.E. class. What he soon found out, he describes, was that his embodiment did not “sink” into any of the available (gendered) spaces—he was denied “comfort” by refusing the labor of concealment—so he was forced to create his own:

[W]hen I talked to my counselor about which room I should use, they said that I am not allowed to use either because of my situation, which is really stupid, um. ‘Cause they said that it’s a risk for me to be in the male changing room, but it’s also a risk to the females in the female changing room, you know, if I change there. So… [shrugs hands up in the air] (“FTM Gym,” 2013).

While CreatingKristoff is confused and expresses (in his online self-representation) that it is “really stupid” that space cannot be made for him in either changing room, he immediately follows his statement with, “But it worked out though…” continuing to labor at his concealment of his inability to “comfortably fit.” Ultimately, CreatingKristoff resolves the panic that his presence in either changing room would have posed on his own: he describes building a relationship with a trusted teacher, ultimately bringing himself to “explain his situation” and ask her for permission to use her classroom storage room to change for gym class. He goes on, describing how amazing just how much stress I’ve avoided…It does bother me a bit that I have to change there though knowing I can’t use either locker rooms anymore, but I mean
it works. I only have, what, until the end of January until I have to keep doing this, and then I am done for the rest of high school, so yeah (“FTM Gym,” 2013).

In mitigating the perceived “risk” perpetuated by the rhetoric of the sexual predator argument, CreatingKristoff describes being forced to seek alternative spaces to continue to conceal that which does not “fit” with the understanding of binary gender that structure the changing room facilities at his school. His ambiguous feelings about the process he has developed to deal with this discrimination are evident: having to use a teacher’s storage room to change for gym class because he is perceived as a risk to both cisgender girls and boys “bothers [him] a bit,” and he thinks the rule is “really stupid,” but ultimately the fact that he perceives his situation as temporary—that is, only for gym class—is evidence of his labor of concealment of his transgender personhood.

YouTube users Ryandrogynty and SabMartin also describe experiences that appear to be directly influenced by the argument that gendered facilities prohibit the threat of deviantly-gendered bodies coming into contact with those who can be perceived as properly gendered. Their efforts to utilize both the “right” and the “wrong” bathrooms demonstrate their ensuing discomfort as “not simply a choice or decision” but what Ahmed refers to as “an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape” (2004, 152). Upon waiting until after school, when most students have left and the bathrooms have “mostly cleared out,” Ryandrogynty describes being confronted with an unexpected situation. Unbeknownst to him, participants in an after school event are using the women’s bathrooms that Ryandrogynty describes usually uses because the bathrooms are typically empty at this point in the day. He describes:
So I walked into the women’s restroom because I needed to care of my business. And I was greeted by dozens of screaming pubescent teenage girls screaming, ‘Why is there a boy in the women’s restroom? This is the girls restroom! Get out!’ So naturally, I got out. Because dozens of women were yelling at me. So, there’s that problem. And the alternative to that situation is going into the boys’ restroom when everyone in my school, most people in my school know that I’m biologically female and when I don’t have a packer/STP device… and when I have the potential of not passing and when security or some sort of staff member can find me and get me in trouble with my school, which I don’t want to get in trouble with my school because I need to pee (“Public Bathroom Dilemma,” 2010).

The “dozens of screaming pubescent teenage girls” respond to Ryandrogyny according to the same narrative invoked by the television talk show host questioning Lila Perry. However what is missing from the narrative of the predator entering the “incorrect” restroom that the talk show host so easily invokes, is the context that Ryandrogyny’s story tells here, including for whom comfort in the bathroom is available. YouTube user SabMartin explains a similar situation that occurs at his school, wherein his efforts to maintain the “comfort” of others by using a particular bathroom come at the expense of intensifying his own discomfort. He explains:

Usually if I go in a girls’ bathroom, I get yelled at. I get taunted. They don’t feel comfortable. They start screaming. I get in trouble until I have to come out with, ‘I’m transgender’ [which they read as] a girl trying to be a boy. And they still
don’t feel comfortable! It’s like well, what the fuck. And then the boys’ bathroom... high risk of getting beaten up... And um, when you get beaten up it’s not fun. And I’m not going to subject myself to that. And people at school are worried about me going into the males’ restroom it’s like, you don’t have to worry about that. I made that mistake many years ago, twice actually, and I’m not doing that again. (“Free to pee,” 2015).

Both SabMartin and Ryandrogyne’s representations express the danger of continuing to rely on a narrative that posits transgender youth as predators who would thus make cisgender youth feel uncomfortable were they to enter into the “incorrect” bathroom. The burden of concealment that transgender youth must bear in order to provide comfort for their peers is incredibly large, and often comes not only at the expense of trans youth’s own comfort, but causes them harm and trauma. The idea that cisgender youth, or their parents, are made “uncomfortable” by transgender youth having access to a particular bathroom as a result of gender identity-based bathroom legislation, circulates in isolation from the actual experiences of transgender youth in those bathrooms. Trans youth are often treated as predators no matter their choice of action when using bathrooms, and are forced to defend themselves against these accusations, work to cover them up, or face violence upon failing to do so.

“I don’t want them to know that I wasn’t born that way”: Who Gets Privacy in the Bathroom?

A primary argument of those who oppose gender identity-based bathroom laws is that such legislation “neglect the privacy rights of most students for the benefit of a few” (Brown, 2013). Closely related to the belief that transgender young people in the “wrong” bathroom are inherently predatory, this argument utilizes the notion of “privacy rights” as
that which is only permitted to the majority (in this case, of cisgender young people and their parents). What gets left out of this argument is the way the same rhetoric is used by transgender young people to describe their experiences of using public bathroom spaces. For instance, in telling the story of one of his so-called “worst” bathroom experiences, YouTube user HisFirstSteps recalls being stared at in a women’s restroom:

I just tried to act like I knew exactly what I was doing. What was I gonna say? No, no it’s cool, cause then that would make me feel weird too, I mean I’m not gonna just tell them I’m a girl when I’m not, but I’m also not gonna be like oh, it’s okay because my parts…like that is jumping pretty far into with some strangers that you just met in the bathroom…(“Story Time,” 2015).

The confusion with which HisFirstSteps recounts this story provides evidence for the fact that privacy is not a straightforward issue and its uncomplicated presentation in mainstream opposition to bathroom legislation is negotiated more complexly online.

Figure 11: Screenshot from HisFirstSteps’ YouTube video “Story Time: Public Restroom Stories (FtM Transgender)” (2015).

YouTube user SuckPurpleSoda (Marcus) brings to mind similar issues in his recounting of being in a women’s bathroom and feeling like he had to explain his presence there:
I’m not gonna explain to her, what I am. I don’t even know who she is…I’m too embarrassed to come out with this to people that I don’t know, that’s why I said that when I meet new people I tell them I’m a guy. I don’t tell them that I’m transsexual because I’m embarrassed of it, I guess. I don’t want them to know that I wasn’t born that way. I want them to know that I was born a guy, not a transsexual (“FTM: Passing,” 2012).

Often the reason why trans youth cite using the bathroom that does not align with their gender identity, is because they have heavily weighed the consequences of doing so, or not doing so, and they are still met with opposition. As SuckPurpleSoda’s and HisFirstSteps’ videos demonstrate, when transgender youth are denied the experience of privacy in the bathroom in this way, it reiterates the gendering of bathroom facilities by way of “privacy” that Cavanagh and others have so clearly established as a coded term for racial, class, and gender purity. The media narrative opposing bathroom legislation that allows transgender young people to use school facilities that align with their gender identity is often bolstered by the idea that a transgender young person’s presence in the wrong gendered place is an inherent invasion of cisgender young people’s privacy. However, in recounting their own experiences of public restrooms, transgender kids also cite a lack of privacy as a reason bathrooms cause them particular anxiety. This experience is rarely seen in mainstream discourse, but it problematizes the idea of invoking “privacy” in arguments for gendered bathroom facilities.

**Reverberations and Reconfiguration: Trans Youth’s Discursive Spaces on YouTube**

To conclude, I return to the YouTube user SabMartin, whose video lamented the fact that he had not seen the inside of the boys’ restroom except for in photographs. In an appeal that seems to speak directly to legislation seeking to address the problem of non-
normatively gendered young people in public bathrooms, SabMartin states, “Peeing shouldn’t have to be a right, peeing should just be something you can do.” His voice trails off as he looks away from the camera, then looks back toward the camera and states in a quieter voice, “Something you can do, you know?” (“Free to pee” 2015).

When we situate SabMartin’s statement in the context of debates about gender identity-based bathroom legislation, we can understand how these legislative discourses, and the popular discourse surrounding them, then echo throughout transgender young people’s self representations. These representations demonstrate, in Kuntsman’s theorizations, how “feelings and affective states can reverberate in and out of cyberspace, intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition” (2012, 1). Reading the affective engagements of young YouTubers with the narratives that circulate about them using bathrooms in this way “allows us not only to follow the circulation of texts and feelings, but also to trace and open up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the fact of affective economies of mediated violence” (Kuntsman, 2012, 2).

The self-representations of transgender youth found on YouTube do not represent a cohesive narrative that neatly aligns with those presented in mainstream media. Instead, by representing their experiences of being both comfortable and uncomfortable in gendered bathrooms, transgender youth “reconfigure” the discursive spaces available for them to articulate their subjectivities (Raun, 2012). I began this chapter with accounts of bathroom panic around anti-trans bathroom laws, particularly in the case of California’s AB 1266, the landmark bill that allowed transgender public school students to utilize bathrooms and locker rooms that aligned with their gender identity. While this law was
heralded as a victory for trans youth upon its passing, it was regarded with disgust by its opponents, presenting a two-dimensional account of transgender youth in these respective discourses. I then looked to videos from 15 young trans YouTubers in the U.S. that addressed, from varying perspectives, lived experiences in these contested spaces.

In this chapter, I have argued that these videos convey the complexity of the “bathroom problem” for transgender youth. Self-representations of transgender youth on YouTube make clear how public bathrooms are not merely a space that can be rearranged by legislation claiming to give trans youth the “freedom” to “pee;” rather, bathrooms are always spaces where transgender youth are forced to (re)negotiate their transgender subjectivities, and where they must labor to individually resolve their own feelings of discomfort and anxiety, as well as the inabilities of institutions to cope with transgender youth. The neoliberal, individualized methods that transgender youth describe in self-representations of their experiences in gendered bathrooms on YouTube demonstrate yet another way in which the burden is placed upon transgender youth themselves to fit themselves into a national body structured by heteronormative, binary gender.
Chapter 3

America’s Transgender Homecoming Queen:

Transnormativity, Affective Happiness, and National Sentimentality

“When I won homecoming,” a singular voice says over an image of a smiling teenage girl, blonde highlights in her long hair glinting in the sun against a blue sky, having a rhinestone tiara placed on her head. As the image disappears, the voice continues: “it was the most awesome feeling ever” (BuzzFeedBlue, 2015). As they are spoken, the words appear written on the white backdrop where the image was previously centered, and gentle acoustic guitar music begins. The logo “BuzzFeed IRL” appears, followed by the title of the video, which reads: “This Transgender Teen Was Crowned Homecoming Queen.” The simple, declarative sentence assumes viewers understand the political implication of this event and, like many other videos circulated by BuzzFeed, seeks to use the experience of an abstract transgender teen to inform and inspire viewers, and ultimately, encourage those viewers to share the content widely. This video presents the story of Landon Patterson, who was elected homecoming queen of Oak Park High School in Kansas City, Missouri, on September 12, 2015.

Patterson’s experience is not the first to become a widely-publicized story of a transgender teen being elected homecoming queen in the U.S.—in 2013, Cassidy Lynn Campbell was featured as part of Time magazine’s May 2014 cover story, “The Transgender Tipping Point,” after being elected homecoming queen, and at least three other transgender homecoming queens were highlighted in local and national news
stories the following year. Conspicuously absent from these news reports, however, is the election of transgender homecoming kings, such as Blake Brockington, who was elected the first black homecoming king of his high school in North Carolina shortly before his death from suicide in the same year as Patterson’s election. The newsworthiness of stories such as Patterson’s, alongside the lack of coverage of those such as Brockington, reveals much about transgender visibility, as well as the assumed cultural universality of homecoming contests as a marker of cultural importance for young U.S. American femininity.

