Rhetorics of trans allyship, toward an ethic of responsible listening and ally labor

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Rhetorics of Trans Allyship,
Toward an Ethic of Responsible Listening and Ally Labor

by

Hannah Lee Johnson

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I cannot believe that I have ended up here. It has been a long, hard journey, one that I can’t fathom being over, but here we are. These acknowledgments are not only thanks to the people who have supported me through this arduous process, but also an apology: thank you, I appreciate you, and now that I have left the University of Iowa, I can reciprocate more of this support for you. I look forward to repaying you all for the support you have given me for the last two and a half years. I hope you all like gift baskets.

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ABSTRACT

Given the rates of discrimination against transgender people and the flaws inherent in existing models of coexistence and allyship, I offer two main concepts to improve trans allyship. First, an ethic of responsible listening, which I explain as the process of opening up discursive spaces for transgender voices to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and to recognize trans people as people. In tandem with listening, then, is its result, ally labor: a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression.

I work through two theoretical questions to help solve the problems with existing theories of allyship: First, how might we move towards more affirming modes of coexistence that allow for difference with the goal of recognizing transgender people as equal members of society? And second, how might we practice allyship differently through listening to voices that have traditionally been marginalized?

Working through these questions, I critique existing coexistence discourses and look toward modes of enacting a more productive discourse of allyship. In order to move beyond understandings of allyship that focus on identity categories, diversity and inclusion discourses, institutional response, and education, we can think of allyship differently, as an ethical orientation that facilitates those who are different from one another living and existing together. I forward a rhetoric of allyship through this dissertation, which I define as the discourses that circulate, modify, and extend the meanings of allies and ally labor, a rhetoric that works to understand how trans and cis people can better coexist together, given an intervention that focuses on trans vernacular voices in order to build and maintain this rhetoric. Intervening
rhetorically allows a focus on the ways that discourses are malleable, contingent, and balance the universal and particular.

In order to do so, I analyze a variety of texts: from popular media coverage of trans celebrities and fictional film and televisual representations to understand the ambivalence of visibility, to ally training manuals from colleges and universities across the United States to parse through the logics of ally training programs, to blogs, zines, and online magazines that craft definitions of solidarity from activists, ending with a qualitative analysis of interviews with 13 transgender people in order to better understand the unique and varied needs of trans people to craft a more holistic version of allyship.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to remedy the limits of existing models of transgender allyship, which I define as the work of living with those who are different from you. At a basic level, cisgender people may learn about transgender people through mass mediated representations of them, whether as fictional characters in film or television or as celebrity spectacles, and I argue that these tropes of transgender people circulate and compete with one another, that even through a narrative of “progress,” old “outdated” tropes can be reused for transphobic political purpose. Other models of allyship have relied on the visibility of allies to create safety and empathy for LGBTQ people in academic contexts, seen in ally training programs like “Safe Zone” projects, but in creating a visible ally identity could end up distancing trainees from those they seek to ally with. Their goals of educating cisgender, heterosexual potential allies is vastly limited by the constraints of the programs. A more radical response comes from activists who work to craft solidarity with those they seek to provide mutual aid, creating closeness and using their privilege to benefit trans people and causes. However, the radical solidarity may make the threshold for action too high—expecting all people to be activists. To create an alternative to these models, I interviewed transgender to theorize an orientation toward trans people that balances the universal need to treat trans people as people and to attend to the particulars of unique experiences on individual levels.
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Preface

It was 11:00 on a Saturday night, and I was a junior in college when I received a text message from my mother’s ex-girlfriend’s kid, who was essentially a step-sibling in all but name, asking if I could talk. I found myself in a conversation that felt very familiar, but not quite the same as the many conversations I’d had with high school friends and acquaintances who had come out to me as gay or lesbian. They came out to me as transgender, haltingly and with caveats but growing stronger and more confident through the course of the conversation.

I wasn’t perfect in that first conversation with them. I knew that this conversation was important, that while I wasn’t the first, I was there for them in that emergency. They explained that they didn’t feel like they were a girl, that they didn’t know what they were, and that they were getting pushback from all sides: their mom, who was convinced they were a butch lesbian because that was her experience; their dad and his family, who had disowned them as “an abomination”; and finally, the high school’s administration, who were attacking our safe music and theatre spaces after they started auditioning for and winning male roles. I listened. I gave advice on the things I could, I asked questions about how they thought they would proceed, and I (probably) asked them some inappropriate questions about surgery and genitals and the intersection of sexuality. At 2:00 a.m., they sighed and thanked me, with a little more hope than they’d had a few hours before. Over time, they resolved their struggles with family and administration, aided by my occasional advice, and almost a decade later, they are professionally acting in Los Angeles, getting roles while identifying as gender nonbinary.

I began this dissertation project on the advice of one of my former professors, who noted that my discomfort with the way cisgender people talked about and represented transgender
people came from a failure of allies, and that I should write about that. No one else had really written about allies, so I should, as a cisgender queer-identified white woman.

Using two cases from famous, self-proclaimed allies to the LGBT community, I started to work through what being an ally really meant. It was in this initial writing, in the spring of 2014, that I started to understand the problems with the stability of the ally identity, that calling oneself an ally made one immune from critique, “because I’m an ally.” Actions, then, were judged not on the basis of their efficacy or their potential to hurt or offend, but their good intentions—because after all, the person doing the actions is an ally. Kenneth Burke talks about how consubstantiality is never permanent but a momentary joining of people, but the concept of ally-as-identity mistakenly believes that the identification between LGBT and cis heterosexual folks, between people of color and white folks, is unceasing.

This understanding of ally-as-identity made me question my own positionality and subjectivity, and through the many years long work of writing this dissertation, I still struggle with these questions of identity. My mom came out as a lesbian when I was 14. As a high schooler in a small, rural town in Illinois, I experienced the intolerance of my colleagues and teachers, from fellow students who threw around the word faggot casually to a teacher’s observation that women come out later in life because they’re sick of men. In high school, then, I fought fiercely on behalf of my mom and my queer friends. I was the über-ally. But I was also white, and my understanding of racism beyond colorblindness didn’t come until I was in graduate school. (Thanks, Darrel!) I saw ally as something I could be, something that made me different. I had an ally button, which I wore on my college backpack, I went to GSA meetings in college (my high school didn’t have one), and I owned a “straight but not narrow” bumper sticker (which ironically lived in my closet in college).
As most productive moments in graduate school go, I was talking to my extremely smart colleague about my new plan to talk about allies. She remarked that in her master’s program, her friend had taken her to dinner with her very conservative parents. When the friend’s mother asked both her daughter and my colleague about “the boys in their lives,” the friend outed my colleague as a lesbian, making for an uncomfortable remainder of their dinner. When my colleague talked to the friend afterward, the friend squawked that she was an ally, and would never do something to hurt her. Her story was one of many moments of ally failure.

I started to rhetorically examine the differences between my intentions and my actions, and of those in public discourse. I attended ally training sessions from the University of Iowa’s Chief Diversity Office and redirected my course of study to a focus on allyship. If what the Safe Zone program was teaching people could constitute allyship, I was skeptical of its effects. In rhetorical scholarship, I could not find the answers I was looking for, so I sought to create them. This dissertation is a long-form exploration of the problems of allyship as I see them through a variety of perspectives. Through my personal anxieties of what allyship was and what allyship could be, I theorized alternatives to the ways that privileged people were being taught to ally with others, because the existing frameworks were not working.

This is not a dissertation project that has been crafted around a fascination with an exotic other, or a text that would deign to explain trans existence and precarity to transgender people. To be frank, the audience of this dissertation is not transgender people—they know the realities I discuss in this project because they live them every day. This is instead prolonged critique and theorization primarily for cisgender people to better learn to provide effective allyship in their daily lives, and to critique the discourses that have established such conditions of precarity for transgender lives.
After finishing this project, I take solace in knowing that my perspectives on how to be better for my trans friends and family have improved past good intentions and bumper stickers. However, I’ve also learned in the process of writing this dissertation that allyship is never an easy task. Frankly, it shouldn’t be.

But my whiteness, my cisness, my relationship with a cisgender man, are all suspect in the study of allyship. Who am I to speak for how trans people want from cisgender people? Who am I to critique thinkpieces from activists on the ground working for their own liberation while I sit in a windowless office and theorize about the right way to enact allyship? Who am I to critique diversity programs that attempt trainings with limited resources, and at least provide a solid baseline of vocabulary?

After writing this dissertation, I would never call myself an ally. I practice allyship, although not as well as I could (no one is perfect). I fail sometimes (often). I struggle with the human elements of this critique of ally-as-identity, which I later call the “liberal allyship” model, because that model is much easier to enact than others I theorize here. But my less privileged friends and family, and the strangers who might become my friends and family, are worth it. They are worth the risk of standing with, they are worth the effort to research oppression so as to use the right vocabulary, they are worth basic human kindness and recognition.

But I am a person who has not suffered from the same discrimination and structural oppression as they have. I have a knapsack full of cis, white, hetero-appearing privilege, to reference Peggy McIntosh’s widely circulated piece. Who am I to speak for?

This dissertation seeks not to speak for trans communities but to speak to and with: both to marginalized populations but also to other allyship practitioners. I’m not calling out allies as the best ally who ever lived, but because I think people can do better for their trans loved ones.
People can do better for trans strangers; they can orient themselves differently toward those whose oppression they have not experienced. People can do better than calling themselves allies and refusing to act.

While I know this dissertation will never become a published academic text, I am still incredibly thankful for the critical insights I have gained through the journey of this dissertation project. I set out to theorize pragmatic solutions to problems of allyship, and the insights within this dissertation do not solve them but may get us closer to a world in which trans people are recognized as people.
Chapter One: Rhetorics of Trans Allyship: Toward an Ethic of Responsible Listening and Ally Labor

“Had I not read your story, I would have had absolutely not a clue you had ever been a boy, a male.”¹ In February of 2014, Piers Morgan interviewed Janet Mock, author of *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*, to publicize her book release on his show, *Piers Morgan Live*.² Mock, then *People* magazine staff editor and *Marie Claire* contributor, was publicizing her first book and making the media circuit. *Redefining Realness* recounted Mock’s experience as a transgender woman of color growing up in Hawaii, engaging in sex work and transitioning at 18, then through a master’s degree, high-profile editorial jobs, and meeting her current husband. During the interview, however, Morgan focused on Mock’s body and personal life, including coming out to her husband. Morgan started the conversation with a comment on Mock’s appearance, saying since he never would have guessed she “had ever been a boy, a male,” that he believed she “should have always have been a woman,” and reminded him of Janet Jackson. Throughout the interview, Morgan referred to Mock’s deadname, the name transgender people were assigned at birth, describing her life before gender confirmation surgery as “when she was a boy” repeatedly.³ Morgan asked Mock how she told her now-husband that she “used to be a man,” a question Mock skillfully evaded. Producer-provided chyrons during the ten-minute segment read “born a boy” and “was a boy until age 18.”⁴

The segment aired several days later while Mock was celebrating her book’s launch, and Mock immediately responded to the televised interview with a flurry of tweets that critiqued Morgan and the way her interview was handled. Most notably, Mock posed in a picture with Emmy-nominated transgender actress Laverne Cox, both making incredulous faces,
accompanying a tweet that read, “Me + @Lavernecox’s reaction after @piersmorganlive tried it with the ‘man’ and ‘boy’ tag lines. #redefiningrealness.” That evening, Mock also critiqued Morgan’s tendency to position her as “born a boy”: “@PiersMorganLive I was not ‘formerly a man.’ Pls stop sensationalizing my life and misgendering trans women. #redefiningrealness.”

Mock’s response to Morgan’s interview led to a magnitude of tweets directed to Morgan critiquing his portrayal of Mock. Many trans individuals were offended by Morgan’s self-characterization as supportive of LGBTQ rights, using Twitter to respond to his treatment of Mock and accuse him of transphobia. Morgan’s tweets in response claimed that by virtue of his previous support of LGBTQ communities and featuring Mock on his show, he was supporting Mock. That, in response to criticism, “As for all the enraged transgender supporters, look at how STUPID you’re being. I’m on your side, you dimwits” and “A lot of very irate people accusing me of ‘transphobia’ because I devoted a third of my show to @JanetMock’s inspiring story. Weird.” Not only did Morgan not understand what he had done wrong, but he insisted that all of his actions were supportive regardless of their effects. He had supported LGBTQ rights in the past, had hosted Mock on his show to boost her book sales, and claimed he could not possibly have done anything transphobic because he was supportive of all LGBT people. Morgan responded to tweets from the transgender individuals, accusing them of “cisphobia.” He conducted a follow-up interview with Mock the night after the original segment aired. Morgan defended his choices in the original interview, reiterating that he was a champion of LGBT rights. He defended his use of “born a man/boy” language, because to him, though she never identified as a boy or man, that she was not a woman until she had undergone gender affirmation surgery at age 18. Online publications such as BuzzFeed and Gawker almost immediately picked up on these tweets, contributing to Mock’s status as a recognizable transgender figure in 2018.
This moment effectively encapsulates several rupture points I see between trans people and their so-called allies. Despite the hurtful things Morgan said to Mock, including deadnaming her, reducing her to her physical appearance, and refusing to believe that her gender could change before gender affirmation surgery, he still considered himself a supporter with good intentions. He thought that by giving her access to a mainstream audience, he was continuing his pattern of support for the LGBT community. I see these rupture points frequently in ally-marginalized relationships; the identity of “ally” is mobilized and reinforced through good intentions and a prior record of support.

This case raises several important questions about coexistence and allyship—the work of living with those who are different from you. First, can “ally” be an identity category to which people assign themselves? What, then, are the implications of that ally identity? Second, how do ally training programs and other modes of teaching coexistence prepare cisgender citizens to understand and coexist with transgender citizens? Third, to what extent can activists expect cisgender people to productively use their privilege to benefit transgender people in everyday contexts?

While the Mock and Morgan case is a very public example, this failure of allyship is in no way an isolated instance. Rather, it captures the concerns of transgender ally politics in the first part of the twenty-first century: that of good intentioned, self-proclaimed allies, assuming that all of their actions qualify as allyship because of their ally identity, despite transphobic actions like deadnaming and transmisogynistic comments like Morgan claimed. The intent is frequently well-meaning, but the impact may be minimal or further marginalizing. I begin with this anecdote to frame the introduction because it effectively encapsulates our modern understandings of allies and allyship, and the discourses I ultimately critique in this dissertation.
project. Through an analysis of campus ally training programs, vernacular activist discourses of radical solidarity, and ethnographic interviews with trans people, I theorize a new perspective of coexistence—one that does not depend on ally as an identity, that does not rely on visibility or recognition, but also takes into account the contextual and contingent elements of dealing with human beings who come from different perspectives and backgrounds, component parts of a rhetoric of trans allyship built in this dissertation.

Given the rates of discrimination and violence against trans people in 2018, I argue for a new rhetoric of allyship. Current discussions of coexistence within activist communities move toward better ways of supporting interpersonal relationships and forming coalitions with other activist groups, but many perspectives of allyship, especially within ally training programs (ATPs) rely on logics of visibility and understanding one’s own privilege rather than taking action to proactively benefit trans people. As an alternative, I argue that an *ethic of responsible listening*, which I define as the process of opening up discursive spaces for transgender voices to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and to recognize trans people as people, could more holistically benefit transgender lives through a process of cisgender people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression, which I call *ally labor*.

*Research Questions and Significance*

Many current understandings of allyship come from higher education and sociology, which present a few problems that might be better approached with rhetorical theory. These disciplines tend to frame “ally” as an identity category that can be trained through awareness of minority populations and one’s own privilege and internal biases. Rhetorical theory and criticism allows for a communicative, performative understanding of allyship, working to destabilize the identity
category of “ally,” and describe allyship instead as an ethical orientation that figures itself toward recognizing trans people as equal in order to enable them to better navigate systems of oppression. In this dissertation, I work through two theoretical questions to help solve the problems with existing theories of allyship: First, how might we move towards more affirming modes of coexistence that allow for difference with the goal of recognizing transgender people as equal members of society? And second, how might we practice allyship differently through listening to voices that have traditionally been marginalized?

Working through these questions, I critique existing coexistence discourses and look toward modes of enacting a more productive discourse of allyship. In order to move beyond understandings of allyship that focus on identity categories, diversity and inclusion discourses, institutional response, and education, we can think of allyship differently, as an ethical orientation that facilitates those who are different from one another living and existing together. I forward a rhetoric of allyship through this dissertation, which I define as the discourses that circulate, modify, and extend the meanings of allies and ally labor, a rhetoric that works to understand how trans and cis people can better coexist together, given an intervention that focuses on trans vernacular voices in order to build and maintain this rhetoric. Intervening rhetorically allows a focus on the ways that discourses are malleable, contingent, and balance the universal and particular. Based on the assumption that rhetoric is “public situated discourse,” that constructs, reflects, enables, and/or constrains judgement, I look to the ways that public discourses around allyship are explained and taken up by those within universities, activists, and trans individuals themselves.¹⁰

In this dissertation, I contribute to rhetorical theory that strives to explain how individuals live together in society, share space, and recognize each other as equals. Given a deficit in these
major subject areas, I bring them together to theorize a rhetoric of coexistence—that is, how do individuals, specifically transgender and cisgender people, live together civilly in the same space while understanding the differences that divide them. Applying and extending theories of vernacular allows me to build on existing rhetorical scholarship that seeks to understand marginalized groups. In this case, I apply and build on queer and trans rhetorical theory, envisioning coexistence beyond passing or assimilation. I engage with existing rhetorical scholarship that theorizes the beneficial and harmful potential of visibility politics for marginalized populations. Allyship, as I theorize throughout this dissertation, takes into account the multivariate and changing needs of transgender people, emphasizing the responsibility everyone has to recognize them as equals. My understanding of effective trans allyship starts with the assumption that “transsexual lives are lived, hence livable,” as feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman wrote in 1997.11

Pinning down the population that is the subject of this dissertation is, as Isaac West discusses, a “slippery” process because of the problems of naming and defining a category built to combat logics of gender and sex as stable.12 Transgender and its frequent abbreviation trans are often described as “umbrella terms,” as trans political scientist and activist Paisley Currah explains, pointing to its appearance in Susan Stryker’s 1994 essay as a metaphor used by many trans scholars and LGBTQ activist groups.13 For Stryker, transgender is “an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries.”14 In her seminal text Transgender History, Stryker remarks that she “uses ‘transgender’ to refer to the widest-imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities,” which is also the strategy of this dissertation.15
Given that much of this dissertation deals with the mass dissemination of *transgender*, I imagine that the popular circulation of the term varies in interesting ways from its scholarly use. Many of the ally training manuals examined through this project, for example, tend to use transgender to refer to any person who does not rigidly adhere to gender binaries and is not cisgender, but their definitions stem from another set of political circumstances in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues were grouped with transgender ones.\(^\text{16}\) The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transgender as “designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to that person's sex at birth, or which does not otherwise conform to conventional notions of sex and gender,” with a note that “although now typically used as an umbrella term which includes any or all non-conventional gender identities, in wider use *transgender* is sometimes used synonymously with the more specific terms *transsexual* or *transvestite*.\(^\text{17}\) While I have critiques of the *OED*’s definition, it is how many Americans understand the term transgender. In recruiting participants for interviews in chapter five, I used the “transgender umbrella” metaphor to include people who identified as gender queer, gender nonbinary, and shifting identities in between. I had to specify the “umbrella” when a participant asked whether they, as a gender queer person, could be included. That I had to specify not to exclude participants who easily fit the academic definitions of transgender I list above is telling about the circulation of the word transgender.

However, to define transgender without self-reflection or critique is to unnecessarily box the term into a corner. To stabilize an always unstable term is contradictory to its basis in movement across gendered bounds and to defy the concept of stable gender binaries. As West remarks, transgender “is always already an unstable identity marker that defines related yet disparate, if not infinitely variable, gender projects.”\(^\text{18}\) The problem, then, lies in how the term
has been solidified into describing an incredibly diverse set of behaviors and identities with an umbrella term. As Currah notes, it has “become almost axiomatic” to use the umbrella metaphor to describe a wide breadth of people, which is seen in a wide variety of contexts. Stryker emphasizes that “it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of transgender.” Taking transgender as an umbrella term that attempts to define itself as “non-cisgender,” then, is to stabilize a concept developed to protest the meaning of cisgender to begin with.

My role in studying transgender people and the discourses that surround them is additionally complex. As detailed in the preface, I come to this project as a white, queer, cisgender, middle-class woman. While I have transgender friends and loved ones, I am not transgender, and thus I approach writing about the structural oppressions trans people face as someone who has never suffered them. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I engaged in an informal practice of member checking, which qualitative researchers frequently use to reduce bias, by discussing arguments and chapters with transgender friends. The importance of doing so was vital given the sociopolitical atmosphere that existed while I wrote this dissertation.

I look to the American cultural and political climate as an exigence for better coexistence practices with transgender people. Transgender people as a population suffer from poverty, homelessness, and housing and employment discrimination at rates far higher than the rest of the American population. According to “The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,” transgender people are twice as likely as the general population to be living in poverty; 29 percent of the survey’s respondents lived in poverty, compared to 12 percent of the United States
population. Contributing to this poverty rate is unemployment at a rate of 15 percent, three times the U.S. population’s in 2015. Another contributor is the rate of workplace mistreatment: 30 percent of the survey’s sample experienced some kind of employment abuse due to their gender identity or expression. Nearly a third of respondents reported being homeless at some point in their lives, with 12 percent experiencing homelessness in the year before the survey, directly linked to their gender identities. Many trans people experience some form of health care discrimination: the report notes that a third of participants received some kind of negative treatment in the process of seeing a health care provider, nearly a quarter of participants did not seek medical care for fear of being discriminated against, and a third did not seek health care when they needed it because they couldn’t afford it. All of these factors contribute to poor mental health among trans people: “40% of respondents have attempted suicide in their lifetime—nearly nine times the attempted suicide rate in the U.S. population (4.6%).” For trans people of color, rates of poverty and unemployment are much higher than white transgender people; three times as likely to be in poverty, four times higher unemployment rate.

Not only are transgender people being discriminated against in housing and employment, but they are also the targets of discriminatory legislation from state and national governments. 2016’s House Bill 2, commonly referred to as North Carolina’s “bathroom bill,” both barred transgender people from bathrooms that do not match their birth certificate’s gender and created statewide discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Despite increased visibility and shifting transgender tropes, which I detail in chapter two, transgender Americans encounter an incredible amount of bigotry and violence on an everyday basis.

My objects of analysis for this dissertation are discourses of coexistence, found in institutional settings like university ally training programs, vernacular activists spheres, and
circulated by transgender people. Chapter two analyzes transgender tropes through the last
decade, tracking their evolution from freak and deceiver tropes to a range of options for trans
recognition. In this chapter I examine transgender tropes seen in popular culture, including the
television series *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black* as well as other programs and films.
Additionally, I analyze mediated coverage of transgender children, Caitlyn Jenner’s transition,
and coverage of House Bill 2. In chapter three, I analyze ally training program manuals, which
exemplify a liberal allyship model that sets lofty goals of inclusion and safety but fails to
accomplish them. In doing so, I examine ten manuals from universities across the United States
and supplement my analysis with experiences in the University of Iowa’s Safe Zone training
programs as a participant and facilitator. Chapter four analyzes activist discourses from different
marginalized groups who craft vernacular responses to liberal allyship that prioritize the
enactment of solidarity. These activist discourses exist online in well-circulated posts such
Indigenous Action Media’s “Accomplices Not Allies” as well as on a range of blogs and other
web publications. In chapter five, I engage in interviews to craft transgender-specific forms of
coexistence that are informed by transgender people. I conducted twelve interviews, ranging
from 30 to 80 minutes long, with a mix of transgender adults that included trans women, trans
men, and nonbinary and gender queer participants.

**Theoretical Perspectives of Visibility and Vernacular**

Through this dissertation, I draw from rhetorical theory that focuses on marginalized or
disempowered discourses and bodies in public. Specifically, I leverage rhetorical criticism on
visibility politics, a political strategy that assumes that an increase of visibility of marginalized
people “equals increased power.” As an alternative to the flawed logic of visibility and
representation, I work through critical rhetoric, an orientation to rhetorical criticism that
understands power as an ever-ebbing and flowing resource that enables and constrains action, and its logical extension, a focus on the critique of vernacular voices—everyday discourse that illustrates the way that power can operate in practice.

Here, I parse through the logics of visibility politics, or the assumption that “that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources.” Visibility politics traditionally conflates increased representation with increased tolerance or acceptance—visibility politics argues that increased visibility also increases resources and legitimacy for those who are visible. Here, I outline the general assumptions of visibility politics and its critique, especially related to the visibility of transgender people.

Representation and visibility are linked to recognition, “or the ability to ‘recognize and be recognized.’” Being recognized is a vital affirmation of our identities, and as Charles Taylor explains, “a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.” Taylor goes so far as to term misrecognition a potential “form of oppression,” contending that correctly recognizing a person’s identity is so important as to affect their sense of self. Via recognition, identities can be affirmed, but they first must be recognized as such. To return to my opening example: by failing to recognize Janet Mock as a trans woman, Piers Morgan denied affirmation of her identity. Morgan received accusations of transphobia because of his failure of recognition.

Visibility politics comes with both benefits and risks for transgender people—that while increased and varied representations of trans people may contribute to positive recognition, it also may render some trans people invisible or make trans people into targets for violence or
discrimination. The activist and academic editors of the recent anthology Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility wrestle with the question “of whether visibility is a goal to be worked toward or an outcome to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, this question—unresolved and unresolvable—shapes discussions that, however varied, share an urgency that might be named existential.” As artist, academic, and trans activist Che Gossett later argues in the anthology, “One of the traps of trans visibility is that it is premised on invisibility: to bring a select few into view, others must disappear into the background, and this is always a political project that reinforces oppression.” Trans visibility is a select visibility, one that renders some visible while rendering others invisible, specifically along racialized and classed norms. As Z Nicolazzo argues in Trans* in College: Transgender Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion, while visibility has led to a “dramatic increase in the visibility of (some) trans* lives,” that visibility was simultaneously “juxtaposed with an increase in violence against the trans* community.” The “some” Nicolazzo points out is vital; while the increased visibility of figures like Laverne Cox provides trans role models, it also makes scapegoats of those who do not conform to binary understandings of gender performance. Such scapegoating, among other matters, leads me to investigate how cisgender Americans can better coexist with transgender Americans, especially those most stigmatized and othered.

Rhetorical scholars are also quick to caution against the binary logic of visibility politics. As Erin Rand argues, “this is not to suggest that queer visibility is necessarily politically progressive but that critics must engage in the struggle to rethink and reshape the limited images available, and they need to do so in a manner that is not restricted by the simple dichotomies,” expecting visibility to garner progression and invisibility as regressive. As I discuss in chapter two, transgender visibility should be especially sensitive to this logic; while visibility has
increased the range of tropes available for transgender representation, it has also established trans people as targets for violence and discriminatory legislation. As E. Tristan Booth warns, “visibility is a risky prospect, particularly with respect to groups that are easily exploited for commercial purposes.” Visibility additionally brings danger when representations of marginalized people become more visible as those marginalized subjectivities also gain “larger access to culture’s dominant exchange of symbols,” according to Morris and Sloop. This results in a potential for that representation to be co-opted or for these marginalized people to become targets of increased surveillance. In other words, according to Peggy Phelan, visibility “summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession.” Visibility makes trans people targets—of oppression, of discrimination, of punitive legislation—though it can also increase public awareness of trans people and the barriers they face in everyday life. Visibility, then, can be a trap, but that is not necessarily always the case. As I argue in chapter two, visibility is an ambivalent force.

Listening to Vernacular Voices

In this section, I address the importance of vernacular discourses to my project, beginning with an orientation towards critical rhetoric, discussing the ways in which vernacular has been theorized, and using understandings of rhetorical listening in order to hear transgender vernacular voices. I use vernacular as theory and method to guide a more ethical mode of coexisting with marginalized populations, listening to trans voices in order to speak with, not for. Understandings of vernacular are rooted in critical rhetoric, which I outline briefly before moving to discussions of vernacular discourses. In this dissertation, I use critical rhetoric and vernacular to better understand and theorize an ethic of responsible listening, balancing a
complex understanding of power with the need to listen to vernacular voices to build theory that guides allyship for them.

Several tenets of critical rhetoric guide my understanding of allyship. First, critical rhetoric has at its core an understanding of power as both oppressive and productive. Drawing from Foucault, McKerrow argues that scholars should understand both domination and freedom as essential parts of critical practice; that is, “freedom from” and “freedom to.” Critical rhetoric, then, allows me to discuss the ways in which power can be seen not only as an oppressive force against transgender individuals but also can work to empower and give agency. Ono and Sloop clarify the importance of critical rhetoric’s focus on both domination and freedom: "by viewing power as a force that flows, circulates, and defines relationships among subjects, we are pushed to see domination and freedom as two sides of the same coin, two flavors of power.” Power works to define privilege between transgender and cisgender individuals, constituting their relationships and allowing for possibility for change. Critical rhetoric is also deeply committed to activism: McKerrow and St. John clarify the goals of critical rhetoric, arguing that “in part, what critical rhetoric does is examine the impact of particular discursive formations on the lived conditions of a people, and at the same time raises the question of social change.” Power, then, can be used productively—in my research, I see these possibilities in the ways in which allyship can amplify the voices of the marginalized, leading to potential social change. Critical rhetoric is then applied in the critique of vernacular discourse, as Ono and Sloop argue.

While McKerrow vehemently denies that critical rhetoric is a method, it is a useful heuristic to understand how power and ideologies circulate and affect human beings. Vernacular, then, is the result of such an attitude, and critiquing vernacular discourses works “to upend
essentialisms, undermine stereotypes, and eliminate narrow representations of culture.”^{45} I work to better understand the needs of transgender individuals through listening to their vernacular discourses, avoiding the reduction of experience that comes from most mass mediated portrayals of trans people. Ono and Sloop extend the utility of critical rhetoric into the language and discourses of the everyday in their discussion of vernacular rhetoric. They argue that “a critique of vernacular discourse strives to understand how a community is constructed and how that constructed community functions.”^{46} Discussing transgender vernaculars, then, helps us to better understand their voices, needs, and perspectives. Through cultural syncretism and pastiche, marginalized communities combine many different elements (occasionally contradictory ones) that may have been borrowed from others, and these discourses, working outside of the legitimated public discourses about them, allow critics to understand the marginalized and their orientation to the mainstream. Ono and Sloop draw attention to the complexity and fluidity of vernacular discourses and argue against constructions of such in marginal orientation “in opposition to a fixed and rigid center.”^{47} Vernacular criticism understands that a community is not univocal or completely coherent, and that not all discourses within a community are antagonistic towards the majority: for example, Caitlyn Jenner still supports conservative political causes despite their advocacy for policy like bathroom restrictions. In transgender communities, we see tensions between assimilation and recognition without reduction to gender binaries—neither claim in total opposition to the mainstream. I discuss this in more depth in chapter five.

Taking vernacular seriously allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints, contradictions, positionalities and complexities that mainstream mediated sources fail to offer when discussing transgender individuals. In addition to contributions from critical rhetoricians, I look to Gerald
Hauser’s discussion of vernacular voices: he argues that vernacular rhetoric is “a rhetoric of nonformal symbolic exchanges by which typical citizens, not just the marginalized, express opinions and seek agreement.”\textsuperscript{48} A discussion of vernacular, then, does not necessitate marginal status. In these vernaculars, individuals “share local knowledge, awareness of local concerns, and fluency in local meanings, modes of arguments, value schemes, logics, and traditions.”\textsuperscript{49} I argue in this project that listening to trans vernaculars is an essential part of ethically understanding the other, and that their local knowledges and logics are worth knowing and understanding. Dealing with vernacular is also always a matter of the contextual and contingent: Jiyeon Kang argues that “vernacular discourse, as a perspective, resuscitates the contingency of public discourse and, as a method, examines alternative modes of civic discourse.”\textsuperscript{50} Examining trans vernaculars, then, allows scholars to understand the multivariate ways in which a marginalized group, in many ways excluded from the civic body, can express differential modes of humanity.

For the fifth chapter, I engage in interview methodologies in order to garner trust and consent from participants who share vernacular discourses with me, influenced by ethnographic and qualitative research that allows the creation of texts where they may not yet exist.\textsuperscript{51} I draw from rhetorical field methods that indicate that “the researcher’s choice of method should be guided by reflection on one’s research questions and goals,” and that “through field methods, rhetorical scholars can engage otherwise inaccessible texts, like local, marginal, and/or vernacular discourses that have not been collected and catalogued in archives and databases.”\textsuperscript{52} Through interviews as a process of consent and trust-building, participants shared their vernacular discourses of coexistence with the goal of improving practices of cisgender allyship.

An understanding of vernacular discourses is vital for the study of coexistence and representing transgender individuals faithfully and fairly. Understanding vernacular allows allies
to better speak their language, learning their histories to better create allyship and ally labor, and ethically use their voices to better aid them in navigating systems of oppression. Vernacular discourses, then, allow for a better understanding of the ways in which transgender individuals constitute themselves in contingent, contextual, and perhaps contradictory ways, without a reductionist perspective of power that automatically frames all of their actions as oppositional.

In addition to addressing vernacular discourses, I stress in this project that it is essential to listen to trans voices in order to speak with them, rather than speaking for them, following Linda Alcoff’s appeal in speaking for others. Alcoff warns that speaking for others is a risky practice, because “the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies.” The solution to speaking for others allows activists and scholars to advocate for marginalized communities without colonizing or further stigmatizing them: Alcoff argues that “we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers.” To avoid the dangers of reducing trans people to dangerous tropes, I look to practices of speaking with and to rather than speaking for, building the theories of an ethic of responsible listening and ally labor with the knowledge gained from listening to trans vernacular voices.

**Existing Paradigms of Coexistence**

In different ways, the paradigms I discuss in this section can fail both potential allies and the populations they seek to serve. I discuss these paradigms of coexistence in order to establish a foundation of existing ally theories that are used in both activism and scholarship. They are
taken up in ways that, while potentially helpful in some contexts for understanding the other, fail to do justice to differing voices or developing models of allyship that take work and commitment. In this dissertation, I critique these existing models of allyship, working through ways to make more productive modes of coexistence that better serve transgender individuals. The liberal model of allyship, seen most frequently in university ally training programs, crafts ally as a stable identity, and through doing so, limits ally action and distances allies from the populations they seek to support. Solidarity encourages the development of mutuality and understanding of difference but may be best used in activist contexts rather than quotidian moments of coexistence. To connect these two disparate models, I interviewed a small sample of transgender people to better understand allyship as it is experienced on a quotidian level, to listen to them and envision a model of allyship that moves beyond the two existing, normative models.

**Liberal Model of Allyship: Ally as Identity**

I argue in this dissertation project that the most common site of ally education is hosted within university spaces and exemplifies what I refer to as the liberal model of allyship, which are discourses of coexistence that I call liberal because they rely on individual concerns and create ally as an identity that is distanced from the people they seek to support, are not equipped to provide adequate support, and who benefit from an ally status. However, this paradigm sets far too low of a bar for allyship, both in the reasons individuals choose to be allies and the behaviors that “count” as allyship. This paradigm, however, has practical import in the arena of ally training programs like Safe Zone on college campuses. Allyship discourses within institutions are important loci of study because they reach large audiences and attempt to make campus environments safer and more inclusive, although the effects of these programs are less constructive.
Student affairs scholarship began referencing allies as a theoretical term in the early 1990’s, generally referring to either straight students advocating for LGB rights or white students advocating for racial justice, as Ellen Broido explains. Scholarship in the 1970’s discussed white allies without conceptualizing the term. Washington and Evans, in an oft-cited work in this paradigm, define ally as “a person who is a member of the 'dominant' or 'majority' group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population.” This definition has enduring value; it appears in ally training programs and online “How to be an Ally” guides from Safe Zone and PFLAG 14 years after its publication. This 1991 chapter outlines the necessary requirements to becoming an ally, which they explain in four areas: “awareness, knowledge/education, skills, [and] action,” and their work focuses on student affairs practice. Like other theories discussed here, Washington and Evans emphasize understanding the marginalized populations that allies hope to advocate for, but the concrete actions that might qualify a person to claim an ally identity are vague. While Washington and Evans’ definition is focused on fighting oppression, this mission is not accomplished within ally training programs’ practices.

In this dissertation, I primarily critique this paradigm; it is the perspective that is most often used in ally training programs and has the most circulation in academia. However, this is not to say that all ATPs always create ineffective allies, but that their goals are often irreconcilable with the internal logics of their manuals. Many of the tips ATPs give to allies in order to better support trans people are so basic as to resonate with my participants later in the dissertation, like using correct pronouns and not outing trans people.
Crafting Radical Solidarity

In chapter three, I analyze a paradigm of coexistence, the radical solidarity model, that directly responds to and critiques the effects of the liberal allyship model. The radical solidarity model builds closeness between accomplices and marginalized activists, encourages active practices of listening and using privilege to benefit marginalized causes, and works against recognition for ally labor. Primarily, these activists draw from understandings of solidarity as an active process, theorized by Chandra Mohanty as “rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.”59 This choice is essential to understanding solidarity—it is not necessarily bound by identity and the rigidity of identity politics, but brings those together who stand against oppression. Accomplices, within this model, are those who stand in solidarity with marginalized groups, “complicit” in activist work.60 They enact ally labor through actions that directly benefit marginalized causes, accomplished through listening to specific needs and using cisgender privilege to aid these groups.

The dynamics that govern solidarity are vital: Mohanty discusses the aspects of solidarity “in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities…. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.”61 Closeness, established through mutuality and common interest, is encouraged, despite the different experiences and values parties may bring to the fight against a particular cause. Frey, et al. explain solidarity as “the commitment to identification with others,” and with Mohanty’s definition, it results in bringing people together, understanding the differences that divide them,
and building relationships through the development of empathy. This is not complete identification, but the use of understanding to better recognize those who stand together.

Relationality, then, encapsulates one of the primary goals of solidarity; people linked together by virtue of common interest and “intense attachment or investment,” as Caitlin Bruce argues, to accomplish a specific goal. However, solidarity is perhaps an inappropriate term to describe interpersonal support or quotidian acts of compassionate coexistence; it primarily deals with activist contexts.

**An Ethic of Responsible Listening and Ally Labor**

In this section, I detail one alternative to the problems that lie within problematic tropes of trans visibility, the liberal allyship model, and the radical solidarity model. In order to better coexist with transgender people, I theorize an ethic of responsible listening, which takes seriously the need for cisgender people to listen to transgender perspectives, allow for transgender response, and act with ally labor given those responses. I define this term as the process of opening up discursive spaces for transgender voices to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and to recognize trans people as people. The end result of this ethic of responsible listening is ally labor, a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression. Combining both of these concepts, then, works to craft a new rhetoric of trans allyship based on the contingent, contextual needs of transgender people.

Within this model, I first draw from the assumption that visibility can be reductionist, and the way to solve this is ethical listening. That is, that if “vision distances and separates,” then “listening connects and bridges,” according to communication ethics scholar Lisbeth Lipari.
Listening, then, allows for closeness to those who are different, rather than being reduced down to a trope or stereotype. I argue that there is an ethical obligation to listen to the other, respond to that other, and “respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others,” as philosopher Kelly Oliver posits. Thus, listeners have a responsibility to allow others to respond, and to listen to that response. Ally labor is impossible to accomplish without first listening to the needs of trans people.

In this ethic of responsible listening, I craft listeners as responsible—both for doing also their own research before listening and for maintaining and building a discursive space for listening to occur, a “responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond.” This ethical element requires that a listener has a basic understanding of general transgender issues and concerns, so that the process does not force the trans person to burden themselves further by teaching the listener everything about transgender experiences. Some background knowledge is required, not only to be able to listen in the first place, but also to be able to respond to the needs of the trans person in the form of ally labor. However, this education is balanced with the understanding that “the excesses of alterity—of difference, otherness, and strangeness—will always inevitably exceed my knowledge, experience, and understanding.” This is why Lipari and Oliver describe their orientation to the other as an “openness,” one that allows the listener to receive knowledge that is unexpected—ideally, the discursive space of an ethic of responsible listening is one of generosity without judgement.

Listening allows allies to respond with ally labor. I focus mainly here on the ability to enact ally labor that listens to trans peoples’ individual and unique needs, so that cisgender people can leverage their privilege in order to better allow trans people to navigate through systems of power. Ally labor, as I detail in chapter five, is contextual to the person being
supported. It is not reflective of charity dynamics but seeks to correct power imbalances through attentive support to particular needs. Responsive to the needs articulated through the process of listening, ally labor can be enacted on a range of scales, treats trans people as people, and accommodates failure.

Chapter summaries

The arguments in this dissertation are crafted in four main chapters, moving from the breadth of trans tropes in contemporary transgender history and the most pervasive model of coexistence, what I call the liberal allyship model, to vernacular ways of understanding shared publics, from activists and through listening to transgender voices.

In chapter two, I analyze the last twenty years of American culture and its relationship to transgender people; namely, that transgender visibility unfolded in a way that created ambivalent public tropes and cultural implications for transgender people, creating not necessarily a narrative of progress but a cultural landscape in which many more trans tropes were made visible. This visibility, however, also creates the conditions for further violence and discrimination against trans people. I argue that transgender children and tropes of innocence, nuanced transgender characters in television series, hypervisible transgender celebrities, and discriminatory legislation like HB2 contribute to this ambivalent visibility. Despite the increase in visibility, then, it is not always the case that positive outcomes follow.

Chapter three theorizes a dominant model of allyship, which I call “liberal allyship,” and analyzes ally training manuals as exemplars for the ways in which liberal allyship constructs passive, visible, stable allies. Liberal allyship is the most pervasive discourse of allyship, but does not serve the populations it seeks to support in effective ways. Rather than accomplish the goals of ally training programs, which I identify as inclusion, safety, and action, the liberal
model crafts allies that are visibly separate from LGBTQ people and who fail to enact ally labor. Rather, visibility garners cultural capital and discussions of privilege renders allies inactive.

Chapter four analyzes a response to the liberal allyship model, one of “radical solidarity” that activists use as a pedagogy through which to instruct people how to stand in solidarity. By analyzing blogs and other online publications from marginalized activists, I argue that these activists craft a particular definition of solidarity in rejoinder to the limitations of institutional models. This solidarity is founded through closeness and mutual aid, active applications of listening and privilege, and without requiring recognition for ally labor. In so doing, the radical solidarity model offers a vernacular response to institutional rhetorics of coexistence, but this enactment of solidarity is potentially limited to traditional forms of activism and may require too much from non-activists in order to participate.

In my last chapter, I use interviews with transgender people to craft a rhetoric of trans allyship, primarily focusing on listening as an important research ethic. In response to problematic trans tropes, relying on ally as an identity, and activist understandings of solidarity, I offer two theoretical alternatives, that of an ethic of responsible listening and ally labor. This ethic relies on responsibility for those who are different from you, which can only be accomplished through listening. Listening enables better ally labor, which is responsive to trans individuals’ unique needs in order to allow them to better maneuver through systems of oppression. An ethic of responsible listening is a model of coexistence that is contextual and contingent, responsive to individual needs, and focuses on the concrete ways cisgender people can enact ally labor for and with transgender people.

Finally, I conclude this dissertation with future directions for coexistence with transgender people, including insights taken from the previous chapters that would lead to better
ally training programs and allyship. I end with the following question: given the political climate created in part by Donald Trump, and increasing violence and discriminatory legislation against transgender people, what choice do we have but to revise our understandings of coexistence?

Notes


2. Mock and Morgan, “Author Janet Mock joins Piers Morgan.”

3. Mock and Morgan, “Author Janet Mock joins Piers Morgan.”

4. Mock and Morgan, “Author Janet Mock joins Piers Morgan.”

5. Janet Mock (@janetmock), “Me + @LaverneCox’s reaction after @piersmorganlive tried it with the ‘man’ and ‘boy’ tag lines. #redefiningrealness,” Twitter, February 4, 2014, 6:54 p.m., https://twitter.com/janetmock/status/430897085362487296.


7. Piers Morgan (@piersmorgan), “As for all the enraged transgender supporters, look at how STUPID you’re being. I’m on your side, you dimwits. @janetmock,” Twitter, February 5, 2014, 10:16 p.m., https://twitter.com/piersmorgan/status/430947982138040320; and Piers Morgan (@piersmorgan), “A lot of very irate people accusing me of ‘transphobia’ because I devoted a third of my show to @JanetMock ’s inspiring story. Weird,” Twitter, February 5, 2014, 7:20 p.m., https://twitter.com/piersmorgan/status/430903631143911424.


16. This is to say that I could not tell you for certain that ally training programs have never read Stryker, Currah, or many of the other trans studies scholars who have contributed to the definitions of the word “transgender,” but in my vast experience reading through manuals, they generally use the most basic understanding possible for the lowest common denominator. Given that at least one ally training program really messed up an explanation of Judith Butler, I doubt that campus diversity programs are dealing with these scholarly definitions.


18. West, Transforming Citizships, Kindle loc. 303.


21. And I absolutely appreciate them for these efforts of making sure this was not an entirely tone-deaf dissertation (and do not blame them if it still is). Thank you for the labor, folks.

This report especially resonates with me given my new occupation in health care software, in which displaying a patient’s “preferred” name could be the difference between a trans patient receiving their necessary care or leaving the clinic after being misgendered.


51. This sentiment is inspired by a seminar at the 2017 Midwest Winter Workshop, in which Sara McKinnon and Rob Asen spoke about their book, *Text + Field*, and explained their rationale for using what is called “rhetorical field methods.”


55. Alcoff, “Problem of Speaking for Others,” 23.


Chapter Two: Changing Trans Tropes: Ambivalent Visibility in Transgender Representations

Transgender visibility has exploded in the past decade, with *Time* naming 2014 the “transgender tipping point” and “the new civil rights frontier.” This period marks significant changes to the ways that transgender people were rhetorically constructed. As I discuss in this chapter, discourses between 2007 and 2016 work to replace, correct, and add complexity to existing understandings of trans individuals, starting with coverage of trans children and youth fighting against schools for recognition of their gender identities, using tropes of innocence to dislodge predatory or deceptive tropes. I argue that these new discourses demonstrate a shift from a period of dehumanizing transgender tropes in which fictional and nonfictional portrayals categorized trans people into deceivers, “born in the wrong body,” and portrayals of moral corruption. I look to the ways that trans people were historically constructed as less than human, the discourses that worked to humanize trans people using innocent kids, complex media representations and hyper-visible transition, and the discourses that reverted back to predator narratives in North Carolina’s “The Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act” (HB2).

Throughout this chapter, I argue that visibility is ambivalent, simultaneously enabling and constraining. If visibility politics is “theory and practice which assume that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources,” the logics of visibility politics do not necessarily garner that legitimacy.

In this chapter, I point to several vital flashpoints of transgender representation in the United States. Through this analysis of media texts, celebrity representations, state legislation and legal cases, I highlight the moments in which new trans tropes were created, disseminated,
and reinforced. The argument I forward through this chapter deals with the ambivalent and contradictions within transgender visibility. These hypervisible tropes create “correct” and “incorrect” ways to be trans. The “correct” way is dependent on gender binarism, or the understanding that there are two and only two very different genders, and adherence to the gender binary relies on gendered norms and surgical intervention, beyond the economic possibilities of many transgender people and unwanted by many. The correct way to be trans is also supported by respectability politics: the trope of innocence and “just like any other kid” perpetuated by trans children delegitimizes those who are not innocent: sex workers, those who transition later in life, those who do not identify with “born in the wrong body” narratives, and those who identify beyond the gender binary.

I use visibility politics as a lens to better understand the mainstream mediated representations of transgender people. As feminist sociologist and critic Suzanna Danuta Walters argued about the explosion of gay and lesbian visibility in the 1990s,

> the age of visibility produces both realities: the hopeful moments of rights and inclusion and the fearful moments of victimization and reaction. . . . Both environments—both the cultural and the political—are captured by the same paradox of visibility and filled with similar contradictions and confusions. The cultural moment is not wholly embracing, nor the political moment wholly rejecting: both realms coexist and interact in an uneasy mix of opportunity and opposition, inclusion and exclusion.²

Seeing representations of trans people as a “paradox of visibility,” then allows for an understanding of these tropes as contradictory, dynamic, and existing alongside, against, and within political discourse. If representation frames and filters reality, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, then what are the implications of these ever-shifting tropes of transgender people that are mobilized by popular media?³ Trans visibility is often described as “a trapdoor” or a “double-edged sword,” balancing celebratory coverage of transgender “firsts” with sobering statistics of violence against trans people.⁴ While mass mediated representations of trans people are in no
way “faithful” illustrations of all trans people because “media images are never a direct reflection of lived experience,” increased trans visibility has cultural and political implications that are worth parsing through and critiquing. If nothing else, we might use these critiques of trans tropes to imagine new possibilities and “to begin to articulate futures ever more enriching.” This is not a chapter to track “positive” versus “negative” tropes, but it instead seeks to understand the circulation and exchange of meaning of transgender people and how it has developed over time. What started as a “history” developed into a process of tracking these tropes for their ebb and flows, the ways some tropes are pervasive, fade into obscurity, but are still rhetorical resources for mainstream media and political discourse.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which tropes of transgender individuals were strategically deployed and challenged in the decade before HB2. These periods are not necessarily mutually exclusive and overlap in their time periods. First, I provide a brief understanding of transgender realities before the 1990s. Next, I argue that transgender tropes through the 1990s and early 2000s crafted trans people as deceivers, “born in the wrong body,” or morally corrupt. Third, I argue that transgender people have been historically victims of precarity, and deal with employment, housing, and health discrimination as well as frequent encounters with violence. Fourth, I argue that mass mediated portrayals of trans children challenged deceiver and predator narratives with innocence and “just like any other kid” accounts. Fifth, fictional media representations of trans people became more complex and nuanced, offering additional tropes to supplant existing ones and to provide cisgender people with more vocabulary to discuss trans issues. Next, I argue that in celebrities’ hyper-visible transitions, they serve as an amplifier for trans issues while reinforcing harmful stereotypes.
However, HB2 and related legislation ignored more recent understandings of trans people in favor of older predator tropes.

**Broad Context of Trans Conditions Prior to 1990s**

From Christine Jorgensen, the first American transsexual woman who sought gender confirmation surgery in Denmark in 1952, transgender and gender variant people have been rhetorically constructed along several lines before the 1990s. Pre-1990s, medicalized narratives of trans people were the most pervasive; endocrinologist and sexologist Harry Benjamin, in writing *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966, is credited for popularizing the term. However, transgender/transsexual was not “an ‘official disorder’ until 1980, when it was first listed in the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.” The majority of scholarship studying transgender people was “representative of the vast majority of work of those times, when the primary concern was the psychology and medicalization of transsexualism.”

Alongside mainstream queer social movements, transgender people engaged in activist practice in the 1960s through 1990s. Three years before the Stonewall Riots, Compton’s Cafeteria Riot marked the first demonstration in opposition to police violence against trans people in 1966. The cafeteria management had levied discriminatory service charges against trans customers, frequently “street kids,” and called the police against them. Eventually, “long-standing grievances finally erupted into violence.” While the Riots did not immediately create long-term change, Stryker argues that they did “create a space in which it became possible for the city of San Francisco to begin relating differently to its transgender citizens—to begin treating them, in fact, as citizens with legitimate needs instead of simply as a problem to get rid of.” The Stonewall Riots in 1969 follow a similar pattern: dissatisfied bar patrons, particularly
“African American and Puerto Rican…queens, feminine gay men, or transgender women,” escalated violence in protest of police raids, which led to “more than two thousand people” trapping police inside the bar and outnumbering their reinforcements.\textsuperscript{13} The night after, thousands gathered at the Stonewall Inn to protest, which is seen as the progenitor of contemporary Pride marches. Both of these riots led to political organizing, although trans people were frequently excluded from organizations like the Gay Liberation Front. Second-wave feminist organizations also contributed to trans exclusion, particular with the “‘transsexual rapist’” trope in the mid-1970s that was spread in women-only spaces, perpetuated by Janice Raymond’s work in \textit{The Transsexual Empire}.\textsuperscript{14}

This is all to say that pre-1990s, conditions were poor for transgender people. As Stryker argues, “transgender-related policy and legislative accomplishments were few and far between before the early 1990s.”\textsuperscript{15} Whittle recounts that “in the 1970s and ‘80s, many trans people were unable to obtain or retain a job or a home, or to protect themselves from violence or discrimination.”\textsuperscript{16} Despite this discriminatory environment, “trans people still pursued their identities.”\textsuperscript{17} While the 1990s marked an improvement in living conditions, it also solidified many common transgender tropes.

\textbf{Dehumanizing Trans Tropes: People “Born in the Wrong Body,” Deceivers, and Villains}

The period spanning the early 1990s to the late 2000s is predominantly one of three dehumanizing trans tropes: people “born in the wrong body,” deceivers, and villains. These tropes dehumanize transgender people by reducing them to body parts or describing them as otherwise morally aberrant. These tropes are not limited to this time period, and while I argue that there have been efforts to correct them, they are still pervasive in popular culture in 2018. As E. Tristan Booth urges, we must view visibility cautiously, especially given that “commercial
interests controlling those representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms.\(^{18}\) Mass-mediated representations of transgender people, then, exist within commercial logics that encourage content that garners the most viewers and the most advertising. I analyze the history of trans visibility in this period using three tropes: the medicalized, born-in-the-wrong-body trope; the trans body/person as deceptive trope; and the morally corrupt trope, in which transgender people are cast as either perpetrators or victims of crime. I draw primarily on communication and media scholars who study trans texts, including Andre Cavalcante, Jamie Capuzzo, Leland Spencer, and Julia Serano, to develop these tropes.

I combine the medicalized trope and the “born in the wrong body” trope because they are inextricably linked. As Judith Butler argues in *Undoing Gender*, the wrong-body narrative is essential to transgender people’s receiving medical diagnoses and access to hormones or surgical interventions.\(^{19}\) This is not merely a trope created and sustained by mass media representations of trans people, although it certainly suffuses popular culture, but a major framing narrative through which trans people become legible. As Catalano remarks in his study of collegiate trans men, it was necessary for his participants to use logics like “born in the wrong body” in order to receive medical care, and that “[s]ome participants had internalized the notion that people who do not conform to the gender binary need to biomedically transition.”\(^{20}\)

The “born in the wrong body” trope is most commonly represented from the early 1990s through the late 2000s through focusing on “‘transgender as transition,’” which reduces transgender people entirely to their transitioning elements, particularly the biomedical ones.\(^{21}\) As a trope, born in the wrong body is complex and requires all of its component parts to have trophological meaning. First, born in the wrong body starts with an assumption that trans people were assigned the incorrect gender at birth, or that they had no input into what gender they were
assigned. Second, that there is a gendered disconnect between the body they were born with and, assumedly, their brains: their body displays one reality, while those who were born in the wrong body claim a different gendered reality. The problem is an essential one—the trans person had no control over the body they ended up with. Third, it assumes some gender dysphoria, defined by the American Psychiatric Association as “a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify.” It is the most readily identifiable trope associated with transgender people, despite contemporary pushback.

Born in the wrong body has solidified as a monolithic trans experience through repetition of mediated representations over time. Jamie Capuzzo and Leland Spencer argue that “television has normalized and reified as monolithic one particular experience of transgender identity and expression.” That is, that the trope has been solidified through televisual representation, which forecloses other possibilities for transgender visibility. In a 2012 essay, Kay Siebler contended that through a range of television genres and in both lead and supporting roles, the trope “that equates ‘trans’ with ‘transitioning’” has emerged and solidified. Containing trans characters to a transition narrative constrains their possibilities for different representations. The consequences of this narrative in media work beyond the television context: speaking about his participants, Catalano argues that the quest for seeming “authentic” among transgender men stems “from the pervasiveness of the wrong body narrative that equates legitimacy among trans people with biomedical transitioning.” The “born in the wrong body” trope is often used as a punchline, as Julia Serano argues regarding a major trans trope, the “pathetical transsexual” character: “Despite her masculine mannerisms and five o’clock shadow, the ‘pathetic transsexual’ will inevitably insist that she is a woman trapped inside a man’s body. The intense contradiction
between the ‘pathetic’ character’s gender identity and her physical appearance is often played for
laughs.”

The second major trope of the early 1990s–late 2000s is that of deceptive transgender
characters. Serano points to the pervasiveness of the “trans characters as deceptive” trope in the
early 1990s, which mediated portrayals of transgender women both fictional and nonfictional:

usually fall under one of two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or the
“pathetic transsexual.” While characters based on both models are presented as having a
vested interest in achieving an ultrafeminine appearance, they differ in their abilities to
pull it off. Because the “deceivers” successfully pass as women, they generally act as
unexpected plot twists, or play the role of sexual predators who fool innocent straight
guys into falling for other “men.”

Serano’s primary example of a deceiver is the character Dil in the film The Crying Game (1992),
a trans woman who is revealed in a love scene to have a penis and testicles, which surprise the
male protagonist. Deceivers, Serano argues, are “positioned as ‘fake’ women, and their ‘secret’
trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of ‘truth.’ At this moment, the ‘deceiver’’s
appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes
the real identity.” Thus, trans people are framed as deceptive because, by passing, they “hide”
their trans status.

The deceiver trope is so pervasive that it has a legal definition: the “trans panic defense”,
in which perpetrators “ask a jury to find that a victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity is to
blame for the defendant’s excessively violent reaction” and that the victim’s “gender identity not
only explain—but excuse—their loss of self-control and subsequent assault of an LGBT
individual.” As of 2018, gay and trans panic defenses are still legal in 48 states, although their
use as the sole rationale for violence is rare. However, this legal defense relies on the trope of
trans people as deceptive: the trans person “hid” their identity, so in their surprise or passion, the
perpetrator could not be held responsible for their actions.
The third trope, which has some overlap with the second, is that of trans people as morally corrupt. Trans people in this period are frequently portrayed as “killers, psychopaths, and villains, who are often mentally ill” or as “tragic victims.” GLAAD argues in a report of mediated representations of trans people between 2002 and 2012, “Victims or Villains: Examining Ten Years of Transgender Images on Television,” that negative tropes and stereotypes are pervasive, “found on every major broadcast network and seven different cable networks, demonstrating that the problem remains widespread.” They identify three egregious examples in *Nip/Tuck*, *CSI*, and *The Cleveland Show*. Crime shows such as *CSI* frequently feature trans characters as both villains and victims. In a three-episode arc, serial killer Paul Millander is introduced; the audience discovers that he is a “psychotic female-to-male serial killer . . . who murders his own mother and then kills himself.” In *Nip/Tuck*, not only are trans characters ridiculed, but the show also “featured a storyline about a transgender woman who regretted her transition, a transgender sex worker being beaten, and an entire season about a psychopathic trans woman depicted as a baby-stealing sexual predator.” In addition to being a baby thief, the last of these characters engages in incest with her adopted child, who commits suicide in front of her. Television shows and films that depict transgender characters as victims are also pervasive: if they are not the perpetrators of violence, they are its recipients, and often the butt of jokes once found dead. *CSI* again provides effective examples: a 2002 episode, “Abra Cadaver,” involves the CSI team finding a murdered trans woman in a golf course sand trap. One of the main characters “comments on the dead woman’s ‘franks and beans’ as he’s uncovering her dead body.” Another *CSI* episode features a trans woman who performs back-alley gender confirmation surgeries in a storage unit, resulting in “the death of one transgender woman in a botched surgery and the murder of another transgender woman who was a witness.” Even *Boys
Don’t Cry (1999), one of the first feature-length films to portray trans masculinity, depicts trans protagonist Brandon Teena as a deceiver and tells a story of gratuitous violence.

The early 1990s through the late 2000s was also a period of relative trans invisibility beyond mass-mediated narratives that sensationalized transgender people and failed to recognize them as citizens. No president had said the word “transgender” in a speech until 2015, when Obama did so in his State of the Union Address. The political arena is, of course, different from that of television and film, but as Capuzzo and Spencer argue, “depictions of transgender lives and issues have been largely absent for most of television history. Typically transgender characters occupied the periphery and appeared episodically.” That is, that while politics failed to recognize transgender people as citizens, so did most instances of television and film. In this period, transgender major characters, even negatively-portrayed ones, were rare.

When they were portrayed, transgender people were represented without divergence from the gender binary or without political outreach: “the lack of interaction between transgender characters and the failure to acknowledge the existence of a transgender social movement depoliticizes and disempowers this form of activism. . . . By depoliticizing transgender subjectivities, these series continue to function within and further hegemonic cisnormativity.” Mediated tropes in this time period rarely move beyond already-understood notions of transgender subjectivity, nor did they showcase the ways trans people advocate for themselves.

Films that engage in the work of these tropes still served important purposes, despite circulating problematic tropes. Cavalcante marks TransAmerica (2005) and Boys Don’t Cry as transgender “breakout texts,” which he defines as “media that break into the cultural mainstream, break with historical representational paradigms, and break into the everyday life of viewers.” Tropes such as “born in the wrong body” are perhaps impossible to escape, but TransAmerica
and *Boys Don’t Cry* generally escape hyper-medicalized, freak tropes. Those films, he argues, “were indicative of a moment in the late 1990s and early 21st century when transgender visibility was starting to move into media culture’s mainstream”; breakout texts work like waves, making “small cracks in the glass ceiling of cultural consciousness” so that future breakout texts can break further through.42

GLAAD’s 2015–16 *Where We Are on TV* report notes that Hollywood still uses many of the “harmful and outdated tropes” I have explicated here.43 This is to say that while these tropes were rampant in the early 1990s through early 2000s, they still exist in pop culture, despite, as I argue, rhetorical moves to correct and replace them.

**Transgender Precarity: Socioeconomic Class, Health, Violence, and Existing in Public**

Transgender people face discrimination and violence in many different contexts, ranging from housing to employment, treatment in the criminal justice system, and access to healthcare. In this section, I discuss how transgender people are victims of precarity, which Judith Butler explains as the “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death . . . [and who are] at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection.”44 Describing the conditions of transgender people as precarity, then, allows an understanding of the multivariate ways that trans people are not supported or protected by a variety of sources—government policy, economic structures, sociocultural norms, etc.

While the term “violence” is most frequently used to describe physical attacks or homicides against trans people, they also face “institutional, interpersonal, and ideological violence” that affects every facet of their daily lives.45 While the trans homicide rate in the US is
alarming, with 21 in 2015, 27 in 2016, and 27 in 2017, focusing only on homicides does a
disservice to the many other spheres in which trans people experience different kinds of
violence. Transgender people face discrimination “in numerous areas that significantly impact
quality of life, financial stability, and emotional wellbeing, including employment, education,
housing, and health care.” As the “U.S. Transgender Survey” reports, that trans people are
rarely discriminated against in only one dimension “leads to severe economic and emotional
hardship and can in turn have devastating effects on other outcome areas, such as health and
safety.” While I separate them into discrete sections, many of these areas overlap and build on
each other, and they should be taken as demonstrative of an environment of precarity.

Much of the discrimination against transgender people is economic. In the 2015 U.S.
Transgender Survey, researchers found that “29% of respondents were living in poverty,
compared to 12% in the U.S. population.” Researchers linked the poverty rate to
unemployment rates, which are “three times higher” than the national average. Given rates of
discrimination within workplaces, with “30% of respondents who had a job in the past year
reported being fired, denied a promotion, or experiencing some other form of mistreatment
related to their gender identity or expression,” unemployment rates and poverty rates follow
logically. To be clear, this 30% statistic measures those who experienced this discrimination in
the year preceding the survey, not total.

Trans people also experience larger numbers of mental and physical health problems. In
terms of mental health, the “U.S Transgender Survey” found that “39% of respondents
experienced serious psychological distress in the month prior to completing the survey,
compared with only 5% of the U.S. population.” Additionally, 40% of respondents have
attempted suicide at some point in their lives, 9 times the rate of the US population. As the
Williams Institute argues, “mental health factors and experiences of harassment, discrimination, violence and rejection may interact to produce a marked vulnerability to suicidal behavior in transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.” That is, suicide attempts are demonstrative of the discrimination trans people face in the multiple spheres of their lives, not of trans status as a mental illness. Physical health is not much better, primarily because of the negative interactions trans people have with healthcare providers. In the year before the survey was conducted, 33% of respondents “who saw a health care provider had at least one negative experience related to being transgender, such as being verbally harassed or refused treatment because of their gender identity.” However, many trans people do not seek health care, either because they fear mistreatment (23%) or because they cannot afford it (33%).

Again, these statistics demonstrate how discrimination in one area escalates the effects in others; socioeconomic precarity is linked to health precarity.

Beyond socioeconomic or health, transgender people are fundamentally denied access to participation in public. As I discuss later in this chapter, bathrooms are a basic human right to which, through discriminatory attitudes and legislation, trans people are denied access to. As the “U.S. Transgender Survey” was distributed in 2015, before the existence of bathroom restrictions like HB2, the survey demonstrates the discriminatory attitudes within public spaces, that 59% of respondents to the survey “avoided using a public restroom in the past year because they were afraid of confrontations or other problems they might experience.” Further, almost 1/3 of respondents restricted their liquid and food intake to avoid public restrooms. Beyond bathrooms, trans people also report “being denied equal treatment or service, verbally harassed, or physically attacked at many places of public accommodation—places that provide services to
the public, like retail stores, hotels, and government offices.” 59 As the 2011 “Transgender Discrimination Survey” notes, trans people face “injustice at every turn.”60

Existing in public spaces is made more difficult because of an inability to procure identification documents that are consistent with their names and appearances. As Stryker argues, “Depending on variables such as where they happened to be born or what levels of healthcare they can afford, some transgender people find it impossible to obtain tightly controlled identity documents (such as passports) that accurately reflect their current name or gender appearance.”61 This assertion is supported by survey data: “Only 11% of respondents reported that all of their IDs had the name and gender they preferred, while more than two-thirds (68%) reported that none of their IDs had the name and gender they preferred.”62 Cost is one of the biggest factors in changing legal name or identification, which intersects, again, with socioeconomic status. This is not a benign, purely legal problem: “Nearly one-third (32%) of respondents who have shown an ID with a name or gender that did not match their gender presentation were verbally harassed, denied benefits or service, asked to leave, or assaulted.”63 Cost is a more complex problem than it seems, because many states require either gender affirmation surgery or confirmation from a physician that the person in question is receiving treatment for “gender transition to the new gender.”64 Correct identification has implications for how trans people are treated in public, and inconsistent identification requires a trans person to out themselves to strangers, creating further visibility and more opportunities for discrimination.

If more cisgender Americans than ever are aware of trans people and their existence, why has the rate of violence against trans people exploded, at least in recorded statistics? According to the Human Rights Campaign, “in 2015, at least 21 transgender people have been victims of fatal violence in the United States, more killings of transgender people than any other year on
record. More transgender people were killed in the first six months of this year [2016] than in all of 2014.  

2016 was the “deadliest year on record” for transgender people, with 27 homicides reported against trans people, primarily trans women of color. 2017 matched that rate, but the actual number of homicides for these years is most likely much higher. The visibility of trans murders has increased with other mediated increases in visibility: there were probably significant numbers of transgender people murdered before 2015, but they were not portrayed as such in the media. As recent edited collection Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility argues, trans people, especially trans people of color, are targets of violence through their increased visibility. Che Gossett argues specifically that “the violence of colonialism and racial slavery, through which Black, queer, and/or trans identities have been forged, cannot be addressed through the politics of trans visibility.” Gossett argues that through respectability politics and trans liberalism, trans people of color are rendered invisible in the logics of visibility politics. While representations of transgender people have changed significantly in the last 20 years, so has the target become more visible on transgender people.

Despite and perhaps because of increased visibility, transgender people are targets of violence. If visibility politics assumes that all visibility helps marginalized groups gain resources, then visibility politics fails, in the case of trans visibility, the most vulnerable of its people. While it is simple to point to the explosion of visibility in the last decade, it is more complicated to see the material impact on homeless trans people or those in “dire poverty,” which Grant, et al. claimed from their National Transgender Discrimination Survey data appeared in trans populations almost four times the rate of other Americans. Tropes of transgender people have changed from one-dimensional freak or punchline portrayals in favor of more nuanced and more visible understandings of trans people. It exemplifies the double-edged sword of visibility:
cisgender people know transgender individuals exist, which is good for improving anti-
discrimination policies and legal protections, but it also means that they are targeted for violence.
Visibility in many instances puts newly visible populations in jeopardy.