The stark contrast between coverage of Patterson’s election and Brockington’s death, which was circulated at much higher rates than news of his election as homecoming king, further emphasizes the value placed on white, upper-class, transnormative femininity, at the expense of black transmasculinity, and young trans people of color. The appearance of transgender young people in national news media outlets has become a somewhat regular occurrence, most often in references to transgender youth suicide rates (see Kellaway, 2015), and the transgender homecoming queen specifically has become notably overrepresented as a “happy” counterpoint to those reports. The repeated highlighting of the election of a transgender homecoming queen as “newsworthy” in popular discourse reveals the symbolic capital that the transgender homecoming queen has as an ideal image of transgender youth. However, it also reveals how this image only gains value at the expense of further overshadowing

4 In the same month as Landon, Jae Irizarry was elected homecoming queen in Trenton, New Jersey, and her story was reported on by Seventeen Magazine and Jezebel. The same year, Violet Ri, student at San Ysidro High School in San Diego, California, Chase Culpepper, student at TL Hanna High School in Anderson, South Carolina, and Sage Lovell, student at Walton High School in Marietta, Georgia, all received local news coverage for being nominated for the title of homecoming queen of their respective schools.
“unhappy” stories of trans youth death. The afterlives of these youth, such as Brockington, provide the “raw material” for the conditions of Patterson’s subjectivity to be seen as “respectable” (Kellaway, 2015; Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013, 74).

This chapter examines the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video as a representation of transgender youth that mobilizes the figure of the transgender homecoming queen to evoke what Lauren Berlant has theorized as “national sentimentality,” which effectively produces an ideal transgender youth citizen (2000, 35). In this video, Patterson is positioned as overcome suffering, achieved happiness, and been crowned homecoming queen—the epitome of young U.S. American femininity. I argue that national sentimentality suggests legal equally for transgender youth can be (and has been) achieved. This process further delineates U.S. citizenship for transgender youth along the lines of transnormativity, or those trans subjectivities in closest proximity to the regulatory norms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality (Beauchamp, 2009). Such representations acquire value not only from online shares and views, but by evoking affective happiness, orienting viewers toward a linear narrative that promises transgender youth that “it gets better,” and insisting to the American public that the U.S. is tolerant and accepting of transgender subjectivities—even as transgender youth like Blake Brockington continue to be rendered disposable to the U.S. nation-state.

“Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” can be read as one representation within the larger media economy of happy transgender youth who are enveloped into the U.S. nation-state as good citizens, stabilizing the reproductive future of the U.S. In so

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5 My reference to citizenship, here, is aligned with Berlant’s notion that what we know as “citizenship” in the U.S. is twofold: both the “legal sense in which persons are juridically subject to the law’s privileges and protections by virtue of national identity” as well as “the more experiential, vernacular context in which people customarily understand their relation to state power and social membership” (34-35).
doing, attention is directed further away from those transgender youth whose
marginalized positions render them outside the intelligible field of U.S. citizenship.
Patterson’s story, as a successful homecoming queen who overcame great struggle in
order to become recognized among her peers as a “just a regular girl” that this video
capitalizes on, gains value in its circulation of happiness in part because of the conditions
created by the embodied surplus of the deaths of trans youth of color.

“Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen”: Landon Patterson

In being elected homecoming queen, Patterson received an unprecedented amount
of national attention compared to other transgender young people elected to homecoming
courts. In addition to local news channels, Patterson’s election was covered by
nationwide and global outlets like USA Today, the Daily Mail (U.K.), MTV, and People
Magazine, as well as advocacy organizations, such as The National Center for
Transgender Equality and Outsports. Patterson is disproportionately represented in
internet searches for “transgender homecoming queen,” which is littered with headlines
determining that Patterson “made history,” was “flying high,” felt “like that princess,”
and was supported by “hundreds” in her election as homecoming queen. Even those not
specifically looking for Patterson might have also been exposed to her story on the
popular website BuzzFeed on October 11, 2015. A month after her election, Patterson
was the focus of “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen,” a digital video included on
BuzzFeed’s YouTube page.

The clip features just over two minutes of alternating images and text, presented
as a slideshow of photos, screenshots of tweets, and text, accompanied by Patterson’s
voiceover and upbeat acoustic guitar music. As images of Patterson posing in her homecoming dress, wearing her cheerleading uniform, receiving her homecoming crown, and standing with her friends in their homecoming dresses scroll across a white backdrop, we hear her reflect upon her experiences in the form of a monologue. She tells her story, and viewers are introduced to “a Transgender Homecoming Queen.” The video now has over 1.5 million views, over 8,000 comments, and over 40,000 “likes” on YouTube.

BuzzFeed’s reach as a disseminator of online content is wide, as the “second-most-shared publisher on Facebook,” as well as one of the “top 10 most visited news and information sites in the U.S. as of 2014” (Ellis, 2014). As a corporate media creator, BuzzFeed plays a large role in maintaining control over “how particular social groups and issues are represented” (Gross, 2001, 4). Therefore the appearance of the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” digital video on the BuzzFeed website demonstrates the cultural sway of Patterson’s story.

Figure 12. Thumbnail image for the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video posted by BuzzFeed Blue (2015).
As we see images of Patterson being hugged by classmates and receiving a bejeweled crown, her voiceover asserts, “winning homecoming was the most awesome feeling ever,” reiterating the happiness evoked from this accomplishment (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). This video representation also demonstrates how the transgender homecoming queen is seen as an ideal subject position: an individual who has overcome her struggle and is rewarded with recognition, praise, and ultimately, inclusion into the nation. Patterson’s status as an ideal subject is facilitated by her whiteness, middle-class status, and heteronormativity, all of which are emphasized in the vide, allowing this representation of Patterson to be read as distinctly transnormative. As the following analysis will demonstrate, deeming representations of transnormativity as valuable functions to delimit transgender youth subjectivities and actively constrain the conditions of citizenship for all trans youth. This chapter will contend with the political stakes of transgender youth media representations that are mobilized in the service of the U.S. nation-state, which ultimately serve to further marginalize transgender youth already positioned outside of the national body.

**Homonationalism and Transnormativity: The Politics of “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen”**

A video focusing on a transgender teen being elected homecoming queen of her high school is part of a broader neoliberal media narrative of transgender youth transnormativity. Such a narrative can capture the threat that non-normative subjectivities pose to a society whose children are presumed (and invested in) to go on to reproduce the capitalist labor force, which Lee Edelman reminds us in his reiteration of “reproductive
futurism” as an orienting force in U.S. contemporary political rhetoric. Young people play important roles in public perceptions of national projects of “security,” as they have come to be seen as the future of modern societies, and representations of young people are therefore highly mediated (Edelman, 2004).

Michael Warner’s explication of the “politics of normal” also contextualizes the development of normative discourse (60, 1999). Warner questions, in the context of a culture of sexual shame that he argues has been associated with queerness, “What could be a better way of legitimating oneself than to insist on being seen as normal?” (1999, 60). However, the problem with this mode of so-called legitimation, Warner points out, is that in the act of declaring “normalcy,” the speaker invokes a standard of respectability and “throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder” (1999, 60). Discourse that constructs some subjectivities as “normal” therefore relies on the idea that other subjectivities are not normal. In this way, normalizing discourses also function as pathologizing: “[w]hat could have been seen as healthy variation, Warner explains, “is now seen as deviance” (1999, 60). Utilizing this framework we can begin to understand the complex status of the “normal” as it is articulated in representations of transgender youth that uphold discursive formations of “transnormativity,” which can function as both pathologizing and hierarchalizing.

Like Jasbir Puar’s theorization of homonationalism, in which she argues that gay, lesbian, and queer bodies are “crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects,” the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video demonstrates how representations
of the young transgender body can be mobilized in similar ways in order to “resolve” the problem that transgender youth present to the heteronormative futurity of the nation (2006, 67). Specifically, “domesticated” transgender bodies, or those that uphold gendered heteronormativity, allow the nation to see how transgender bodies can be “fit” into the nation without disrupting its regulatory order. As Cael Keegan has argued specifically in terms of representations of transgender subjectivities in film and television, “transgender difference” is presented as “resolvable” through representations of transgender subjectivities that are “unproblematically fold[ed] into heteronormative familial and social structures through a democratic extension of progressive optimism and a re-stabilization of the gender binary” (2013, par. 28). This emergence of transnormative subject positions is situated within, and facilitated by, the neoliberal economic, social, and cultural restructurings that have contributed to the valuing of individualist and multiculturalist logics that frame current understandings of mainstream visibility for marginalized subjectivities.

The so-called free market political economy of neoliberalism is reflected in a worldview that emphasizes the individual, and has shifted notions of “citizenship,” or feelings and privileges of national belonging, in the multicultural U.S. As Jodi Melamed, among many others, have documented, this neoliberal multiculturalism “sutures official antiracism to state policy” and “hinders the calling into question of global capitalism…produces new privileged and stigmatized forms of humanity, and…deploys a normative cultural model of race…as a discourse to justify inequality for some as fair or natural” (Melamed, 2006, 14). These ideologies actively constrain the conditions of national belonging for those for whom neoliberal multiculturalism deems “undeserving”
because of their lack of participation within the market, while obscuring the structural limitations that global capitalism places on marginalized subjects. The following analysis of the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” digital video as a distinctly transnormative representation of transgender youth demonstrates how the presentation of Patterson’s homecoming win as a success story contributes to a progressive narrative of visibility that neoliberal multiculturalism imagines.

The Transgender Homecoming Queen and White Femininity

The newsworthiness of Patterson’s story reveals much about both transgender visibility, as well as the homecoming queen title as cultural capital in the project of femininity for young U.S. American women. The homecoming queen is perceived to be the most popular and most beautiful of the female students at a given high school, determined by an election by her peers. Cassidy Lynn Campbell was deemed “America’s transgender homecoming queen” by Time Magazine in 2014, demonstrating how the title of homecoming queen carries enough cultural capital within the U.S. to be symbolic of the nation (Time, 2014). Campbell’s title in this way is reminiscent of Sarah Banet-Weiser’s theorizations of the connections between beauty pageants and national identity. In historicizing the Miss American pageant, Banet-Weiser observes, “[t]he pageant invites a reading of the body both as a symbol of the national social body and as the individual liberal citizen” (2004, 72). If we consider the election of the homecoming queen as a type of pageant, given the emphasis it places on beauty and popularity, we can see how the homecoming queen can also come to symbolize the “national body” and the
“individual liberal citizen,” as well as how the election of the transgender homecoming queen could represent the neoliberal progression of ideal citizenship and nationalism.

Repeatedly presented in news coverage as “progress,” the presence of a transgender girl on the homecoming ballot is seen as an inarguably positive sign of increases in transgender visibility, and subsequently, acceptance, in the U.S. public sphere. The promise of resolving the crisis of national identity that transgender subjects represent to the heteronormative U.S. is offered through the transgender homecoming queen. Like Banet-Weiser has documented of beauty pageants in the 1950s U.S. as a space of “containment or conversion” of the nation in racial crisis, the promise of resolution “is offered through the vehicle of the female body, which comes to ‘represent’ nationalism in terms of a particular image of femininity. This same female body, however, also ‘represents’ the nation in terms of a particular culture or community” (1997, 7). Thus, Patterson’s celebration as homecoming queen in this video demonstrates how the transnormative female body is presented as a victory for the U.S. as a tolerant nation, and as progress for a transgender rights movement that seeks to have transgender youth regarded as “normal youth.” Therefore we must understand the representation of the transgender homecoming queen as not simply a sign of “progress” for transgender youth, but rather situate the complexity of the circulation of this image as deeply connected to the nationalist struggle for a universalizing “American identity” that is built on racialized and classed systems of heteronormative gender in the U.S.

In this way, we can see the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video as part of a history of popular media mobilizing images of only those trans women who were in closest proximity to white, upper-middle-class womanhood, such as Christine
Jorgenson, whose gender transition in 1951 gained worldwide media attention, and was almost exclusively reported in terms of her white, upper-middle-class femininity. Emily Skidmore documents the rise of this representation of trans women in U.S. popular media in the 1950s and 1960s as cohering around Jorgenson’s depiction as the “good transsexual” (2011, 271). Because Jorgenson was hypervisible in the mainstream press at this time, her story, and those of other trans women who were capable of approximating this norm, “came to define the boundaries of transsexual identity” (2011, 271). Skidmore describes how media representations consistently produced Jorgenson as “definitively female” by aligning her with the qualities of idealized form of femininity. Skidmore writes, “her white skin, blond hair, and slender frame garnered constant comment throughout her tenure in the media, and these comments ensured that her body would be intelligible as female to readers” (2011, 275). Representations of Jorgenson are not unlike those of young trans women today who are heralded for their beauty and ability to be seen as “authentic” and “humanized” trans women—perceptions which depend on those young trans women’s performances of “the scripts of white middle-class womanhood” (2011, 294).