Class concerns are especially salient when talking about trans people because of surgical intervention—if people expect trans women to look like Cox or Jenner, cisgender audiences will fail the trans people who do not look that way. As discussed previously, many trans people experience economic precarity. These are not people who can afford the trappings of gender like the most visible trans celebrities can. The victims of violence against trans people are primarily trans women of color—people who look nothing like Jenner but deserve the same consideration of humanity. Transgender children avoid these concerns through tropes of innocence: they are “just like any other kids” and were “born this way.”

**Trans Kids Are “Just Like Any Other Kids” and “Born This Way”**

While many transgender adults fight against housing, employment, and health discrimination and are at high risk for suicide and violence, transgender children fight for different rights, including school bathrooms, name and pronoun recognition at graduation, and the ability to run for the Homecoming or Prom court position that matches their gender. In this section, I argue that transgender children and youth who battled their schools for gender recognition achieved more than legal victories—their discourses of innocence, “born this way” tropes, and the desire to be “just like any other kid” challenged constructions of trans people as freaks or criminals. However, the construction of trans children both by their legal representatives and media coverage removes much of their agency and as in many other representations of LGBTQ individuals, confirms understandings of gender binarism.
Jennings is famous, among many reasons, because she was, as ABC News put it, “one of the youngest known cases of an early transition from male to female.” That is, that Jennings and the publicity around her was a flash point, or as Andre Cavalcante argues, a transgender breakout text, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Jennings reflects an emergence in stories of transgender children “when stories of transgender people -- adults or children -- were scarce.” As Christine Connelly, who is on the board of directors for the Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, remarked, “She was the first young person who picked up the national spotlight, went on TV and was able to articulate her perspective and point of view with such innocence,” and that stories like Jennings’ allows Americans to see that “we’re real people.” Innocence, then, is one of Jennings’ primary advantages; she is believed and seen as a girl, because the trope allows her to evoke all-knowing understandings of herself at such a young age.

Stories of trans children operate along the established trope of children’s innocence but also serve to remove children’s agency regarding their gender identification. In order to contest tropes that cast trans people as freaks or criminals, these narratives of trans children’s innocence has to repeat the “born this way” argument. This trope was promoted through mediated coverage of trans children, often appearing in headlines, but also through the children themselves, though they did not know, perhaps, that they were contesting previous tropes. As Jeff Bennett explains, the trope of being “born this way” is “a widely circulated notion in LGBT communities that is employed in a multitude of spheres for a range of social and political purposes,” commonly built from biological discourses of genetics and hormones. Constructed as an antidote to the religious right’s stance that LGBTQ people choose to be gay or trans, the “born this way” trope allows LGBTQ people to construct their identities as “inborn,” which gives LGBTQ people the
same protections as civil rights legislation. The “born this way” discourse is used especially in the case of Coy Mathis, who was six years old when her struggle to use the girl’s bathroom became the subject of a lawsuit against her Colorado elementary school. Mathis, too, evokes this trope of innocence. As a kindergartner while the primary media coverage centered around her, Mathis remained a happy, pink or purple-haired child, who reportedly knew she was a girl from the age of three. While her battle for bathroom access was only on the local level, her cute face gained national attention and a documentary featuring Coy and her family. As Coy’s mother Kathryn Mathis says in an interview with the Colorado Springs Independent,

If your 5-year-old biologically born girl came up to you and said, “I’m gonna wear this princess dress ’cause I’m a girl,” you wouldn’t say, “Oh, you're too young to know if you’re a girl or not.” People always phrase it as [Coy’s] too young to make such a life-changing choice, but it’s not . . . a choice at all. She doesn’t know what transgender is. . . . She’s always felt like she was a girl and just happens to have a body that doesn’t look like a girl.

Kathryn Mathis both contests and confirms the stability of gender in this statement. That is, that bodies do not necessarily equate to gender identity, but at the same time, that Coy has always been a girl, that there was no choice in the matter, which deprives Coy of a certain amount of agency, and that girls wear princess dresses and behave in feminine ways. This statement is emblematic of characterizations of trans children; they confirm gender stereotypes, repeat the “born this way” discourse, remove agency from the children, but change understandings of what gender means—it is not necessarily tied to the body.

The innocence of these trans children is a fitting corrective to existing negative tropes of transgender people as deceptive or morally corrupt for several reasons. Innocence and the “born this way” discourse also allow the child to avoid blame or guilt. None of the trans-as-criminal trope can be attributed to them because they are so young and innocent. The stereotype of trans people as sex workers also does not accumulate on trans children; they do not have to worry
about money, but they also repel any moral judgement—they did not ask for this, they did nothing wrong to deserve it, and they just want to be like every other kid. The age and lack of experience of the trans children enables these discourses—especially in the young children, like Jazz, Coy, and Natalie Maines, they have not, and probably could not have, done anything morally wrong. Any connotations with the children are positive ones, especially given that they are in generally white, middle to upper class families. Innocence is a very powerful trope, as Gabrielle Owen argues; Jazz Jennings especially “appear[s] ‘natural’ and self-evident” as a girl, and the innocence that children have innately “prevents the authorization of their knowing, but it serves another, parallel function of making such knowing transcendent, originating in a pre-discursive supernatural or preternatural realm. Innocence is the currency of exchange in stories of transgender children.”

Jennings and Mathis, as I discuss in this chapter, are well-served by the trope of innocence, although it does limit their agency.

Especially in the cases of the very young children who were well-publicized as trans, trans girls are made to look very hegemonically feminine with feminine hobbies and interests, reinforcing gender binaries. Their stuff defines them as girls, perhaps because their hormones and secondary sex characteristics cannot yet define them as women. In the case of Coy Mathis, she is seen with long hair, which is sometimes purple, and she is always wearing dresses—one of the only ways you can distinguish her from her triplet brother. Jazz Jennings has also been photographed with long hair, makeup, feminine clothing, and she worships mermaids. In an interview with Barbara Walters, Jennings is described as demonstrating she was a girl by “growing her hair out, piercing her ears, and wearing dresses everywhere -- even to kindergarten.” These choices mark her trans status—she is not a girl because she says so, but because she surrounds herself with feminine accoutrement. Her bedroom is no exception: “Jazz's
bedroom is filled with things one would find in a typical girl's room: dresses in the closet, pink and purple sheets, and a bed overflowing with stuffed animals. There are also mermaids—lots and lots of mermaids.” These things are what rhetorically create Coy and Jazz, as well as many of the other young trans children, as innocent girls, just like any other.

Media portrayals give the parents of the child two options for representation: they are either commended for their “bravery” in supporting their trans child or condemned for the ways they “brainwashed” their child into claiming they were trans. The accusation of child abuse is the claim most often seen by conservative news, blogs, etc. in response to trans children narratives. The Mathis family, for example, retreated from public life and moved across Colorado after the considerable negative publicity they received. These parents should be investigated by the Department of Child and Family Services, according to some publications. Conservative advocacy organization American College of Pediatricians claims “conditioning children into believing a lifetime of chemical and surgical impersonation of the opposite sex is normal and healthful is child abuse.” Because their name so closely resembles the American Academy of Pediatricians, conservative news groups like Fox News took the ACP’s claims as scientific fact instead of the rhetoric of a designated hate group. Again, the agency of the child is removed, and the parents are blamed for brainwashing or convincing their child that they are trans. Alternatively, the parents are mentally ill for “allowing” their child to claim to be a girl or boy, which it is argued will result in permanent damage for the child. This removes blame from the child, making parents the target of “mentally ill” accusations that so frequently target trans people.

Many of the children’s narratives are coded under the language of rights, but in this case, perhaps some unconventional ones. While trans activists of all ages have been advocating for
bathroom rights, trans children’s narratives construct name and gender recognition at Homecoming, Prom, and graduation as rights. These rights latch onto the discourse of “just like any other kid” and shape the ways transgender people are understood. As part of the innocence trope, “just another kid” flattens difference and bestows rights as long as trans kids stay invisible. Through these logics, trans kids prioritize things like being Prom King as something that humanizes them, like in the case of Issak Wolfe, who was denied this right by his principal in rural Pennsylvania in 2013.\footnote{83} Trans Homecoming and Prom Kings and Queens were highly publicized because not only had the teens achieved this right to run as the gender they identified as but also because their peers elected them, symbolically garnering widespread acceptance.

As discussed later in this chapter, the bathroom is a site of contention for trans people of all ages, and it is usually the condensation point for legal arguments about discrimination. The bathroom, as Isaac West and many others discuss, has long been a place of trans activism and controversy.\footnote{84} In many ways, constructing a child as the potential perpetrator instead of the victim of predatory behavior in bathrooms reverses the conventional conservative logics around letting ‘men’ in women’s bathrooms and locker rooms. The arguments around trans children in bathrooms then shift to when the children grow older, as seen in the letter from Coy Mathis’s school district that defended their decision to keep Mathis out of the girls’ bathroom, that “as Coy grows older and his male genitals develop along with the rest of his body, at least some parents and students are likely to become uncomfortable with his continued use of the girls’ restroom.”\footnote{85} Children, especially those who are six, are seen as sexless and not a threat in the bathroom—not until they are older, that is. Trans Mainer Natalie Maines, as a fifth grader, did not receive critiques from her classmates or teachers but had to “use a staff restroom following a complaint from the grandfather of a male student about Maines’s use of the girls' restroom.”\footnote{86}
Maine’s victory in Maine marked the first time a state ruled that “a transgender person should use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify,” perhaps because Maines did not fit the typical predator narrative.\footnote{Maines’s victory in Maine marked the first time a state ruled that “a transgender person should use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify,” perhaps because Maines did not fit the typical predator narrative.}

**Fictional Trans Characters Provide Depth and Breadth of Representation**

Andre Cavalcante points to *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* as “a new field of transgender breakout texts.” I argue in this section that television series like *Transparent* and *OITNB* provide depth and breadth of transgender representation in the 2010s, which can supplant problematic mass mediated tropes of transgender characters as deceivers, “born in the wrong body,” or morally corrupt.

In 2013, prison comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* was released on Netflix, one of Netflix’s first original programs and one of the first television shows to feature a transgender character with complexity and nuance. Cox, a trans actress who had previously appeared on reality shows like *I Wanna Work for Diddy*, plays Sophia Burset, a transgender prisoner.\footnote{In 2013, prison comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* was released on Netflix, one of Netflix’s first original programs and one of the first television shows to feature a transgender character with complexity and nuance. Cox, a trans actress who had previously appeared on reality shows like *I Wanna Work for Diddy*, plays Sophia Burset, a transgender prisoner.} In flashbacks, Burset is shown before (played by her twin brother) and after transition, which gives context to the crime that landed her in prison, stealing credit cards to pay for her transition surgeries. *OITNB* includes several different storylines to illuminate the difficulties of being trans both in and out of prison. The character struggles with her relationship to her wife Crystal and son Michael, both of whom find difficulties with their new family structure. Sophia also struggles with fellow prisoners who call her a “he-she” and “tranny,” or eventually confront her with violence in later seasons, as well as a battle to receive the correct dosage of hormones. I argue here that the Sophia character provided a broader cisgender audience with more vocabulary to discuss trans issues. Additional representation, especially
representations that are different and complex from existing dehumanized trans tropes, enrich trans visibility through diversity of representations.

While its main transgender character was not portrayed by a transgender actor, *Transparent* is notable for several reasons. First, *Transparent* is the first television series to have a transgender main character. Second, *Transparent* used transgender actors for all other trans characters, in addition to trans consultants and crew members. Third, *Transparent* was award-winning; not only was it the first major television show to have a trans main character, but it was recognized as such by important venues like the Golden Globes and the Emmys. *Transparent* traces the narrative of Maura, played by Jeffrey Tambor, who transitions at a later age, and the ways her family adjusts to that information in complex ways.

Through television shows like *Transparent* and *OITNB*, audiences are exposed to representations of the everyday lives of transgender people. While some of the plot lines are about transition, for the most part they do not reduce their trans characters down to medicalized bodies and move beyond tropes of “born in the wrong body.” In *OITNB*, the medical plotline focuses on Sophia’s everyday struggles to get the correct dosage of hormones—an everyday struggle for many trans people. Similarly, while Sophia is proud of her vagina and explains how female anatomy works to her fellow inmates, the show does not reduce her to her genitals or frame her as a deceiver. Maura in *Transparent* adapts to being a woman in many quotidian ways: learning to walk and dress as a woman, receiving harsh insults while using the women’s restroom, and fitting into her family after revealing such a big secret. The plotlines are about surviving and thriving as a trans person, but their gender does not define them. While part of Sophia’s backstory includes transition, the show also focuses on the character’s life after transition, which makes it one of the first shows to represent trans everyday life. Escaping the
transition narrative is vital to changing tropes about trans people because stories outside of transition refuse the medical logics of trans bodies and allow audiences to see them as fully-realized people instead of pre- or post-surgical intervention.

While *OITNB* gave audiences an in-depth view of a trans woman experiencing both transition and its aftermath and consequences, *Transparent* gives both depth and breadth of representation. Its main character is in her 70s, but Maura’s trans friends who teach her how to be a woman, Davina and Shea, are middle-aged and in their 20s. Additionally, unlike many other mass mediated portrayals of trans people, *Transparent* includes a trans man with a major storyline. As Mitch Kellaway points out, “*Transparent’s* Dale stands out in American pop culture as the first post-transition trans man who's played by a trans male actor.” Just the inclusion of a trans man character is important; trans men have very little mass mediated representation outside of *Boys Don’t Cry* or Chaz Bono. However, the character has been criticized by trans people and media critics because of the flawed representation of trans men in *Transparent*’s portrayal. While the main character’s genitals are not discussed, Dale reveals that he is a “man with a vagina” to a virtual stranger, Maura’s daughter. *Transparent* seems to portray the trans women in the show beyond destructive tropes, but the trans man character repeats “born in the wrong body” tropes and focuses on genitals.

These representations are not perfect. In the case of *Transparent* especially, the trans characters are white and do not seem to struggle with issues like homelessness that many other transgender individuals face. *Transparent* does not talk about losing jobs or housing because the characters are trans, although it does deal with more personal issues, like dealing with the bathroom problem. In many ways, *Transparent* allows cisgender viewers to empathize with the Pfefferman family, portraying a narrative that could happen to any family. I also argue that it
equips viewers with resources to support trans people in the future because of its focus on the
intimate and personal. *OITNB* is more sophisticated, then, with issues of class and race, but it
still casts Sophia as a criminal, reiterating tropes of criminality seen in the 1990s-early 2000s.
These shows, however, circulated widely and are award-winning; despite some of the
problematic representations, they also add to the repertoire of knowledge cisgender audiences
have of trans people and work to dislodge and correct some problematic tropes of transgender
people.

**Caitlyn Jenner Provides A Hyperpublic, Questionable Flashpoint**

In 2018, if Americans can name a transgender person, it is most likely Caitlyn Jenner. As
an Olympic gold medalist and supporting character on popular reality television show *Keeping
Up with the Kardashians*, Jenner is a public figure who appeals to multiple generations, and her
transition was extremely well-publicized. The *BBC* named Jenner as “the most high-profile
American to come out as transgender.” Jenner’s transition was hyper-public. She confessed to
Diane Sawyer, although still going by her male name and pronouns, “For all intents and
purposes, I am a woman.” Shortly thereafter in May of 2015, Jenner appeared on the cover of
*Vanity Fair* wearing white lingerie, sporting long hair, makeup, and a hegemonically feminine
appearance. Jenner legally changed her name and gender in September of 2015 and premiered
a reality television show, *I Am Cait*, on E! in July. Alongside the magazine cover story and new
reality show, Jenner also won *ESPN*’s Arthur Ashe Courage Award. Jenner’s very public
transition contribute to an explosion of transgender visibility in the 2010s. In this section, I trace
the discourses surrounding Jenner’s “reveal” that contributed to a hyperpublic transgender figure
who ultimately cannot speak for most transgender people.
While Jenner’s fame contributed to many Americans’ knowledge or understanding of transgender individuals, it also created a condensation point for public transphobia in response to Jenner’s coming out. Upon winning the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, Jenner’s bravery was compared to a double amputee Army veteran and CrossFit athlete, who was falsely named runner-up to the award by a Boston radio personality. The meme belittled Jenner in comparison to the sacrifice of veteran Noah Galloway, who “lost an arm and leg to a roadside bomb in Iraq.” This meme spread on Twitter and Facebook until ESPN noted that there were no runners-up for their major ESPY awards. In August 2015, an offensive Caitlyn Jenner Halloween costume was released based on her Vanity Fair cover image—the costume was of a hairy cisgender man wearing a dress, which only serves to repeat tropes of trans women as men in women’s clothing.

Mass mediated representations of Jenner put her forth as the spokesperson for all transgender people, but Jenner as a figure is a problematic role model and representation of the majority of trans people for a variety of reasons. Her celebrity, already established by her Olympic accomplishments and her role on Keeping Up with the Kardashians, is inextricably tied to her meteoric rise as a transgender celebrity. As Michael Lovelock argues, in Jenner’s mediated representations, “discourses of celebrity have worked as central epistemological frames through which their transgender subjectivities have been rationalised and made legible within normative frameworks of knowledge.” That is, that her celebrity filters, frames, and makes understandable her transness to Americans, forming her into a trans reference point despite the fact that “She hadn’t met a single trans person before her transition in 2015.”

Several trans activists responded to Jenner’s Vanity Fair cover by discussing the explosion of visibility that accompanied it. As activist Mock described, “In less than an hour
after the Vanity Fair cover was released, I was inundated with media requests to either provide a quote for an article, sit down for a television interview or write an opinion piece. That one hour resulted in more requests than I have received from the release of my book, the release of Laverne Cox’s TIME cover, my infamous CNN debate and the consistent deaths of trans women of color — combined.” 103 That is, that Jenner’s preexisting celebrity gained her so much more publicity than anything with trans women of color would have ever received, which required Mock and Cox to call attention to that specific visibility. The common rhetorical move, then, as trans critics responded to Jenner’s Vanity Fair cover, was to latch onto coverage of Jenner in order to draw attention to the ways in which Jenner did not embody all trans experiences, while still affirming Jenner’s experiences.

First, in discussing Jenner’s appearance and beauty, Mock and Cox call Jenner “gorgeous” but also use those moments to note how inaccessible that beauty is to many trans people.104 As Mock wrote in response to the Vanity Fair cover story, Jenner’s privilege and financial status is to be credited for that beauty:

the facial feminization surgery that Caitlyn describes in Vanity Fair is almost universally excluded from coverage. This means that most trans people, particularly trans women of color, cannot access the basic care that they need. It means that going to the doctor feels like a battle — if a trans person can get there at all. It means that trans people participate in criminalized economics like the drug and sex trades to pay for the health care they need or seek the care from friends or unsupervised black markets. It means that trans people die seeking the care they need to live. To tell Caitlyn’s story with care is to demand justice for trans people.105

Here, Mock is not responding with anger or critique of Jenner, but to point out that her experience is not common or accessible for most trans people, especially trans people of color. Beyond appearance-based care, Mock points out that health care is a risky and sometimes dangerous place for trans people; doctors stigmatize them, insurance companies do not reimburse them for much trans-related expenses, and even with the best physicians and insurance, the costs
could be too high. Judging all trans people against the standard of Jenner, then, is to ignore the structural barriers trans people have to healthcare. Cox responded similarly to Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* cover, using similar feedback she received on her *Time* magazine cover image, that “there are many trans folks because of genetics and/or lack of material access who will never be able to embody these [cismormative beauty] standards. More importantly many trans folks don’t want to embody them and we shouldn’t have to to be seen as ourselves and respected as ourselves. It is important to note that these standards are also informed [sic] by race, class and ability among other intersections.”

While Mock reminds journalists to cover Jenner with consideration, to “use the right name and pronoun,” she also implores media sources to keep “highlighting the extent to which it is not the typical trans story. Her story can only be told by also telling the stories of the trans people who are struggling to survive systemic discrimination.” Yes, Caitlyn Jenner is beautiful, but she is not representative of all trans people.

While mass media publications label Jenner as a transgender activist, trans activists like Mock resist this label. Mock stated that Jenner did not speak for the trans community in response to an untoward comment Jenner made, that “It’s Caitlyn Jenner, who’s a very specific person, with a specific set of experiences that are very moneyed, very white, and very privileged.” Jenner has attempted to remedy her bad publicity since making objectionable political comments: she started the Caitlyn Jenner Foundation, which has granted $100,000 to trans organization, and donated $2 million through the MAC AIDS Fund’s Transgender Initiative, despite still supporting the Republican Party, as trans *Broadly* author Diana Tourjée argues in a longform piece covering Jenner.

Trans critics draw attention to the responsibility Jenner has been given as a result of her hypervisibility: to stand for all trans people. As Mock states in 2015, “To make any trans person
a symbol for an entire community is an unfair task.” Most trans people do not experience the world like Jenner does. Cox reinforces this statement: “I have always been aware that I can never represent all trans people. No one or two or three trans people can. This is why we need diverse media representations of trans folks to multiply trans narratives in the media and depict our beautiful diversities.” As my participants discuss in chapter five, one trans person cannot and should not represent all trans people.

While Jenner serves as the most public example, other celebrities have come out as trans with fewer negative reactions from the trans community, although they lack her breakout status. Laura Jane Grace, the guitarist and lead vocalist of punk band Against Me!, came out in 2012. While the band experienced conflict after Grace came out, their album Transgender Dysphoria Blues premiered at number 23 on the Billboard charts. While Grace is still white and fairly privileged, she perhaps represents a kind of trans body that is not hegemonically feminine and glamorous; Grace is a tattooed rock star, not a Jessica Lange lookalike. As Z Nicolazzo argues, the 2010s is marked by “a dramatic increase in the visibility of (some) trans* lives,” which happened in parallel to media coverage of violence or murder against trans women of color. Some transgender people are constructed as worthwhile of the positive visibility they receive, while others are not.

Celebrities who come out as transgender serve as amplifiers for trans issues, but to what ends? Do these hyper-public confessions serve to improve trans lives or garner more publicity and fame for the celebrities? It is overly simplistic to argue that the publicity itself is always already problematic or destructive. What are the possibilities that are enabled by everyday Americans knowing at least one trans person? Empathy begins with the spectacle—it is a starting
point, it is not perfect but it is a start, and perhaps these spectacles are tinder for a future fire. Visibility reaches everyday Americans, despite its flawed representations.

**HB2 Harkens Back to Freak and Predator Tropes**

In March of 2016, North Carolina state legislature passed House Bill 2 (HB2), otherwise known as “An Act to Provide for Single-sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations,” or “Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act” for short. A special session of the State Legislature was called in response to Charlotte’s anti-discrimination legislation, pushing through the bill in a day, as Governor Pat McCrory signed it into law that night. HB2 changes several parts of existing law: it designates that “transgender people who have not taken surgical and legal steps to change the gender noted on their birth certificates have no legal right under state law to use public restrooms of the gender with which they identify,” shortens the time window for filing discrimination complaints from 3 years to 1 for all protected classes, and includes clauses that forbade raising the minimum wage or changing child labor laws. While this language sounds benign, the logics behind HB2 constructed transgender women as predators who were not really women without gender confirmation surgery. I argue that the backlash to HB2 was so significant because HB2 and its supporters perpetuated outdated understandings of transgender people that were not wholly compatible with changed perceptions of trans Americans in the last decade, reusing old tropes of villainy and deceiver to the detriment of trans people. Visibility allowed for some figures to gain positive recognition, but it also fueled the vilification of transgender people.

First, HB2 is constructed to argue for the primacy of sex over gender. The bill concerns itself with sex according to legal documents, which are only changeable in the case of surgical
intervention. HB2’s language specifically defines sex as “biological sex,” which is defined in the bill as “the physical condition of being male or female, which is stated on a person's birth certificate.” To change sex listed on a North Carolina birth certificate, a person must undergo gender confirmation surgery, which North Carolina refers to as “sex reassignment surgery,” and prove the status of the surgery either “by a notarized statement from the physician who performed the sex reassignment surgery or from a physician licensed to practice medicine who has examined the individual and can certify that the person has undergone sex reassignment surgery.” The bill restricts use of bathrooms to those that correspond with sex listed on birth certificates but does not put into place a method of checking birth certificates or punishing those in the “wrong” bathroom. Instead, it seems to collapse gender and sex; otherwise, how would someone know if a person was in the wrong bathroom?

In defense of HB2, the Governor and members of the State Legislature have rationalized discrimination as a way to protect meanings of sex and gender. Governor McCrory has said to the Charlotte Observer in response to accusations of bigotry: “I’m the farthest thing from a bigot. I love everyone and I’m going to treat everyone equally. I want to treat people who are transgender – I want to hug ’em and say I love ’em. But I don’t agree with the concept of redefining gender. That is a major societal change.” By this logic, HB2 protects its citizens from the consequences of redefining gender—that too much progress too fast, like Charlotte implemented, is dangerous.

Working from the bill’s assumption of biological sex, then, HB2 also perpetuates understandings of transgender women (by NC’s definition, men) and men as predatory in women’s spaces, and HB2 ostensibly works to keep North Carolina’s women and children safe. Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representative Tim Moore supported the governor’s
persistence in backing HB2 by saying “I applaud the Governor in his continued efforts to promote the economic growth of our state while ensuring basic privacy and safety protections of citizens in bathrooms, showers and changing facilities.”

This broaches the question: privacy and safety from whom? This harkens back to previous trans tropes that positioned trans people as villains; entangled in many of the tropes that mass media established for transgender people is the underlying assumption that transgender people are in some way morally corrupt.

I argue that McCrory redefines gender in more ways than he thinks—in reality, HB2 encourages the policing of gender performance despite its language of biological sex. There are no measures to check biological sex in the space of the bathroom, or to carry around a birth certificate to prove biological sex like Arizona’s SB 1070 immigration law. But is this bill just sexist? It does cast men as predatory—that it is not really trans people who are threats to cisgender women but the men dressed as women. McCrory and others seem more concerned with “men” in women’s spaces. Their logic states that allowing trans women to use women’s restrooms is the same as allowing cisgender men wearing women’s clothing, which is a false equivalency. HB2 supporter Teresa Hillman claimed she attended a rally supporting HB2 because “I don't want men in my bathroom. I don't want men in my children's bathroom.”

The real threat is of men in bathrooms, not necessarily of trans women, because as discussed above, North Carolina allows and requires gender confirmation surgery for birth certificate alterations. Thus, trans women who have undergone gender confirmation surgery would be allowed in women’s restrooms—the surgical barrier is something else entirely.

The predator trope is frequent throughout discourses surrounding HB2, and children are included in the parties HB2 attempts to protect. What about the work of the trans children? They do not fit the predator stereotype. Their innocence constitutes them in the group of people who
would potentially be preyed upon. It is only when they become adults that they can no longer depend on innocence and “just like any other kid” tropes. While McCrory claims to not be in the business of “redefining gender,” he is only concerned with trans women, who he sees as men dressed in women’s clothing. Trans women are the constitutive outside. Trans men and children are no threat to the safety of women and children. Adult genitals, though, seem to matter. Coy Mathis’s school district argued they were fine with Coy as a young, gender-bending child, but that “as Coy grows older and his male genitals develop along with the rest of his body, at least some parents and students are likely to become uncomfortable with his continued use of the girls’ restroom.” Trans children aren’t seen as a threat, because the threat is of sexual violence from who HB2 consider men. Gender expression is equated with sexuality, and trans children are devoid of sexuality.

Almost immediately, HB2 received backlash. Locally, protesters staged sit-ins at the North Carolina Legislative Building, and 54 were arrested for doing so. Additionally, rallies were held to protest HB2 in Raleigh as well as to demonstrate support for the bill. Nationally, the consequences of HB2 were significant. Businesses like PayPal announced they would no longer be building expansion in the state, the NBA moved the All-Star Game, and prominent musicians either boycotted performing in North Carolina or used the concert to raise money for pro-LGBTQ organizations. Among the cancellations were Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam, Cirque du Soleil, Ringo Starr and Boston, along with Nick Jonas and Demi Lovato. Cyndi Lauper kept her North Carolina appearance but donated all the proceeds from the event to Equality North Carolina, an organization formed to combat HB2, while Mumford and Sons donated their proceeds “to a local LGBTQ organization,” and Duran Duran hosted Equality NC volunteers and spoke against HB2 onstage. Perhaps the hardest-hitting were the athletic
cancelations. The NBA decided in July of 2016 that it would pull the 2017 All-Star Game from Charlotte, and the NCAA moved seven championships from the state, including two rounds of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. Some estimate North Carolina will lose an estimated $400 million in revenue as a direct consequence of HB2.

Protestors also critiqued HB2 online. These protests commonly appeared in the form of memes—image-based messages that were effective because of the staggering contrast between an extremely masculine-appearing trans man and the rest of the women in the space of the women’s restroom, for example, or a beautiful trans woman in the space of a men’s restroom. Many memes came from trans men who appeared hegemonically masculine: bearded, tattooed, muscular. While these memes were very effective for throwing the logic of HB2 back in Governor McCrory’s face, they also served to reinforce the rationale behind the bill—that men are a threat to women, and woman-only spaces keep women safe. Trans man Mitch Kellaway argues that bills like HB2 “are explicitly crafted to target trans women, to police who is ‘allowed’ to call themselves a woman and take up women’s space.” Trans men are rendered invisible in HB2; the concern of the bill is supposedly to protect women from those who are not authentically women and therefore present in the bathroom to prey upon ‘real’ women.

In May of 2016 in direct response to HB2, the Justice and Education departments under President Obama released a “Dear Colleague” letter that public schools must allow bathroom and locker room access based on students’ gender identification. To support this guidance, the Obama administration connected funding from Title IX with adherence to the recommendations, that schools receiving federal funding had to adhere or lose their funding because they were in violation of the sex discrimination act. This guidance, however, was short-lived. On August 21, days before school started for many K-12 students, U.S. District Court Judge Reed O’Connor
of Texas blocked the Justice and Education departments’ bathroom guidelines, siding with the thirteen states who are suing the Obama administration. These thirteen states argue that this bathroom guidance, while not legally binding, is unconstitutional and an example of government overreach, arguing that the administration “conspired to turn workplaces and educational settings across the country into laboratories for a massive social experiment, flouting the democratic process, and running roughshod over common-sense policies protecting children and basic privacy rights.” Given that the Departments of Justice and Education only issued guidance, not legislation, the accusation that the Obama administration is flouting the democratic process is overblown. However, the Trump administration rescinded the guidance in 2017, and in 2018, the Department of Education announced it would stop pursuing claims of discrimination against transgender students, effectively prohibiting students from making Title IX claims on the basis of gender identity.

I see policies like HB2 as shamelessly reusing past transgender tropes in response to increased trans visibility. Visibility politics is not always already positive and progressive: the ambivalence of trans visibility is an exemplar of that claim. The cultural and political implications of visibility politics are more complex than the calculus of “visibility = good” and “visibility = progress.” Despite, and perhaps because of, the gains made by the Obama administration, there is no assurance that visibility for transgender people results in better lived realities for all.

Conclusion

This chapter draws attention to the changing tropes and understandings of transgender individuals. From the 1990s through 2016, I trace the tropes that are established, contested, and adjusted, crafting more options through increased visibility but that reify gender binarism and
encourage respectability. In responding to dehumanizing 1990s-early 2000s tropes of “born in the wrong body,” trans deceivers and trans moral corruption, I argue that 2007-2016 public discourses of trans visibility work to dislodge these problematic tropes but cannot ever dispose of them entirely. Discourses of innocence established by transgender children create “just like any other kid” tropes, which blend “born this way” tropes with discourses of normalcy and gender conformity. Popular trans television programs *Transparent* and *OITNB* create depth and breadth of transgender representation, which equips cisgender people with knowledge through increased vocabulary and trans experiences. Hypervisible transgender celebrities’ coming out events, especially in the case of Jenner, provide a visible transgender reference point for cisgender people, contesting existing tropes with a famous figure. HB2 and its backlash draw attention to the problems of visibility—that increased visibility can also led to a negative cultural response in the form of discriminatory legislation that harkens back to the problematic tropes of the 1990s and early 2000s. The response to HB2, though, demonstrates hope for the future in increased cis response. The increased and varied transgender tropes help cisgender people better understand trans people, although dehumanized tropes still circulate despite moves to replace and correct them. The expanded and more visible understandings of transgender Americans also come with danger. To look back on the last decade, it can be understood both as a period of progress, tainted with problematic politics, as well as a period of significant regression. Even visibility that looks progressive, however, is still subject to the logic of mass mediated representation, including commercial logics.

One major problem with these changing tropes and the explosion of trans visibility is that they create a “right” and a “wrong” way to be trans. The “right” way glorifies hegemonic adherence to gender norms and the surgical intervention to match, which is far beyond the
economic realities of many trans people. The “right” way also traffics in respectability politics: the “innocence” trope created and perpetuated by trans children works to delegitimize sex workers, people who transition later in life, trans people who don’t identify within the “born in the wrong body” discourse, and trans people who do not identify neatly as men or women. Visibility politics logics are also ill equipped to deal with trans people of color.

I argue that this decade is vital to understanding the current context of transgender Americans—that while many destructive tropes are being contested and corrected with new tropes, detrimental understandings of trans people are still circulating through legislation like HB2. I locate this context as a vital exigence, “an imperfection marked by urgency” as Bitzer describes, for more complex, ethical understandings of transgender people, which I theorize in this dissertation as a new model of coexistence.135
Notes


7. Stryker, *Transgender History*.


18. Booth, “Queering Queer Eye.”


34. GLAAD, “Victims or Villains.”


36. Adams, “CSI.”

37. Adams, “CSI.”


42. Cavalcante, “Breaking into Transgender Life,” 541.

43. GLAAD, *Where We Are on TV*.


54. Ann P. Haas, Philip L. Rodgers, and Jody D. Herman, Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults: Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2014), 2.


61. Stryker, Transgender History, 150.


67. Gossett et al., Trap Door.


69. Grant et al. Injustice at Every Turn. This could also be because the report oversamples youth, who probably don’t have many material assets.


71. Grinberg, “Jazz Jennings.”

72. Grinberg, “Jazz Jennings.”


74. Bennett, “‘Born This Way,’” 214.


78. Goldberg and Adriano, “Understanding Transgender Children.”


87. “Maine’s Highest Court.”


98. LaCapria, “Caitlyn Jenner.”


100. In a golf game interview with Matt Lauer, Jenner confessed that she thought the Halloween costume was funny, and that she was “in on the joke.” J. Bryan Lowder, “Caitlyn Jenner vs. ‘the Community,’” *Slate*, September 9, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/09/09/caitlyn_jenner_gay_marriage_and_the_halloween_costume_respectable_trans.html.


111. Cox, “On May 29.”

112. Nicolazzo, *Trans* *in College*, 5.


114. House Bill 2.

115. House Bill 2.


120. Frosch, “Legal Dispute Over Transgender Rights.”


122. Barrett, “HB2 Demonstrators.”


126. Glum, “Anti-LGBT Laws.”


Chapter Three: Institutional Discourses of University Ally Training Programs and the Limitations of Liberal Allyship

“Visibility is the most important role you have as a member of the program.”¹

“Some risks of being an ally to LGBTQ people . . . Others may speculate about your own sexual orientation or gender identity. You may be labeled as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender ‘by association,’ which you might find uncomfortable.”²

When I attended the University of Iowa’s Safe Zone training program in the summer of 2014, the facilitators gave us paper stars for our first activity, which varied in color.³ The University of Iowa’s Safe Zone Project is “a campus-wide program that offers a visible message of inclusion, affirmation, and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in the university community,” enacted through two two-hour training sessions led by volunteers. During this first activity, we were told to think of a family member who was the most precious to us and write their name on one of the points of the star. Then we were told to write a friend’s name on another point of the star, plus the name of a community in which we were invested, a career goal, and a life goal. Once we had all filled out our stars, we all gathered in a circle, with the facilitators requesting we not speak. The facilitators walked us through the process of coming out as LGBTQ—although it was primarily lesbian and gay focused language. Our star color determined what kind of treatment we would receive in this activity. Blue stars were lucky, and when those with blue stars came out to their precious family member, friend, or community, they were welcomed with acceptance. Pink and yellow stars were less lucky; while a family member might eventually accept you, you would lose your friends and future profession. Red stars were the least lucky; they faced exile from every facet of their life. In the activity, not only was this narrated through different treatments for each color, but our acceptance or lack thereof by each of the people or spheres was also demonstrated through what we were directed to
do with our stars. If the person or community accepted you wholeheartedly, you were allowed to keep their name on the point of the star. If they eventually accepted you after hardship at the beginning of your coming out process, you folded back the point of the star. If that person exiled you from their lives based on your sexual orientation or gender identity, then you tore the point of the star off and dropped it on the ground. After all of the scenarios had been completed, we were asked to reflect together about how that activity felt for us, how we felt about imagining that our chosen career path was closed off to us or that our friends would never speak to us again.

There were many heartfelt testimonies about how affected participants had been by this activity, which I was greatly skeptical of—coming out as what? I was fairly certain they were only talking about gay and lesbian statistics, because there was no way these were inclusive of transgender statistics. I learned later that the colors of the stars corresponded to statistics throughout the exercise, with your family’s rejection equating to the 42% of homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ, for example. The logic of the exercise, then, was built on the understanding that we, the participants, needed to go through this activity because we had never experienced something like this before. That we, assumed heterosexual and cisgender people, had never experienced the kinds of negative attitudes that came with being LGBTQ. This activity, along with many others in the two hour training session, constructed us as not-LGBT, as separate from the community we were to support. Of course we all needed to be guided through an empathy exercise; it was assumed that we had no idea what LGBTQ people experienced. This exercise is one of many within ally training programs designed to promote empathy and develop an understanding of one’s privilege, two important tasks within ally training manuals.

The epigraphs of this chapter were taken from two ally training manuals from two different institutions, but together they exemplify the core tenets of what I call liberal allyship, a
model of allyship that relies on ally as a fixed, visible identity, separate and distinct from LGBTQ identities. The liberal model is exemplified by the principles of liberal individualism, taking from Michael Warner who defines the term as “a belief in voluntarism and the ego-integrated self.” Thus, I name this model of coexistence that relies on individual, private persons, separate from others. What I call the radical solidarity model, on the other hand, theorizes an alternative to allyship through vernacular voices, formed from close connections, using understandings of privilege to benefit marginalized communities, and without requiring recognition for allyship labor.

This chapter and the following analyze these two different strands of coexistence and look to the invention capacity of the activists, educators, and critics who have built these discourses of coexistence. While the two models are not mutually exclusive, they are the primary competing discourses of allyship and solidarity in practice in 2018. In this chapter, I use ally training manuals and ally training programs as an exemplar for the liberal allyship model, arguing that these manuals epitomize allyship as fixed, visible identities that are distanced from LGBTQ people. Rather than train their participants to support people through ally labor, which I define as a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression, they focus on learning terminology and gaining empathy rather than teaching participants how to engage in concrete action.

I argue in this chapter that allyship discourses within ATPs have serious implications for how allies are manufactured at the university level and what actions are expected of them. While I do not roundly condemn the liberal allyship model, I critique the limited possibilities it creates for participants. By both external, university circumstances and internal logics of the manuals,
ally training programs fail to accomplish their goals of crafting safe campus environments, allies who act as advocates, community members who are educated in LGBTQ terminology, and inclusive campus settings.

For this chapter, I gathered ally training manuals available online from a variety of universities, plus one from the Peace Corps, examining 10 in depth. While I did not participate in the ally training programs from each of these schools, the analysis of this chapter is supplemented from my experience at the University of Iowa both participating in Safe Zone training sessions as well as training to facilitate them. I benefit here from viewing these documents from several different perspectives: as a participant, who engaged with others during training sessions; as a trained facilitator, who could question the logic of these manuals in a day-long training session and ask for behind-the-scenes information; and as a scholar of gender identity and sexuality, who could fact-check the incorrect analyses of Judith Butler, for example. The manuals I drew from were published or updated between 2005 and 2016. Of the manuals that listed authorship, these authors tended to be residential life staff, diversity services staff, or faculty in psychology, counseling, or gender studies. At least one manual listed an undergraduate student advisory committee as contributing to the authorship and organization of the ally training sessions. While “Safe Zone” is a common title for these programs, names vary in each setting, so for ease of language, I refer to them as ally training programs (ATPs), as per Woodford et al. I use USU’s “Allies on Campus” program as an example of ATPs’ most frequent goals:

The purpose of the Allies on Campus Program is to provide a network of faculty, students, and staff who are committed to providing a safe and affirming zone for anyone exploring issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Allies strive to reduce homophobia and transphobia, as well as other forms of heterosexism and gender identity-based discrimination through education, advocacy, awareness, and creating a visible network of Allies.
Generally, I discuss these goals in terms of safety, advocacy, education, and inclusion throughout this chapter. However, ATPs fail to accomplish these goals in several different ways—by creating further distance through defining ally as an identity category, by creating allies who do not advocate because they have been ill-equipped to do so, and by encouraging visibility for allies to create safety, end up garnering cultural capital for allies. For example, SIUE constructs a “Safe Space” as

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 a place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where the rules guard each person’s self-respect and dignity and strongly encourages everyone to respect others.  
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The goals of these programs are not congruent with the effects of these programs, although it would be nearly impossible to accomplish those goals with the limited resources ATPs make do with.

In order to make this argument, I argue that the liberal model of allyship constructs allies as separate from LGBTQ communities, focused on understanding their own privilege, and visible. First, I contextualize the emergence of ATPs in the early 1990s and describe the typical contents of training manuals. Second, I argue that while ATPs seek to improve inclusion, they fail in doing so through reaffirming distance and difference between allies and LGBTQ people. Third, I argue that while ATPs seek to improve intervention and advocacy, they fail because in their focus on privilege and crafting empathy, they do not provide the training necessary to intervene. Fourth, while ATPs use ally and Safe Zone symbol visibility to create a safe campus environment, a byproduct of that visibility creates cultural capital.
What Ally Training Programs Look Like and How They Developed

Before moving forward, I offer a short history of ATPs. As higher education scholar Kristen Renn argues, programs arose from “research on the development of gay and lesbian (sometimes also bisexual) identities and the experiences of gay and lesbian students,” primarily enacted through campus climate studies. She discusses four factors that led to further study of LGBTQ students in the early 1990’s: “decreased pathologizing of minority sexualities, increased visibility of gays and lesbians on and off campus, emerging emphasis on understanding various domains (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) of student identities, and increased attention to campus climate and experiences of nonmajority students.” Given these factors, universities conducted climate studies, which reported significant problems for lesbian and gay students in university climates. In response to the growing awareness of climate problems for LGBTQ students, different offices on college campuses began offering ally training programs in the early 1990’s to attempt to fix these climate problems. Student Services scholar Kerry Poynter claims to have formed the first of these programs in 1992 at Ball State, called “SAFE On Campus.” These ally training programs sought to create visible allies for LGBTQ students, the expression of which could include buttons, pins, stickers, signs or placards designating the person an ally or the space a “Safe Zone.” The most commonly cited essay in ally training programs comes from Washington and Evans’ 1991 piece, "Becoming an Ally." Written specifically for and by student affairs professionals, essays throughout this book are cited in many ally training programs. Their definition and its adaptations are immensely popular and pervasive, also including selections from “Understanding Gay and Lesbian Students of Color” and the Cass model, a 1979 model of sexual identity development. They define ally as “a member of the dominant group or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal or professional life through
While it certainly was an important text to understanding LGB students and their needs in the early 1990s, it is quite outdated for use in 2018. As seen in the title of the text, the book does not deal with transgender concerns and barely broaches bisexual identities throughout.

LGBTQ students founded the idea for ATPs in the early 1990s. As Poynter argues, “after hosting a string of regional student leader conferences, the program idea spread across the Midwest.” As the 1990s progressed, “educational policy makers and program planners” started to notice the growing popularity and efficacy of ATPs. As many higher education scholars who study ATPs note, there is little research describing the origins of these programs or their efficacy. In the mid to late-2000s, ally training manuals began including transgender concerns. However, despite the fact that “transgender issues are invariably much less understood than lesbian or gay concerns,” trans-specific material is either mentioned briefly or conflated with lesbian and gay-specific issues. It is unclear what, exactly, has been changed and added since the early 1990s; much content is antiquated and out of date. This is not to say that ATPs have gone out of fashion: while they received pushback at their inception, most ATPs seem to have found a place within university structures.

However, ATPs still retain many vestiges of 1990s visibility politics and understanding the origins of identity politics is vital to understanding ATPs’ focus on ally visibility. As Renn describes, early higher education research on LGBTQ students strove to normalize and make visible: that “proving the existence and documenting the experiences of gay and lesbian students and faculty bolstered claims to normalcy.” This intersects with the popularity of visibility politics as a political approach. As Erin Rand notes, “visibility politics became an increasingly common tactic for activist groups of all kinds in the 1990s.” Given the proliferation of ally
training programs in the early to mid-1990s, it is not surprising that these manuals would use the same tactics as LGBTQ activist groups, assuming, as Dan Brouwer argues, “that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources.”

ATPs in their current form are products of the 1990s and its ethics.

There is no standardized “Safe Zone” handbook, guidelines, or rules. The majority of these programs grew out of the context in which they occurred, by the people who could put them together, out of whichever program at the university would support the program: that is to say, they were thrown together by various sources, from various departments, given similar but different exigences for existing. Higher education scholars Hothem and Keene explain this phenomenon: “There are no prepackaged Safe Zone kits for purchase: there is no ‘Center for Safe Zone Training’ a staff person can attend; training models will be unique to each campus depending on the expertise and resources available to those creating the network.”

Poynter created an edited volume, Safe Zones: Training Allies of LGBTQIA+ Young Adults in 2016, in an attempt to create the first standardized ATP, as “there has been no standardized curriculum or reference on the topic” because facilitators were “dependent on hand-to-hand/word-of-mouth dissemination of curricula, workshops, and handouts.” Because of this lack of standardization, ally training programs are cobbled together from other schools’ existing manuals or programming, either on a wholesale copy-paste basis or with some editing for location specificity and/or to update antiquated information. Like Poynter notes, the exigence of his book was that there was “no centralized place to gather knowledge, resources, activities, and experiences of those who run or facilitate these Safe Zone ally developmental programs.”

Poynter’s text was not published until 2016, so that most of the manuals I examined for this
chapter do not include his materials; his effort to standardize ATPs has not been adopted widely in the manuals I found. For example, Cuyahoga Community College’s manual was updated in February of 2014, but given that its recommended book list has only one entry from after the year 2000, it is evident that the manual was not overhauled from previous versions. Other manuals were updated or published in 2009, 2014, 2015, and 2016.

About Specific ATPs, Manuals

Here, I explain the format of most ally training manuals and explain their overall form. The ally training manuals I examined ranged from 20 to 140 pages long, although the median length of these manuals is 38 pages. These manuals are primarily text-based, composed primarily of lists. Some contain infographics along with the list-based collection of resources, but rarely are the manuals given much color or many images.

Some manuals begin with an explanation of their exigence—why Safe Zone exists on their campus. For example, Cuyahoga Community College features a note from its cofounder, Jim Buccini:

I had been attending Tri-C for several semesters, and was aware of other schools who had Safe Zone programs and Gay-Straight Alliances. I had not felt particularly unsafe at the Western Campus, and yet I was still very aware that there was no outward and visible sign of support for LGBT students. Passing by Dr. Nahla Harik-Williams’ office one day, I noticed she had a Safe Zone sign hanging above her desk. Having identified her as an LGBT ally, I approached her and proposed the idea starting a student organization and a Safe Zone program on the Western Campus.26

The note continues to trace the history of Tri-C’s Safe Zone program, including first members and initial results of the program in 2004, and also thanks the surrounding colleges for sharing their materials.

In some cases, vocabulary or glossary sections directly follow this immediate establishment of purpose in order for participants to understand basic language used to describe
LGBTQ identities. Vocabulary lists describe “key terms” like “gender identity” and “homophobia,” while listing other related terms like “faggot,” “lesbian,” “transgenderist” and “Two-Spirit.” As evidenced by some of the related terms, manuals include slurs and terms are out of common usage, balanced with commonly-understood concepts and identities. Other manuals leave this task for later in the manual, after explaining basics like the difference between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, using vocabulary lists to list more specific identity categories.

The manuals are commonly organized around the same general themes. Here, I reproduce the table of contents for Brown University’s very comprehensive manual, which is divided into two main sections separating discussions of sexual orientation from gender identity:

- Safe Zone Program Introduction
- About This Manual
- Becoming an Ally: Benefits & Risks
- Sexual Orientation:
  - Glossary of Terms
  - What is Bisexuality?
  - “Coming Out” Issues
  - What Is Heterosexual Privilege?
  - How Homophobia Hurts Everyone
  - “Straight But Not Narrow”: How to be an Ally to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People
- Gender Identity:
  - Glossary of Terms: TGI
  - Trans/Transgender Issues
  - Intersex Issues
  - Androgyne, Genderqueer, Bi-Gender, & Multigender Issues
  - Working with Trans People: Some Things to Keep In Mind
  - How to be an Ally to Trans People
  - “What Should I Do If…?” Commonly Asked Ally Questions
  - Online Resources
  - Reporting Gender & Sexuality-Related Bias Incidents.

Most manuals also include content that reviews identity development models for LGBTQ people. These pages generally contain the Cass Model of “Homosexual Identity Formation,”
which includes stages of “Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, and Identity Pride.” This identity model was published in 1979, was cited in _Beyond Tolerance_, and appeared in seven of the manuals I examined in depth for this chapter. Some manuals also cite the Kinsey Scale, found in their introductions to sexual orientation.

Most manuals contained sections on heterosexual privilege, with some additionally providing cisgender privilege lists. They explain heterosexual privilege very simply: “the basic civil rights and social privileges that a heterosexual individual automatically receives, which are systematically denied to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender persons on the sole basis of their sexual orientation.” Many provide examples for what heterosexual privilege looks like, formed either in a “Privilege Knapsack” format or with relatable scenarios in which a lesbian’s partner is in the hospital and since they’re not married, the hospital won’t allow access.

Beyond the aforementioned topics, ATPs also provide many lists that are ally-specific. These include topics like “Qualities of an Ally,” and “Guidelines for Being an Ally.” Qualities of an ally include traits like “Believes that it is in her or his self-interest to be an ally” and “Chooses to align with GLBTI and responds to their needs.” Some guidelines for being an ally are “Prepare yourself for a journey of change and growth that will come by exploring sexual identity issues, heterosexism, transphobia, and other issues of difference” and “Don’t assume heterosexuality. In our society, we generally assume that everyone we meet is heterosexual. However, many GLBTIQ people will hide their identities until they feel safe to ‘come out.’”

Many manuals take one or two pages to deal with bisexual and intersex-specific topics, with some containing myths about these populations. At the end of most manuals, they contain lists of resources, both local to the college or region and national resources. These range from local
PFLAG meetings or campus Gay Straight Alliance organizations to the Human Rights Campaign website and links to queer religious organizations in almost every denomination.

To more specifically look at the ways that allies are constructed in these manuals, I focus here on the lists provided in sections titled “Being an Ally” or “Ally Resources.” In addition to using Washington and Evans’ seminal piece, separated into many different sections, ally training manuals list other collections of actions for allies to do. Among these include, for example, “Strategies for Being an Effective Ally,” “Responding to LGBTQIA Bias,” “How to be an Ally to Trans People,” “Making your Campus a Safe Zone” “Using Privilege to Create Change,” and “10 Ways to Fight Hate on Campus.” These lists do not drastically differ manual to manual, although they have different titles. While some are specific to context, i.e. being an ally to trans people versus being an effective ally writ large, most lists are general.

Primarily, ally training manuals give allies a large list of tactics to perform, ranging from concrete to vague. In specific terms, ATPs suggest that allies should regulate their language use and listen. Haywood Community College tells allies to “Avoid using terms such as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend;’ instead, try using ‘partner’ or ‘spouse.’” Brown makes sure that language use is consistent when speaking to or about a trans person: “Never use the word ‘it’ when referring to someone who is transgender.” Utah State equips its allies with this direction when a person comes out to an ally: “Don’t judge. Regardless of your own personal or moral belief about LGBTQIA persons, keep in mind that the person has made hirself vulnerable to you. Just listen.” However, manuals can also be very vague, using language like “support” and “be aware of” instead of naming concrete action items, like in Cuyahoga Community College’s suggestion to “Support your lesbian and gay colleagues” or SIUE’s direction to “Believe in yourself!”
The manuals examined came from a wide range of colleges and universities. I had previously assumed that ATPs were mostly housed at large public research universities that had LGBTQ resource centers, but the manuals I examined did not necessarily support this assumption. Of the nine post-secondary manuals examined, two were from community colleges, two were from private, selective universities, and five were from public, mostly research-based universities ranging from 950 to 37,000 enrolled students. Geographically, most regions of the United States were represented in the sample.

Given the rampant adaptation from other ally training manuals, however, it is difficult to make assumptions about the relationship between region and the content of the manual itself. Bridgewater State and Worcester Polytechnic’s manuals are two of the most adapted, and those colleges are both located in Massachusetts, a much different educational setting than Southern California or Utah. However, some manuals are context-specific. While many campus environments have improved in terms of tolerance, that is not necessarily the case everywhere. For example, Utah State’s ATP was developed to cater to their high Mormon population. They explain that the struggle between students’ religious identities and their sexual orientation or gender identity demands “visible support of welcoming, non-judgmental faculty and staff” for questioning students. Marking a new environment as safe and welcoming, then, creates support for students who did not feel safe to share concerns about their sexual orientation or gender identity at home. Given that ally training programs were started in the early to mid-1990s, the concern for creating a safer space than intolerant homes or high schools is fitting for these university-based manuals, based on climate studies at the time.

The ally training manuals I examine in this chapter reference which manuals they adapt or copy from, which leads me to believe that while some outliers exist, ally training manuals are
a genre that does not vary significantly from university to university. Frequently cited manuals are from Bridgewater State, Worcester Polytechnic, Ball State University, and the University of Iowa, among others. Based on the information cited in these manuals as well as the other manuals credited for content, I assume that many of the manuals are rarely given significant overhauls beyond basic vocabulary additions or resource updates. Some manuals draw upon other manuals’ information but significantly alter it for contemporary concerns. USU, for example, contains a section on heterosexual privilege designed in the style of Peggy McIntosh’s “Invisible Knapsack,” which exists in many other manuals, but adds a section on cisgender privilege in the same style.

While the manuals are very similar, some almost complete copies of each other, this is not to say that all of the manuals are the same. For example, the California Faculty Association manual, crafted by faculty and staff at California State University—Long Beach, is very activity-heavy, ranging from empathy exercises as seen in the opening anecdote of this chapter to LGBTQ panel presentations, which ask panelists to answer questions like “What things would you NOT be comfortable with an ally doing or saying?” and “What cautions do you have to take on a daily basis as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer person on campus?” Utah State University includes infographics, like the Genderbread Person, includes colorful illustrations throughout, and frequently parallels any mention of homophobia with transphobia and heteronormativity with cisnormativity.
Figure 1. “The Genderbread Person,” by Sam Killermann. Free access infographic.

Additionally, USU details concrete actions in the list “Responding to LGBTQ Bias,” with suggestions like “Name it, Claim it, and Stop it!” in order to name the biased comment, make it a concern of yours personally, and request the biased commenter stop. Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville’s manual contains a list of “Strategies for Being an Effective Ally,” which succinctly gives concrete advice to allies looking to support LGBTQ people, giving specific advice on intervention techniques like, “Take an educational approach. Ask for clarification. Question.” While this sounds like the intervention technique one would use with an ignorant, racist relative, it is nonetheless a useful technique to use when encountering
homophobia or transphobia: asking “what makes you say that?” is a great way to force bigots into rationalizing their hate. Now that I have discussed the goals of ATPs, their histories, and their most frequent contents, I move to a discussion of how those goals are not accomplished and have problematic implications within ally training manuals.

Creating Stable Identity Category to Distance from LGBTQ People

In this section, I argue that if one of the main goals of ATPs is creating LGBTQ inclusion, they fail to achieve that goal through the creation of “ally” as a stable identity category, which creates separation from LGBTQ individuals in the process of constituting allies as a unique and separate group. Ally training manuals produce ally-as-identity through their constant construction of what makes an ally. Kenneth Burke famously argued that identification occurs through the ability to talk another person’s language through “speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, [or] idea.”47 As Crick and Gabriel explain, “identification is thus a combination of having identity, meaning here an object defined by its distinct properties, and being identified with.”48 In ally training manuals, identification is formed by creating an ally identity, which is then defined in opposition to LGBTQ people.

In the process of constituting “ally” as an identity, ally training programs simultaneously construct allies as separate from LGBTQ people. Ally training manuals use the noun form of “ally”; that is, that an ally “is a person who…” when defined by the manuals, like in the case of SDSU’s manual, defining ally as “Is a person who provides a safe space that is highly visible and easily identifiable to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. It is where support and understanding are key and bigotry and discrimination are not tolerated.”49 In most manuals, lists describing “ideal qualities of an ally” or “what is expected of a Safe Zone Ally” linguistically
(re)affirm that an ally should have particular traits and do particular things, and that ‘ally’ itself is stable.  

In several manuals, they define ally as separate explicitly in their definition. “Member of the dominant social group” and other similar language is used frequently. In some manuals, allies are explicitly identified as “heterosexual all[ies],” which not only excludes the possibility for cisgender non-heterosexual allies but reveals the underlying assumption of heterosexual and cisgender allies. As Maurice Charland argues, rhetoric “calls its audience into being,” and I argue that ally training manuals constitute ally as an identity category of its own, separate from LGBTQ identities. One manual does so by defining the terms ‘advocate’ and ‘ally’ as nearly the same, but with one essential difference: an ally “advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own [and] reaches across differences to achieve mutual goals” while an advocate simply “works to end intolerance, educate others, and support LGBTQ issues, concerns, and equal rights legislations.” In so doing, ally training manuals define allies against the population they claim to be supporting. In this case, the only division between advocates and allies is that allies are by definition privileged and thus separate.

Harkening back to the basics of Burke, creating ally as an identity category creates an “us” and a “them.” As he argues, identification is “compensatory to division.” Ally training manuals and their establishment of ally as an identity casts marginalized individuals, in this case LGBTQ people, as “other,” and works to reinforce boundaries of identity. Through much of the manuals, they provide topic introductions that may be seen as exoticizing LGBTQ populations, like in Brown University’s manual, they direct participants to be allies through actions and assumptions, including: “Do not assume that a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person is attracted to you just because they have disclosed their sexual identity. If any interest is shown, be flattered, not
flustered. Treat any interest that someone might show just as you would if it came from someone who is heterosexual.”

First, this statement’s inclusion in the manual is not encouraging for the kind of audience ATPs imagine. Second, while the advice says to accept flirtation as if it’s from a heterosexual person, the normalizing move comes off as patronizing at best and othering at worst. While ally training manuals contain many moves to try to create identification with LGBTQ people, including exercises that encourage empathy with coming out and questionnaires that seek to dismantle heterosexual privilege, there are simultaneously discourses that distance allies from those they seek to ally with.

This is not to say that building empathy for LGBTQ people is inessential to allyship. Through this building of empathy, though, LGBTQ people are crafted as an exotic other, much different from heterosexual people, requiring a huge amount of information in order to understand them. Activities like “Guided Imagery,” as seen in the California Faculty Association manual, attempts to craft empathy through imagining the differences between LGBTQ people and cisgender, heterosexual people, but only furthers this distance:

Guided Imagery turns today’s world upside-down to give participants a chance to experience heterosexism and homophobia. Through a narrated presentation, the participants are asked to imagine living in a world where same-sex relationships are socially expected and celebrated and opposite-sex relationships are deviant. Thus, those who identify as heterosexual are stereotyped, isolated, and receive unequal treatment. By creating a world in which heterosexuality is the minority and homosexuality is the majority, the stigma, tension, and anxiety that an LGB individual experiences can be made known and confronted.

Through this exercise, allies are walked through a world in which they are no longer the majority, and the ways they suffer discrimination in a wide variety of ways, including “you keep switching the channels, but all you can find are shows featuring Lesbian or Gay couples and their families.” While this operates similarly to the “Invisible Knapsack” of white privilege, the CFA spends an enormous amount of time guiding heterosexual, cisgender participants through a
visualization exercise in which they imagine what the world would look like if they were just as discriminated against as LGBTQ people. This functions, however, to reinscribe differences between LGBTQ people and allies: allies require at least fifty minutes, between the guided imagery activity and the activity named in the opening anecdote, to build empathy for LGBTQ people. Dedicating so much time to empathy-building increases the distance between LGBTQ and those who seek to ally with them.

The problems with creating further distance between allies and those they seek to support are multitudinous. Ally training manuals that have “risks of being an ally” sections reaffirm heteronormativity while additionally providing distance between the ally and the LGBTQ community. The manual argues that being seen as LGBTQ is negative and undesirable—that a potential risk of being an ally is being misrecognized as LGBTQ. For example, “You may become the subject of gossip or rumors” as an ally, which crafts association with LGBTQ people as a negative byproduct of allyship. While LGBTQ people are recipients of hate crimes and discrimination, I do not think that is what these ATPs warn their allies of. Instead, cisgender heterosexual people may treat allies poorly because of this misrecognition, implicitly arguing that allies do not deserve this treatment. This serves to reaffirm cisnornativity and heteronormativity through crafting recognition as LGBTQ as undesirable.

A lack of identification between allies and LGBTQ people works against ATPs mission of creating inclusive environments. It is hard to feel obligated to act unless it is seen as benefitting you. Through listing risks of being an ally, or describing allies’ role as “You are simply serving as a safe person and a resource,” allies are not imagined as playing an essential part in supporting LGBTQ people. At every turn in the manuals, LGBTQ people are crafted as different, especially as seen in sections like “How Homophobia Hurts Us All, but lists the ways in which
heterosexual people are damaged by association with LGBTQ people: “[Homophobia] is often used to stigmatize heterosexuals; those perceived or labeled by others to be LGBTQ; children of LGBTQ parents; parents of LGBTQ children; and friends of LGBTQ people.”

60 Given the lack of identification, establishing common goals is difficult. In the next chapter, I explore alternatives to understanding ally as an identity, because of the risks that come from an identity without mutuality, trust, or labor. This lack of focus on outreach or supportive action can be seen most clearly in ATPs’ focus on internal reflection over ally labor.

**Prioritizing Internal Reflection Over External Action**

If one of the goals of ATPs is to create allies who advocate for marginalized communities, they fail to accomplish this goal because they prioritize internal reflection and empathy-building over training their participants to intervene or support LGBTQ in specific ways. In this dissertation, I define ally labor as a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression. In this context, I refer to ally labor as operating in support of LGBTQ people. Given the focus on internal reflection on privilege and learning about LGBTQ issues, ATPs prioritize internal knowledge and self-reflection over providing concrete examples for how to support LGBTQ people. Through the composition of these manuals, priority is given to teaching allies vocabulary, empathy for LGBTQ people, and to recognize their privilege as cisgender heterosexuals, rather than teaching allies how to intervene in moments of bigotry or refer LGBTQ people to a better source of support. The lack of concrete actions suggested in these manuals leads to limited ally labor potential for allies.
Much of the burden of education in ally training programs is an understanding of vocabulary and gender and sexuality 101 rather than on concrete action an ally could take to benefit LGBTQ people. In every manual encountered, I found a long glossary of terms. Many were prefaced with sentiments that “terminology is important [and] the words we use, and how we use them, can be very powerful” as well as the acknowledgement that people need a “starting point for discussion and understanding.” Generally, these glossaries contained LGBTQ identity terms, like “transgender,” “transsexual,” and “queer,” as well as terms that may be offensive to LGBTQ people, like “faggot,” “tranny,” and “dyke,” with the disclaimer that these might have been reclaimed by LGBTQ people. The more extensive glossaries either give more nuanced definitions to their terms, list more than the basic terms, or both. For example, USU features two symbols, “caution” and “label,” to denote “potentially problematic terminology” and “terms individuals may self-select to describe identities, behaviors, or orientations” respectively. Additionally, ally training manuals explain the basics of gender and sexuality—specifically, the difference between gender, sex, and sexual orientation as well as thorough explorations of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Many of these explanations of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are formatted into easy-to-digest lists. The logic of these glossaries, then, is that an ally can either learn them or have them on hand so that any vocabulary word to describe LGBTQ identities can be understood quickly. Many terms are rarely unpacked fully. If these vocabulary words are not fully explored, allies are not equipped to engage in ally labor: they have a small base of knowledge, but it may not be sufficient to fully support LGBTQ people.

After understanding the basics of homophobia and transphobia, ally training manuals usually challenged the trainee to examine their own privilege, focusing internally rather than
externally. ATPs assume their audiences are heterosexual and cisgender. With a few different
tactics, ally training programs invert heterosexual/cisgender dominance in order to help trainees
realize what privileges they have as heterosexual and cisgender people. The first way they do this
is by presenting a list of heterosexual and/or cisgender privilege, in the same format as
McIntosh’s “invisible knapsack.” For example, in terms of cisgender privilege, a privilege
cisgender people have is “keeping your name, pronouns, and voice the same throughout your
life.”63 Closely related, ATPs present questionnaires that flip invasive questions LGBTQ people
receive about their sexuality and gender identity, for example: “Have you thought about the
impact that being openly cisgender could have on your career?”64 The question has impact
because it attempts to demonstrate how intrusive that question would be in any circumstance, but
it is a common question trans people receive. In the same vein as the questionnaires, some ally
training programs use activities that invert heterosexist/cissexist hegemony and make the trainee
understand what it feels like to be in the minority.65 As I described earlier, the California Faculty
Association’s manual features the activity called “Guided Imagery,” which describes a world in
which heterosexuality is no longer the norm, that “those who identify as heterosexual are
stereotyped, isolated, and receive unequal treatment.”66 While understanding privilege and
learning vocabulary is vital to ally development, that these programs spend the vast majority of
their short time doing so reflects their priorities. ATPs care more about allies working on
themselves rather than acting in support of others.

ATPs attempt to teach participants two specific kinds of ally labor: to intervene when
something offensive is said and to refer LGBTQ people to external resources. Ideally, this would
require allies to leverage their privilege to benefit LGBTQ people. However, ATPs either do not
have time to do so or do not give concrete advice on how to do so. This call for ally labor exists,
but is so vague as to make action difficult or impossible. Intervention is mostly framed in terms of other heterosexual people who make gay jokes or slurs; allies are told, for example, to “step in and stop offensive language when possible” and to “interrupt prejudice.” Others provide models for intervention, like Utah State, which instructs allies to “diffuse the situation, educate others about why it’s harmful and unacceptable, and provide support to the person who has been targeted” and gives specific instructions on how to do so. USU’s model of intervention is specific and targeted, but it is the only manual I examined that equipped its allies with so much information. USU demonstrates that time constraints are a demonstration of priorities rather than an all-encompassing prohibition against ally labor.

ATPs’ other form of ally labor is to teach allies to refer LGBTQ people to local and national resources. As Cuyahoga Community College outlines, an successful ally “knows where to find resources & referrals & when to refer.” Most ATPs have a list of resources at the end of the manual, split between a combination of local resources, either at the university or college level or the city/region level, and national resources, like PFLAG and the Human Rights Campaign, for more information on certain topics. ATPs assume that the manuals train allies to be experts in what these resources can provide, although given the lack of detail contained with those links in most ATPs, I do not know whether allies are equipped to do so. ATPs establish allies as creating a safe environment in which to talk, but there are many disclaimers: “displaying a Safe Zone sticker does not make you an expert. Be prepared to give referrals to campus and community resources when necessary,” one manual states. The suggestions for action that ATPs provide are lacking; they can be ambiguous in what that action should actually look like.

ATPs primarily spend time on teaching their participants empathy and how to understand their own privilege as cisgender heterosexuals but fail to teach allies what to do with that
privilege. What are the possibilities available for allies once they understand their own privilege but are not equipped to do anything with it? ATPs offer suggestions to intervene in instances of homophobia or transphobia, but they do not train their allies on how to specifically mediate in these moments. While understanding one’s privilege is an essential step to productive allyship, opportunities for allyship labor are foreclosed when an ally does not know what to do with that privilege. If one of the tasks is for allies to “Become aware of the daily exclusions that affect those who are not heterosexual, male, upper/middle class, able-bodied, and/or white” and manuals do not go further than that, how do allies move beyond self-absorption into action? In many ways, the responsibility of an ally is described as visibility, leading to a further lack of ally labor.

Visibility Increases Safety and Cultural Capital

One of the main goals of ATPs is safety, accomplished through the visibility of allies. However, I argue in this section that while safety may be established, so too is cultural capital for the ally. Cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu explains, is the collection of skills, accreditations, taste, degrees, and so on that enable social mobility and collective identity. Displaying the Safe Zone placard is constructed as a vital component of being an ally. Visibility functions in two ways: first, as intended, ATPs create the possibility of visibility by proxy, which I define as the process through which an ally is recognized in order to create better access to safety for LGBTQ people. Second, an unintended consequence of that visibility is the accumulation of cultural capital for the ally. Through constructing the liberal model of allyship, individualism is at its core—as are the byproducts of visibility.