Like beauty as a marker of “definitive female”—ness and subsequent access to the nation, popularity can offer similar access, particularly for young people (Skidmore, 2011, 270). In her work with racialized minority girls and young women in Victoria, British Columbia, Jo-Anne Lee recalls how “popularity” among these girls was one way in which citizenship was coded. For girls who “have already been positioned outside the

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6 Christine Jorgenson is an American former GI who underwent sex reassignment surgery in Denmark and was thrust into the public eye. Her experience “introduced many Americans to the concept of transsexuality” and “she has remained the most prominent individual within historical treatments of transsexuality” (Skidmore, 270, 2011).
prerequisites of liberal notions of citizenship,” one way of approximating citizenship in high schools is through seeking popularity (Lee, 2006, 93). Lee writes, “Girls live in a cultural context in which whiteness is assumed and normalized as beautiful, attractive, and ‘popular,’ a pseudonym for full inclusion and belonging” (2006, 105). Because beauty and popularity are so deeply connected to normative race, gender, and class, it is impossible to view the transgender homecoming queen as outside of the implications of those terms which she is said to fulfill. The gendered, raced, and classed implications of both of these nebulous ideals are visible by contextualizing them as mutually constitutive “symbolic capital” that historically trans women and girls have had (little) access to as ways of achieving a sense of belonging within nationalist ideals of white femininity.

As Toby Beauchamp contends, “perceived gender normativity is not limited strictly to gender, but is always infused with regulatory norms of race, class, sexuality and nationality,” so it is impossible to read the representation of Patterson as the “beautiful homecoming queen” without taking into consideration her embodiment of those norms (2009, 360). As such, Patterson’s representation in the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” digital video is a clear demonstration of the enfolding of transgender youth into a neoliberal capitalist project of national belonging. The performance of normative gender that the transgender homecoming queen demonstrates is undergirded by her whiteness, middle class status, and heteronormativity, all of which are prominently featured in this short digital video segment recalling Patterson’s winning homecoming queen. Her intricately beaded gown, status as a cheerleader, and her appearance on the arm of her “king” work to connect Patterson to “dominant notions of
what constitutes feminine…behavior” throughout the video, and will be analyzed in more detail later in this chapter (Beauchamp, 2009, 360).

To understand how the transgender homecoming queen has been taken up in U.S. popular discourse more broadly and is mobilized in this video specifically, we must contextualize this image within the idea that “national capital” is valuable and desired—particularly for citizens who are positioned outside of the necessary requirements for U.S. citizenship, including whiteness and heteronormativity. Citizenship, as Berlant and others have argued, no longer includes only the public action of participation in politics, but a private notion of belonging to the nation. The privatization of U.S. citizenship, Berlant argues, “involve[s] the rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture, characterized by strong patriotic identification mixed with feelings of practical political powerlessness” (1999, 3). The documentation of Patterson’s election as homecoming queen in the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video can be seen as one of these sentimental spaces wherein the election of a transgender homecoming queen is imagined as a victory. The video therefore positions the U.S. as a progressive nation in the neoliberal multicultural sense, and reassures marginalized citizens that they can have a place in that nation too—provided they aspire to the regulatory raced, classed, and gendered norms that Patterson fulfills and that allowed her to achieve such a victory.
“All my peers can see me as just a regular girl”: Transnormativity and National Belonging

In order to demonstrate precisely how, and why, Patterson is positioned as a symbol of liberal citizenship and U.S. American progress, I now turn to the digital representation of her story in the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video circulated on the BuzzFeed YouTube channel. A close reading of the representation of Patterson’s story reveals how, with the proper affective labor, certain transgender bodies can be enveloped into the nation, and being elected homecoming queen is one way of approximating that ideal citizenship status. This close reading will also reveal how those representations of transgender youth that are more likely to be mobilized in popular discourse are distinctly transnormative, as they follow a narrative of transgender crisis (in terms of both unhappiness for transgender individuals and the threat that transgender subjectivity poses to the heterormative nation) being resolved by proper performance of heteronormative gender, ultimately leading to happiness and resolution.

In the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” digital video, viewers hear Patterson’s voice recalling the day she won homecoming queen. As she speaks, both photographs of Patterson and phrases of her monologue appear as visual cues to bolster her voiceover. Structuring the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video not as an interview or a reenactment, but as Patterson introducing herself to the world in her own words is purposeful, and encourages a reading of the video as “subaltern testimony and complaint” (Berlant 1999, 33). However as a photo montage with voiceover, the video’s format can also emphasize those aspects of her monologue that the video’s creators deem important. For instance, as viewers hear Patterson say, “there were so
many thoughts going through my head,” viewers simultaneously see a photo of Patterson being crowned. As Patterson continues, the following words appear on the screen next to the photo: “And all I could do was cry” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).

This pattern continues, with portions of Patterson’s spoken monologue being highlighted by also appearing as written text in the video. She says, “One of those thoughts in my head was just,” and as she speaks the words appear on the screen: “I did it.” As Patterson reiterates her feelings of winning, she says, “I feel so accomplished. And I’m so happy that all my peers can see me as just a regular girl. That’s all I ever wanted” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). The final sentence in this phrase also appears written on the screen. Viewers then see a photo of Patterson in her homecoming dress, posing with another girl from her school in a homecoming dress, and she continues: “And it just felt so cool to know that everyone saw me” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). The rewards for winning homecoming queen stretch far beyond a crown, as Patterson describes in her monologue, placing the video’s message in a political larger context for trans youth subjectivities.

Figure 13. Screenshot from the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video showing an image of Patterson being crowned alongside the words “All I could do was cry” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).
Patterson’s voiceover espouses the importance of transgender visibility by establishing how “cool” it felt “to know that everyone saw me”; she emphasizes the word “saw,” and asserts that everyone “seeing her” was she “has always wanted” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). The desire to be seen that Patterson expresses in her monologue and that the BuzzFeed video creators chose to emphasize by putting the words on the screen, has cultural significance in the context of normative narratives of queer and transgender visibility. Being crowned homecoming queen, the video suggests, validates Patterson’s existence as a “real” girl, whose transgender subjectivity provides the context for her journey to “success.” The video’s emphasis on Patterson’s visibility in this way, not merely as being seen, but as being seen in the correct way, demonstrates another function of transnormativity.

Considering the wide circulation of this video, it is important to interrogate why, and how, this particular image of the “happy” transgender youth has become a mode of gaining national belonging for transgender youth. Questions such as those posed by Beauchamp, including: “Which bodies can choose visibility, and which bodies are always already visible – perhaps even hyper-visible – to state institutions? For whom is visibility an available political strategy, and at what cost?” must be considered as “transgender visibility” quickly becomes a media tagline (2009, 363). Patterson’s story (and its reiteration by the editing of the BuzzFeed video) draws attention to the importance of being “seen,” “coming out,” and “not having to lie anymore,” all of which link her visible transgender subjectivity to her success. However Patterson’s representation cannot be read without also remembering that, “while (some) trans people gain (a particular kind of) visibility through attention from popular media and medical research, such gains must
always be evaluated in relation to their dependence on regulatory norms of race, class and sexuality” (Beauchamp, 2009, 363). Patterson’s fulfillment of these norms is made visible by the affective investment the video places in her ability to perform (trans)normative gender.

If we consider the homecoming queen as representing an ideal young American femininity—that which Patterson says she has “always wanted,” and that which would effectively validate her young womanhood—we can see how this image functions within “intimate public sphere” that Berlant describes (1997, 5). Patterson’s heteronormativity is put on display and validated by the participation in, and winning, of the gender-segregated homecoming queen election. As the video highlights the accomplishment of this “victory,” we can see how Landon’s citizenship “as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere” (Berlant, 1997, 5).

In the video, Patterson recalls that since winning homecoming queen, she is “so happy that all my peers can see me as just a regular girl. That's all I ever wanted and it just felt so cool to know that everyone saw me” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). When heard in conjunction with seeing a photo of Patterson smiling in her homecoming dress and crown, the video imagines Patterson’s victory as allowing her access to an imagined fantasy of social membership and popularity. Patterson’s words and the production of the video suggest that her social belonging as a member of her high school class is achieved. What is not clear, however, is how this image is contingent upon transnormativity—those terms on which Patterson’s visibility as “a regular girl” depend.
The video presents images of Patterson that emphasize her styled hair with perfect curls flowing to just below her shoulders, her intricately beaded, strapless, white, floor-length gown, and her rhinestone tiara, shoring up the regulatory norms of white, middle-class feminity that properly align her embodiment with that of the liberated transgender subject, who is no longer encumbered by being seen as anything other than “just a regular girl” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). Such liberated transnormative subjects, Keegan argues, “[supply] the affective matrix for a new form of ideal citizenship that the audience moves to achieve through sympathetic absorption of trans difference” (Keegan, 2013). Now that Patterson is happy as “just a regular girl,” so too can the nation breathe a sigh of relief that the “problem” of transgender youth has been solved through the “assimilative power of liberal democratic ideology and its gendered logics” (Keegan, 2013, par. 28). Through the representational affective labor of Patterson’s transnormative struggle, or the struggle of not being visible as “a regular girl,” the video presents her as being deserving of this ideal citizenship, offered to her through viewers’ sympathy.

*Figure 14.* Screenshot of a professional photo of Patterson showing her white floor-length homecoming gown, blonde highlighted hair styled into loose waves, and rhinestone crown. (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).
“I get to live to my full potential, which is awesome”: The Happy Transgender Homecoming Queen

One way transnormativity functions as cultural hegemony is by way of an affective economy, which is evident in media representations of transgender youth whose (hetero)normative qualities are rewarded with “happiness.” This affective economy is demonstrated in the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video as happy affect evoked from viewers in this video shores up the restorative capacity of transnormative representations of transgender youth and aligns Patterson’s happiness as homecoming queen with the happiness of the nation. Assigning value to particular subjects in representations that are circulated in mainstream media outlets is a mode of demonstrating (as well as bolstering a broader system of) normative subjects in a given society. Therefore where and how these discourses are circulated for the purposes of assigning value can be determined by situating them within affective economies, or spaces where emotions are exchanged (Ahmed 2004). The complex power of emotionality in how these discourses circulate is highly reliant on power relations.

Figure 15. Screenshot from the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video showing the words, “All my peers can see me as just a regular girl” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).
When specifically considering Patterson’s video as part of the happy affective economy that circulates in relation to transgender youth, we are reminded how, “Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in ‘happy persons,’ we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable” (Ahmed, 2010, 11). Smiling photos of Patterson in her homecoming dress and her cheerleading uniform, as well as Tweets about how “inspiring” and “encouraging” she is, that appear in the video convey how the video presents Patterson’s homecoming queen title as orienting her toward what Lauren Berlant refers to as “the good life,” or a sense of national belonging that is oriented toward “conventional fantasies” of “upward mobility and intimate continuity” (2011, 2; 182).

Further, because the video is created and circulated digitally, it “makes affect felt in an unprecedented manner” (Clough, 2008, 8). The music, voiceover, photos, and editing work together in this video to form a representation of a young transgender person who moves from unhappiness to happiness, from “lying to everyone” to living a “true life,” aligning her with the emergent transnormative subject position as “a body that must journey from negative to redemptive affect” in order to become intelligible in the popular sphere (Keegan, 2013, par. 3). Patterson’s individual achievement is reiterated over and over again in the video, as is her happiness. The linear narrative that the video presents, ending her story with the idea that “society accepting trans people for who they are” will be the ultimate achievement, as well as her association of “happiness” and “easy life” with “coming out” as trans, situate her story in what has now become a familiar narrative of trans(normative) politics and lived experience (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).
The “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video demonstrates how the image of the transgender homecoming queen functions as a “happy object.” On its own, the image may not be as moving, but when attached to a feeling of happiness—for instance, an image of Patterson crying tears of happiness after receiving the crown—the image becomes an object created by happiness, which subsequently is “passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods” (Ahmed, 2010, 21). The video is circulated as an object of happiness; like the image of the family that Ahmed describes, the image of the transgender teen winning homecoming queen is invested in by BuzzFeed because it is “what good feelings are directed toward” and because it “[provides] a shared horizon of experience” for BuzzFeed’s viewers (Ahmed, 2010, 21). Further, the video highlights many characteristic happy objects that orient Patterson toward “just being a regular girl,” which, as she notes, allow for her happiness to manifest: the “girls’ uniform,” the “girls’ show choir dress,” as well as unmentioned objects that are nonetheless present in the video: the expensive-looking white homecoming dress, the messages from others reiterating her courage and ability to be “inspirational.” Patterson’s proximity to all of these objects contributes to making her trans personhood valuable.
Throughout the video, Patterson also describes how being elected homecoming queen allowed her to be seen as strong and courageous: “I had never had so many people messaging me telling me how my story was inspiring to them, or I inspire them, and that I have strength and I have courage.” As she speaks, screenshots from Twitter appear as if to provide evidence for her statements. “The most negative thing,” Patterson says, a photo of a protestor wearing a sweatshirt reading “GodHatesFags.Com” and holding signs that read “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” and “Destruction is Imminent,” flashes onto the screen, “was probably the Westboro Baptist Church protesting me”\(^7\) (BuzzFeed Blue 2015). Then as quickly as it appeared, the photo is replaced by Patterson saying, “but I didn’t care about that,” and the text of her words fills the white space. Patterson’s transnormative embodiment also allows her to disregard protestors without a second

\(^7\) The Westboro Baptist Church notified Patterson’s Kansas City, Missouri, school district that they would be protesting at Oak Park High School on the afternoon of Patterson’s homecoming ceremony. In response, “at least a couple hundred students, parents and local churches showed up to support Patterson, marching nearly a mile…to confront” the protestors, who subsequently left the school (Helmuth 2015, par. 4).
thought—photos of her in her beaded gown, coiffed hair, and rhinestone crown serve as visual reminders, directing viewers away from the Westboro Church protestors and the threat of transphobia, toward the real focus of the video: her happiness in receiving not only the crown, but the acceptance of her peers as “a normal girl.” This re-orientation is possible by way of images highlighting Patterson’s whiteness, her middle-class status, and her heteronormative gender performance. Even the generic music that is included in the production of the video seems to suggest that Patterson’s story has followed a chirpy, forward-progressing narrative.