Training manuals state repeatedly that ally is a stable identity category, but what does it mean to be visible as an ally, and what is gained through doing so? Here, allies work as the
object of recognition, that as Alyssa Samek argues, “visibility has provided for a crucial ‘politics of recognition,’ or the ability to ‘recognize and be recognized.’” Being recognized as an ally has important implications for the ways in which safety and cultural capital are condensed onto their visibility. They stand as a recognizable symbol that accumulates the resource of safety for LGBTQ people and cultural capital for themselves. Charles Taylor argues that recognition is vital, that “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence…and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves,” and that a lack or failure of recognition “can inflict harm, be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” Taylor argues that being recognized is vital to crafting identity, and linked with Samek’s claim, visibility allows people to be recognized and thus shapes their identities.

If we follow from the logic of visibility politics and recognition garnering further legitimacy for those who are visible, why make allies visible? By the definition ATPs establish, allies are heterosexual and cisgender—they do not need further legitimacy. That ally training programs espouse the virtue of visibility and recognition to their allies is suspect. But given this politics of recognition, what does it mean to be the object of visibility—or is it a vestige of 1990s visibility politics that ATPs never outgrew? Being the object of recognition as an ally is the focus of this section because it seems so antithetical to the mission of most ally training programs—ATPs are crafted to garner recognition for allies, but their missions are “to reduce homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism” on campuses—no visibility necessary. While I argue here that ATPs’ goal is to create safety, they also must reward allies through visibility in order to gain participants in their programs.
Many ally training manuals make the assertion that the most important duty of an ally is to be visible. This is generally seen through the display of a Safe Zone placard or sticker in their office space but is occasionally abstracted to the ally themselves acting as a “Safe Zone” to LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. Some of the ways in which ally training programs stress visibility are in the display of the Safe Zone symbol. One training manual lists “Is VISIBLE (e.g. Displays a Safe Zone logo, attends events)” as one of the ways that allies can be effective.\textsuperscript{75} The liberal model focuses on visibility above many other goals—one main way they invent possibilities for allies is through visibility. Seen through Safe Zone placards, mugs, water bottles, key chains, buttons, etc., ally training programs routinely construct allyship as operating as a visible object. The symbol, Maine Maritime Academy argues,

\begin{quote}

is a message to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people and their allies. The message is that the person displaying this symbol is understanding, supportive and trustworthy if a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person needs help, advice or just someone with whom s/he can talk. The person displaying this symbol can also give accurate information about sexual orientation and/or gender identity.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

As I discuss throughout this section, the symbol is a powerful statement, but perhaps allies cannot live up to the symbol’s lofty standards of establishing safety and providing support with 4 total hours of training, especially when much of the focus of ATPs is visibility.

\textit{Visibility By Proxy}

One of the functions of ally visibility is the assumption that increased visibility for allies also creates more safety for LGBTQ people. Visibility by proxy, process through which an ally is recognized in order to create better access to safety for LGBTQ people, garners positive resources for LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. As queer theorist of space Christina Hanhardt argues, “\textit{Safety} is a key term in LGBT politics, colloquially as well as in political organizing and social service provision.”\textsuperscript{77} A focus on safety in university spaces follows logically, especially
given ATPs’ emergence in the 1990s. ATPs establish early in their manuals the need for creating “a safe, inclusive environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer individuals” on campuses. Following this statement, ally training programs espouse the importance of displaying the Safe Zone symbol once the training is completed. It becomes easier to see what this visibility serves through analysis of these manuals—that it is not necessarily for the benefit of an ally to be visible but exists for the creation of safety for others, or visibility by proxy.

If we take an understanding of safety like visibility by proxy does, visibility does labor on behalf of LGBTQ individuals. However, that manifests in safety as a taken-for-granted concept in these manuals. It assumes that visibility will create safety, that the presence of a symbol and the person who posted it will automatically garner safety. That is, that in statements like “The Safe Zone symbol identifies you as someone who is a supporter of LGBTQ community members and someone who is committed to creating an environment free of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and bias,” the creation of safety is assumed. In many ways, ally training programs use their symbol to do the work of allyship for the ally. By virtue of the symbol alone, a safe zone is created. Allies are a conduit in this model—operate visually so that safety can be provided by experts, seen in manuals like SIUE’s that state “Safe Zone members can be recognized by prominently displaying the Safe Zone logo, thereby highlighting their visibility to the University community,” which is then followed by the statement that allies are people “who can direct those who come to them for assistance to professionals and other community resources.” Through the logics of visibility politics, ally visibility enables further resources to be conveyed to LGBTQ people, creating a safe environment in the process.

Safe Zones are described as safe, welcoming, supportive, and confidential spaces for LGBTQ students, faculty and staff. Describing safe zones as “highly visible, easily identifiable”
connects to the notion that allies’ visibility creates safer spaces for LGBTQ individuals. The symbol itself sends a message that the person displaying the symbol is knowledgeable and supportive to LGBTQ people. Some of the efficacy of creating a safe zone, then, depends on the visibility of the ally, and their visibility works by proxy to establish this safety.

While it is impossible to determine the efficacy of posted Safe Zone symbols for creating a more inclusive and safer environment, the standards of a safe space might never be fulfilled if ally training programs define them like SIUE does: they define the space they seek to create as a utopian space in which one can be comfortable and not fear any form of oppression, structured by specific guidelines that maintain equality, safety, and respect for all people. How can an under-trained ally and a Safe Zone symbol possibly create such a space? As Hanhardt argues, “at many colleges and universities, the mere words safe space on a sticker on a door may signal that those inside are sympathetic to LGBT students without naming those very identities.” Statements like SIUE’s both create too general of a safe space and an impossible one for most of the ally training program’s participants.

If this safety afforded by visibility by proxy exists, it is a safety that “is built upon a binary logic that constructs ‘gayness’ as a primary identity and other identities as peripheral or marginal.” Visibility may improve safety for white lesbians and gay men, but cannot improve climate for those who experience discrimination along multiple axes of identity. However, this safety is contextual; for universities like USU, the safety created by ATPs is an essential refuge from Mormon intolerance. I cannot support rejecting measures to build safety for LGBTQ people, but some of this safety may not be able to protect the students who are most at risk.

If we follow this logic of visibility by proxy, then safety is a resource given by virtue of this visibility, although in many ways the safety is questionable. However, as feminist theorists
Catherine Fox and Tracy Ore point out, the logics of this safe space are built “within a normalizing gaze of a white, masculinist, middle-class subject, rendering queer subjectivity in a most simplistic and reductive manner and producing an illusionary ‘safety.’” What kind of safety is then being afforded, and to whom? ATPs render queer subjectivity down to the lowest common denominator, so the question of what kind of safety is a fair one. It also resonates with the lack of intersectionality in many ATPs—if race or class is discussed, it is given one slide.

One manual, from Ohio Northern University, lists “GLBT Students of Color” as a topic in the table of contents but does not actually include the page in the manual. Rhodes College uses the language of “Dual Prejudice,” that they experience “double discrimination,” to describe LGBTQ students of color—it occupies one page of a 64 page manual. The safety that is created is one that supports white gay men primarily; the manuals do not equip allies to deal with anyone outside of that identity. Through only one visual signifier of safety for LGBTQ people, ATPs also function to ignore or diminish other identities.

Having Safe Zone signs visibly displayed can be reassuring to LGBTQ students who need support, and the visual signifier on its own, removed from the ally itself, accomplishes important and interesting rhetorical labor that marks spaces as safe without requiring the ally to do labor. Connecting back to what I build as the liberal model of allyship, safety is reduced down to the individual and visual; an ally posts a Safe Zone sign as a representation of their inclusive attitudes, which then crafts that space as safe. The ally then, by virtue of being in that space, is rendered as ‘safe,’ and LGBTQ individuals can seek the ally out for support. However, as I discuss in the next section, that visibility also gives benefits to allies in the form of cultural capital.
Cultural Capital Garnered Through Visible Allyship

In this section, I argue that ally training manuals emphasize visibility and the benefits and risks of allyship in order to earn cultural capital for participants. Ally training programs reassure allies that training programs are valuable for heterosexuals. Lists in ally training manuals like “How Homophobia Hurts Everyone” and “Benefits of Being an Ally” list benefits like “you increase your ability to have close relationships with same-gender friends” and “you become less locked into gender-role expectations and stereotypes.” However, there are also “risks” inherent in being a visible ally, that among other risks, that non-LGBTQ people might “speculate about your own sexual orientation or gender identity.” I argue here that visibility allows ally status to act as market logic, with both rewards and a potential symbolic risk to that visibility.

Visibility explicitly earns allies specific benefits. Some of these are explicitly named in ally training manuals, like how an ally could become “a role model for others” and you could “empower yourself to take an active role in creating a more accepting world by countering prejudice and discrimination with understanding, support, and caring.” These explicit benefits are designed to make allies feel good about being visible, that their participation in ATPs is worthwhile and beneficial not only for them but for the LGBTQ community and society broadly. Through their ally identity, visibility is assumed: they will be a role model, which is predicated on the recognition of being an ally. ATPs might hope that an ally may move beyond visibility to acting in ways that support LGBTQ populations, which would earn allies recognition by virtue of the action, but the entanglement of visibility with a stable ally identity makes implicit that an ally does not need to act in order to receive recognition.

However, visibility also accrues benefits implicitly. For example, as the Safe Zone placard bestows safety, so does it bestow cultural capital onto its owner. The ally is a good
person through having the Safe Zone symbol posted. They have gone through the ATP, they have sacrificed their time and effort in order to learn, thus they earn the right to post the symbol. SIUE’s manual attempts to tell allies that they should feel good about themselves when they take action supporting LGBTQ, but their sentiment that an ideal ally “is quick to take pride in personal success in responding to homophobia and overcoming fears” serves to assure allies that it is okay to be self-congratulatory.\textsuperscript{92} SIUE constructs allies as overcoming adversities, despite the fact that it is much more difficult to be LGBTQ than to be an ally to them. While virtue signaling has been adopted as an insult by American conservatives, its definition without political connotation describes this phenomenon effectively: in essence, allies are using their visibility as such to signal virtue to others, garnering them cultural capital.

While the Safe Zone symbol and the visibility of allies seek to create safer campus environments, they also result in a logic of benefit and reward that leads to allies who are dependent on recognition as such. As I detail in the next chapter, this logic of cultural capital could develop into a need for recognition for ally behavior. That is, if allyship is constructed as garnering cultural capital, it also sets up the expectation that an ally will be rewarded and recognized for their good deeds. Some activists call this “ally cookies,” or metaphorical pats on the back for allyship labor.\textsuperscript{93} Allyship then does not support LGBTQ people but merely strokes the ally’s ego and builds cultural capital. Accomplices do not need this visibility; they do not look for opportunities to be recognized or rewarded for their labor.

Some manuals urge allies to critically examine what it means to be conflated with LGBTQ people, that there are risks inherent to becoming an ally. In several ally training manuals, an entire section is dedicated to detailing the risks of becoming an ally; that while being visible as an ally comes with benefits, it can also come with detriments. This section draws
explicitly from Brown University’s “Some risks of being an ally to LGBTQ people” section, although many manuals have similar lists. It powerfully operates as an example for the cultural capital diminishing work that ally training manuals do. The manual argues that a byproduct of being as an ally is being conflated with LGBTQ individuals by your cisgender, heterosexual peers. This is constructed as a risk: that one of the downsides to being a visible ally is that someone may assume you are LGBTQ. A large part of this list speaks to the specific ways in which unsupportive family and friends may respond to a visible ally identity; that an ally might “experience alienation” from loved ones because of their association with LGBTQ people, or that homophobes may insult them. By virtue of being visible, you are also a target for the same discrimination LGBTQ face. Given an ally’s privilege, the biggest risk of all would be to have that taken from them. In some ways, these points allude to the lived realities of LGBTQ people; they have to deal with these issues every day, while an ally suffers by association.

Some manuals urge allies to critically examine what it means to be conflated with LGBTQ people, that there are risks inherent to becoming an ally but an ally should be able to move past them in favor of the benefits. The risks are offered right after discussions of benefits but do not appear in every manual. One manual notes that “If you are heterosexual, learn (by doing) not to become defensive or distracted from your anti-heterosexist stance at work when people ‘accuse’ you of being gay or lesbian simply because you have taken a pro-gay stance.” Manuals construct being conflated with LGBTQ people as a risk of being an ally, although they urge members to look past this risk and focus on the benefits. This also reflects ATPs’ goal of knowledge: part of understanding one’s own privilege should be understanding what those who are not privileged experience in their everyday lives. The liberal model acknowledges the risk
and urges allies to think of the possibility of being seen as LGBTQ instead as something else they can do to benefit LGBTQ people; here, identity is paramount as an individual.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter, I illustrated the complicated, sometimes contradictory logics of what I call the liberal allyship model for several reasons. This chapter emphasizes that while liberal allyship is the most pervasive model, it should not be exempt from critique. Its implications can have important, damaging effects on the people ATPs attempt to support, though its goals of crafting safe, inclusive campus environments, supported by allies who are educated and who act in support of LGBTQ people are worth pursuing.

The liberal allyship model, seen here through ATPs, creates a stable ally identity that could result in a lack of action on the part of the ally. Liberal allyship affirms and widens the divide between LGBTQ people and cisgender heterosexual people. By making ally an identity, and one that is separate from LGBTQ people, liberal allyship constructs a not-us, failing to create empathy with LGBTQ people, which is the foundation of better supporting them. While these programs claim they are designed to craft empathy and tolerance, the logics of ally-as-identity thwart the ability to do so. ATPs do not instruct allies in ways to support LGBTQ people through action. Their focus instead is on the ally themselves. ATPs seem to assume allies will move on from understanding their own privilege and developing empathy for others to ally labor but give vague or no instruction on how to do so. Furthermore, while ATPs pursue the goal of safety within campus environments, creating visibility to accomplish that safety results in increased cultural capital for allies.

The discourses of the liberal model are among the most circulated; what does it mean, then, to train a large number of people in a model of coexistence that further distances the ally
from those they seek to support? In many ways, as I have discussed, it creates an othering effect. These programs should be crafting closeness with communities that are different from participants’, so that perhaps allies can come together with LGBTQ people and use cisgender and heterosexual privilege for beneficial purposes.

I imagine with all of the vocabulary and long lists of tasks to do as an ally, participants might be overwhelmed and become paralyzed in inactivity. ATPs are not the only context in which the liberal model exists; online queer activist sites frequently post language guides and directions on how to be an ally that conform to this model, guided by individualism. But this becomes more like the language police rather than a guide for how to act with and support those who are different.

I left the ally training program sessions I attended at the University of Iowa feeling very strange: they emphasized the placard participants would receive more than anything else, the facilitators did not effectively moderate the space and allowed white men to dominate, and my notes after leaving were marked with “me, me, me” and “not ‘what you can do for others’ but ‘what can you do to your awareness to make you better.” While I was not the intended audience for these training sessions, I still felt uneasy about the visibility-centered focus, which the radical solidarity model seeks to remedy.
Notes


3. University of Iowa Safe Zone Training, phase 1. I participated in both phase 1 and 2 sessions in 2014 and took rigorous notes, though my memory has been bolstered by participating in facilitator training in February 2015 and the materials I gained from that training.

4. University of Iowa Safe Zone Facilitator’s Manual, 9. As a trained facilitator for Iowa’s Safe Zone Trainings, I have access to the materials used to guide these trainings—these are not publicly available documents. It was unclear what year these statistics were gathered in.


6. While an in-depth ethnographic examination of these ally training programs would have provided a much more complex understanding of how universities teach participants to be allies, both time and financial constraints prohibited my conducting such an analysis. That said, in facilitating these sessions, I have gotten the impression that the manual does not differ significantly from the in-person training experience, except for various activities done in the training itself. Many manuals included descriptions of these activities.


14. Many of these ally training programs use a sexual orientation identity development model from 1979, because it was cited in *Beyond Tolerance* from 1991. Even in the manuals that have been updated in the last decade, this model is still frequent. It’s a testament to the lack of resources these programs are working with, certainly.


18. Woodford et al., “Ally Training Programs on Campus.”


36. These headings are taken from the following institutions’ ally training manuals: Southern Illinois University–Edwardsville, Utah State University, Brown University, Cuyahoga Community College, Maine Maritime Academy, and Rhodes College.

37. Haywood Community College, 19.

38. “Guide for Brown University.”


41. While Utah State does not explicitly publish the numbers of Mormon students, according to faculty estimates, USU’s student body is 65 percent Mormon.


44. “Allies on Campus Training Manual.”

45. “Allies on Campus Training Manual,” 34.


56. “Guide for Brown University.”


64. “Allies on Campus Training Manual,” 23.
68. “Allies on Campus Training Manual,” 34.
78. As seen on my mug, which I received after undergoing Phase 2 of the University of Iowa’s Safe Zone Training.


86. Fox and Ore, “(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities,” 631.


88. “Safe Zone Manual—Rhodes College,” 44.


Chapter Four: “‘Ally’ Isn’t a Label We Give Ourselves”: Vernacular Discourses of Radical Solidarity

Anyone who concerns themselves with anti-oppression struggles and collective liberation has at some point either participated in workshops, read ‘zines, or been parts of deep discussions on how to be a ‘good’ ally. You can now pay hundreds of dollars to go to esoteric institutes for an allyship certificate in anti-oppression. You can go through workshops and receive an allyship badge. . . . Ally has also become an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support. The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless.¹

“Ineffective and meaningless,” direct action support group Indigenous Action Media (IAM) calls the term “ally” in its widely circulated May 2014 zine “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex.”² In this zine, IAM decries allies who create an “ally industrial complex,” “whose careers depend on the ‘issues’ they work to address,” and who “advance their careers off the struggles they ostensibly support.”³ The group critiques those who profit from the struggles of the marginalized as well as those who call themselves allies but fail to truly support these communities, including academics and activists who benefit from their position as professional allies. Far from responding only to indigenous activist issues, the zine generalizes the problems of “ally” across many different contexts of activism. The group calls out the major sins of the “ally industrial complex,” labeling the different brands of allies with “savior” complexes, “exploitative” activist motives, desire for “recognition,” “patronizing” perspectives toward knowledge, or total silence and inactivity.⁴ IAM calls for a different perspective toward activism within marginalized social movements: that of an accomplice, which they define as a person who is complicit in direct action against oppression built through mutual consent and trust.⁵ Much more than a scathing critique of liberal ally politics and behavior within institutions, IAM and a variety of writers and activists, such as Mia McKenzie of Black Girl
Dangerous and Mari Brighe of Autostraddle, invent a vernacular discourse of allyship, one that centers radical solidarity over the passive, visible ally created by the liberal model.6

I define radical solidarity as an activist discourse that, through a critique of the effects of the liberal model, imagines coexistence as being formed from close connections, uses understandings of privilege to benefit marginalized communities, and does not require that those who practice it be recognized for their actions. This chapter is fundamentally based upon understanding a different mode of allyship from the pervasive, institutional liberal allyship model. The radical solidarity model demonstrates that allyship is not, and should not be, unilateral, and expands the options available to those looking to be allies or accomplices to marginalized people. Radical solidarity is a vital way to understand the problematic elements of liberal allyship but also how to better stand in solidarity with marginalized individuals.

Understanding the way the solidarity model changes relations between marginalized activists and their accomplices is vitally important to escaping the confines of the visibility and passivity of stable ally identities. I define ally labor as a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression. In this chapter, the definition of ally labor is expanded to accommodate the multitude of marginalized people discussed by activists.

This is not to say that the radical solidarity model and the liberal allyship model are mutually exclusive. They have very different goals that are specific to their contexts. ATPs are institutional discourses that address individuals, while the vernaculars within the radical solidarity model are activist discourses who address “ally culture” as a whole. The stakes to each of these projects are different. Campuses benefit when the liberal model is enacted if even some of their goals are accomplished because thirty people have been educated in LGBTQ 101 that
were not before. Activist contexts, in which problematic allies take time away from activist work by occupying the space with their perspectives and demanding recognition, demand accomplices, who are willing to build relationships, risk their privilege, and will not further burden people who deal with oppression on a daily basis. The problem the radical solidarity model points to is the moments where liberal allyship practices are used in activist settings, not simply the existence of the model itself.

I argue in this chapter that the primary critique the radical solidarity model presents is that through a focus on stable, visible identity categories and internal reflection, liberal allyship creates allies that fail to perform ally labor in activist contexts. The radical solidarity model critiques the effects that liberal allyship has on activist culture. The radical solidarity model uses these critiques to encourage action in solidarity; that from using your privilege to benefit marginalized causes to standing in solidarity with others, the entire model is predicated on action. Additionally, this action should exist without requiring acknowledgment, because privileged people do not need more cultural capital. Working in action, the radical solidarity model encourages closeness rather than distance, practices of standing together and equality rather than relying on discourses that other the marginalized. However, the radical solidarity model has very high standards for activism—too high for most people to accomplish.

Before moving into an analysis of the radical solidarity model, I first talk about the sources of the fragments drawn together to create the model and review the ways that solidarity has been conceptualized. I then analyze the ways in which the radical solidarity model offers vernacular responses to liberal allyship in the remaining three sections. First, the radical solidarity model critiques liberal allyship's creation of a stable, visible identity category, which creates further distance from marginalized populations, encouraging instead a close connection
with marginalized people through solidarity, mutual aid, and long-term relationships. Second, radical solidarity critiques an emphasis of internal reflection over action; critics instead suggest a focus on using privilege to benefit activist causes. Third, I investigate the critique that ‘ally’ should not be a visible identity category, nor should allies seek recognition for that identity.

About the Texts of Radical Solidarity Model

The radical solidarity model of allyship is a discourse I have identified through a variety of online articles from activists and critics, which demonstrate a vernacular response to institutional discourses of allyship. While the broad aim of this dissertation is to theorize a better mode of allyship for transgender people, I have put together the radical solidarity model from a wider diversity of sources dealing with marginalized subject positions within the United States. This perspective of solidarity can be found from many different activist sources, including racial justice, indigenous rights, disability rights, queer activism, and labor movements. Some publications include ROAR Magazine, a radical, grassroots-oriented journal, and Socialist Worker, a long-running publication that provides leftist commentary. Online publication sites include Black Girl Dangerous, which works to “amplify the voices, experiences and expressions of queer and trans people of color,” Autostraddle.com, “the world’s most popular lesbian website,” and Offbeat Empire, a collection of lifestyle blogs. Other sources include activist groups posting manifestos or other group-specific formulations of solidarity; among these are IAM, which was formed “to provide strategic communications and direct action support for Indigenous communities sacred lands defense,” CODEPINK, a woman-led anti-war coalition, and Unsettling America, which works to craft solidarity among Indigenous activists. The remainder of the texts analyzed for this chapter are from personal blogs, generally hosted through WordPress.
Some of the writers include critics and activists writing from Indigenous, queer and trans people of color, Muslim, and trans perspectives. Some notable examples include writer and activist McKenzie, founder of *Black Girl Dangerous*, who supports queer and trans people of colors’ voices through publishing their work; Brighe, a trans writer for *Autostraddle*; Ariel Meadow Stallings, the founder of *Offbeat Bride* and other sites within the *Offbeat Empire*, a white woman responding to disciplining moves within progressive politics; Xhopakelxhit, an Indigenous activist who protested at Standing Rock. Bloggers like Fatihah Iman and bunnika are anonymous.

Given the variety of sources and diversity of authors, some of these texts circulated more frequently than others. “Accomplices Not Allies,” for example, garners 3.4 million hits on Google and has been reposted on many different activist pages and online publications. Stallings’ piece on “liberal bullying” on *Offbeat Empire* was reposted in *The Guardian*, leading to increased circulation.\(^9\) This circulation created exigence for response, seen explicitly in Iman’s WordPress post. Other blogs were less frequently circulated, although some were linked together and in conversation with each other.

All of the fragments I gather together that exemplify the radical solidarity model have been published in the last six years, ranging from 2012 to 2017, and respond to different exigences. Generally, they respond to problematic encounters with those who call themselves allies, in observation of the ways in which the liberal model has become pervasive amongst allies, and in order to correct that behavior. Some specific exigences include Caitlyn Jenner’s public transition, which *BGD* writer Princess Harmony Rodriguez used to coin the term “ally theatre.” *BGD* founder Mia McKenzie then picked that concept up to use in a critique of white allies, based on an upsetting tweet she received from a white woman.
Theories of Solidarity and Vernacular

In this section, I outline the common threads in scholarly solidarity and vernacular research. Many scholars writing about solidarity come from foundations of feminist or feminist of color inquiry, while other scholarship is driven by activist experience. While there is certainly overlap between the activist practices and theoretical constructions of solidarity, the radical solidarity model has a unique perspective of solidarity’s definition.

Within most discussions of solidarity, the term is defined in terms of those who collect and fight against a common struggle. Jodi Dean refers to this as “conventional solidarity,” as opposed to “affectional solidarity,” which “grows out of intimate relationships of love and friendship.” Conventional solidarity, according to Dean, “grows out of common interests and concerns,” and that first, “conventional solidarity arises out of the shared traditions and values uniting a group or community” and additionally, “conventional solidarity refers to the sense of ‘we-ness’ of groups involved in a common struggle or endeavor.” In most discussions of alliances and coalitions, the underlying logics are those of conventional solidarity.

Solidarity does not have to be based solely on a common enemy or oppression, but those who choose to work together. Chandra Mohanty argues that “rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.” This choice is closer to the understanding of accomplices that the radical solidarity model defines. That is, that Mohanty theorizes solidarity in terms of the people who join forces with one another rather than the opponent of that action. Rather than viewing an entire group as against a transphobic politician, for example, Mohanty focuses on the ways that those people fighting against transphobia have made conscious choices to fight together.
Complete commonality is not required for solidarity. As Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz argues, “solidarity does not require sameness, but shared effort, commitment, and struggle.” Stressing the importance of common interest across different perspectives, Mohanty defines solidarity “in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. . . . Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.”

This is to say that difference should not be collapsed within solidarity: the diversity of perspectives is valuable to solidarity, not detrimental. Mutuality and accountability, then, refer to the ways people should be responsible to each other and treat each other with fairness and respect. Ideally, there would be no power difference between members in order for mutuality to be created and maintained. Fixmer and Julia Wood argue that this mode of solidarity marks the third wave of feminism, that the third wave “works to build a new kind of solidarity that recognizes and brings together blurred, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory facets of women’s identities that were often compartmentalized by feminists in other eras.” Solidarity ideally creates diverse and complex coalitions, not predetermined by commonality.

Solidarity is based on striving toward identification, though complete identification among those who stand in solidarity with each other is not necessary. Frey et al. explain how they view solidarity as “the commitment to identification with others.” This is a commitment to identification in progress—one that will never be finished but that accomplices should still strive for, in order to better accomplish the mutuality and trust described above. Judith Butler, however, critiques this assessment of solidarity as identification, that “we have too often presumed that we must identify with those with whom we ally. But if we insist on identification in this way, we tend to reproduce communitarian politics, allying only with those who are already similar to us,
and refusing to confront those whose views and whose lives may well seem quite different.”

That is, that identification leads to creating solidarity with those who are like us, which does not create the kind of transnational feminist solidarities Mohanty encourages. This is to say that identification is a common impulse within solidarity, but that it may result in linkages that only bind together those who are already similar, rather than creating a force that brings a multiplicity of people together for a particular cause, tied together by their affective commitments.

Affect links people in solidarity together: affect is commonly the tie that brings people together in solidarity across many different contexts, including literal standing together. Caitlin Bruce claims that “solidarity . . . signifies intense attachment or investment,” specifically as many standing together as a whole sharing these investments. The balaclava, she argues, is a symbol of solidarity for Pussy Riot, and the circulation of images of the balaclava in solidarity protests demonstrates how affect can create a “a global network of affinity, concern, and investment.” Additionally, solidarity does not require physical standing together, but can be achieved through the circulation of “‘easily recognizable, easily replicated’ images.” Understanding solidarity with affect emphasizes both the importance of affect in creating solidarity with others and also demonstrates the wider possibilities of solidarity not constrained to proximity.

Using Vernacular Theory to Examine Online Activist Discourses

Throughout this chapter, I draw attention to activists and critics who write outside of and against institutional discourses of allyship; I use rhetorical theories of vernacular in order to better understand these discourses. In their seminal piece discussing the importance of the critique of vernacular discourse, Kent Ono and John Sloop point out that an attention only to institutional discourse, the discourses that reach the “widest possible audience,” critics ignore
“important texts that gird and influence local cultures first and then affect, through the sheer number of local communities, cultures at large.” To correct this problem, rhetorical scholars must criticize vernacular discourse, in order to understand the “personally situated interpretations” of those outside of institutional discourses. Much more than that, though, is the relationship these vernacular voices have with and against institutional power, that as Gerald Hauser claims, “They contain the voices of citizens who do not hold office, do not have access to official forums, and whose expression of opinions and sentiments exerts influence more through its logic of circulation than as a significant official statement.” Vernacular does not entirely escape hegemony: it “does not exist only as counter-hegemonic, but also as affirmative, articulating a sense of community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies.” As Robert Glenn Howard defines dialectical vernacular, it “imagines the locations of discourse made possible by institutional forces as harboring some vernacularity. At its base, the dialectical vernacular imagines a web of intentions moving along vectors of structural power that emerge as vernacular whenever they assert their alterity from the institutional.” The relationship between vernacular and institutional discourse is dialectical—neither are mutually exclusive, but I highlight here how the radical solidarity model works through its moments of conflict with institutional discourses of liberal allyship and its opposition to the effects of identity-based, recognition-seeking behaviors.

Through analyzing zines, manifestos, blog posts, editorials, and other think-pieces, I rationalize a vernacular approach for several reasons. While this chapter in no way critiques a single community’s vernacular discourses, it does gather together a variety of communities’ perspectives on a single issue—critiquing problematic allies and their behavior. The voices featured in this chapter come from marginalized communities and do not have enormous
circulations like the liberal model does. The audience of these pieces differs, too; they speak to other activists, other marginalized people, and those seeking to stand with them. Rather than speak to individuals, radical solidarity discourses critique the present culture of allyship, crafting a vernacular response in order to dismantle the problems they see. Here, I look to vernacular discourse that responds to institutional discourses of allyship, rather than look to a single community’s vernacular discourses, drawing primarily Howard’s discussion of dialectical vernacular. Activists constantly adapt, revise, and correct discourses of coexistence from the effects of liberal allyship discourses. These vernacular discourses of radical solidarity, then, respond to liberal allyship’s focuses on stable and fixed ally identities, priority of internal reflection over ally labor, and a production of visible allies with strategies that instead create active accomplices that work closely with marginalized communities in solidarity.

**Closeness through Solidarity and Mutual Aid**

In this section I argue that activists craft the radical solidarity model around a logic of working alongside and mutual aid, creating closeness, in response to liberal allyship’s focus on a stable, fixed ally identity that creates distance and a lack of identification with marginalized groups. Using metaphors like “working alongside” and “mutual aid” instead emphasize activists’ importance of standing together and interdependence, rather than further distancing with metaphors like “support” and “help.”

Action defines solidarity: liberal allyship favors intent, while radical allyship favors impact. As trans artist Yishay Garbasz stated in an interview with graduate student and artist Nine Yamamoto in an interview published for Verso Books, “The only time I'm an ally is when I'm actually taking action. When that action stops, that's it…. I don't care about people's intentions, because that's magical thinking, and it's not enough. I prefer the word ‘solidarity’ over
‘ally’, because it always implies action.” In moving to solidarity rather than ally-as-identity, intention is irrelevant, only the impact matters. Ally identities are created by negation: you are not a member of a marginalized group, thus ally. But the relationship to that marginalized group is never examined—you can be an “ally” without any action whatsoever, in which there is intent but no impact. Solidarity reinforces the need for impact and action rather than the intent of identifying as an ally; it demands that accomplices work to shorten the distance between them and marginalized people. What solidarity results in, then, is a collection of people who have chosen to work together, bound together by principles of equality and mutuality. However, that is an ideal circumstance—solidarity can be enacted very differently.

Rather than create further distance between marginalized groups and their allies, activists within the radical solidarity model emphasize the closeness that comes with standing in solidarity. As I argued in the previous chapter, liberal allyship defines allies as visible and not identified with marginalized people. In many ways, the solidarity model directly contradicts this focus on visibility and lack of identification: as anonymous author M writes in ROAR Magazine, a grassroots radical online publication, solidarity “dispels the idea of one inside and one outside, foregrounding how individuals belong to multiple groups and how groups overlap with one another, while simultaneously demanding respect for the identity and self-sufficiency of each of those groups.” This is not to say that the solidarity model collapses difference, creating universal identification with marginalized people and those who stand in solidarity with them. Instead, the model recognizes the complexity of intersectional identities while also acknowledging that those who suffer from oppression are uniquely positioned to speak on those experiences in ways that their potential accomplices are not.
The radical solidarity model is, as opposed to an identity-based viewpoint, a perspective of fighting for a particular cause regardless of identity. The solidarity model works to dismantle notions of “helping” and “supporting,” preferring metaphors like ‘mutual aid,’ ‘solidarity,’ and ‘accomplice’ in order to assume egalitarianism among those fighting for the same cause. Khury Petersen-Smith and Brian Bean of Socialist Worker critique dimensions of allyship that depend on these faulty dynamics, saying they “flow from a relationship in which white allies and people of color are relegated to ‘supporters’ and ‘supported,’ rather than working together to confront racism.”

As argued in the previous chapter, liberal allyship trains their allies to distance themselves from LGBTQ identities, but I see here that these power dynamics lead to allies who do not see the battle against transphobia as one that directly effects them. They become followers or supporters, acting passively or not at all, rather than fighting alongside. This perspective is the core of solidarity—working closely together, battling together instead of merely assisting. Mutual aid is a primary example of correcting the effects of liberal allyship’s distancing measures.

Mutual aid is radical solidarity’s alternative to the issue of power dynamics between marginalized and privileged people, primarily a critique of an orientation toward charity. Communication scholars have differentiated between charity and mutual aid in discussions of social justice. Frey, et al. especially set forth an understanding that solidarity “should not be confused with friendliness or charity,” because charity creates and constantly reaffirms the gap that distances ‘us’ from ‘them.’

Social justice, according to Frey, et al., is not a matter of generosity to a lesser other, or “when ‘we’ give our time and energy to help ‘them’ escape from oppression; it is done when we realize that none of us is truly free while some of us are oppressed.” Stressing equality, Frey, et
al. suggest a perspective of solidarity that does not simply “help” but works alongside for mutual benefit. Liberal allyship creates allies that have “romantic notions of oppressed folks they wish to ‘help.’ These are the ally ‘saviors’ who see victims and tokens instead of people,” according to IAM.31 Accomplices, in contrast, see those they stand with as equals, suffering from a number of systematic oppressions that may foreclose their ability to gain material benefits. To provide mutual aid, then, is to assume that a relationship is built on trust and responsibility to each other and will not be a unidirectional flow of support.

As I continue in the next section, listening to marginalized people, understanding one’s own privilege, and using that information about themselves and others is essential to acting in solidarity.

**Listening and Using Privilege to Benefit Marginalized Causes**

The radical solidarity model critiques the liberal allyship model for prioritizing internal reflection over ally labor—that is, liberal allyship focuses on vocabulary while radical solidarity prioritizes action. While listening and understanding one’s privilege are vital parts of acting in solidarity with others, the radical solidarity model moves further and urges accomplices to *act* with the perspectives of the marginalized and understandings of their own privilege in mind in order to benefit marginalized communities. To encapsulate the vernacular response to liberal allyship, I first discuss listening and move to how accomplices can use that new knowledge to better stand with marginalized causes.

Liberal allyship and radical solidarity models both encourage listening, but the radical allyship model encourages accomplices to *act* with the knowledge they have gained. Instead of suggesting that the ally follow the lead of the marginalized, the radical solidarity model emphasizes that listening is an active process in which an accomplice can learn about the diverse
experiences of marginalized groups without burdening them, and that learning when to speak is critical in solidarity practice.

Rather than vaguely suggesting that allies should listen to marginalized voices and do their own research, the radical solidarity model encourages active listening to the diverse experiences of members of marginalized communities. As Indigenous Action Media argues, as opposed to allies, “Accomplices listen with respect for the range of cultural practices and dynamics that exists within various Indigenous communities.” IAM specifies exactly what accomplices should be listening to, rather than leaving allies to determine for themselves. In addition to listening, IAM directs accomplices to pay attention to the multiplicity within Indigenous movements, that groups are diverse and heterogeneous. Extrapolating to trans-based movements, this might be equivalent to learning about many different ways trans people experience oppression—along vectors of race, class, adherence to the gender binary—instead of assuming all transgender people have the same perspectives and histories. As trans Autostraddle writer Mari Brighe writes,

> While white trans women with cis-normative appearances are often the public ‘face’ of the trans community because of their relatively privileged status, it’s absolutely critical to remember that their experiences are not at ALL representative of the entire trans community and their concerns should not dominate the discourse of trans issues. Trans women of color are at considerably higher risk of joblessness, homelessness, and violence, and good allies should make a strong effort to listen to and work for the betterment of those who are most at risk.  

Listening, then, is much more complex than the intake of information. Through listening, an accomplice can direct their efforts more specifically in order to be the most effective accomplice possible and make change where it is most necessary. Instead of giving money to support white trans women, for example, an accomplice might learn that trans women of color are much more in need of resources and direct resources to them instead. Moving beyond seeing, which reduces
an accomplice down to visibility only, people can better understand the diverse lived realities of marginalized people through listening, as listening scholar Lisbeth Lipari argues.\textsuperscript{34} Success occurs when an accomplice moves beyond the superficial and truly listens to those they wish to stand in solidarity with. In many ways, the radical solidarity model teaches solidarity along the same lines as Mohanty: encouraging mutuality, accountability, and to practice solidarity across multiple dimensions of difference. Understanding the diverse perspectives of those who one seeks to create solidarity with is key to building bridges with others.

Additionally, the listening process, which also includes doing one’s own research, should not further burden the marginalized. As \textit{Sojourners} contributor for intersections of politics and Christian-based faith, Layton Williams writes in a discussion of allyship and failure, “I try to find existing resources from people of color that will help me understand how I should act. (This is different, by the way, than asking a person of color to make time to educate me).”\textsuperscript{35} Marginalized communities have already committed time and energy into creating resources about their experiences of oppression: accomplices then should pursue those resources rather than ask a member of that marginalized community for additional emotional labor. In a more direct way, accomplices are asked to use the resources of the internet to their advantage: “Don’t understand how non-binary gender identities work? Find out on your own, without demanding that individual people in your life with those identities explain it for you. Don’t understand the concept of transmisogyny? Get reading. Google is your friend!”\textsuperscript{36} Researching the information instead of asking those with marginalized identities for emotional labor is the best solution.

Solidarity also argues that accomplices should listen to members of marginalized groups instead of talking over them. As blogger Iman writes, “Listen to what I have to say – Muslim women’s voices are so often silenced that it’s really important for us to be able to speak up. We
need the space to tell our own stories and we need those stories to be listened to.” Listening, then, is a two-pronged process—knowing when to stop talking and taking into consideration what one is listening to. Information gathering is certainly a large part but in no way encompasses the entirety of listening. This, too, is unlike the liberal allyship model, which tells allies to listen, but not what to do with that information. Within marginalized spaces, it is also necessary for the accomplice to understand when to listen and allow others to speak. This especially applies in spaces that are designated safe for marginalized stories and experiences: an essential part of listening within the radical solidarity model is providing spaces for minority voices to be heard, which much more difficult if privileged people take up that space. Taking Muslim perspectives as an example, “If Muslims are discussing the discrimination they face, you’re welcome to listen, but mainly – be quiet. We need room for our voices to be heard, and they can’t be heard if privileged Westerners are constantly butting in with their own amazing insights.” Essentially, Iman touches on the critique that privilege people do not know when their perspectives are unnecessary, and in a safe space for marginalized people, it is more appropriate to listen. However, this is very context-specific: many participants of ally training programs, for instance, would not find themselves in a room full of LGBTQ people.

Critics in the radical solidarity model respond to the tendency they see of privileged people who are not accustomed to staying silent and listening to other peoples’ experiences with oppression within activist communities who then fling accusations of “reverse racism” or “cisphobia.” This is not to say that accomplices must remain silent at all times, but that they must respect that not every space is safe for everyone to speak. Bunnika details some considerations to take into account when considering speaking in marginalized spaces: “while minorities need to work to actively challenge our oppression, it’s unfair that we once again be
asked to bear the social burden. Anyone calling themselves an ‘ally’ should constantly be working to recognize the ways in which they feed oppression, and try to always consider their multitude of privileges before speaking out in a minority space.” Part of an orientation toward solidarity and away from the self-absorption of the liberal allyship model is to respect the norms of marginalized spaces. As bunnika reminds their readers, “demanding that you be respectful and allow minority voices the stage does not necessarily mean that those minorities despise your presence or don’t appreciate your effort to be a good ally.” An essential part of solidarity, then, is to be aware of the space in which marginalized discourse is allowed, and not coopting that space. Accomplices should not demand recognition for allowing marginalized people the right to speak in their safe spaces. True solidarity, as constructed by activists and critics from a variety of perspectives, emphasizes the imperative to listen to marginalized voices and give them opportunity to speak, because privileged voices can speak and be heard anywhere. An awareness of privilege, then, allows accomplices to both listen and know when it is appropriate to use that privilege in defense of marginalized people.

Beyond the process of listening, critics construct solidarity around using one’s privilege to speak in the right places. Solidarity, then, models a time for speaking and a time for listening, and how to speak in ways that use privilege to benefit marginalized people, going further than the liberal allyship model suggests. One practice of intervention with privilege is signal boosting. Brighe draws attention to this skill, reflecting a model of allyship that uses privileged voices to serve as amplifiers for marginalized voices: “When you’re discussing issues specific to the trans community, you should be asking yourself ‘Is there a trans voice that can address this situation that I can signal boost?’ Being an ally means listening to what we have to say, and prioritizing our voices over your own.” Using one’s privilege, then, allows for the greater dissemination of
marginalized voices. However, there would be no need to signal boost trans voices within a trans space—signal boosting is relevant in spaces where the privileged person has cultural capital. Listening is for learning about marginalized perspectives, but the accomplice’s duty is to speak for marginalized people and causes when the marginalized cannot, using that knowledge earned from listening.

Privilege allows people to speak in spaces where marginalized voices might not be heard, but it also sets up privileged people to expect that any effort that does not merely reiterate further oppression deserves commendation because they are better than homophobes, racists, etc. As bunnika implores fellow privileged individuals attempting to stand in solidarity: “We need to try and have enough empathy and basic human respect to say, 'I’m not the one who matters here. Society lets me have my say all the time, that is my privilege, and I need to relinquish it if I really desire equality.’”\textsuperscript{43} As discussed earlier in this chapter, part of standing in solidarity is using privilege for good, but bunnika points out that giving up privilege is a task many privileged people are not accustomed to.

Standing alongside, as I have used metaphorically throughout this chapter, is also a literal obligation. Part of this standing alongside requires risk and sacrifice, which accomplices are generally shielded from because of their privilege. As Brighe writes, being an accomplice requires effort, and just as vitally, “takes bravery and a real concern about the welfare of the trans community. It’s a sacrifice, undertaken willingly and without the expectation of getting anything in return.”\textsuperscript{44} As discussed, radical solidarity often frames itself in opposition to liberal allyship, which does not necessarily require sacrifice and sets allies up to expect recognition in exchange for supportive behavior. The radical solidarity model responds to the failings of liberal allyship by imploring accomplices to be better and for marginalized communities to have higher
standards from future accomplices. That is, that “trans people are so accustomed to being shunned that we’ve been willing to accept even a modicum of kindness and acceptance as a momentous act of allyship. I think it’s time we move beyond that and expect more from those who would claim to be our allies (and from ourselves.).”\textsuperscript{45} The call for better attitudes from accomplices is tied to risk in that marginalized people risk a great deal in their activism—so should the privileged people who are attempting to support them.

Radical solidarity crafts an imperative to listen to the diverse perspectives of marginalized people and use privilege to benefit particular causes. Taken together, these skills move from the groundwork the liberal allyship model establishes and takes those skills a step further into action. Within radical solidarity, then, privilege is not only something an ally understands about themselves, but privilege can be used to provide mutual aid to communities and to call out others with privilege who may not listen to the voices of marginalized people. However, the radical solidarity model is quick to warn accomplices who take action that they cannot be reliant on recognition or acknowledgment for that labor.

**Against Recognition for Being an Ally: “#sorrynotsorry, but I don’t bake.”\textsuperscript{46}**

The radical solidarity model positions itself against special recognition for ally behavior or ally status, most often seen in the phenomenon named by activists as “ally cookies” or “ally theatre.” Both describe people who look for recognition for their allyship, either in thanks (cookie) or by virtue of the performance itself (theatre). Liberal allyship encourages visibility for both safety and cultural capital—and while the radical solidarity model might view ally visibility as a material benefit for creating safety for marginalized people, they define correct behavior as that which takes action to stand with marginalized causes without needing reward or recognition. The critique of visible allies works in two ways: first, to call out bad behavior from a large
number of people looking for recognition, and second, to define solidarity, the correct behavior, in order to convert allies to the radical solidarity model.

The radical solidarity model finds the necessity of giving allies recognition or cookies troublesome for several reasons. First, that allies “already get them [cookies]. In abundance.”47 On top of the privilege they already have, which Phoenix describes as cookies, allies additionally demand recognition for any behavior that could be construed as supporting marginalized people. It makes sense, then, that the radical solidarity model responds negatively to this practice, comparing it to “putting kindness coins in the proverbial slot machine, expecting a big payout” among other metaphors.48 Setting expectations for behavior is an important element of radical solidarity pedagogy, and critics argue that the demand for recognition from allies is inappropriate. Marginalized groups are thankful for the aid, but like Brighe says, “don’t expect a constant outpouring of thank-yous for what you’re doing. Don’t get huffy if you don’t get hugs and cookies and rainbow glitter for every single thing you do as an ally. Don’t pout if you don’t get the ‘props’ you deserve for the work you’re doing.”49 While some of the things Brighe lists are hyperbolic, she sets out a fair critique, and also calls attention to further destructive behavior: when an ally reacts negatively because they have not received accolades. Because, as Iman points out, “activist work doesn’t exist for the benefit of making privileged people feel better about themselves.”50 Blogger The Angry Black Woman points out that when people are “over-praised” for allyship behavior, it leads to allies only acting in order to receive this praise, looking for the recognition that comes from it, thus ally cookies.51 This is not to say that receiving recognition is inherently bad; instead, the demand for recognition from allies puts undue burden on marginalized populations who deal with oppression every day without getting credit for it.
Radical solidarity activists emphasize that the work of solidarity is difficult, that unlike liberal allyship that has been critiqued for being “colonized, pretty, and almost as hard to swallow as not having allies at all,” being an accomplice is a more onerous task that does not rely on receiving recognition for their accomplishments. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the liberal allyship model is problematic not because its goals but because it fails to accomplish them due to external factors and internal logics. Through its visibility and lack of action, it frustrates activists who engage in consistent ally labor. While marginalized activists recognize when accomplices do solidarity work, it is not as simple as giving aid and earning trust. The Anti-Oppression Network reminds its readers that “we must understand possible feelings of resentment, bitterness, and even resistance towards us from the people we seek to work with…. building trust takes time, so we must recognize that what we can offer may not always be immediately needed or accepted.” Trust-building is a process, not an exchange of favors for immediate recognition or “ally cookies.”

The radical solidarity model accuses the liberal allyship model of low expectations and argues that solidarity is not reliant on praise for meeting those expectations. As blogger The Angry Black Woman notes, people who speak up in order to correct “the biases and imbalances in our culture” are not worthy of praise, because it’s “something they should have been doing in the first place.” The threshold for accomplices standing in solidarity is higher than for an ally, beyond the standard of human decency as claimed by several activist bloggers. Allies do the bare minimum, while accomplices go further and without recognition for doing so.

Part of the force in these arguments is the naming of problematic ally behavior. These critics define ally theatre, ally cookie, plus the different kinds of ways allies fail to truly stand in solidarity, like Indigenous Activist Media’s categorization of people who engage in activism for
“missionary work,” or “exploitation and co-optation.” While it is less common to see trans allies engaging in “missionary work,” the principles of gaining cultural capital from ally practice is applicable for trans contexts. As Mia McKenzie from QTPOC blog *Black Girl Dangerous* remarks, “Lots of so-called 'allies' are in it for the cookies and it shows…. Fighting oppression, for these folks, isn’t worth it unless everybody can see them doing it.”

Given the emphasis placed on visibility in liberal allyship, it follows that allies seek recognition for their labor. The ways in which these activists name problematic ally habits are part of the ways that they build a pedagogy of radical solidarity. That is, in order to better teach prospective accomplices how to behave, activists must first draw boundaries around what not to do. One of the biggest violations of the radical solidarity model is to claim ally as an identity, and even further, ask for recognition for doing the work of an ally.

Visibility is tied inextricably to recognition as an ally and for allyship labor, but radical solidarity suggests alternatives to recognition-seeking behavior. Self-proclaimed allies “require an audience for every performance” and only speak up for marginalized people or causes when “everybody can see them doing it.” McKenzie uses her article as an opportunity to not only decry problematic behavior but also (re)affirms what solidarity is and what its bounds are. Accomplices who truly implement the tenets of solidarity, don’t “require an audience or a pat on the back.”

Radical solidarity critics object to the idea that allies must be given recognition in order to keep them as allies. They respond to the claim that activists should work hard in order to ensure allies “stay that way,” quoting from Ariel Meadow Stallings from *Offbeat Empire* in a widely circulated blog post. In that blog post, Stallings railed against the high expectations of
activists, accusing them of alienating those who attempted to support them. As blogger bunnika argues, ““Sometimes we feed an ally’s ego because of simple fear of alienating them,” and that treating an ally gently is justified because it is easier than being alone in the struggle against oppression. It is simpler to let an ally’s mistake go instead of calling out that privileged person and potentially losing all support. However, as Iman points out, the concern that marginalized people should not alienate their allies actually implies “that people living with oppression, stereotyping, maybe even outright discrimination up to and including physical violence, should make sure they try their hardest to keep any potential allies sweet.” Giving recognition to allies who benefit from particular privileges while those they seek to ally with are dealing with oppression is unreasonable. Allies should not receive acclaim for calling out transphobia, for example, while trans people have to fight for their own identities to be recognized. Allies’ feelings are not the responsibility of marginalized people to manage: they have enough to deal with: “This struggle is not about you getting praise for being a wonderful person – it is about correcting very serious, damaging oppressions that [marginalized people] have to navigate on a daily basis.” This shaming is an effective mode of critique; privileged people do not understand their privilege unless confronted with information like Iman gives. How productive that shaming might be in encouraging changed behavior from allies, though, is yet to be seen.

Conclusions

As I have discussed through this chapter, the radical solidarity model offers many focused critiques of the liberal allyship model that encourage the practice of closer identification with marginalized people, moving beyond internal reflection to ally labor, and taking action without requiring recognition for that action. In their critique of the liberal allyship model, the radical solidarity model invents new rhetorical possibilities for standing with others. Reinforcing
scholarly understandings of solidarity from theorists like Mohanty, radical solidarity encourages the practice of creating relationships with those privileged people seek to stand in solidarity with, without going so far as to create a universal identification with potential accomplices. I have argued that in defining solidarity, the radical solidarity model creates a pedagogy of how to act in the world. Through critique of liberal allyship, they define what not to do in order to act as an accomplice. They invent vocabulary, including “mutual aid” and “ally cookie,” in order to name the phenomenon they encounter in their struggles against oppression. Taken as a whole built from fragments, these practices, what to do and what not to do, can be taken as a training guide for potential accomplices.

I seek to draw attention to the ways in which the radical solidarity model critiques the liberal allyship model to better educate current and future accomplices. Through a pedagogy that encourages action, call-outs, and doing both of these things without the expectation of recognition, the radical solidarity model shames liberal allies. Given the stakes of allyship and solidarity, the radical model uses shame as an important rhetorical tool to move liberal allies to act; there are peoples’ lives at stake, and the liberal allyship model cares more about receiving recognition for being an ally. The tone in which these critiques are made, then, is fitting for the situation: action, or lack thereof, has serious implications for the everyday lives of many people who battle oppression.

From this chapter and the previous one, we can see the complexity of coexistence in practice. Neither the liberal model of allyship nor the radical solidarity model are perfect projects of productive coexistence. The liberal allyship model is critiqued for setting the bar too low, while I critique the radical solidarity model for setting the bar too high. In crafting an ally identity, the liberal allyship model simultaneously distances allies from marginalized people and
discourages concrete action. The radical solidarity model can require emotional labor and resources that are not sustainable for every privileged person. This is not to say that the standards of the radical solidarity model are too high or unachievable, but that crafting it as the only way to succeed in standing with marginalized people forecloses the minor ways people can act in solidarity.

As discussed in this chapter and the previous chapter, vernacular activist and institutional discourses of allyship are frequently circulated efforts to better improve relations between those who hold different amounts of privilege. However, while these discourses of the radical solidarity model significantly improve upon the institutional discourses of allyship, they do not consider the everyday concerns of transgender people.
Notes

1. Indigenous Action Media, “Accomplices Not Allies.” When this piece was published, very many of my academic colleagues sent it to me, for months after. This may contribute to its prominence here, but the phrase “accomplices not allies” also garners 500,000 Google hits, even with the problematic algorithm.


5. Throughout this chapter, I refer to people who do the labor of solidarity as “accomplices,” giving full credit to IAM for my introduction to the term. This is not to say that I am creating a stable identity category like liberal allyship does for allies, but that the choice to use accomplices is a stylistic one and allows for precise subjects to be named within sentences.


11. Dean, Solidarity of Strangers, 18.


20. Bruce, “Balaclava as Affect Generator,” 54.


36. Brighe, “There Are No Cookies.”


38. Iman, “What We Expect from Allies.” Asterisks in original.


41. bunnika, “Overstepping Allies.”

42. Brighe, “There Are No Cookies.”
43. bunnika, “Overstepping Allies.”

44. Brighe, “There Are No Cookies.”

45. Brighe, “There Are No Cookies.”


48. Iman, “What We Expect from Allies.”

49. Brighe, “There Are No Cookies.”

50. Iman, “What We Expect from Allies.”


52. Xhopakelxhit, “Everyone Calls Themselves an Ally.”


56. McKenzie, “How to Tell the Difference.”

57. McKenzie, “How to Tell the Difference.”

58. McKenzie, “How to Tell the Difference.”


60. bunnika, “Overstepping Allies.”
61. Iman, “What We Expect from Allies.”
62. Iman, “What We Expect from Allies.”
Chapter Five: Understanding Trans Vernaculars: An Ethic of Responsible Listening and Ally Labor

Piper, a trans woman who has recently earned her PhD in the humanities, described an instance of productive listening in a moment with her cis friend and the friend’s husband. In grabbing dinner with her friend and husband, she brought up the moment in which she was “read” by an Uber driver. During the course of a ride, Piper asked for some interesting local attractions. He looked at her in the rear-view mirror and suggested a gay bar, which had upset her because he read her as transgender, suggesting a gay bar rather than restaurants or pubs. Piper did not go into detail about the story with her friend, although she had told me the details earlier in our interview. Her cis friend was puzzled because she did not understand the meaning of the word “read” in that situation, and Piper did not give further detail. Piper’s friend told her husband to look up the term so that they could better give Piper support. Piper ate her barbecue instead of educating two cis people, and eventually they came to an answer and provided appropriate support, reassuring Piper in that moment about her appearance and how awful the Uber driver was. Once the friend had reassured Piper, she gave Piper her pickle. Piper laughed while recounting this story, because while giving trans women pickles seemed arbitrary to me, Piper and her friend had read a blog post titled “Cis People: Give Your Pickles to Trans Women.” In this post, blogger Jetta Rae details how pickles are the perfect food for trans women taking hormone replacements because spironolactone, an androgen blocker, is a diuretic, and pickles are an ideal “way of taking in fluids and replacing lost salt that helps retain those fluids.” Through the friend’s previous knowledge of this blog post, and their willingness to research further to gauge Piper’s emotional state, she was able to provide support. As Piper described the moment, “It didn't burden me, it was a quick reflex, it was so they could help out
on a different front. If all acts of allyship were like that, the world would be great for trans people.”

The anecdote above raises several points about the ways in which allyship discourses circulate and respond to the needs of transgender people. In this story, Piper describes a setting in which a cisgender female friend and her husband performed several effective moments of ally labor, which I define in this chapter as a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression. First, that they gauged her discomfort with a prior event; second, in order to better support her, they looked up previously unknown terminology without burdening her, and third, they provided labor both verbally and in the form of a pickle, demonstrating prior knowledge. They listened to her complaint, they did their own research, and they used their privilege to help navigate oppression, even if it was in a small way.

For this chapter, I interviewed twelve transgender adults, attempting to understand not only the ways they interpreted allyship but how preexisting discourses of allyship, like the liberal allyship and radical solidarity model discussed in chapters three and four, were circulated, modified, accepted, and rejected through their perspectives. I had suspicions of how listening theory might apply to trans allyship, but through an interview-based study led by trans vernaculars, I was able to simultaneously build and enact theory, based on and crafted iteratively through the practice of interviews.

In this chapter, I take seriously the imperative to listen to trans voices in both method and theory. Here, I develop an ethic of responsible listening, which is reflected both in the methodology and the analysis of the interviews. I define an ethic of responsible listening as the
process of opening up discursive spaces for transgender voices to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and to recognize trans people as people. The goal or result of an ethic of responsible listening is ally labor, as demonstrated and explained in the anecdote above. Beyond simply listening, ally labor embraces a need to act with that information, and thus ally labor responds to the needs of transgender people, learned through the process of listening, in order to help them better maneuver through systems of oppression.

I distinguish an ethic of responsible listening and the work associated with it, ally labor, from the previously discussed models of allyship in a few important ways. First, ally labor does not rely on visibility or cultural capital like the liberal model of allyship—the process of ally labor should be done without the need for recognition or “ally cookies” for doing so. I stress ally labor to distinguish this concept from liberal allyship’s creation of ally as an identity category. Because ally labor is processual and action-based, it avoids the passivity inherent in an identity category—under my model, those who listen must also act to benefit marginalized people. An ethic of responsible listening requires less from its practitioners than the radical solidarity model does—I construct ally labor on a range of scales so that it does not need to look like activism in every context, or even any context. The biggest differentiator of an ethic of responsible listening is its balance between the universal and the particular: in order to better serve the heterogenous, unique perspectives and needs of transgender people, listening focuses on both the broader trans experience as well as the specific contexts of the trans people in dialogue with listeners.

I argue that my participants, in their vernacular, critiqued the flawed logics of visibility, liberal individualism, and radical solidarity models of allyship. In so doing, they enable a different construction of allyship, one that I flesh out in this chapter. Additionally, they contributed to my theories, an ethic of responsible listening and ally labor, by responding in the
discursive space I had built, listing their unique needs, and I credit them with co-crafting the theoretical impulses I detail here. In order to balance universal needs of (trans) people and the particular needs of each individual, I argue that listening and ally labor can operate to benefit transgender lives in a wide variety of ways.

This chapter unfolds in three parts. First, I describe my methodology and my participants for the interviews. Second, I argue for an ethic of responsible listening, that opening up a discursive space for trans perspectives and voices to be heard and responded to is worth the research because of its contextual and particular findings. Third, I argue that ally labor is a vital result of an ethic of responsible listening, because it forefronts action, ranges in scale from the institutional to the interpersonal, it accommodates a universalizing impulse of being treated as “normal” while balancing the contextual and contingent, and understands failure as a growth mechanism with the process of ally labor.

About Procedures and Participants

Before moving forward, I detail the procedures used in this interview study. This study was approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board, with particular measures in place that sought to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants deemed by the IRB as a “sensitive population.” Participants were solicited through current relationships and postings to semi-private social media groups. Participants were urged to pass along the information of the study to friends who identified under the transgender umbrella, utilizing a snowball sample model. While a snowball sample method can be seen as a recruiting method of convenience, it also proved incredibly important in the process of building trust with subsequent participants—the snowball sampling method served as a vetting process for a population that naturally may be distrustful of researchers. Participants were greatly helpful in advertising my study to others, but
that resulted in more participants who came from academic backgrounds. In soliciting participants, the only criteria for inclusion in the study were to identify as transgender, to be out to at least some people in their lives, and to be over the age of 18. In order to fully protect participants’ confidentiality and privacy, I used a consent letter, delivered in advance via email, rather than a consent form with their signatures, so that none of their identifying information was connected to their participant number or pseudonym. Participants gave oral consent before I began recording the interview. All interviews were conducted over the phone due to the diverse locations of participants and for convenience of scheduling.

While I constructed an interview protocol for this study (see Appendix A), the questions were open-ended and new questions arose from individual interviews. Before beginning substantive questions, I asked interviewees five demographic questions: gender, pronouns, race, age, and out status. Given my research throughout the earlier chapters of this dissertation project, there are questions I did not ask participants because of a concern of invasiveness: whether they had undergone any form of gender confirmation surgery (top or bottom), whether they were on hormones, or about their romantic partners or sexual orientation, although some participants mentioned these things through the course of the interviews. All participants were assigned participant numbers and given pseudonyms. Interviews ranged from 24 minutes to an hour and 19 minutes; most interviews did not exceed an hour. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the exception of one instance of interviewer error in which rigorous notes were taken. All identifying information was removed from the transcriptions, including names, locations, and institution names. These interviews were conducted between January 11 and March 15 of 2018.

The rationale from this interview study drew from, as Alcoff writes, “the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others.” I discuss listening both literally and
metaphorically: metaphorically, as Darrel Wanzer-Serrano argues, “we can understand it
[listening] as a critical-interpretive strategy for coming to archival and textual material with an
openness to the Other that challenges sedimented ways of understanding and acting in the
world.”8 That is, that listening dislodges the primacy of prior understandings and allows for new
possibilities to be found—if one listens without letting tropes or stereotypes interfere with that
understanding. The design and procedures of the interviews themselves followed this theoretical
direction. Questions were open-ended, which led to participants speaking without interruption
for long stretches of time. Given that these interviews were conducted over the phone, some
nonverbal indications of listening or turn-taking were lost, but it fit the theoretical drive of the
study well. That is, that I came into each interview without preconceived notions of participants,
and for an hour or so, I heard their voices, speaking their truth, with minimal interruption or
prompting from me. In some cases, as the interview progressed, participants became more
comfortable with me (and I with them), and there were more conversational moments.9 In the
process of performing these interviews, then, I worked to craft a space for dialogue,
implementing an ethic of responsible listening within the procedures of the study itself.

As alluded to above, through the recruiting process and the interviews themselves, I
foregrounded the importance of gaining informed consent and building trust with my
participants. As Susan Stryker discusses in her introduction to The Transgender Studies Reader,
much of the goal of this chapter, and this dissertation project writ large, is to better understand
desubjugated knowledge, to focus on the “embodied experience” transgender people have of and
“to the discourses and institutions that act upon and through them.”10 While much of my process
as a researcher was developed with implementing listening as a method, I also was sensitive to
the context of the vernacular perspectives I was seeking. Through recruitment, I attempted to be
as low-commitment as possible—just 30-60 minutes over the phone, at a time and date of the participants’ choice. Many participants aided in the process of recruitment by vouching for me within their friend groups and on social media, and my transgender friends recommended my study with the understanding that I would not abuse their time or distort their words. I developed many of my interview procedures through my own anxieties of burdening trans people with teaching a cisgender person, and thus foregrounded their unique perspectives and narratives rather than blanket assertions. While I am not transgender, I had been researching and analyzing trans voices for the past seven years, and the process of the interviews balanced my accumulated knowledge with the necessity to listen to viewpoints that surprised me, that would craft branches of experience that might create a fuller, more complex and contextual framework for allyship. In some of the interviews, I responded with reassurance, though not surprise, at the horrible treatment participants had received from bosses, friends, family members, and institutions. As seen in the interview protocol, one of my first questions to participants was to ask them to define allyship or allies, and in the interviews where I built the most trust and created a dialogue with participants, they frequently returned to their original definition to revise it, make it more contingent, or emphasize certain elements over others. Sometimes we looked at texts together—I mentioned listicles or online guides on how to be an ally, and over the phone, separated by thousands of miles, we read the article together, with mutual commentary. In one instance, I asked about listicles, a participant did not have a response at the time but emailed me their thoughts afterwards. In the best interviews, the participant and I felt like friends. In these ways, I did not so much “access” trans vernacular discourses; they were instead shared with me through a process of trust-building.
I coded the interviews inductively and deductively. Primarily, I coded based on inductive coding principles, which seek to discover themes based on recurring patterns within data.\textsuperscript{12} I found seven common themes between interviews: allyship as action, a quest for normalcy, that trans people are heterogeneous, that allyship should be “common decency,” that voting politics were an essential part of allyship, that intersectionality was a vital allyship concern, and that allies should protect trans privacy.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to inductive theme-finding, I also analyzed interview data deductively, starting with theoretical understandings of visibility and existing circulations of allyship meanings, rather than starting with a tabula rasa.\textsuperscript{14} During the interviews themselves, too, I was able to use these understandings to further probe participants specifically related to conversations I had already written about, making the experience more iterative than I had imagined.

For this chapter, I interviewed twelve people who identify under the transgender umbrella. Five participants identify as women, three identify as men, and four identify as gender queer or nonbinary. The ages of my participants range from 26 to 55, with six participants in their mid- to late-twenties, three participants in their thirties, a participant in her late forties, and two participants in their fifties. All but one of my participants are white. Orchis identifies as “Diasporic African”; they were born in the Caribbean, and their perspective as an economically-struggling, older, non-binary parent influenced this chapter much more than their quoted words indicate.\textsuperscript{15} The participants disproportionately represent academic involvement; seven of my participants were either graduate students or had earned PhDs. The people I have connections with and who helped recruit participants primarily did so on trans-specific academic Facebook groups, because those are the communities to which they were connected. My accelerated timeline for interviews further constrained my study—some potential participants could not be
interviewed during the timeframe of the study. Additionally, if I had been able to compensate my participants, I would have been able to recruit more widely and diversely. I did not advertise the study so widely because I was not able to compensate my participants for their time—a choice made because I did not want to further take advantage of trans peoples’ voices and labor. Other participants worked in retail, self-employment, or sales, beyond participants who mentioned they were unemployed. Generally, though, participants were middle-class, with only three working/lower class participants. Participants were geographically diverse, representing both coasts and the Midwest, rural and urban areas.

Most of the participants were out to most of the people in their lives. Some had exceptions, like Piper, who is not out to her students; Nadia, who is out only to family and some friends; and Cam, who is not out in their current workplace. Otherwise, participants responded that they were “completely” or “very very” out. While “out status” was in the original demographic data I collected, it was not a recruitment criteria until after conducting the first interview of the study with Nadia, which was quite brief given her relative “stealth” status, passing completely as a cisgender woman in public with only a few select friends and her family knowing she is trans. As she put it, “The problem for me is that I’m not typically out to most people, or most of my friends, not that I have a problem being out, it’s just not something that comes up, I don’t mention it. I have a lot of female friends who are being good allies, they just don’t know they’re being good allies.” Thus, the construction of transgender allyship I outline in this chapter, that participants contribute to and support, relies on the assumption that in order to consciously perform ally labor to trans people, cisgender people have to know the recipient is trans.
**An Ethic of Responsible Listening**

My key theoretical intervention in this dissertation is what I term an *ethic of responsible listening*. In this section, I will define and explain the component parts of this theory, listening and response(ibility), which is tied to ethics. Combined into an ethic of responsible listening, I define this term as the process of opening up discursive spaces for transgender voices to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and to recognize trans people as people. Practices of responsible listening work in tandem with ally labor, as listening’s goal, result, or output. Ally labor is a category of complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression, which I expand further in the next section.

As the primary component of my theoretical contribution, I define listening as *the process of opening up a discursive space for transgender perspectives and voices to be heard and responded to*. I take listening to be the process of making space for new and different understandings, and within the scope of this dissertation, specifically based on transgender voices, based on Lipari’s definition of listening, which she explains as “an encounter with radical alterity that disrupts our everyday understandings and habits of thought.”¹⁹ That is, that the process of listening in trans/cis contexts reflects the ways that listening can unsettle sedimented understandings of trans people formed by mass mediated representations’ tropes. Understandings of transgender lived realities are expanded through listening.