The representation of the transnormative young person is therefore seen as “promise of happiness” in two ways: for both Patterson’s individual happiness, and the happiness of the U.S. as a liberal democratic nation-state. For as Ahmed writes, “The promise of happiness is the promise that the lines we follow will get us there, where the ‘there’ acquires its value by not being ‘here.’ This is why happiness is crucial to the energy or ‘forward direction’ of narrative” (2010, 32). In the final sentence of her monologue, Patterson concludes her recounting of her personal journey from unhappiness to happiness with the following claim: “Hopefully one day my wish is that society will accept trans people for who they are, and it won’t be looked at as this taboo thing” (BuzzFeeb Blue, 2015). Her final words, “[a]nd I definitely believe we can get there someday,” are legible both audibly and visually as text (BuzzFeeb Blue, 2015). In this way, the promise of “transgender acceptance” allows Patterson’s success story to contribute energy to the “forward direction” of the narrative of neoliberal multiculturalism, which diverts attention away from questioning global capitalism by suggesting that tolerance has been achieved (Melamed, 2006).
“All I could do was cry”: The Transgender Homecoming Queen and National Sentimentality

The documentation of Patterson’s happiness in being crowned homecoming queen is emphasized by juxtaposing it with the suffering she endured along the way to this achievement. In her characterizations of happy affect, Ahmed argues, “the very obstacle to happiness is what allows happiness to be sustained as the promise of the good life,” and the specter of transgender unhappiness is referenced throughout the video (2010, 32). The declaration that “before” Patterson “wasn’t happy at all,” as well as the presence of the Westboro church protestors at her school upon her election, are ultimately resolved in the course of the video (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). It is the ability of this suffering to be endured and overcome that works to bolster the transgender homecoming queen narrative—she promises individual happiness, and happiness for the nation as welcoming of difference.
“My high school experience as transgender has been so awesome,” Patterson says, as photos of her in her floor-length fully beaded white homecoming dress, flanked by mostly white girls in similarly beaded gowns, as well as other photos of Patterson in her cheerleading uniform herself appear on the screen. Viewers then hear Patterson recall her experience throughout the process of deciding to come out as transgender in high school. She explains:

Like, it’s been so much easier than I thought it was. I kept stressing myself out about it before I came out as trans and making myself think it was gonna be this big horrible disaster and it was just gonna be so dramatic and, coming out as trans has made things so easy for me.

The strife that she experienced before coming out, which is resolved by way of visibility, ultimately allows her to live “easily,” or oriented toward “the good life.” Overcoming the struggle of not being “out” as transgender is not only characterized by an “easy” life, as Patterson describes, but also by her personal happiness. She explains: “And… I finally feel so much happier with myself, and it’s just made my day to day life easier. I feel like I’m not lying anymore and putting on a show or having to be something I’m not” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).

Figure 19. Screenshot of image from the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” showing the words “I feel like I’m not lying anymore” (BuzzFeeb Blue, 2015).
Patterson identifies the struggle of not being able to live a “true” and “happy life” as being resolved by “coming out “as transgender. As she reiterates in the video: “I finally feel so much happier with myself…now that I came out, high school has became so much more fun for me” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). In this way, we can read her story as contributing to a culture of national sentimentality surrounding transgender youth in the contemporary U.S. National sentimentality, Lauren Berlant writes, is “a liberal rhetoric of promise historically entitled in the United States, which avows that a nation can best be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy” (1999, 34). The structure of the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video encourages viewers to “affectively identify” with Patterson—to be happy for not only her success in being voted homecoming queen, but also her ability to withstand private (not living a “true” life) and public (Westboro Baptist Church protestors) suffering, resolve social difference, and uplift the promise of a nation that “can get there someday” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015).

The video’s creators emphasize those aspects of Patterson’s monologue that they deem most important by presenting viewers with textual reiterations of particular phrases in Patterson’s testimony. Viewers not only hear, but also see, the words: “I feel like I’m not lying anymore”; “I just get to live to my full potential”; and “I definitely believe we can get there someday” written on the screen as Patterson says them. The idea of having “lied” and not lived to one’s “full potential” are seized upon here as the universal trauma of transgender youth, and it becomes easy to see Patterson’s story as one that is “deemed to exemplify a population’s subordination” (Berlant, 1999, 33). In an uneven economy of trans youth visibility, or a discursive landscape that values some transgender youth more
than others and is constrained by transnormativity, Patterson becomes the stand-in for all transgender youth whose ultimate struggle is not being able to be their “true selves.” Within this frame, her story is intelligible as an “American egalitarianism narrative,” the sentimental rhetoric of which “promises the alleviation of suffering: through compassionate recognition by, sentimental representation within, and affective inclusion into the national body” (Strick, 2014, 4).

The video both makes Patterson’s trans subjectivity invisible, by referring to her as “just a normal girl,” and highlights its rhetorical importance to the building of an tolerant nation, by connecting her election as homecoming queen to a potential happy future, wherein “society will accept trans people for who they are.” When she speaks these words, after having been pictured as happy and successful throughout the video, Patterson promises happiness to the nation in the form of providing “social hope, a sign of ‘how far we have come’ or hope for a world where discrimination has been overcome” (Ahmed, 2010, 113). The video demonstrates how following such a heteronormative “happiness script” promises a future of happiness that is also productive. Specifically,
Patterson’s representation points to an American future that the intimate public of U.S. citizenship values, which as Berlant reminds us, is “tacitly white, and still contains the blueprint for the reproductive form that assures the family and the nation its future history” (Berlant, 1997, 6). The mobilization of her transnormative story, with its requisite happy ending, works to stabilize the reproductive future of the U.S.

Figure 21. Screenshot of image showing Patterson wearing her crown, and her eyes are closed as she embraces someone whose face we cannot see in the image, which is the last image highlighted in the video (BuzzFeeb Blue, 2015).

**Whose Happy Ending? Corporeal Excess and Transnormative Youth Citizenship**

The video’s happy ending is clear; Patterson has access to those happy objects that bring her femininity into line with heteronormative understandings of gender: “I finally get to wear the girls uniform and the girls dress in show choir” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). Beyond her homecoming crown, the girl’s cheerleading uniform, and the girl’s show choir dress, she asserts that in coming out as trans, “I just get to live to my full potential, which is awesome” (BuzzFeed Blue, 2015). This outcome is significant, as it “work[s] to secure a moral distinction between good and bad lives” (Ahmed, 2010, 89).
Patterson’s happy ending orients her toward “the good life,” and in so doing allows her life to be seen as “good.”

This video’s positioning of Patterson as an ideal trans youth citizen whose transnormativity promises a happy future for the U.S. does so at the expense of those youth positioned further from the norms that this video highlights. In other words, the circulation of Patterson as a “happy” transgender young person obscures “unhappy” transgender youth from the public’s view. As “transgender youth” coalesces as a category of personhood in public media discourse, this visibility must be read through Susan Stryker’s argument that such increases in public discourse “surveils, splits, and sorts in order to move some trans bodies toward emergent possibilities for transgender normativity and citizenship while consigning others to decreased chances for life” (2014, 38). In “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen,” Patterson’s personhood is imbued with value, and non-normative trans youth personhood is implicitly devalued. This division of transgender youth into those deemed worthy of citizenship, happiness, and, ultimately, life, and those whose lives are not perceived to have value, is highlighted by Blake Brockington, whose happy ending as the first black homecoming king elected in his North Carolina high school was cut short by his death from suicide.

While the “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” video emphasizes how, to Patterson, “winning homecoming was most awesome feeling ever,” reports of Brockington’s homecoming win was reported—and experienced by Brockington—differently. Being elected homecoming king was “single-handedly the hardest part of my trans journey” a quote from Brockington in The Advocate reads. “Really hateful things were said on the Internet. It was hard. I saw how narrow-minded the world really is”
As a young black trans man who was rejected by his family and placed in foster care upon coming out to them as transgender, Brockington is already positioned far from ideal trans youth citizenship. Unlike Patterson, who is positioned as able to overcome the unhappiness inherent in the transgender young person who “does not fit” into by way of her individual strength, Brockington is not permitted that same path. Brockington is not welcomed into the nation in the same way as Patterson because, in the eyes of the nation, he was not able to overcome his unhappiness—he was subsumed by it. And in death, he is subsumed into a public discourse of transgender youth suicide that serves to bolster the project of trans youth normativity.

As C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn have importantly argued, “value [is] extracted from trans of color death” in the service of “globalized homonormative and transnormative political projects” (2013, 67). The value of Brockington’s death is as a warning to those who are not able to embody transnormative happiness: the only future is death. Following Brockington’s death, which was more widely circulated than his initial homecoming king win, *The Advocate* reported, “Brockington’s death is the sixth reported suicide of a trans youth in the U.S. this year, in an ‘epidemic’ that trans advocates say sees far more casualties than are noted by media” (Kellaway, 2015).

Reporting Brockington’s death alongside repetitions of trans youth suicide rates demonstrates how such circulations, like the deaths of trans women of color that Snorton and Haritaworn examine, “paradoxically [give] birth to both the conditions that allow more recognizable trans subjects to mobilize and ascend into life, and to the forces that immobilize subaltern trans lives” (2013, 67). The story of Patterson as a successful, “real” girl can only circulate as progressive by way of the “corporeal excess” of
Brockington and other trans youth of color who are immobilized in death (Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013, 74). Ahmed writes, “The availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment” (Ahmed, 2004, 149). In order to allow the public to become “comfortable” with transgender young people, as Patterson describes in the conclusion of her video, the bodies performing the labor of that comfort are those who are positioned further from the regulatory norm, and who do not have the “option” of visibility; rather, they are always hypervisible in their inability to “fade back into the population” (Aizura, 2006, 296). These bodies must affectively bear the “burden of concealment” as their non-normative embodiments do not align with ideal transgender citizenship, or those trans youth who fit happily into the nation.

As the lack of media coverage of Brockington’s homecoming win compared to the circulation of news of his death—both of which pale in comparison to the circulation of Patterson’s “Meet A Transgender Homecoming Queen” BuzzFeed video—demonstrates, affective investments in those narratives of transgender youth that fit more “comfortably” and “happily” into normative understandings of transgender youth gain value in their circulations. What is not seen, however, is the labor performed by those whose stories do not provide value in this economy, those whose “burden of concealment” undergirds those very economies, and how the “corporeal excess” of the deaths of trans youth such as Blake Brockington provide the “raw material for the generation of respectable trans subjects” such as Landon Patterson, America’s transgender homecoming queen (Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013, 74). Ultimately, the circulation of stories like the “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen” video contribute
to the institutionalized “disposability” to which the state “eagerly consign[s] queers and trans populations” that do not fit comfortably into the national body (Aizura, 2014).

In this chapter, I have argued that “Meet a Transgender Homecoming Queen,” a short video produced and circulated online by the content aggregator website BuzzFeed, is part of a discourse of transnormativity that functions to produce ideal transgender youth citizen subject positions. By evoking national sentimentality and circulating in an affective economy of happiness, this video presents the transgender homecoming queen, Landon Patterson, as a “happy” transgender young person. By highlighting Patterson’s whiteness, middle class status, and heteronormativity, the video presents transnormative youth as individually happy, as well as happy for the nation; these subjectivities are capable of stabilizing the reproductive future of the U.S. Transnormative representations of youth gain value within a neoliberal multicultural political economy as significations of progress, while transgender youth who are positioned further from the intelligible field of U.S. are erased from view except in their deaths. As the context of Blake Brockington’s posthumous mobilization demonstrates, the visibility of normative transgender youth comes, quite literally, at a deadly cost: the erasure of non-normative transgender youth.


Chapter 4

“Just having fun being one of the girls”: Affective Labor and Ideal Trans Girl Citizen Subjects in Clean and Clear’s “See The Real Me Campaign”

“Things just keep getting better and better for Jazz Jennings—and hopefully that means things will get better for all of us.”