First, I offer listening as an alternative to a focus on the visual fascination with transgender bodies and lives as detailed in chapter two. Rather than seeing transgender people through the tropes that circulate about them, especially destructive tropes like being deceivers, villains, or born in the wrong body, listening allows for a more complex understanding of
transgender subjectivity. Listening works to dismantle harmful tropes and stereotypes of transgender people. Beyond the binary logics of visibility politics, whereby simply being visible works to transgender people’s advantage, “listening connects and bridges” the gaps in cisgender people’s understanding of transgender lived experience.20 The logics of visibility tend to flatten transgender lived realities down to palatable, one-dimension representations of complex, always-intersectional people. Problematic stereotypes that are widely spread do not, or cannot, garner assets for all transgender people. As discussed in chapter two, villain and deceiver tropes contribute to the structural oppression of transgender people in many different spheres. Creating a discursive space that allows transgender voices to be heard and responded to, then, moves beyond the logic of visibility under which visibility equals liberation and invisibility equals repression. Listening makes available a wide range of possibilities that welcome the breadth of transgender lived realities.

The complexity of listening mirrors the complexity of trans vernacular voices. In order to fully understand and make space for these perspectives, the listener must also withhold some of the judgements or assumptions formed from media representations or activist rules and standards of behavior. Beyond dangerous tropes of trans people as deceivers, listening should avoid presuppositions or value judgements, which can be seen in some toxic activist solidarity work—critiquing politics for their impurity, judging whether something is liberatory or repressive, whether an action or behavior is radical or hegemonic. In my understanding of listening, context is essential, and cases are more complex than those who critique them tend to acknowledge. In the interviews I describe throughout this chapter, the participants’ actions are motivated by many different factors, including privacy, safety, security, and survival. Judging Nadia for her choice to be stealth as hegemonic, for example, flattens the reasons she has for doing so.
By listening, I do not necessarily mean building empathy or “moral sensitivity,” which scholars like Paula Tompkins argue is the object of listening. Instead, listening here is tied to the importance of dialogue so that transgender perspectives can be heard and responded to. This is not to say that listeners should not also be empathetic, but reducing listening down to empathy misses the active, processual nature of crafting a discursive space that allows for response. Response is a component part of listening—listening cannot be a one-sided practice, but one that creates and facilitates response.

To focus on “response” further, I use feminist philosopher and ethicist Kelly Oliver’s conception of the “responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond” as a key ethical imperative of an ethic of responsible listening. Beyond the initial production of a discursive space, then, listening must maintain that space through facilitating future response, so that it does not “close off the possibility of response by others.” Adding to the complexity of listening, then, is the responsibility listeners have to keep the discursive space open and allow for dialogue, so that opportunities and new possibilities can be created from that space. The goal, then, of listening, is to craft and maintain this discursive space, and to guide cisgender listeners to use their privilege to benefit transgender people through concrete action, which I call ally labor and detail further in the next major section.

In this theoretical construction, I embrace the double meaning of responsibility as not only “the responsibility to response-ability,” but also the responsibility people should have towards each other. One of The Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions, specifically, guides my understanding, “The state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something. (responsibility to/towards.) A moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of.” Correct
behavior, moral obligation, and respect all culminate in my conception of an ethic of responsible listening.

I use ethics in conjunction with responsibility because beyond an imperative to respond, listening requires an ethical imperative to make some of the issues that affect transgender people universal—they affect people of all gender identities. Sedgwick describes a “universalizing view” as one that, rather than focusing on concerns that affect only a small minority, sees an issue as one of “continuing, determinate importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities.”25 Whereas Sedgwick discusses concerns of queer theory in describing either only gay or lesbian subjects (minoritizing) or those of all sexualities (universalizing), I highlight the ethic of understanding gender in a universalizing way—as “something that affects everyone,” in the words of participant Keith.26 The ethic of responsible listening I detail in this chapter is thus rooted in a universalizing approach to gender and gendered issues. Per this approach, children suffer for being told that pink is for girls, men suffer for being told they cannot show emotion, and women suffer for being seen as brash or shrill when outspoken. As late-30s trans photographer Stephanie notes, “The rules for how to treat people are generally pretty similar and universal, like, you call people the names they want to be called by!”27 The way to make cisgender people care, in other words, is to approach trans issues as issues that those of all gender identities face. Responsibility, to return to the previous paragraph, describes the obligation to respond to transgender voices and be accountable for enacting change that supports transgender people and those of all gender identities.

This is not to say that trans issues are all necessarily universalizable, but a consideration towards both the universal and the particular in listening to trans voices, rather than either/or, solves several potential critiques of this theory. If focusing merely on the particular, that
transgender people must be helped and supported, that cisgender people are responsible for them, it is easy to become trapped in a savior complex logic that repeats the charity model and the unidirectional orientation of liberal allyship, as I critiqued in chapter four. Transgender people do not need to be saved. They are, though, disproportionately affected by structural factors and are currently targeted by the United States government. However, an attitude of solidarity, which I define as people who choose to work together, without complete commonality, who may seek to identify with each other, and who are linked by affect, can link trans and cis people together fighting for the same causes. Linked together by a desire to normalize all gender identities and performances, focusing on both the universal and particular moves beyond ‘help’ and toward dismantling structural oppression against nonnormative gender expression.

Any ethic toward trans people, however, must start at the assumption that transgender people are people. My participants’ basic requirement for allyship was that “it's just treating me and trans people like totally normal people.”

When I asked what participants wanted cis people to know about them, or about trans people generally, the most frequent response was that they were people, like red-state, barely surviving queer woman Mandi says: “That I'm just a person, that I'm not a threat, that I just want to be able to exist and to move in spaces with the same amount of freedom that they can move around in spaces.”

Why “normal” comes with a considerable amount of baggage, the very basic element of an ethic of responsible listening requires recognizing trans people as such.

When I talk about responsibility, I do not mean patronizing, charity-style, but relationally, like friendship. Previous/established relationships add further responsibility beyond the base assumption of recognizing trans people as people. Participant Keagan, an incredibly thoughtful genderqueer graduate student in the hard sciences, was particularly specific on this
matter, that friends, specifically, should be more supportive and accountable toward their trans friends. Rather than treating asking questions as a burden, they should ask for the best way to proceed. As they put it, their friend had “some leeway to be, ‘I am your best friend. Give me some guidance on how to support you, because I feel like I care about you so much and this is something I want to be a part of.’ And so in that sense, it’s not so much a burden but kind of my friend’s responsibility to be like, ‘I’m your friend. This is another part of our friendship. What can I do?’”31 In other words, the level of responsibility was higher in an already established relationship, that friends owed something more to their trans friends to ask questions and figure out their specific needs.

*The Problem of Trans Visibility*

In chapter two, I discussed the tropes of visibility circulated, constructed, and modified by mass mediated representations of transgender people. While trans representation is improving in depth, variety, and increased visibility, many of the harmful stereotypes constructing trans people as villains or deceivers have resurfaced in wake of HB2. This is not to say that these damaging tropes disappeared—many of the participants still experience tokenism, exoticism, and othering. Through my interviews, participants critiqued these practices of reading trans bodies as token representatives of a homogenous group, as deceivers, and as exotic others. They implored that cis people listen to them as an alternative to assuming a host of things based on their visual appearance. In this section, I discuss some major complaints participants made of mass mediated culture, that rather than listening to their unique perspectives, many people around them made harmful assumptions based on their bodies.
Participants railed against the impulse of visuality to reduce trans people down to tokens. Mandi, an underemployed transgender woman living in a conservative state, identifies a time in which she was the “token trans person” in a Unitarian Universalist congregation:

They asked me to speak on World AIDS Day, and I tried to tell them, “Listen, I don't know anything about this topic, I don't feel comfortable talking. There are organizations out there with people who know about this stuff, who would probably be happy to provide you with someone who would be willing to talk about this stuff, and get people involved, but I'm not that person.” They pushed me to do it anyways, and I kind of bombed it because the only thing I know about HIV/AIDS is just from a personal perspective, you know, “wear a condom, know your partners, get tested.” I just felt like they wanted me up there because the trans community is impacted by HIV/AIDS more than cis people are, so obviously I would be a good person to talk about it, even though that's not the case.”

In their refusal to listen to Mandi’s pleas of ignorance, the church members flattened her unique experiences and recognized her not as a person with a variety of knowledge but as a representative of a homogeneous group. What’s true of a generalized whole, HIV/AIDS status, was not true of Mandi. By relying on the visual, token logic, the church literally and figuratively refused to listen to Mandi’s perspectives. As discussed in chapter two, the UU church made the assumption that trans visibility was always a net positive, rather than thinking of the stigma created through making a trans person talk about HIV who had no experience with it. Mandi, regardless of her HIV/AIDs status, was merely a visible prop.

Tropes of trans visibility are also manifested in everyday interactions with cis people who “read” them in public, understanding their bodies in terms of its (lack of) adherence to expectations of gendered bodies. As discussed in chapter two, one of the biggest problematic trans tropes is that of a deceiver, someone who is trying to fool cis people with their bodies.

While in many mass mediated scenarios the deceiver is also a villain, someone hiding their trans identity in order to perpetrate a crime, the deceiver trope also pops up in more benign situations.
Piper describes her reaction to the phrase “I never would have guessed that you were trans” that primarily come from cisgender strangers upon finding inconsistencies with her identification. She is incredibly aware of the ways that trans stereotypes have circulated, and in this anecdote, is attempting to understand why the phrase “I never would have guessed” upsets her so much:

The two reasons it's a terrible phrase, one: it centers everything on the cis person, and what they're feeling and seeing, and second, it reifies that terrible stereotype that trans people are trying to hide something. That's the feeling you get from it, that trans people are deceitful or hiding something or trying to trick people, which gets played out a lot in terms of trans panic defenses. It seems to be reflective of that, or, and the reason for that is also similar to the cis-gendered reason, it makes the trans person feel like an object, like the reason you're going out in public is to see how many cis people you can trick, right? So the only reason trans people exist is for cis folks to see who is trans and who is not-trans, and the whole, “I wouldn’t have noticed” makes it focus on the cis person's like, "damn it, I didn't guess who the trans person was correctly today!" so it just creates a whole prism of awfulness.34

In her analysis of a seemingly-nonthreatening phrase, I see several ways in this anecdote as to why recognition and a reliance on visible tropes is detrimental to transgender well-being.35 To continue from Piper’s already-astute analysis: first, it gives the cis person primacy in the acts of recognition and attributing tropes to people. Without knowing a person, without listening to a person, a cis person makes many assumptions about a trans person’s identity, based on their exposure to trans people in mass media. They have the power to label based on their assumptions of gender expression and identity. Second, that transgender appearances are developed not as gender expression but as an attempt to deceive cisgender people. Based only on tropes of visibility, trans subjectivity is reduced or denied. Piper’s gender expression is read only as a an impulse to deceive the cisgender person, that a cisgender person’s main task is to rely on the visual in order to find trans people who are trying to “trick” them.36 Trans people are reduced to deceivers, trying to visually fool cisgender people, rather than expressing their gender in unique and diverse ways.
A few interviews particularly mentioned ally training programs because of their experience within university contexts. As I discussed in chapter three, impulses towards educating cisgender people about LGBTQ vocabulary and lived reality, as seen in ally training programs (ATPs), can result in increased distance from the population they look to support. That is, they craft LGBTQ people as exotic others that they must learn a bevy of vocabulary in order to understand. Ethan, a trans man who is a graduate student in the hard sciences, points directly to the ways in which ATPs further a reliance on visibility with materials filled with “othering/exoticizing stuff.”

I brought up what I sought to do with this project and asked him if he’d had an experience with ATPs after a discussion of leftist tendencies to be rigid about language use. While he refers to that impulse as “relatively benign,” he points to the homogeneity of representations of trans people in ATPs: “All of them have gigantic glossaries of stuff. (laughs) They're just incredibly awkward in that way, like in the long list of definitions and terms, that not everybody uses, and all this stuff is contested, maybe none of this stuff is actually that big of a deal, I don't know.”

Through an over-reliance on vocabulary, these tropes of visuality are perpetuated—people should not need 50 pages of terminology in order to interact with other people. In doing so, trans people are constructed as an exotic other: that in order to better understand that exotic other, ATP participants must learn a long list of possible identity terms, even though many of them might be outdated or are overly specific. ATPs and the terminology within them instead can serve as a replacement for “learning not to be phased by other peoples’ weird ass experiences or being a good listener.” This forecloses the process of listening because while the cis people in ATPs do some research, ATPs both do not include in-depth experiences of trans people nor does it lead to listening in order to understand the multivariate, heterogeneous experiences of trans people. For both of these reasons, crafting trans
people as exotic others functions to shut down the potential of listening—understanding is as shallow as the tokenizing/stereotypical logic and widens the gap between trans and cis people.

Through these examples, I look towards the limits and damages of visibility. I posit listening as a corrective to a reliance on visible, negative transgender tropes. This need for listening seeks to correct the potential of a “trap door” of transgender visibility, that as Gossett, Stanley, and Burton detail in their introduction: “The question arises of whether visibility is a goal to be worked toward or an outcome to be avoided at all costs” because of its potentially damaging effects.\textsuperscript{40} Rather than helping cisgender people learn about trans lived realities, visibility seems to contribute to the solidification of problematic tropes, which is why the trans people in my study encourage further research from those looking to listen to their perspectives. \textit{Read “stuff trans people have written themselves.”}\textsuperscript{41}

Before the process of an ethic of responsible listening can begin, people must understand some of the basics of transgender experiences, accomplished through research. I position this research as an impulse toward the universal trans experiences—although there is not one singular trans experience, there are experiences that many transgender people share: difficulty in switching identification or name, treatment by the medical field (in either procuring hormones or surgical intervention or being treated like a person), and correct pronoun usage. Cis people who do their own research can work to understand these basics without burdening trans people further—trans people then do not have to do all the work of educating cis people of the fundamental challenges they encounter every day. This, however, comes with its own complex problems of research skill and biased search engine algorithms.

Research is both an investment in knowledge and time, demonstrating genuine interest in learning before inconveniencing trans people. While research can expose cis people to universal
trans experiences, it also demonstrates the diversity of trans experiences—that not all trans people can easily pass, for example, or that the experiences of trans people of color is very different from the everyday lives of trans white people. As Keagan frames it, cis people should be “doing that research for themselves, reading the type of scholarship that you are producing,” and that a requirement of allyship should be “reading more people’s lived experiences and seeing how different that can be for any given individual. I certainly don’t speak for everyone.”

Listening, especially in a one-on-one context, gets at many of the particulars of one trans individual’s experience, but in order to flesh out that understanding, research is vital. Extrapolating from one trans person’s experience in interactions with other trans people without knowing the great diversity of trans experience could be harmful in those future encounters.

While some participants decry the internet and its listicles for reducing the trans experience down to “10 Ways to Be a Better Ally,” many others are encouraged by the wide range of narratives that are easily accessible online. Orchis, a 50-year-old black nonbinary person and extremely passionate online activist, draws attention to the ways in which the internet has changed the way conversations around terminology and definitions are used, and points to the internet as a solid foundation for learning more about marginalized experiences:

Honestly, I'm really excited. As somebody who didn't start off with computers, and who started off being really intimidated by computers, definitely did not come up in the time of the internet, being born in the late 60s and childhood in the late 70s, I'm really excited about what happens online, in terms of how folks rub antenna, share information, push the bounds of definitions and wordings that are being used, sort of interrogate some wordings that maybe used to work but then they had a second thought and they were looking at it more closely from this angle, and realized, ‘Ehhhh, no, we're not using that one anymore, we're trying something else,’ I like that process a lot… [If] I want to drop a quick article on somebody, it's really easy to google things, so if it's easy for me or someone who experiences oppression, or someone who's also trying to be a good accomplice to people, if it's easy for me to just type in a couple of keywords into Google and stuff just starts popping up, that's what I expect from people. Go do some work! Because I'm doing it. I do it. I do it daily.
Orchis highlights the way that the internet is beneficial both in the way it allows dialogue across geographic bounds as well as how it simplifies the process of educating others. Rather than taking time to explain complex issues to cis people, Orchis can “drop a quick article on somebody,” and it does not have to burden them. Research is also seen as important work that Orchis expects from “a good accomplice,” that they see that research as an easy way to know more about different kinds of oppression and better ally with them. Thus, research also demonstrates ally labor, as I discuss later in this chapter, rather than just a precondition of listening. This is not to say that cis people are required to keep up with the intricacies of every terminology conversations, but that educating oneself is a vital foundation to listening.

My participants frequently named google as a useful resource for cisgender people to research trans issues. As nonbinary postdoc in the hard sciences Cam adds, “I think googling it is going to help at least 3/4 of the time,” although they also encourage listening and asking questions based on some knowledge of trans issues. Simple googling can provide a wide variety of narratives encapsulating a huge diversity of experiences—it does not seem like too much to ask for people to use that resource. It is very difficult to craft a space for dialogue without knowing some universal issues trans people encounter. How would a potential listener understand the need for safety and privacy within that discursive space without knowing the violence and discrimination that could result from outing a trans person? Importantly, though, they are not the end-point; as Orchis says, sources like Everyday Feminism are “a fine jump off place to think more deeply,” or an effective “kindergarten 101.” They cannot do the work of listening, but you have to go through kindergarten before you can graduate, as it were.

One of the issues with a lack of research or exposure to trans people is that it risks burdening the trans person to articulate needs that should be commonsensical and universal (to
both the human and trans experience). One of the participants recently got top surgery, and while they describe their nebulous relationship to pronouns, genderqueer graduate student Keagan realized top surgery was a concrete phenomenon that they could use to come out to cis people. However, the reactions of their cis friends were discouraging in several ways: their cis friends often react in a way where I don’t know if this is a happy thing, like “I don’t know how to show you that I support you, but I don’t know if congratulations are in order or what to say.” And on one end it’s like that transparency that level of honesty is awesome and I really appreciate that but on the other end, it shows me that they might not know other people who have gone through this before, which is kind of a scary thing because I’m suddenly then the sole representative in their lives and what it means to go through these experiences. It’s a lot of pressure, and it makes me feel even more like an other, like an outsider, where I suddenly have to let this person in on a huge range of issues they have no idea about and haven’t actually tried to learn about.46

In describing their experience as a “trans ambassador,” Keagan drew attention to their concern of being tokenized due to the ignorance of their cisgender friends. Without research or exposure to any other trans person, Keagan became their one and only source of knowledge, which put undue pressure on them.47 Through showing their ignorance, Keagan’s friends made Keagan feel like the only source of truth on trans issues, turning their particular needs into universal trans concerns. Keagan points out the flaws of ignorance; without research, cis people do not have knowledge of the specificities of transgender-specific phenomenon like hormones or gender affirmation surgeries. Without this knowledge, they then cannot provide sufficient ally labor. Keagan’s role as the only trans friend, like other instances of tokenism by race, sexual orientation, or gender, does not facilitate support without an enormous burden on them. This puts more pressure on the listening process; before opening up a discursive space for dialogue, those attempting to listen must first be educated, and in this case, Keagan would be the one educating them.
While I critique ATPs for their focus on language and vocabulary over teaching allies to perform concrete action to allow trans people to better maneuver within systems of oppression, understanding terminology can be vitally important as a precondition to listening so that a trans person is not re-traumatized through teaching cis people their experiences. Orchis theorizes an “ethic of care” in their interview, exemplifying an instance of vernacular theorization that starts with people learning how others are “located in relation to different systems of oppression or privilege” so they do not continually burden those who are already marginalized.48

And so for folks to really learn about the language, about the language tied to folk, whoever they’re dealing with, is crucial… if you're talking to folks like me, who are constantly being bombarded with oppressive shit, then it becomes the job of the person who says they want to be a friend to learn what microaggressions look like, that's important, so that you don't have to be constantly unpacking something horrible that happened to you when you're on the brink of tears so you can train or teach someone how to support you in that moment, like, it's too much.49

As Orchis shared with me in my interview with them, they experience oppression along many different axes, and they are exhausted. Well-intentioned cis people who do not learn about these multivariate kinds of oppression, who look to listen to Orchis’ experiences and open up dialogue with them, only add to the weight they carry with them every day. Even some consideration of terminology, as seen in ATPs and online, could take some of the burden off trans people. As mentioned, research is a precondition for listening, not a replacement—to understand the particulars of trans experience, one must listen to their contextual needs and perspectives.

This is not to say, however, that all research is good research—many of my participants also critique this sentiment, “just google it” in a few essential ways. First, they point to the dilemma of listicles homogenizing the trans experience—that BuzzFeed or Everyday Feminism is only giving a small slice of trans existence, and not all trans lives are lived like that, as Orchis points out. They argue that while lists written by BuzzFeed and Everyday Feminism are an “entry
point into thinking about these things,” that people who rely too heavily on them end up
“encountering something infinitely more complex than those lists could account for or allow to predict, they shut down. They're of no use.” In Orchis’ case, people encounter Orchis’s
intersectional identity and have no response to the complexity, because their understandings of trans lived experiences do not encapsulate that reality.

To say “just google it” is also fraught with complexity. The sources that are richer and speak to an individual trans experience may be more difficult to find, due not only to a lack of research skills but also due to algorithmic bias, as Safiya Noble discusses in her book, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* Because algorithms are built by humans, and humans are naturally biased, so too are the algorithm’s results. Google favors recency and popularity, so when a person googles “transgender,” for example, the first results are usually about very recent transgender conflicts or controversies in the “news” category, and then large-scale organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, and Planned Parenthood dominate the first page with quick guides to treating transgender people. To assume that all people who are striving to do their own research and listen to transgender people are also skilled researchers, then, assumes education and access to resources that not everyone has.

*Listening is Contextual and Contingent*

Listening is contextual to not only the trans person but also the circumstances of situation in which ally labor may arise. The very basics of listening are straightforward: at its most basic, participants implore cisgender people to “be there, listen. Amplify our voices.” That is, within the model of an ethic of responsible listening, to not only listen to Mandi’s perspective but also to take her response in the form of the directive of “amplify” and do something with it—in this
case, perform ally labor. Before that ally labor can be performed, though, it is important to know the particulars of Mandi’s request to “amplify”: in what circumstances? I regret not asking her in that moment, but she expanded her initial answer a few seconds later:

Hannah: What do you think is important in an ally?

Mandi: People who amplify trans voices and support, talk policy, and politicians who are in favor of trans people and trans justice, and people who help us get our basic needs met.53

So, for Mandi, to amplify trans voices is primarily relevant in political or activist contexts. Given what I learned about Mandi, that she had suffered employment discrimination in every job she had worked since coming out, was currently unemployed, and lived in a hyper-conservative state from which she could not afford to leave, it makes sense that her biggest requests from potential allies were to amplify trans voices politically and help her and others meet their basic needs.54 That level of specificity is vitally important—learning more about Mandi, the circumstances she is in, and her particular needs would guide the kind of action I could take to help her navigate systems of oppression. They certainly differ from the trans academics who deal with entirely different problems on an everyday basis.

Amplification of trans voices was a popular theme: participants highlighted how vital it was to hear a diversity of perspectives and facilitate more exposure to those voices. Cam, a nonbinary academic researcher in the sciences, echoes this sentiment: one of the things cis people can do to better support trans people is “listening to them and centering their voices so that other people can listen, too.”55 In the abstract, that sentence is a fine answer to “what can cis people do to better support trans folks?” but I was able to ask for an example during our interview, pushing Cam to answer “What would that look like?” to them. And so, to Cam, “the
function of cis allies is mostly in regards to access to power and access particularly to institutional and structural power,” a similar but ultimately much different answer than Mandi provided.55 To Cam, access to structural power meant a tenured professor leveraging her privilege to make sure there were gender-neutral bathrooms at the next iteration of a conference, plus other examples of maneuvering better within academic spaces. A focus on the contextual and particular, rather than stopping at the universal, facilitates a better, more complex form of listening that can respond.

The process of crafting a discursive space should facilitate dialogue. Thus, it is vital to ask transgender people what they prefer in the instance of listening, because they know and live their particular trans realities every day. Their needs are unique and diverse: as Keagan puts it, listening is vital especially in instances when “someone is telling you about any experience you might not understand that’s very individual,” and that people should “always err on the side of listening more than talking.”56 Keagan describes the need for cisgender people to listen to especially in the cases in which they do not have any understanding and the trans person has a unique point of view on the topic, getting at the particularities of individual experiences. This is also to say that the process of an ethic of responsible listening requires those who are listening to be aware of the space they occupy within that discursive vernacular space: it is not for cis people. In many ways, it is a zero-sum game: the more talking a cis person does in that space, the less opportunity a trans person has to respond and add their vernacular perspective.

Listening is vital to understanding the particular needs of people in a variety of contexts. To take being out as an example, some of my participants were very publicly out, while others were only out to some people, not out at work, or not out to their families. That information is valuable to know, because it dictates how to provide ally labor in different circumstances, around
different people. Especially given the current political climate, being out can be a matter of safety, as it carries a lot of risk for many trans people. As Cam describes, “If you have a friend who is okay with being out, and can do so safely, listen to them when they tell you that, because that's where you will get a lot of cues about how they want to be referred to and how they want to be treated socially.”\textsuperscript{58} Cam draws attention to the specific and differing needs of transgender people; they differ in how out they are, what names and pronouns they prefer, and how they expect people to help them maneuver systems of oppression. But as trans man graduate student in the hard sciences Ivy details, “different people tend to want to go about it [correcting peoples’ pronoun use] by different routes, so like, maybe one person wants people who misgender them to be corrected every time…but maybe someone else is just like, I really don’t want to make waves, don’t correct anybody, just do it yourself and set the tone.”\textsuperscript{59} Again, the degree to which individual needs and contexts demand different responses is a vital component of listening, and listening allows for complex expression of diverse needs in order to better facilitate ally labor.

In this section, I have discussed the theoretical impulses of an ethic of responsible listening, analyzed the problems of visibility that merit correction, described the importance of research in order to understand universal trans needs, and emphasized the role of listening in grasping the particularities of individual trans lived realities. A balance of the universal and particular is required to effectively listen to trans vernaculars and enact ally labor that will help individual trans people better maneuver systems of oppression.

**Ally Labor: Attending to the Particular**

In this section, I first outline the theoretical drive of ally labor, a theory motivated by an understanding of the contextual and contingent needs of trans people, and how privilege might be leveraged to better allow trans people to exist and maneuver within systems of oppression.
Through a balance of the universal needs of people (and trans people, more specifically) with the particular, unique needs of each individual trans person, ally labor works from the knowledge acquired through the listening process to respond to these needs. After describing the theory behind ally labor, I describe what it may respond to—an understanding of ally as noun instead of verb. I then move to describe a range of contexts in which ally labor can occur, ranging from institutional to interpersonal. Next, I outline the ways that ally labor can help trans people maintain or build a sense of normalcy—that is, that they want to be seen as people. Balancing a universal impulse from the previous section, then, is a focus on the contextual nature of ally labor that seeks to treat trans peoples as individuals with unique needs. Lastly, I discuss failures of ally labor, and how they might be used as learning opportunities.

The definitions of ally labor used through this dissertation have developed significantly since the term’s introduction in chapter three. There, I originally described ally labor as concrete action that enacts allyship, focusing on ally labor as the opposite of the passivity of the ally-as-identity constructed by ATPs. The term grew more complex in chapter four, where I initially analyzed its application when linked with a solidarity model—the emphasis from activists focused on action, but never named it. Given that it is probably unnecessary to label action as done by allies or under the guise of allyship in most activist contexts, the radical solidarity model is probably correct in not naming the term. In this chapter, however, I use ally labor as a result or end point of responsible listening, as described in part by my participants. This is an umbrella category for action that is specific to the needs of transgender people, uses privilege to benefit them within structures of power. As a result or necessary outcome of an ethic of responsible listening, ally labor gains more specificity and weight. Given that a discursive space has been created to share trans vernaculars, shouldn’t something be done with those conversations?
While I am not trying to make the definition of ally labor intentionally vague, I do want to draw attention to the breadth of possibilities that ally labor accommodates. Part of my critique in chapter four of the radical solidarity model is that the threshold for action is incredibly high, and in many cases, unachievable for those who are not professional activists. Ally labor, in comparison, can be enacted on smaller scales and ranges up to much larger structural change. One barrier to activism is the concern about language use and vocabulary, which I detail in chapter four; concern about language or purity of motivation can be paralyzing, leading to a total lack of action. Ally labor, as a result of an ethic of responsible listening, has fewer barriers to entry. Broadly conceived, ally labor can be as simple as persistently correcting waitstaff who refer to a trans person with the wrong pronouns, as I discuss Cam mentions later in this chapter.  

In this example, cis people are taking the burden of action, that it is their responsibility to ensure that their friend is referred to by the correct pronouns in a space. Ally labor might look like speaking out to government officials to change specific policy, revising workplace practices, or as unemployed and discriminated against participant Mandi suggests, “provide us [trans people] with the basic necessities, food, housing, stuff like that.” Ally labor is reliant on the process of listening—different trans people need different things, different cis listeners can provide different things, but those things vary and are the result of the dialogue built into an ethic of responsible listening.

Ally labor is contextual and contingent. While I critiqued ally training programs in chapter three, I cannot disagree with the intention of these curriculums. However, over the last thirty years of their existence, they have been subsumed by the dominant logics of visibility and diversity. By attempting to outline bulleted lists of what to do to be an ally, ATPs have foreclosed any different possibility or way of behaving in different contexts. I emphasize ally labor’s
connection to listening because of its contingent and contextual nature—because culture changes, because individuals have different and varying needs, because situations are unpredictable—cisgender people must listen in order to understand what ally labor is most appropriate for that person in that moment. As participant Keagan sums up, the result of allyship is “relational, it’s contextual, it’s so specific to the moment and so it’s hard to give a boiler plate set of instructions or guidelines.”

Ally labor is a process that is messy and never finished. Alongside an understanding of productive failure, I draw attention to the ways in which ally labor is a never-ending process because it is overly simple to think of ally labor as a discrete unit of action. Rather than saying that every time a person correctly uses their friend’s pronouns of reference, for example, ally labor suggests that, like its name suggests, allyship is work that is never finished. There will always be more opportunities to correct misgendering, always more opportunities to improve the structural conditions for trans people. Treating ally labor as a unit of measure might be cleaner and more straight-forward, but it also perpetuates the self-congratulatory tendency many allies have about their behaviors. As discussed in chapter four, allies tend to demand recognition for their actions, requesting “cookies” for good ally behavior. Ally labor is action, but it is action that given our current political climate, needs to continue, over and over again. I drew ally labor from the concept “emotional labor,” and similarly, the work of emotional labor is never finished in the workplace or the home.

While I discuss ally labor as a unidirectional process, from cisgender person to transgender person or population, I am more interested in the ways that privilege circulates to enable these kinds of practices. For example, the vast majority of my participants are white, and many are financially stable, while others are suffering from racial discrimination, under employment, or
unemployment. White transgender participants also talked about allyship as ways to improve conditions for trans people of color or homeless trans people. As Piper notes, “allyship has to be intersectional for it to be effective allyship.” While I discuss ally labor as one-way for simplicity’s sake, ally labor is so much more complicated in practice. While it relies on privilege, it is simultaneously contextual—people have privilege based on their identities, but they also have different privileges in different spaces. Intersectionality, then, is a vital component—it’s not a matter of the privilege Olympics, like “I have more privilege than you because I have one fewer marginalized identity than you do, so now I’m your ally,” but… it’s not just cis people “saving” trans people.

One of the most important parts of ally labor as I conceive it is the understanding of learning from inevitable failure. Politics are impure. No one is born woke. Mistakes happen. Following Aimee Carrillo Rowe, I view failure as productive, that failures can provide moments of self-reflexivity that illuminate structures of power, despite a momentary lack of “success” in supporting those you ally with. As Carrillo Rowe details, “the work, then, is to move productively through the politics of failure to adopt a posture that absorbs failure into a process of remaking self, home, and field.” Failure is a part of the allyship process, one that stresses that the ally reconfigures their understandings of privilege given their unique standpoint and grow from that knowledge. It is tempting to take from Halberstam’s understanding of queer failure; the promise that “under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” is tantalizing. But within the scope of ally labor, failure has consequences on other human beings, and Halberstam’s approach is too personal and too
whimsical to be applied to this particular situation. Misgendering someone is not creative.

Failure is human nature, but I do not construct ally labor as seeking to fail.

“Ally is a Verb, Not a Noun” 67

Before I dive into the examples of ally labor, I first look to the critiques my participants have made of the liberal allyship model that is reliant on ally as an identity category. As I discussed in chapter three, the liberal allyship model, bolstered by notions of liberal individualism, is dependent on the creation of ally as an identity, distinctly separate from the marginalized people allies seek to support. In their discussions of allyship, some participants of my study fundamentally critique this perspective, that ally is not an identity, but that allyship instead is a process of action.

Some participants explicitly defined ally in terms of action rather than identity. The explicit “title” of ally is not something an ally can claim for themselves. Keagan uses circulating discourses of allyship to argue that point: “I have heard other people say ally is a verb and not a noun, and that really resonates with me. I think that it is not just a status that people can acquire and then they are done.” 68 They point to the instability of the category, and that implicitly, those who think that ally is a noun or an endpoint are not correctly doing allyship. They continue saying that “I think it’s a continual process and a way you have to show up again and again. More of a something that you can do allyship, but you can never fully or try to fully have that status or title for yourself. It’s a lot more than that.” 69 Through describing allyship as a process of repeated support, Keagan dislodges the primacy of the ally identity. Ally instead is someone who enacts ally labor consistently.

As nonbinary scientist Cam argues, “ally” cannot be an identity, although it can be a contingent status, modifying existing circulations of allyship discourses for their own use:
Cam: I think that trying to be an ally is a state that you can stay in, permanently, but I don't think you like earn your ally card and you have it untouchably forever, like a tenured professor.

Hannah laughs.
Cam: I'm only a little petty, I swear. Yeah, I would say that trying to be an ally, or trying to be a better ally, is a state that one can stay in indefinitely. But you're not automatically an ally forever if you manage to be one, one time.

Hannah: It's a process.
Cam: Yes.
Hannah: Or a practice.
Cam: Or maybe a conditional state.70

Drawing from their experiences with academic tenure, Cam argues that ally can be a conditional state, one in which the ally is defined not by a negative, of not being trans, but in which an ally is defined by their labor. Ally is a status one earns through consistently enacting ally labor.