“The real me is happy and proud to be who I am, and I’m just having fun being one of the girls!” As part of an advertisement for a popular line of skin care products geared toward teen girls, this statement coming from Jazz Jennings is poignant. One of the most recognizable young transgender people in the U.S. today, Jennings has appeared in countless media outlets, most recently as the star of her own TLC reality series. Subsequently, she has become the face of Clean and Clear’s “See The Real Me” advertising campaign. Throughout these and many other representations, Jennings identifies as a transgender girl, a subjectivity with important implications for understanding youth citizenship that girlhood studies that has heretofore left unexamined. In a culture that, as Anita Harris argues, targets girls as its primary market, urging girls specifically to participate in regulated spheres and consume in the capitalist market in order to be considered ideal citizens, Jennings’ representation and participation in this campaign provides a unique entry point into questioning how transgender girlhood(s) are fit into, and ultimately, made invisible in the service of, contemporary consumer girlhood as a citizen-subject position.
Transgender studies provides a productive platform through which to envision a future of girlhood studies that will remain relevant to the dynamic forces of late modern capitalism. Jennings’ mainstream success, combined with the campaign’s focus on successful girls who are designated as such for overcoming personal obstacles to their happiness by individual strength of self, make her involvement in the campaign a unique lens through which to view consumer citizenship, affective labor, and media economies of visibility for transgender youth today. Specifically, Jennings’ participation in the campaign provides evidence of trans youth subjectivities providing affective labor for global capitalism that is contingent upon their proximity to normative understandings of youth—in particular, of girlhood—that scholars have characterized as white, heteronormative, able-bodied, and upper class (Harris, 2004; Gonick, 2006; Driver, 2007).

The current neoliberal capitalist political economy is also particularly relevant to the climate of consumer citizenship in which commodity activism thrives. This neoliberal shift in how culture—and individuals—are valued creates the conditions for campaigns such as “See The Real Me” to emerge as modes of commodity activism. Using self empowerment as its currency, commodity activism utilizes the “logic and language of branding” to encourage citizens to participate in the market to improve themselves, alongside economic exchange (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, 17). As the following examination will reveal, the Clean and Clear’s “See The Real Me” campaign is intelligible as a form of commodity activism, to which Jennings’ subjectivity, as a widely known, successful, and (trans)normative transgender person in popular discourse, adds
affective value to the (im)material commodity of “self empowerment” produced by the campaign.

Jennings’ transgender subjectivity is “put to work in the expansion and accumulation of global capital,” and this video capitalizes on her transnormativity as a way in which to fold, as Emmanuel David has also documented, “transgender performances” into commercial exchange (2015, 172-173). The work that Jennings’ transgender subjectivity, specifically, performs for the campaign can be characterized as “affective labor,” or that which Michael Hardt argues, is “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (1999, 96).

This immateriality of affective labor is evident in online spaces, where the creation and communication of affect is virtual (Hardt, 1999, 96). Jennings’ video, produced as branded content for Clean and Clear, contributes to the “digital archive” of transgender youth subjectivities that is dynamically created, engaged with, and exploited online. The “See the Real Me” campaign as a digital marketing campaign primarily focused on YouTube is therefore part of the digital archive of immaterial labor to which corporate brands insert themselves “seamlessly…not only into social networking sites, but also, into the everyday lived experience of users” (Pybus, 139). By presenting the stories of Jennings and others on social networking sites, such as YouTube, that viewers are already familiar with, this branded content becomes part of a network that reaches more deeply into the everyday lives of users, while further obscuring the labor that upholds that expansion. The affective and immaterial labor of Jennings’ story in this
video, in other words, “are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect” that is intensifying in online economies (Terranova, 2000, 38).

The expansion of neoliberal capitalism in the U.S. has created new conditions for visibility, consumption, and citizenship, all of which have framed representations of Jazz Jennings in popular discourse over the past five years, culminating in her being asked to participate in the “See The Real Me” campaign by Johnson and Johnson brand Clean and Clear. This chapter understands Clean and Clear’s “See The Real Me” campaign as an example of commodity activism, a method of branding that utilizes the discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism to mobilize underrepresented groups, such as queer populations, as tools for marketing. As the following close reading of Jennings’ short video feature as part of this campaign demonstrates, this campaign is mobilizing a very particular image of Jennings in order to capitalize on the affective labor her transgender subjectivity can provide to the commodity activism of this neoliberal multicultural branding campaign.

Public discourse surrounding Jennings’ involvement with this campaign more broadly, as well as the representation of her video “Jazz Jennings: Being Your True Self” as a specific part of the campaign, demonstrate the ambiguous place that transgender girlhood occupies in the media economy of neoliberal capitalism, and how her transgender subjectivity is used as affective labor to mobilize ideal neoliberal consumer citizenship in the U.S. today. Making Jennings “work” as part of this campaign geared toward teen girls, demonstrates, as Dan Irving has outlined, the neoliberal imperative to fit transgender subjectivities into the discourses of productivity in heteronormative
capitalism (2008, 49). Jazz’s trans youth subjectivity is made “productive” by way of approximating the regulatory norms of girlhood and trans(normative) embodiment.

**See The “Real” Me: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Consumer Citizenship**

The so-called free market political economy of neoliberalism is reflected in a worldview that emphasizes the individual and has shifted notions of “citizenship,” or feelings and privileges of national belonging, in the U.S. The neoliberal citizen is one who can “contribute to their nation’s advancement in the global political economy,” as the expansion of global capitalism is a primary goal of neoliberalism (Irving, 2008, 52). Corresponding with neoliberal trends of “[d]eindustrialization, privatization, economic rationalism, and deregulation,” the relationship between individuals and society has shifted, Harris argues, “from citizen-state to consumer-corporation” (Harris, 2004, 69). Therefore the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are increasingly organized around the market, wherein “[i]ndividuals are encouraged to exercise their citizenship responsibilities and rights in relation to privatized service providers rather than the state” (Harris, 2004, 69).

Neoliberal economic policies that encourage individuals to seek inclusion into the nation via proper consumption practices contribute to the logic of multiculturalism, which obscures the violence of global capitalism by providing lip service to tolerance and diversity within a productive nation. As Melamed demonstrates, neoliberal multiculturalism, sutures official antiracism to state policy” which “hinders the calling into question of global capitalism…produces new privileged and stigmatized forms of humanity, and…deploys a normative cultural model of race (which now
sometimes displaces conventional racial reference altogether) as a discourse to justify inequality for some as fair or natural (Melamed, 2006, 14).

Locating multiculturalism within the political economy of neoliberal consumer citizenship demonstrates how these ideologies actively constrain the conditions of national belonging for those whom neoliberal multiculturalism deems “undeserving” because of their lack of participation within the market, while obscuring the structural limitations that global capitalism places on marginalized subjects.

To further contextualize neoliberal multiculturalism in popular discourse, we can also see how visibility for marginalized subjectivities is constrained by these discourses. The idea of branding, or adhering meaning to a product “as a means to make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer,” is one space in which the corporations capitalize on this visibility (Benet-Weiser, 2012a, 4). As U.S. multiculturalism “heightens the political importance of the idiom of culture and of cultural identities for contemporary cultural politics,” subjectivities being co-opted for the purposes of promotion is widespread and has implications for political and social representation of marginalized groups (Davila, 2012, 8). In other words, neoliberal multiculturalism is subsumed into a marketplace that values “underrepresented” subjectivities as “lucrative markets in consumer culture,” demonstrating how visibility for marginalized subjectivities becomes impossible to separate from brand culture. The neoliberal multicultural market also undergirds the development of consumer citizenship, or the idea that individuals can access to the benefits of citizenship via participating in the marketplace. To Banet-Weiser, “the marketplace is constitutive of politics—political identities, rights, and ideologies are often formulated within the consumer marketplace,
rather than in opposition to it” (Banet-Weiser 26). This marketplace, in which the “See the Real Me” is situated, is not only one where products are being purchased, but also where politics are being negotiated and subjectivities are being worked on and out.

As consumer citizenship expands alongside neoliberal global capitalism, scholars of girlhood have posited that young women are “positioned as the ideal neo-liberal subjects” (Nayak and Kehily, 2008, 144-145). The emergence of neoliberal ideologies of “individual responsibility and choices” come together with “broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women” and, Harris argues, make young women in particular “the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity” (2004, 6). Because young women are positioned as “flexible, technologically savvy, open to change and in control of their destiny” in popular discourse, girlhood studies scholars argue they are primed to take up the “project of self-transformation and personal development” on which ideal neoliberal consumer citizenship is premised (Nayak and Kehily, 2008, 144-145).

Neoliberal capitalist outlets look to young women in order to idealize “girlhood” as a marketable commodity to young women who constitute “an important consumer group as their disposable income increases” (Harris, 2004, 20). Therefore, “the image of successful, individualized girlhood itself is one of the most profitable products being sold” to young women and others, imbuing this girlhood subjectivity with value (Harris, 2004, 20). The ideal neoliberal citizen is therefore embodied in the young, wealthy, flexible, successful, individualized girl, and, as the following analysis will show, Jazz Jennings is well positioned to be read as such.
“The Teen Caitlyn Jenner”: Jazz Jennings as Ideal Trans Girl Citizen

15-year-old trans teen girl Jazz Jennings has become one of the most recognizable transgender young people in U.S. popular media. Her life story has been extensively shared online via her popular YouTube channel, and her story (and fame) spread even more quickly after she was interviewed by Barbara Walters on 20/20 at six years old. Shortly thereafter she was the subject of the documentary *I Am Jazz: A Family in Transition*, which aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network in 2011. In the years since, Jennings has published a children’s book about her life, started a nonprofit organization to assist other trans youth, and became the subject of a reality series on cable television channel TLC that premiered in July 2015. She also has become well known as a young trans advocate, and has been recognized by a number of mainstream LGBT organizations’ and presses, including GLAAD, *Out Magazine*, *The Advocate*, and LogoTV, which awarded her the 2014 Youth Trailblazer Award. She has also been named a Human Rights Campaign Youth Ambassador. Jennings has been credited with increasing visibility for transgender youth, and her presence in mainstream media is often looked to as a sign of “progress” in teleologies of transgender rights discourse.

*Advocate* reporter Yezmin Villarreal chronicled Jennings’ rise to fame in a July 2015 article, and attributed her success in part to an increasing interest in “trans rights” as “activists are looking for focus…“[i]n the wake of nationwide marriage equality” (2015). Jennings’ fame is represented, in this article, as “her first full-time job,” immediately placing her subjectivity in the realm of productivity for the mainstream LGBT rights movement (Villarreal, 2015). In characterizing her trans youth celebrity status, Villarreal validates Jennings’ endeavors as successful within capitalist productivity: “Jazz works
hard. She already has a published children’s book titled *I Am Jazz*; she runs a nonprofit organization, TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation, dedicated to supporting transgender youth; and she makes and sells customized silicone mermaid tails for teenagers (the profits are donated to her nonprofit)” (2015). Highlighting Jennings as a published author, the founder of a nonprofit, and an entrepreneur—in other words, emphasizing her “entrepreneurial spirit” and her economic success—allow her to be seen as “productive,” a key factor, as Irving reminds us, for ideal transgender citizenship within neoliberal capitalism (2008, 49).

Further interventions from critical transgender studies illuminate these representations of Jennings as an ideal citizen. Toby Beauchamp argues we must question which subjectivities are valued within “mainstream visibility,” and why, and those for whom visibility is not merely an option on the way to mainstream success (2009, 363). Jennings’ media representations are numerous and typically emphasize her embodiment in ways that uphold her subjectivity along the lines of being “just a normal girl” by extensively highlighting her “beauty,” “long hair,” and other aspects of her normatively feminine appearance. This focus on her physical attractiveness in representations of her in popular discourse is reminiscent of Salvador Vidal-Ortiz assertion, “beauty is “a key, intertwined element of whiteness in transgender representations” (2014, 265). The emphasis on Jennings’ conventional feminine appearance is not unlike representations of Christine Jorgenson in 1950s and 60s popular media, who was characterized as the “good transsexual” by aligning her with the qualities of idealized form of femininity in popular representations (Skidmore, 2011, 275). Emily Skidmore documents how Jorgenson’s
“white skin, blond hair, and slender frame garnered constant comment throughout her tenure in the media,” and allowed her to be read as undoubtedly “female” (2011, 275).

Other representations of Jennings in popular discourse further demonstrate her proximity to heteronormative gender, such as the Huffington Post publishing a video of Jennings declaring her desire to “be a mother one day” when she was 12 years old (Huff Post Queer Voices, 2013). As Jennings becomes increasingly well-known as the “girl who just happens to be transgender,” the specificity of trans youth subjectivity gets pushed further toward the margins of mainstream visibility (Villarreal 2015, par. 1). She and her success as an entrepreneur and reality TV star are often cited as counterpoints to trans youth suicide rates and staggering numbers of LGBT youth who are homeless (Villarreal 2015, par. 7). The focus on her appearance in many popular media representations, as well as her heteronormativity and her economic success reveal how “(some) trans people gain (a particular kind of) visibility through attention from popular media,” but also how, “such gains must always be evaluated in relation to their dependence on regulatory norms of race, class and sexuality” (Beauchamp, 2009, 363). These norms become particularly clear when we examine Jennings’ representation within Clean and Clear’s popular digital media campaign called “See The Real Me.”

“Double digit increases in market shares”: Commodity Activism in the “See The Real Me” Campaign

Jennings made headlines when she was named “the new face of Clean and Clear” as a participant in “See The Real Me,” an advertising and social media campaign of the skin care brand that is a subsidiary of Johnson and Johnson Consumer Companies.
Described as being “about building confidence in teenage girls,” the campaign has been praised in many outlets for its successful use of social media as the foundation of its branding campaign. The campaign centers on the Clean and Clear YouTube channel, where “a series of short documentaries bypass acne, focusing instead on girls who pursue passions that, based on their appearances, may challenge expectations” (Newman, 2014, par. 3).

These short videos are all easily sharable at under two minutes long with professional production (Clean and Clear spent $29.1 million on advertising in 2012); the videos feature upwards of 20 “expectation-defying girls” telling their stories of individual accomplishment (Newman, 2014, par. 19, par. 8). For example, “Alexa’s” video tells the story of her overcoming her shyness to become a leader in her school’s JROTC program, and “Precious,” who is blind, is represented in her “See the Real Me” video as doing daily activities without assistance. These videos are characterized as “branded content” for Clean and Clear, which “aims to align brands with consumers but not sell to them overtly,” so the videos do not mention Clean and Clear or their products. Instead, the only evidence that the videos are associated with the brand comes in the form of their logo as an “end card,” or the last image viewers see when the presentation of a girl’s story has concluded (Newman, 2014, par. 8).

The “See The Real Me” campaign claims to be “about girls having the courage to show who they really are, and what makes them unique” (Morgenson, 2015). Such claims to authenticity by way of courage and uniqueness can also be read as neoliberal celebrations of individual success and happiness via consumption. When asked about what “fueled” the “See The Real Me” campaign, Clean and Clear brand manager Kacey
Dreby responded with the following, telling of the decisions involved in the format of the ad as primarily driven by social media:

In our research, we found that teens today want to be seen and heard, but they're afraid of being judged. With the advent of online comments and forums, judgment is accelerated and amplified; teens can feel torn down seconds after posting a selfie. So, in addition to meeting our audience on the digital channels where they were spending their time, it was important that our content empower them on those same channels (qtd. in Morgenson, 2015).

The idea of “being seen” and “being judged” as primary motivators for creating the “advertising and social media campaign” in the particular way that they did—largely by posting “branded content” on YouTube rather than only in the traditional television ad format—is echoed by Jeff B. Smith, president of skin care at Johnson and Johnson Consumer Companies, the corporation that owns Clean and Clear. In an interview with the New York Times, Smith asserts, “There is an interesting dynamic with teen girls today that we call the paradox…They live in the world of social media and are very much out there and want to be seen, but they’re afraid of being judged” (Newman, 2014, par. 10).

The suggestion that the “See The Real Me” campaign will help girls who want to be seen, but are afraid of being judged develop confidence places it squarely within the realm of commodity activism—a key aspect of contemporary brand culture, or “the way in which these types of brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships,” that emerges in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism (Benet-Weiser, 2012a, 4). The campaign has also been praised for its focus on “audience interaction.” Dreby describes in no uncertain terms: “For [Clean and Clear], content isn’t ‘we post; you respond.’ We stick around to have an authentic, ongoing, two-way dialogue with our fans. It makes the teen girls we're
speaking to feel heard, which is a big part of SEE THE REAL ME®” (qtd. in Morgenson, 2015, par. 11). The potential for dialogue as engendering an “authentic” experience for “fans”—as opposed to buyers—of Clean and Clear products is also emphasized by praise that the brand has received for casting of “non-actors” for its content.

The girls in the “See The Real Me” campaign videos, according to marketing strategist Jen Drexler who was interviewed about the campaign by the New York Times, “look like my teenage babysitters who show up on a Saturday night” (qtd. in Newman, 2104, par. 21). This assessment allows Drexler to conclude, “Clean and Clear has a very authentic and honest place that it’s coming from, and here they feel very much on the side of teenage girls” (qtd. in Newman, 2104, par. 21). As Drexler’s comments demonstrate, “authenticity” is taken up by this campaign in a way that facilitates the cultural valuing of visible “real-ness.” The “symbolic construct” of authenticity, or what Banet-Weiser characterizes as that which “continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives,” is what contributes to this campaign’s ability to endow its subjects with value by virtue of the fact that they are “real girls” (Banet-Weiser 2012a, 5).

Jennings’ video is the frontrunner of this campaign, as it appears on the home page of Clean and Clear’s YouTube page, it is the first video to be listed on the “See the Real Me – A Clean and Clear Series” page, and a picture of Jennings appears as the thumbnail for the #SeeTheRealMe video playlist. Jennings’ separate video series apart from her “See the Real Me” video ad entitled “Jazz Jennings: Clear Skin and the Courage
to be Yourself,” also appears on the Clean and Clear YouTube main page. Jennings’ involvement as a transgender girl involved in a mainstream marketing campaign can be analyzed alongside uneven increases in transgender visibility. However, because this campaign in particular has been praised for its success in marketing “authentically” to teen girls, Jennings’ involvement in such a successful campaign is worth noting.

Advertising trade publications praised the campaign for its success in a number of different realms. Most prominently, special attention has been paid to the Clean and Clear branding company by YouTube, who chose the campaign to feature in an article called “Video Marketing Lessons from Clean and Clear” (Morgenson, 2015). The article highlights Clean and Clear’s ability to go “from a handful of videos on YouTube to more than 120...earn[ing] millions of views for its anchor series, SEE THE REAL ME®, and, more importantly, has seen double digit increases in market share” (Morgenson, 2015).
Figure 22: An Instagram post from the Clean and Clear brand’s account page featuring a still from Jennings’ “See the Real Me” video feature.

Highlighting the brand’s success in this way reveals the primary achievement of the campaign as increasing market share for the company, which is built on “empowering teen girls.” Situating Jennings’ story as one from a “real girl,” as this commodity activism campaign does, reveals how the video values Jennings’ transgender subjectivity only to the extent that it reiterates her ideal girl citizen subject status, and ultimately, in becoming invisible, provides the affective labor for her story of individualized success. The “See The Real Me” campaign is clearly an example of commodity activism that markets toward girls, whose consumer citizenship status is engendered by the neoliberal free marketplace. The function of Jennings’ trans(normative) subjectivity in this commodity activism campaign is perhaps best identified with her short video included as part of the “See The Real Me” branded content series, which is analyzed below.

“Being Your True Self”: Transnormativity and Affective Liberation

Titled “Jazz Jennings: Being Your True Self,” the video feature starring Jennings invokes authenticity from the outset, encouraging viewers, particularly those who are young and female-identified to watch the video as inspiration in their self-development as girls. Invoking the idea of a “true self” in the video’s title importantly orients it toward youth in late modern capitalism, who Harris argues, are “obligat[ed] to become unique individuals.” However that obligation is “constructed as a freedom, a freedom best expressed through the display of one’s choices and projects of the self” (Harris, 2004, 6). Clean and Clear taps into this rhetoric of freedom that obscure the regulatory imperative
to choose, display, and “work on the self” facing girl citizen subjects in late modern capitalism in particular.

When the video begins, soft piano music underscores the seriousness and sadness of Jennings’ monologue, and indirect, light-saturated shots of her face and body appear on as a golden sun sets outside the frame. “I’ve always known exactly who I am,” she recites, as viewers see a darkened figure against the sunset run their hands through long, flowing hair. Jennings’ face comes into focus as she says, “I was a girl trapped in a boy’s body,” and in the next shot, her shoulder and the strap of her tank top are evident, followed by a close-up of her face looking into the distance (Clean and Clear, 2015). These shots emphasize Jennings’ physical body so as to direct viewers to the embodied experience Jennings is describing of being “trapped in the wrong body,” a dysphoric feeling that has become familiar as a narrative of transgender subjectivity (Engdahl, 2014, 267). Dysphoria, which has historically been a mode of “diagnosing” transgender subjectivity as pathology in medical discourse, has become a recognizable characterization for transgender subjects in popular discourse, allowing this representation of trans subjectivity to be seen as normative. As many popular representations of transgender subjectivities (and the rest of the video) demonstrate, once this dysphoria is overcome by way of an individual’s ability to gain happiness by re-aligning themselves with “the right path”—in this case, being in the “right” a body, or that which aligns with heteronormative gender—transnormative subjects are ultimately folded back into the nation; they are “happy” both as individuals, and as citizens of a happy nation (Ahmed, 2010, 48).
As Jennings recalls her experiences as a transgender middle school student, and viewers are pointed toward instances of “feeling bad,” or how “[t]rans difference has been typified in Western culture…particularly because transness itself has no as-yet discovered biological etiology” (Keegan, 2013, par. 3). The images in the video serve to highlight the isolation and loneliness Jennings experienced, presented as a result of her unresolved transgender subjectivity. She explains, “Growing up has been quite a struggle being transgender. Especially in middle school. Some kids greet each other with hugs and then just give me a hi. And sometimes I’ve even been called an it. So I basically kept to myself” (Clean and Clear, 2015). Viewers watch as Jennings, alone in her room, pets her cat, stands alone beside a lake, and stares out at the street in front of her house from behind a closed window.

The isolation and unhappiness Jennings describes are allusions to her transgender subjectivity—being in the “wrong body” prevents her from being hugged by classmates, or from referring to her as “she” (rather than “an it”). This declaration holds her classmates accountable to their transphobia, though this stance is buried by the quick change in her intonation at this point in the video. Rather than lamenting her loneliness before she “put [her]self out there,” her upbeat voice now reflects excitement as she declares, “But this year I decided to make a change and put myself out there and make new friends” (Clean and Clear, 2015). The video’s narrative positions Jennings as able to become realigned with heteronormative gender through a re-dedication of individual effort to approximate the regulatory norms of girlhood.
Figures 23 and 24. Screenshots from Jennings’ “See the Real Me” video feature showing her profile being highlighted by a setting sun, while she has a contemplative look on her face as she looks into the distance, and which she is looking out from behind a closed window (Clean and Clear 2015).

Jennings’ desire to “put [her]self out there,” highlighted in the video, is reminiscent of what Harris refers to the reconfiguration of the “private and public split” for certain girls in late modernity. Specifically, Jennings’ recollection of her story falls into line with Harris’ observation of the “new understanding that young women ought to make their private selves and ‘authentic voices’ highly visible in public,” which ultimately allows for further regulation of girls’ “interiority through the culture of display and confession” as well as a “new emphasis on youth participation in political life” (Harris, 2004, 125).

Jennings is represented as motivated by the “incitement to discourse” that this campaign encourages of the girls who are involved, but reading her involvement through the imperative of transgender subjects to “fade back into the population” in order to gain belonging within the nation complicates our understanding of the late modern girlhood that Harris’ reading provides (Aizura, 2006, 296). Specifically, as a trans girl, Jennings must retreat from her transgender subjectivity in order to “speak out” as her “authentic self,” thus emptying her trans youth subjectivity of any value in the service of upholding normative ideals of girlhood. Making her transgender subjectivity invisible—that is, as a
“struggle” she was able to overcome—reveals the affective labor that her transgender subjectivity provides toward approximating the normative girlhood that she espouses in this video. The invisibility of her trans subjectivity is made even more apparent in the second half of the video, wherein the video presents Jennings as happily surrounded by friends.

She opens the front door to her house, and viewers see a group of three girls smiling, waving, and shouting “Hey!” to Jennings, who greets them with a smiling face. She goes on to explain, “For the first time, I invited girls over to the house. We started hanging out more, and it was just a great time for me—and it still is” (Clean and Clear, 2015). As she speaks, we see the girls putting on makeup, doing each other’s hair, trying on clothes in Jennings’ bedroom, and dancing and posing for selfies in front of the mirror. Jennings can be seen laughing, with her arms around her presumably non-transgender female friends, and she blows a kiss toward the camera. These moves are not only about demonstrating the “happiness” that Jennings achieved, but also serve to redirect viewers’ attention; the video pivots from away from her transgender subjectivity to highlight her normative girlhood subjectivity. Jennings is surrounded by girl friends who read as white and normatively feminine; they happily pick outfits from a well-stocked wardrobe, and choose from a large collection of makeup and hair styling tools as they dance around the colorful bedroom of a large, middle-class home.
The next “happy” scene takes place at a pool party. Two cisgender boys in bathing suits are seen splashing into the pool in an attempt to catch a football, as Jennings, sitting fully clothed on a chair beside the pool with her friends, laughs and points. Viewers hear Jennings say, “The real me is happy and proud to be who I am, and I’m just having fun being one of the girls.” The scene ends with Jennings flanked by two of her female friends with their legs splashing in the pool, arms interlinked. Jennings, laughing, puts her head on her friend’s shoulder, and the scene fades out. Jennings then appears on a plain background, smiling wide and speaking directly to the camera to conclude, “I’m Jazz. See the real me,” as the Clean and Clear logo appears (Clean and Clear, 2015). Viewers are affectively moved by the story presented in Jennings’ video, which concludes with images of her smiling and surrounded by girl friends as evidence of her newfound confidence. With a marked turn in the music, now upbeat to match the excitement of the scene, the video presents Jennings as opening her front door to not only receive her girl friends to her home, but also to end her isolation.
The video shows Jennings’ as liberated, in line with transnormative representations that represent transgender youth as overcoming their personal struggle of their transgender embodiment, which serves to then liberate the nation. As she moves from a frowning face in the beginning of the video and recalling times when she “was even called an ‘it,’” Jennings is “moved out of dysphoric affect and toward a place of authenticity that mimetically resolves the problem of trans difference in American society” (Keegan, 2013, par. 6). The video presents Jennings’ struggle of being transgender as resolved by her individual confidence, ultimately allowing her to gain access to her “real” self, which is “happy,” “proud to be who I am,” and “just…one of the girls” (Clean and Clear, 2015). Jennings’ representation as a “real girl,” who through her own individual effort became free of isolation and struggle, allows viewers to sympathize with her in multiple ways: as an ideal neoliberal girl citizen subject whose individual effort allowed her to become her “real self,” as well as a way for the national body to “sympathetic[ally] absorb trans difference” through the affectively “moving” presentation.
of her transnormativity (Keegan, 2013, par. 7). The images of focus in this video bolster the representation of Jennings as a liberated, ideal citizen.

Specifically, Jennings’ non-normative subjectivity is brought back into line by placing her in proximity to normative girlhood. Jennings is social with girls who read as white, upper class, and normatively gendered. They put makeup on each other, do each other’s hair, and try on clothes, reflecting the imperative to work on one’s self that is associated with young femininity in late modern capitalism. And finally, the appearance of Jennings and her friends in the presence of normatively gendered young men at the pool party underscores the heteronormativity of normative girlhood. By presenting her transgender embodiment as a “struggle” that is ultimately overcome not only through individual self-motivation, but through ascendance to “authentic” girlhood—that is, a girl who has other girl friends, who wears makeup and styles her hair, and who admires boys at the pool—Jennings’ transgender subjectivity gains value only insomuch as it becomes invisible.

Motivated by the affective mood of neoliberal individualism as well as the knowledge that her transgender subjectivity prevents her from being seen as “a real girl,” the video conceals Jennings’ gender deviance in the way that “is about much more than simply erasing transgender status” (Beauchamp, 2009, 357). Because “marginalized gender identities can approximate the norm in part through clinging to ideals of whiteness and class status,” Jennings’ ability to be read as “a real girl” occurs through her position as being able to align her gender presentation with “white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual understandings of normative gendering” (Beauchamp, 2009, 357). Therefore a close reading of Jennings’ representation in this video reveals how the
gendered, racialized, and classed underpinnings of ideal citizenship function to position Jennings as an ideal trans(normative) girl citizen subject, as well as how such subjectivities are valued in their capacity to uphold the neoliberal multicultural nation. As the following section will outline, Jennings becomes an object of “national love” through the affective labor of her transgender subjectivity, which is made productive in the service of the nation by upholding ideal girlhood as a neoliberal consumer citizen subject position, and further devaluing non-normative transgender and girlhood subjectivities.

Making Jazz “Work”: Affective Labor of Transgender Subjectivities

Reading Jennings’ participation in the “See The Real Me” campaign through the video outlined above illuminates the affective labor performed by her transgender subjectivity, which is quite literally figured as surplus when she asserts she doesn’t want to be known as “the transgender girl” but “the average girl” in popular media following the release of the Clean and Clear video (Nichols, 2015). Within the video, Jennings’ transgender subjectivity provides the “affective matrix” through which viewers of the video can sympathize with her inability to be seen as a “real girl,” and thus resolve the nation’s “trans difference” once she is able to overcome her dysphoric feelings (Keegan, 2013). In this way, we can see how her transgender subjectivity is put to work (Irving, 2008) by providing the affective labor for Jennings to be accepted into the “national body,” which as Ahmed reminds us is “is assumed in its ‘freedom’ to be unmarked” (Ahmed, 2004, 133). In order to gain entrance to the “national body,” Jennings must ultimately give up her (visible) transgender subjectivity. For this affective labor—
inspiring sympathy and, ultimately, happiness, in viewers by way of becoming invisible—her subjectivity rewarded with access to feeling like “a real girl.”

By highlighting the happiness and freedom that is presumed to come with embodying one’s “true self,” this video represents Jennings as an ideal citizen of the neoliberal nation. Because her transgender subjectivity is necessary (to overcome) in order to approximate the neoliberal ideal citizenship that the “See The Real Me” campaign espouses, Jennings’ transgender subjectivity becomes productive in the context of this ad campaign. The video capitalizes on Jennings’ transgender subjectivity as providing feelings of “ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community,” which Clean and Clear can then incorporate into the commodity activism of their “See The Real Me” campaign (Hardt 1999, 96). Further, the specifically digital affective labor Jennings’ provides to the campaign here is effectively “free”; while she is initially compensated for her participation in the campaign, the countless shares and views that her story provides for Clean and Clear continues to exploit her labor seemingly endlessly in the expansion of the market that is characteristic of digital economies (Terranova, 2000, 36).

As this video feature demonstrates, Jennings’ approximation of the national ideal becomes recognizable in the figure of the successful girl citizen-subject, a “can-do girl” who Anita Harris argues is “optimistic, self-inventing, and success-oriented” in discourses of late modern capitalism (2004, 25), while her counterpart, the “at risk girl,” represents the “girl as failure” (Harris 2004, 25). The “See The Real Me” campaign is built upon “real girls” testifying their journeys of “[a]utonomous selfhood” as a “project of self-transformation and personal development” (Nayak and Kehily, 2008, 144-145).
Including Jennings in their campaign demonstrates how Clean and Clear is investing in her as a “can-do” girl, who has overcome her “at-risk” status as transgender by way of her own self-motivation; however that “accomplishment” is only presentable as such through her proximity to the norms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and celebrity status. As Harris argues of the can-do girl subjectivity, “the material resources and cultural capital of the already privileged are required to set a young woman on the can-do trajectory” (Harris, 2004, 35). Similarly, transgender subjectivities are bound by the imperative to approximate whiteness in exchange for legibility and citizenship (Skidmore, 2011; Lee, 2006; Beauchamp, 2009).

The emphasis on needing to “fit in” here—images that show Jennings’ prolonged loneliness as juxtaposed with “putting herself out there,” her assertion that she is “happy” once she is “just…one of the girls” as the conclusion to the video—invokes the ideal transgender citizen who is “at home within one’s body” and “at home in the nation” (Aizura, 2006, 295). The feeling of “fitting in” in this way brings to mind citizenship as “fading back into the population” as well as “the imperative to be ‘proper’ in the eyes of the state: to reproduce; to find proper employment; to reorient one’s ‘different’ body into the flow of nationalized aspiration for possessions, property, wealth” (Aizura, 2006, 296). Ideal transgender citizenship orients both trans subjects toward productivity, as well as the nation towards capitalizing on that productivity. As Irving has importantly argued in his work linking trans subjects to neoliberal political economy, “Discourses of economic productivity contributed to the degradation of transsexuality and the systemic erasure of transsexual individuals. Within a heteronormative capitalist society organized around binary sex/gender and exploitative labor relations, transsexuality did not work” (2008, 296).
Therefore for Jennings to “work” as a trans subject, for her to be productive for the “See The Real Me” campaign, she must be fit into a system that has historically erased her subjectivity.

In order to allow viewers to feel “at ease” with Jennings being considered a “real girl,” her transgender subjectivity must be “overcome”—become invisible to access ideal neoliberal citizenship status—allowing the image of Jennings, in this video and its circulation throughout popular discourse, to take the shape of the national ideal. Mobilizing this image of Jennings demonstrates what Dan Irving has argued of the imperative for transgender subjects perform “good” and “deserving” citizenship by way of fitting into “a heteronormative capitalist society organized around binary sex/gender and exploitative labor relations” (2008, 49). The way Jennings fits (and is fit) into the nation, through her transnormative narrative and arrival at “real girlhood,” demonstrate show as certain transgirls are valued, others are pushed far from view.

Transgender Girlhood and Media Economies of Trans Youth Visibility

Bringing together critical transgender studies and girlhood studies to interrogate representations of Jennings as part of a neoliberal multicultural political economy that compels young people to strive for ideal consumer citizenship as a way of approximating unique and individual happiness and success, reveals yet another mode of what Puar refers to as the “ascendancy of whiteness” within neoliberal multiculturalism (2007, 26). The connection of whiteness to “(neo)liberal ideologies of difference—market, cultural, and convergences of both—that correspond to ‘fitness-within-capitalism’…ultimately promise ‘incorporation into the American Dream’” (Puar, 2007, 26). Jennings’...
transnormative subjectivity allows her to achieve the “American Dream” of ideal neoliberal girl citizens—being “free” to be “herself.” In so doing, Jennings becomes “part of the production of a narrative about young feminine citizenship as a purchasable commodity, as made more real in the act of consumption” (Harris, 2004, 91). However as scholars of transgender citizenship and visibility have documented, representations of Jennings as a “normal girl” position her transgender subjectivity as that which needs to be overcome, or resolved, in order to be seen as an authentic and unique neoliberal individual—that is, she must be represented as transnormative.

While Jennings references harassment she has endured—and importantly, overcome—there is no mention of the structures in place that maintain the hierarchy of her transgender subjectivity as a pathologized gender identity. The emphasis in the video on her own courage and confidence that allows her to triumph over this difficult period in her life redirects attention from the structural marginalization of transgender youth—particularly those who are not in close proximity to the norms that she embodies. This is not unlike what Sarah Banet-Weiser has documented of the context of race within consumer citizenship, wherein “representational practices offer what looks like more inclusive, more democratic society—but one with no political referent or practice” (2007, 146). Jennings being represented in this campaign has been documented in popular discourse as working toward “increased media visibility” and “positive representations” of transgender youth (Banet-Weiser, 2007, 146).

With this contradiction in mind, I look to an article published by the Huffington Post documenting Jennings’ involvement with the campaign. Reporter JamesMichael Nichols explains,
Due to Jennings’ bravery and insistence on living as her true self both on and off camera, she is helping to change the way the world sees transgender people. She claims she’s ‘just having fun being one of the girls’ in her new Clean and Clear video, above, but we know better: she’s transforming the world (Nichols, 2015, par. 1).

The previous close readings of Jennings’ representations within this campaign closely puts this reporter’s assertion of Jennings’ ability to “transform the world” into context. The visibility that this author espouses—that is, the way the world sees transgender people—is not so much changed as it is brought back into line with normative subject positions. Like in the Clean and Clear video, Jennings is presented here as a neoliberal ideal youth citizen subject who is brave and insistent on living as her true self, which works to demonstrate her “capacity…to inhabit the national body,” (Ahmed, 2004, 133). Thus non-normative transgender subjectivities—or those who are positioned further from this capacity—are further devalued and non-normative youth subjects are pushed further from view.

In this chapter, I have argued that Jazz Jennings’ video feature in the “See The Real Me” digital marketing campaign from the Clean and Clear corporation can be read as transnormative, as it presents Jennings as moving from someone who is struggling, to someone who is successful, from “a girl trapped in a boy’s body,” who is mourned by the nation, to “just one of the girls,” who is an object of “national love” (Keegan, 2013; Ahmed, 2004, 131). Reading the “See the Real Me” campaign as commodity activism “illustrates the contradictions, contingencies, and paradoxes…between merchandising, political ideologies, and consumer citizenship” that this representation capitalizes on and is embroiled in (Banet-Weiser 2012a, 17). Jennings’ involvement with the campaign was cast as a victory for her, as her individual celebrity status would be increased as a
spokesperson for Clean and Clear, and as a victory for transgender youth visibility. It was also represented as a victory for Clean and Clear as a brand, whose choice to include Jennings in the campaign as a way of letting “real girls” share their “real stories” allowed them to reap the social, cultural, and, ultimately, economic benefits that come with such a noble accomplishment within neoliberal multiculturalism. However, as this article has demonstrated, increases in visibility that are confined to transnormative representations do not translate into political power. At best, they distract from the need for further political interventions for these marginalized groups by suggesting neoliberal multicultural progress has already been achieved. At worst, they completely erase those stories already far from view in popular discourse: of non-normative transgender youth who are positioned far outside the realm of intelligibility to the nation.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Who Gets to Be Seen?

Fitting (Certain) Trans Youth into the National Body

“When we’re trying to be normal, when we’re trying to be included in a culture that never wanted us to be in the first place, we don’t get to talk about our lives.”


As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the tenuous place that transgender young people occupy in popular discourse is made even more precarious by the affective media economies structuring that discourse. By examining how media economies of transgender youth shape the contours of citizenship for trans youth subjectivities, we can come to a fuller understanding of how certain trans youth subjectivities are mobilized as the image of the neoliberal, multicultural national ideal—a normative national body of citizens. These subjectivities gain value in their circulations, at the expense of marginalized transgender youth whose stories are already rarely ever told. The valuing of transgender youth according to how well they “fit” into the nation is evident in the affective economies of trans youth media discourse that these chapters have traced. Happy trans youth subjectivities—who have overcome their “bad” transgender feelings—are deemed most valuable in their capacity to align transgender youth with the heteronormative national body. Thus trans youth are left with limited choices with which to articulate their subjectivities—and live their lives.
The erasure that transnormativity commits is violent, as part of a system of institutionalized transphobia that continues to impose violence onto marginalized trans populations. Rampant increases in poverty, criminalization, homelessness, unemployment, lack of healthcare, death, and disappearance that transgender people continue to face at the hands of the state are lost when the individualized, transnormative stories of trans people are mobilized in popular discourse as evidence of the progression of the U.S. as a tolerant, exceptional nation. As the story of Blake Brockington in Chapter Three, as well as the stories of countless others whose lack of neoliberal multicultural relevance (read: non-normative) deem them unworthy of inclusion in popular discourse, demonstrate, the valuing of normative trans youth subjectivities necessarily occurs on the backs of non-normative trans youth subjectivities, further marginalizing trans youth to the edges of precarity. By tracing the contours of these marginalizing systems, this project maps places where intervention and resistance are necessary, possible, and already occurring.

**Transgender, Youth, and Media Studies: Contributions of this Project**

By bringing studies of youth together with critical transgender studies and critical media studies, these chapters present more nuanced readings of transgender youth, as well as how media economies of visibility function to produce ideal trans youth citizen subjectivities. Narratives of transgender youth being fit into the national body by way of affective exchange are evident online, where transgender youth subjectivities are constantly being worked on and out. Therefore these chapters have looked to digital media economies, where narratives of transgender youth are circulated and negotiated, to
trace how, and why, exchanges of affect allow some narratives to gain more value in their circulation. This dissertation therefore contributes to a number of growing fields of interdisciplinary scholarship, including that which examines transgender youth (Gill-Peterson, 2014; Owen, 2016), as well as transnormativity in media representations of transgender youth (Keegan, 2013; Campisi, 2013; Sandercock, 2015). Further, my explorations of digital media economies throughout these chapters is situated alongside critical scholars of digital media (Karatzogianni and Kuntzman, 2012; Terranova, 2004), as well as studies of affective labor online (Balance 2012; McCosker and Darcy 2013; Garde-Hanson, 2013; Scholz, 2013). Transgender studies, youth studies, and media studies frame my analysis because I find their theoretical tools important and productive for the interrogations of the discursive and material worlds that transgender youth navigate on a daily basis. However my work also demonstrates a crucial need for analyses that draw on these fields together, in order to broaden the understandings of how discourse functions through the lens of neoliberal multiculturalism.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that questioning the terms of transgender visibility must not be ignored, particularly as part of the shifting landscape of neoliberal multiculturalism, which utilizes affective economies to accrue value for images of the ideal trans youth citizen. These chapters illuminate how transnormativity echoes throughout popular discourse. By situating narratives of transgender youth subjectivities within media economies of visibility, not only can we trace the discursive flows of these narratives, but we can also uncover spaces where resistance is always occurring, even as neoliberal multicultural capitalism attempts to bring those resistances under control. Reading these affective economies through their reverberations in cyberspace and beyond
leaves room for protesting the mediated violence these media economies commit and helps us to imagine a world for transgender youth otherwise. This world is one where transgender youth can talk about, and live, their whole lives, not just the parts that fit in with the national body. The proliferation of transnormative images of youth reverberates loudly through media economies, drowning the voices of those trans youth whose non-normative subjectivities are always already resisting the terms of the national body—by surviving within it.

**Redistributing Value: Making Transgender Youth Erasure and Resistance Visible**

This dissertation took on the task of tracing how narratives of transgender youth circulate online, and doing so revealed how possibilities for transgender young people to articulate their own subjectivities are foreclosed by only focusing on those in close proximity to heteronormative gender. As these chapters have demonstrated, narratives of transgender youth that fit more comfortably into normative understandings of transgender identity and embodiment gain value in their circulations. In order to allow the U.S. American public to become “comfortable” with certain transgender young people—the homecoming queen, the “average girl,” Jazz Jennings—the bodies performing the labor of that comfort are those who are positioned further from the regulatory norm, and who do not have the option of visibility. These bodies must affectively bear the “burden of concealment” which occurs invisibly and violently in media economies of transgender youth visibility.

Understanding how and where discourses of transgender youth normativity circulate allows for spaces of rupture to become evident. One such space
been briefly engaged with in this project) is through online self-representations posted on social media such as YouTube and circulated throughout other platforms such as Tumblr. By centering the experiences of non-normative trans youth, in less highly regulated spaces, we can see places where these young people “reconfigure” the discursive space of transgender visibility by, as Tobias Raun has documented in his work, enacting “a kind of bio-digital politics through the publicized bodies and onscreen self-disclosure of feelings attached to this body” (Raun, 2012, 179). Therefore future work examining the media economies of transgender youth visibility must turn toward these young people’s self-representations in order to document how these youth bear the burden of concealing their transgender subjectivities (in various capacities) so that more transnormative youth are intelligible in neoliberal U.S. public discourse.

To conclude, and contextualize this call to action, I look to a YouTube video posted by user AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy in November 2014 entitled, “being transgender at the mental hospital.” Unlike the vlogs that Raun documents, this video comes from a young transgender person, for whom the stakes for “belonging” are often covered over by youthful innocence. However in this video, in which Achilles shares with his viewers the events that unfolded upon being taken to “the local psychiatric hospital” after a suicide attempt, we can see how special consideration must be taken to make the stakes of transgender youth visibility evident. In the broader context of media economies of transgender youth visibility that this dissertation has documented, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy’s video stands out from those digital videos taken up by BuzzFeed and similar circulatory media outlets as “heartwarming” or “inspirational” stories of transgender youth who are able to “just be themselves.”
AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy’s self-representation immediately complicates ideas of transgender visibility as his video opens with an apology to his viewers for his absence from his YouTube channel by explaining that he “went stealth for high school.” Going stealth, or effectively erasing his transgender embodiment for the purposes of survival, demonstrates further the labor transgender young people must perform to resolve the institutional inability to cope with transgender youth. He goes on: “I want to talk about something that happened over the summer that I just decided that I should probably share to let people know.” Speaking directly to the camera, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy makes his feelings public in a way that uncovers that which neoliberal multiculturalist logics render unintelligible in narratives of progress for transgender youth. This digital self-representation demonstrates how possibilities for transgender young people to articulate their own, often “unhappy” or transgressive narratives are foreclosed on by only focusing on those in close proximity to normative youth and gender identity.

AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy explains the events that unfolded when he arrived at the “local psychiatric hospital” one night after being arrested for attempting suicide:

Figure 27. Screenshot from the opening of the video “being transgender at the mental hospital” posted by on YouTube by user AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy (2014).
So, one of the first things they asked me was obviously, ‘What’s your name?’ And being that I’m just 16, my name on my birth certificate or ID has not been changed, so when I told them it was Jack it became apparent that there was some sort of discrepancy between those two so…They didn’t like the transgender thing.

Explaining his treatment upon his arrival to the hospital serves as the introduction to this traumatic experience of institutionalized transphobia that very clearly demonstrates how transgender youth face unprecedented discrimination, despite attempts by neoliberal multicultural media economies of transnormative trans youth visibility to indicate otherwise. After recounting his arrival at the hospital, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy explains, “Being that the hospital was in Texas, no one really likes that stuff here, so…I’m basically going to describe the frankly really bad conditions and what it’s like to be a transgender person in the mental health field.” This initial administrative violence is then repeated throughout the video, as he recounts the hospital’s refusal to allow him to have his name, Jack, on his identifying nametag, and the staff forcing him to introduce himself by his “birth name” repeatedly during his stay at the hospital:

They would try to trick me into telling them my birth name, how to pronounce it, because you know, I’m from Pakistan. I have a really long, complicated birth name, it’s really hard to pronounce. And they would try to be like, ‘Oh, where are you from?’ ‘How do you pronounce your name?’ and I was just like…you’re just trying to trick me into pronouncing it so that that’s the name you’ll call me by.

As the experience that AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy describes in this segment of the video, as well as his subsequent reaction to being treated this way, demonstrates, transgender youth who do not fit neatly into the confines of transnormative embodiment must navigate far more entrenched structures, including nationalism and racism, that bolster and exacerbate institutionalized transphobia. The complex intersectional subject positions that non-normative transgender youth occupy are not often seen in media
discourses that attempt to (re)present transgender youth as universally struggling for recognition in terms of assimilative recognition by the nation-state.

In addition to these experiences, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy goes on to describe various instances of harassment he endured while being treated for mental health issues at the hospital, including being told by a staff member at the hospital that the reason why he was in the hospital was “not because you tried to kill yourself, it is because you are transgender and you need to be fixed.” After a trigger warning that he was going to be discussing sexual assault, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy recounts:

I didn’t read over the rules…I was kind of panicking, and I was taken into a dark room, by myself, and I was told to take off all my clothes. Um, I said no, and I was told that if I did not comply I would be in trouble and that it was the rules of the hospital and that every patient had to remove their clothes upon coming in, to check for like knives, or anything that could be used to harm yourself. Like they said it was a safety procedure.

At this point viewers see AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy make quotation marks in the air with his fingers as he says “safety procedure,” and he shakes his head while under his breath says, “no it wasn’t.” Eventually, he explains, he was forced by a nurse at the hospital to “remove everything so that she could see my genitals.” As he looks at the camera, the trauma that he experiences recalling this particular incident is invoked by the distraught expression on his face, as he then looks down after a brief pause and continues to explain. Not only does AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy recount the details of this incident in order to make it visible to viewers, but he importantly connects this individual incident of transphobia to a broader culture that devalues trans lives and refuses them agentic subjectivity. He explains:

A lot of the questions that I’ve heard transgender people being asked is basically, what’s going on downstairs. And basically this nurse took it upon herself to
answer that question and abuse her power as a medical assistant. And when I asked all of the other patients they reported to me that, um, I was actually the only one who was forced to take off all of their clothes.

When understood as part of the systemic, institutionalized refusal of dignity and respect to transgender young people in spaces like that of the psychiatric hospital, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy’s narrative reveals how erasures of such lived realities provide the surplus for transnormative stories of transgender youth happiness, such as those of Landon Patterson and Jazz Jennings, to gain value.

Juxtaposing those representations often circulated by powerful corporate media outlets, such as BuzzFeed and Clean and Clear, with self-representations posted on YouTube, such as AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy’s “being transgender at the mental hospital video,” makes the labor that AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy and countless other non-normative transgender youth perform in these uneven media economies visible. Specifically, affective investments in those narratives of transgender youth that fit more “comfortably” and “happily” into normative understandings of transgender youth gain value in their circulations only through the concealment of those stories that do not contribute happy affect to the media economies of transgender youth visibility.

This dissertation opened with an excerpt from trans activist Reina Gossett’s plenary address at the 2015 INCITE! Color of Violence 4 Conference. Less than one year before this conference, AchillesGuideToTheGalaxy had already posted his video “being transgender at the mental hospital” on YouTube. Transgender youth getting to be seen, which so many corporate representations of transgender youth highlight as unequivocally desirable in their happy representations of normative transgender youth, does not come without costs. Within a culture that regularly devalues and traumatizes those who are
already hypervisible to the state in terms of their non-normativity, the visibility that mainstream media offers as a “solution” for marginalized trans youth is useless at best, and deadly at worst. Transgender young people positioned far outside the confines of ideal citizenship not only do not get to talk about their lives, they often don’t even get to live them. As this dissertation has demonstrated, media economies of transgender youth visibility mobilize certain transgender youth subjectivities at the expense of erasing those positioned further from the norms that transgender youth must embody, or approximate, in order to be recognized as “real” youth. This system further devalues non-normative trans youth lives, relegating them to the dark corners of disposable humanity, valuable only insofar as they mobilize normative trans youth subjectivities, or in death.
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