This is also to say that allyship can be constructed as a set of choices: as Cam continues, they give the reasoning that “we cannot demand 100% perfect action from everyone 100% of the time” and that instead, allyship should be seen as “what you do when you are presented with a situation where you could be an ally.”71 Cam presents an instance in which a person is at the grocery store, or any other kind of everyday setting and witnesses a moment of bathroom blocking. Given the choice of “continu[ing] toward the broccoli” or “attempting to be helpful” and stepping in to intervene at that moment, one can be an ally if they choose to help.72 Saying an ally identity does not exist when there are no moments to intervene, however, “may not be realistic.”73 Rather, allies become relevant when there is a context for them to act.

Institutional to Interpersonal Ally Labor

If ally is a verb, rather than a noun, then the “doing” is ally labor. All of my participants described allyship in terms of concrete actions one could do to support trans people. These ranged from so-called “low-level, casual cis allyship” on an interpersonal level to larger scale,
“institutional” measures, but were all framed in terms of specific, actionable items a cisgender person could do to aid trans people in maneuvering systems of oppression.74

Starting with the institutional level, many of my participants describe allyship as using privilege and access to power in order to benefit those who do not have privilege or power. While many of these perspectives are set within academic contexts, participants also extrapolate to the medical sphere to describe how ally labor creates better circumstances for trans people within institutions. Cam, a scientific researcher within academia, defines their definition and role of allies as “mostly in regards to access to power and access particularly to institutional and structural power.”75 Cam’s experience led them to discuss an academic context in which hiring faculty or accepting graduate students could be aided by cis faculty. That is, that cisgender people “have access to the vast majority of power that exists” within institutions, specifically regarding “hiring and where funding goes and who gets admitted to programs and other sorts of institution-based factors that are not necessarily easy to break into if you are an outsider or underrepresented in some way.”76 They suggest that in academic hiring practices, something Cam was very concerned with, cis people can leverage their privilege to benefit transgender applicants. On an institutional level, then, ally labor looks much different from interpersonal support or assurance; instead, ally labor seeks to rectify power imbalances and “access to upward motion.”77 In terms of power and institutional access, then, ally labor recognizes that “a lot of us have the opportunity to give somebody else a leg up with the little tiny bit of power that we have.”78 While many participants defined ally as a person who did not experience the same oppressions as a marginalized group, that many participants also identified the potential for them, generally middle to upper-middle class white trans people, to serve as institutional allies for those within their own communities who are stigmatized in different ways based on their race or
class. While I have primarily discussed ally labor as occurring between a cis and trans person, that is not always the case—it is a mobilization of privilege that is at the core of ally labor rather than cis ally/transgender beneficiary. Privilege varies among transgender people—yet another way they are a heterogeneous population that cannot be spoken for unilaterally.

This is not to say that the institutional level of ally labor must happen within workplaces; changing identity markers and the medical sphere can provide significant barriers to transgender people. Thus, enacting ally labor on an institutional level, because “a lot of the trans experience has to do with documents and bureaucracy and jumping through hoops,” is important to provide on more than an interpersonal level. In this case, institutional ally labor looks like, among many other things, “people who go out of their way to help with the transition process, by sort of letting people know where to go, what to do, making changes in the institutions they work for to make their services more accessible to trans people.” In simple modifications of procedure, like modifying software to default to “preferred name” rather than legal name, people can enact ally labor that significantly improves the lives of trans people.

Many institutional moments of ally labor were specific to coming out and transition within academic contexts. Belinda, a 49-year-old trans woman in graduate school for the humanities who came out a few years ago, details the experience of her university-specific support after her very public coming out on a school-wide listserv: “And then the Dean of the school did what I think you're supposed to do when a student comes out like that, you invite them in to hear their opinions and their voices, but she actually listened. I walked in with a wish list of four things that I said, ‘Okay, I want to see if you're serious,’ and everything I asked, she was just like, "done, done, done, done." All of those were people that there at the university, and each one of them drawing on either their personal or professional abilities to help me navigate
that space.” In the Dean’s professional role, she performed ally labor by making Belinda’s transition, including name changes and institutional support. Granting the items from Belinda’s wish list made it easier for her to exist in that space.

Another good example of ally labor on an institutional level came from Cam, a nonbinary trans academic living in an urban area who conducts lab experiments in the hard sciences. They describe a moment in which an academic conference had not provided gender neutral bathrooms, and they were “bathroom blocked” while using the bathroom that would offend the fewest people. A faculty acquaintance appealed to conference organizers and remedied the problem, but it mattered that the faculty member was tenured: “So that example that I gave was a woman who knew that she had tenure, which means she could make noise, and no one can fire her. And that’s something that's incredibly powerful inside of an academic system, where, someone like me, who is junior and does not have tenure, attempts to rock the boat, it's very easy to make me look expendable. But by having an ally who listened to me, had a little more power and knew how to wield it, I got access to a gender-neutral bathroom.” In addition to listening to Cam’s needs, the faculty member used her access to power to accomplish ally labor in helping Cam gain access to a safe bathroom. This ally labor did not create risks for Cam, in a precarious position because of their lack of tenure, or force Cam to take on further risks due to a lack of access to conference organizers. Institutional ally labor, then, uses authority and clout to provide support within systems of power.

Institutional ally labor is distinct from interpersonal ally labor—generally, ally labor was mentioned in terms of friendship and established relationships, although can be extended in some contexts to strangers. How, then, is interpersonal ally labor used to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression? Generally, interpersonal ally labor comes in the form of acts of
assistance, asking the trans person for the kind of support they want, using cisgender privilege to benefit trans people, all of which remove burden or “social weight” from transgender people."\(^{84}\)

For acts of ally labor, participants listed a variety of actions that qualify as interpersonal ally labor that range from small acts to time and resource-intensive struggles. Ivy remarks upon his friends’ willingness to participate in a Pride event with him, despite being straight and cisgender: “I had a couple of really good friends come march in the pride parade with me, and be really excited about it, be really purposefully celebratory, and that was really awesome."\(^{85}\) Ally labor for Ivy, then, is participatory; the act of celebrating together was encouraging to him.

Additionally, ally labor “includes checking and responding to casual acts of transphobia, which might be, if a trans person were present, labeled as a microaggression.”\(^{86}\) In these moments of ally labor, trans presence is not required for the effort of correcting transphobia; it could be done with or without the trans person witnessing it. In the case of a trans person witnessing the micro aggression, this act of ally labor takes the burden off the transgender person to respond to transphobia. Without a trans person present, the act of ally labor does not need to occur within a relationship with a trans person, but as an act of ally labor for transgender people generally. The scope of ally labor, then, is flexible.

One example of ally labor that struck me as poignant and significant came from Ethan, who described what his friend group did when any of them had gender confirmation surgery or other “life stage” events:

Something that I’ve experienced in my social circles where there’s a mix of cis people and trans people is that when somebody’s getting surgery, it kind of has ended up, it’s treated similarly to if anybody else is sick or if someone has a baby, because it’s like, oh, you’re recovering for a week or two, and then people get on casserole rotation or whatever, and bring the afflicted person food and hang out with them while they’re all laid out and stuff like that. I think it’s cool to see how that has worked; the way that it’s worked is “oh, this is just sort of like a life stage thing for a lot of people that gets thrown together with other life stage things.” It’s a kind of normalization where the thing doesn't
get swept under the rug, in the bad old days you really could not be open about what you were doing. If you transitioned you might very well try and move somewhere different, but certainly not let anyone around you know that you were getting surgery. But to have it be sort of a thing that people will show up and help out around in a way that’s reciprocal, because the understanding is, oh, well, everyone is probably going to have some weeks like this in their life, where they need care from their friends in that very basic kind of way. Among the friends that I’m thinking of, there’s enough general knowledge such that everyone kind of knows what’s involved, “oh, yeah, you won’t be able to do laundry because you can’t lift your arms above your head, ah, yeah.” It’s never used as an othering thing, I guess.\textsuperscript{87}

While casserole trains are generally confined to instances of birth, illness, and death, Ethan and his friend group engaged in ally labor to include top and bottom surgeries into those instances. While providing food during surgery recovery is a norm for many people, this social circle expanded the efforts of caring for someone in recovery through understanding what recovery entailed and supporting based on that knowledge. Laundry can be ally labor when it is specific to the context of helping transgender people through top surgery recovery. As I discuss in the next section, Ethan found that the ally labor provided by his friends after top surgery mimicked other “normal” rites of passage that would merit such assistance. Ally labor here, then, demonstrates care that does not necessarily have to be specific to trans people, but that looks like more mundane forms of interpersonal care.

Ally labor uses privilege to benefit transgender people. As Orchis argues, “accomplices” deploy privilege in order to perform ally labor: “they're making their privilege available to other folks, they're using it actively, and risking loss of social capital and loss of access, in order to say the right things and do the right things, in order to live in a way that is aligned with folks who are oppressed, who they are in solidarity with.”\textsuperscript{88} Orchis defines ally labor as acts that both use privilege to benefit others and risk a loss of that privilege. While they are vague in what that might look like, other participants are more specific about how to use one’s privilege as ally labor. As Mandi suggests, “Provide us with resources. A lot of us can't hold down jobs because of
workplace discrimination and harassment. Provide us with the basic necessities, food, housing, stuff like that.” In our interview, Mandi detailed harassment or discrimination in every workplace since she had come out. Her employment status resonates with studies that demonstrate massive amounts of trans poverty. One way to provide ally labor to her specifically is to use financial and/or class privilege to provide her with groceries—a prime example of interpersonal ally labor. Giving her a job might qualify as institutional ally labor.

Additionally, ally labor alleviates the burden on transgender people. Stephanie, a 37 year old self-employed trans woman working in the arts, comes up with her own term to explain this phenomenon, saying “It's definitely nice when someone is there to correct people who misgender or deadname, to save you the social weight of having to correct someone yourself, like you are being presumptuous and saying, ‘no, you have to respect me,’ now you're having a third party saying ‘no, Stephanie is worthy of respect and you should call her by her name and use her pronouns.’” She uses “social weight” as a way to explain the burden of having to demand respect for herself. Ally labor, on the other hand, saves her from this social weight and spares her the burden of having to correct someone’s use of her dead name or incorrect pronouns. Tied together with the previous discussion on privilege, ally labor is particularly useful because cisgender people will believe or listen to other cisgender people—ally labor puts privilege to work by taking advantage of these dynamics. Ethan describes his experiences within his workplace in which his academic advisor and members of his lab took on the burden of “spreading the word” when he came out. The people in his lab specifically took on this burden while taking his concerns into account: They asked me, ‘oh, so if I'm referring to you this way and other people aren't, what should I say to them?’ and I was just like, ‘you can just tell them this, tell them that I'm transitioning, that's simple.’ But the reason I really appreciated that is
because that wasn't just saying ‘oh, I’ll do this helpful thing for you,’ it was also effectively saying, ‘and if people say anything shitty, or if they don't react well to it, you can count us to have your back.’ Both his advisor and the people in his lab provided effective ally labor in explaining to others within the department that he was transitioning and how to refer to him. Furthermore, they provided implicit care, which Ethan identifies as preparing to defend him if other people did not accept the news. Not only did they take on the burden of coming out for Ethan, they also provided further ally labor through a promise of future help with negative reactions.

While pronoun use can be seen as fundamental and basic, its deployment is still a significant act of ally labor. Cam describes the habit of their friend group of using correct pronouns, every single time, regardless of setting:

My group of friends is a mix of cis folks and trans folks, nonbinary and otherwise, and the cis folks in particular in the group that we hang out with, persistently correctly pronouns everyone in the group, no matter whether outsiders choose to or not. If somebody's parent is referring to them the wrong way, or if a server at a restaurant gets something wrong, there is persistent correction, not in the "excuse me, this person is actually whatever" kind of way, but just by using their correct pronouns, consistently and repetitively, until it sticks. And that's a strategy I really appreciate because it puts no burden or awkwardness whatsoever on me, but the person who made the mistake realizes that they've done something that is out of step and they have the opportunity to correct and fit back in with the step of conversation.

Cam describes this habit in terms of modeling good behavior without drawing attention to the trans people who are being incorrectly pronounced. The cis person correcting pronouns does not demand recognition for this behavior, but in doing so, take the burden off Cam in instances where they are being misgendered. The person using incorrect pronouns is essentially given, as one of my other participants describes it, “peer pressure.” Some trans people do not want pronoun corrections to lead to conflict, so by virtue of a subtle method like peer pressure, the
task is still accomplished without unnecessary attention or social weight placed on the trans person.

While all of my participants listed concrete actions to take to support trans people, one participant critiqued the impulse to shame allies with sentiments like “don’t be an asshole,” which appeared in many other interview transcripts. Ally labor, then, is more than just being a decent human being, according to Keagan; it requires more specific effort. At some points, participants stalled in attempting to answer my questions, working through the complexities of what they would consider ally labor in conversation with me. Ivy criticized these shaming sentiments and other vague expressions of allyship like “support,” by drawing attention to the need for specificity in constructing allyship:

I think keeping it realistic and keeping it constructive, like constructive criticism you think someone's actually going to be able to act on, is helpful, and then throwing in some measurables, like some nebulous things like "be a decent person by…" I mean, "support people" is fine, but you can also throw in some things that people can watch themselves improve on, like "if you see someone getting harassed, say something. If you can't say something to the person causing the conflict, say something to the victim and make sure they know that you recognize that it's not okay." And then people can feel good about their progress and then actually continue to make progress.

That is, that part of the issue with liberal allyship, ally listicles, and other collections of information designed to advise cisgender people of how to be better allies to trans people, is that they are vague and do not include concrete actions to take. In his discussion, Ivy notes that allies might be best served with constructive criticism and concrete, actionable items that allies mark their own progress in doing. Ivy’s expression of ally labor resonates with the general conception, but he notes that it is difficult to perform ally labor without some sense of reward. In the liberal allyship model, this reward would be extrinsic, based on cultural capital and recognition for one’s tasks. Ivy instead suggests intrinsic rewards, so that someone could feel better by virtue of accomplishing those concrete tasks under the umbrella of ally labor. Ivy also suggests support
from other allies—that “I think if allies encourage and give some constructive and more positive feedback to other allies, like ‘hey, I really appreciate that you’re doing this, thank you’ is good. If allies expend that energy on other allies, then that can keep a lot of momentum going.” In this way, ally labor can sustain itself without requiring recognition from marginalized people.

Appeals to Normal

Part of the impetus for this theory came from the considerable effort required to work in solidarity as I describe in chapter four. While some of the vocabulary from the radical solidarity model is peppered throughout the interviews I conducted, many participants resisted a binary between activist and non-activist, constructing allyship as something anyone could do. Despite Orchis’ use of the term “accomplice” throughout our interview, many other participants sought to be treated like normal people. What normal means, however, is worth investigating. I connect this to a universalizing perspective, as Sedgwick outlines, and through constructing trans issues as everyone’s issues, we might find a more fruitful perspective toward “normal” as the participants in my study describe.

Not everyone can be an activist, but most people can be supportive and responsive to trans needs. Through discussing the role of allies and allyship with me, Ethan realized that some of his sentiments started to suggest that "everyone should be an activist to some extent," and once he realized that, revised some of his perspectives:

But most people are not activists, and those who really make that a big part of their lives are probably likely to be in contact with more trans and queer people already. If you're speaking up as a supporter of an issue, don't take up too much of the floor for yourself. I'm not really a big fan of the—standpoint theory for dummies where you're supposed to defer to any member of whatever group you're trying to support, because like I said, everyone has a heterogeneous perspective on their own issues, I also generally don't think that what your identities and life experiences are do not literally change the truth value of what you're saying, they just weight your expertise on an issue or make you more likely to be sensitive to stuff. I don't really advocate for a "defer to trans people all the time no
matter what the topic at hand is." I'm just a scientist, most of the stuff I'm thinking of is how to be cool to the trans people in your life and not be a stressor."99

While Ethan confirms some of the perspectives of radical solidarity, like when he brings up the tendency for privileged people to occupy marginalized spaces, he mostly defines ally labor against radical solidarity principles, including his use of a strawman argument against deferring to trans voices. Ethan is the biggest proponent for the heterogeneity of trans perspectives in the study, and many of his claims and critiques are framed within a desire not to speak for every transgender person or to hedge his comments based on the heterogeneity of trans voices. He does, however, describe a common sentiment I found in my interviews: many participants did not frame trans allyship in terms of activism or solidarity, but the desire to be recognized as normal or equal.

Many participants indicated that instead of framing themselves as activists, they preferred to be seen as nothing out of the ordinary and that their identities extended beyond their “transness.” As fifty-five-year-old Keith says, “being transgender isn’t the only thing about me,” and people should not reduce him down to his trans identity.100 Given his age, some of these discourses were expected—his primary focus is embracing his masculinity, being a straight man, and passing as one. I assumed he would circulate some of these discourses of normalcy, given his generation. However, I did not imagine that many participants would echo these sentiments of appeals to normalcy.

This desire for normalcy appeared generally in the form of basic recognition as people. An ideal world for Mandi, for example, would be one “in which everyone's basic humanity was respected. The inherent worth and dignity of every person was respected, where everyone just had their basic needs met, just without question or exception.”101 Generalizing beyond transgender people and perhaps representing her communist viewpoints, Mandi demonstrates
several universals for all people. Moving more specifically to transgender concerns, Mandi rails against a lack of recognition or misrecognition within her very conservative state in a resigned way: “I’m just a person, I’m not a threat, I just want to be able to exist and to move in spaces with the same amount of freedom that they can move around in spaces.” In her statement, Mandi refers specifically to bathroom bills that restricted her freedom in many settings, including workplace restrooms. While Mandi does participate in activism, at the core of our conversation was a desire for a baseline recognition as equal. Her perspective towards politicians was cynical at best; if they could not even see her as a person with the freedom to use the restroom of her choice, how could she expect to succeed at activism? Belinda, a forty-nine-year-old trans woman, gestured towards a general desire for trans people to be recognized as people, couched in rights-based discourses: “most trans people are with me in the belief that, ‘look, I just want to have the same rights and acknowledgements that everybody else has.’” This is a little different from a discourse of normalcy but echoes Mandi’s statements in terms of basic human dignity; without this starting point, how can other tasks get done?

I argue in chapter four that the radical solidarity model sets high expectations for its members, and much of my participants’ circulation of those discourses was to repeat that sentiment. As Keagan sets forth, allyship is best accomplished for them in three ways: “I think like on a basic level just see me as a human, being supportive, not being actively transphobic.” They go on to describe allyship as “low hanging fruit . . . like, not being an asshole.” This certainly goes against the high threshold for solidarity. As graduate student in the humanities Nadia says, “I want [cis people] to just treat me the way they’d treat any other woman.” For her, this includes concrete action like creating inclusive gendered spaces, but at its most basic level, looks to cisgender people to recognize her as a woman, nothing more. Ally labor, in
Nadia’s perspective, is not difficult—just treat her like they would any cisgender woman. Radical solidarity overly complicates matters.

Participants argue that activism can complicate what is fairly simple—treating trans people like people. As Ethan argues, “Sometimes, badly done, allyship can kind of come off as this savior complex sort of thing, and we’re like an endangered species of animal or something like that.” While I argue that the radical solidarity model seeks to prevent savior complex logic, that is not to say that it does not happen in practice. The multivariate ways that activists within the radical solidarity model shame insufficient allyship also produces a dynamic in which many instructions for correct conduct are provided in order for people not to screw it up, but invariably, people do. As Stephanie jokingly comments, many of these instructions craft a message that says, “Hey, you can learn to be less stupid,” though “people make it [allyship] more complicated than it needs to be.”

Allyship can be as simple as “be a decent human, don’t be an asshole,” according to Piper. As she puts it, many activist discourses “could easily be phrased as ‘if you wouldn't say it to a cis person, don't say it to a trans person.’ especially one you don't have a close relationship with.” Harkening back to discourses of “just like anybody else,” Piper draws attention to the relative ease of ally labor: it is not a huge adjustment, for example, to refer to someone with the correct pronouns: “if someone introduces themselves to you, and their name is Ashley or something, and then you would typically treat someone named Ashley as having, say, she/her pronouns.” While Piper adds that there are also “some nonbinary considerations there,” she regards the fixation on pronouns and correct language use as strange. Addressing someone just like they would a cis person, however, is simple and straightforward, because trans people are normal people.
Participants appeal to “normal” through sentiments like Stephanie’s, in which she says, “I think the most important thing is to me, just not treating it like it's a thing, really, in terms of interpersonal relationships. Just treating it like it's not remarkable. Because for most people most of the time, it doesn't matter.” By categorizing her trans identity as “not a thing,” Stephanie reduces the importance of her trans identity, making it as unobtrusive as possible. It is normal. Stephanie is a person and would prefer to be treated with decency.

Appeals to normalcy represent a low bar for the treatment of transgender people. In these appeals, trans people do not request special treatment, simply treatment as another person, with nothing different about them. Treating trans people as such is common sense—all a cisgender person would have to do is treat them like they treat everyone else.

*Ally Labor Is Contextual and Contingent*

Certainly, ally labor is contextual to the person one is performing it for. While I do not know that any person can faithfully escape dominant discourses of allyship, it certainly makes ally labor easier if one asks transgender people how best to support them. As Keagan explains, people can overcome assumptions of what ally labor looks like for that person through asking: “One of the first questions people ask me is, ‘awesome, what can I do to support you in that process?’ And so, it’s not so much of an assumption of allyship is doing like X, Y, Z, but it’s like, meeting someone where they’re at and trying to figure out what they need from you.” Asking, itself, can demonstrate a willingness to listen.

Ally labor is contextual to the person, the relationship one has with them, and the situation action is happening in, because trans people have varied needs of treatment in different spaces. As Nadia describes, cisgender people should “be aware of [how] they’re treating trans people and asking themselves if they would treat a cis people of the same gender the same way,
and if the answer is no, then they’re doing it wrong.” For Nadia, ally labor looks like treating transgender the same as cisgender people. This, however, comes with caveats, because of the “special problems that face trans people.” It is a balance of appeals to normal and appeals to the specific needs to trans people I emphasize in my conception of ally labor.

Listening enables effective ally labor specific to the personal asking for it. As Ethan summarizes, “if somebody comes out to you as trans, if they’re starting transition and all that stuff, basically if you know someone who is starting to transition, ask them how you can be supportive, just like you would for any other life event that might be difficult.” Trans experiences are not homogeneous. Trans people prefer different acts of ally labor, but in asking, the situation is akin to other moments of crisis, like serious illness or grieving a death. Different people require different kinds of ally labor in those situations while sharing major standards of behavior for those events.

Part of an ethic of responsible listening, then, calls for potential allies to listen to the needs of trans people in order to provide person-specific acts of ally labor, as Nadia describes: “I worry a lot about passing. And so sometimes I’m just not in a good mood because I don’t know, it’s raining, and my hair got wet and now it looks like shit. Maybe a thing that allies could do in that situation is reassure me that things are okay and that this doesn’t mean I pass any less.” One of the things Nadia worries about is her ability to pass, and effective ally labor for Nadia would be to help her pass and provide her with reassurance that she is succeeding, though this might look like a simple compliment. Other participants differ and would be uncomfortable if someone complimented them on their successful passing.
Failure: The Rupture Points of Ally Discourses

I asked the question of ally failure not necessarily to garner stories of when bad things happened to trans people, but in order to identify the places where trans people encounter well-intentioned failure. As Carrillo Rowe describes, “failures arise as pivotal moments signaling the soft spots that arise as we push on the limits of representation.” In the context of this chapter, failure is most often described as the moments that demonstrate a clash in ally discourses, or actions that attempt to embody ally labor but fall short. Failure is an example of the precarious balance between the universal and particular—in the following examples, a tenuous balance between a general understanding of trans people and the particular needs of the trans person as the recipient of action.

I use this extended example from Piper to demonstrate an instance of well-intentioned failure from a cashier at a skincare store. The cashier demonstrates a lack of understanding of trans lived realities, despite the seemingly good intentions in complimenting Piper, and outing her to the entire store.

In public, it seems that one of the greatest risks for trans people is feeling uncomfortable, and usually that happens, in my experience anyways, when a trans person gets read. . . . I think the phrase I always hear is “blah blah blah blah, you’re so brave.” I think that phrase just needs to be stricken from all cis ally vocabularies. I was buying something at Lush, and my identification hadn't been switched yet, so obviously I know when handing over my credit card and my license, to buy things, that the cashier’s going to notice I'm trans. That just happens, inevitably. But the cashier then just said, "oh, blah blah blah, I didn't even notice, you're so brave." And I'm like, look, there's . . . Lush stores are small, they're fairly crowded, and now you're just obviously indicating to everyone else that I'm trans. Where if you could just . . . swipe the credit card…. It seems very counterintuitive, because people want to be nice and offer reassurances to people who they think might be nervous, but those reassurances signal to the trans person that they can also be read by people who are more threatening, which I think where a lot of the stress from those interaction comes.

I use this anecdote as an example for a failure for several reasons. While this situation was with a stranger, the cashier brought attention to a marginalized identity category in a small space, outing
her to the rest of the store. Additionally, the cashier revealed that Piper could have better passed as trans, if her credit card and ID matched. In this instance, a person doing ally labor might have intervened on Piper’s behalf, in order to quickly correct the cashier despite identity inconsistencies. In general for Piper, the solution is clearly not to make comments like “you’re so brave” or “I never would have guessed,” which she says “risks that passing to come undone.” That kind of failure comes across to the trans person as saying, “oh, I wouldn't have guessed someone who had that nice of makeup and a dress would also have a penis?” While Piper’s last comment is humorous, it succinctly summarizes an instance where research, at the very least, might have helped educate the cashier in what not to say to trans people, so they could avoid harming trans customers.

Failure also comes from attempts to gain ally cookies, as I critiqued in chapter four—action is only done to make the ally look progressive. I provide an extended example of Cam’s experience with a cisgender ally who took the tenets of radical allyship too far in asking publicly for pronouns, in a moment of demonstrative allyship that damaged her relationship with Cam. In this example, Cam responds to my request for “failure of allyship” stories:

I was at a party with a group of friends last year, and there were people there that I knew and people that I did not know, and at this point, I was out as nonbinary to all of my friends who were there, and a friend of mine, very well-intentioned, came over to me with a friend of hers that I didn't know, and introduced this person to me, and she gave her name and I gave my name and we said "nice to meet you" and it was great, and then my friend turned to her friend and said, “Oh, just so you know, this is the kind of party where you should probably ask people's pronouns, because it's that kind of crowd.” And so, this other girl and I sort of looked at each other for a second, because she knew that wasn't cool, and I was just, “Ohhh, now we're gonna do this game.” And it put her in the position of having to be like, “Oh, okay, let’s try again, my name is so and so, and my pronouns are she/her.” (In a humorous tone) And then I had to reintroduce myself and say, "my name is Cam and my pronouns are they/them." My friend seemed very pleased with herself and sort of went back into the party, and it was fine, and nothing else happened with regards to this, but I spent a significant portion of the night feeling like I had extremely been put on the spot, and been made out to be the token, introductory non-
In this example, Cam draws attention to those attempting to benefit trans people asking or introducing with pronouns, can have problematic effects. Cam’s friend’s actions resulted in embarrassment for them, and Cam felt used—that they only existed for a lesson in proper pronoun use. Beyond this, Cam was the object of attention when they did not need to be, violating their desire for privacy. This is not to say that they never wanted to be referred to by their correct pronouns. Earlier in this section, I described how Cam was supported by their friend group, who “persistently correctly pronouns everyone in the group.” The example they describe at a party, on the other hand, is inappropriate for Cam in that context: they are uncomfortable with their gender identity as a topic of conversation. While asking for pronouns might be seen as something generally seen as good and important for trans inclusivity, its execution in certain circumstances is unwanted and unnecessary, because it contradicted the particular needs of the trans person at the center of the situation.

As I have discussed through this section, ally labor is the product of listening. It balances the universality of personhood with the particularity of individual trans needs. It consists of tangible action that can be applied at the institutional level or the interpersonal level. It does not seek to fail but views failure as potentially productive moments of improvement.

**What Can We Do with an Ethic of Responsible Listening?**

In this chapter, I have argued for an ethic of responsible listening in order to craft a discursive space for transgender vernaculars to be heard and responded to, based on an obligation to craft dialogue and recognize trans people as people. Through this ethic of responsible listening, cisgender people can provide better ally labor, which leverages cis privilege to enable trans people to better navigate systems of oppression. Listening enables a
move beyond tokenizing and othering but requires prior research in order to attune oneself to the specific needs of the trans people within that discursive space. The result of an ethic of responsible listening, ally labor, is a verb, not a noun, ranges from institutional to interpersonal contexts, establishes trans people as normal people, is contextual to the individual necessities of trans people, and accommodates productive failure.

Ally labor and an ethic of responsible listening enable new ways of looking at allyship and how it is enacted. First, it allows for a heterogeneous understanding of trans people, based on individual needs and particular contexts. Along those lines, it fights the dehumanizing tropes of villain and deceiver as seen in many mass mediated representations of trans people. It gives the space for trans people to articulate their needs and to be listened to and responded to. It does not rely on visibility or encourage visibility as the best option to improving conditions for trans people. It can be enacted on smaller scales than what is thought of as activist work, and thus may make changes in small ways that are achievable for those who are not full-time activists while still aiding trans people.

This is also to say that this theory-building comes from the insights of primarily white, primarily middle-class, highly educated people. Some of them are very conversant in the theory I cite throughout this dissertation, write about trans issues academically, or discuss activism on a daily basis. While three of my participants (Orchis, Layla, and Mandi) could be considered as economically precarious, their circumstances intersect with race, disability, and abuse in ways that the majority of my participants are not experiencing. Do the conditions of precarity that affect trans women of color so disproportionately also allow for listening and ally labor to be used outside of the contexts my participants suggest? Many of my participants have the luxury to be able to say that being trans doesn’t affect their everyday lives that much, that as Stephanie, a
middle-class white woman, has “had a lot of either respect or not give a damn toward” her, rather than what I termed “open antagonism” in my conversation with her. Gender identity is only one identity that intersects with many, and I am not sure Americans have overcome the threshold for listening to women, people of color, people with disabilities, or many other marginalized groups—why would listening to trans people be easier?

While I think practices of listening and ally labor would be helpful and beneficial to trans people, I am not arguing that this is the only solution to existing problems of allyship. In terms of rhetorical theory, this chapter seems like a fundamentally interpersonal response to discourses of allyship and how to connect with those who are marginalized. Especially given my use of vernacular criticism, it is easy to critique this model as flawed because it seems in places to be endorsing hegemony based on individual trans needs. To that critique, I have two responses. First, that cases are more complex than labeling them as liberatory or hegemonic—while trans participants constructing themselves as “normal” or wanting to be seen as normal certainly resembles an assimilationist perspective, normal is much more complicated for many trans people. For them, it entails security, privacy, safety, and survival. Who am I, a cis person, to argue with a trans person’s need for survival? Second, it broaches the question of judgement—who are critics of vernacular discourse to judge whether something is liberatory or hegemonic? As a cisgender person, I am certainly in no position to dismiss the needs of trans people because they could be construed as assimilationist, heteronormative, or cisnormative. If given the opportunity to provide ally labor, I will provide it, because I have a responsibility to do so. In most cases, it is because I love and care about the trans people in my life, and my impulses towards critical theory are secondary to their needs. The least I can do is listen, to ask questions, and to refer to them with the pronouns they refer in the circumstances they request. In the case of
most of my participants, they are not asking for those who listen to be radical and always acting in solidarity all of the time. They are asking for basic recognition as people. It is a low bar, and one I am happy to help overcome. The basic assumption in this dissertation project is that there are others who would also put in the work of an ethic of responsible listening so that they could provide effective ally labor as well.
Notes


3. “Piper.”

4. Among these procedural concerns suggested from the IRB included the concern that confidentiality could be breached by others accessing the voice recordings, which meant that the transcriptions could be done by me and only me, that audio would be transcribed within 48 hours of the interview, and that audio would be deleted immediately upon transcription of the interviews. Additionally, the devices upon which the audio and interview transcripts would be stored were encrypted to a very high level, and I was the only person with access to those files.


9. These are marked throughout the chapter as they occur with a conversational tag that indicates that there is dialogue between me and the participant.


11. This is not to say that I was in any way a therapist, but many of the interviews were exhausting for me to participate in, and I was not the one experiencing systemic oppression.


13. To code these themes, I used Dedoose, an online app developed for qualitative and mixed-method research, because NVivo is too expensive and Dedoose has free trials.

14. For more information on a hybrid approach to qualitative research, see Jennifer Fereday and Eimhear Muir-Cochrane, “Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid

15. Orchis speaks not in sentences or paragraphs but pages. They are an incredibly intelligent, thoughtful critic who does not translate well to written text. The experience of speaking with them, though, was essential to this project, and theorizing with them for an hour and a half was vital to the theorizations laid out in this chapter. As they described to me, they are a “rogue theoretician” who made me attend to the complexities that many of my other participants did not have to think about, let alone experience.


26. “Keith.”

27. “Stephanie.”
And what happens if cisgender people do not recognize transgender people as people? I do not have an answer for that. I really wish I did, because that seems to be the biggest problem that trans people are facing right now, a total lack of recognition of their humanity. Primarily I look at the problem of good intentions gone awry in this dissertation, and making cisgender people believe that trans people are just people is too high of a barrier to overcome.

This is not to say that all of my participants thought about this statement the same way; at least one was flattered by the confirmation that they were successfully passing, and that if his documents had been in order, he would have successfully passed. “Keith.”

42. “Keagan.” The “you” in this quotation set refers to my research, because participants were incredibly generous and supportive of my work even when they did not have to be.
46. “Keagan.”
47. “Keagan.”
48. “Orchis.”
49. “Orchis.”
50. “Orchis.”
52. “Mandi.”
53. “Mandi.”
54. “Mandi.” The last line of our conversation before saying goodbye was “I am a Communist, sorry,” which explains a lot about Mandi’s perspectives in our interview.
55. “Cam.”
56. “Cam.”
57. “Keagan.”
58. “Cam.”
60. “Cam.”
61. “Mandi.”
63. This is not to say that ally labor is a negative or burdensome thing, but it does take work, and if it so difficult for many Americans to understand emotional labor, let alone perform it, I wonder how many will be willing to undergo the process of ally labor.
64. “Piper.”

67. “Keagan.”

68. “Keagan.”

69. “Keagan.”

70. “Cam.”

71. “Cam.”

72. “Cam.”

73. “Cam.”

74. “Cam”; “Ethan.”

75. “Cam.”

76. “Cam.”

77. “Cam.”

78. “Cam.”

79. “Ethan.”

80. “Ethan.”

81. This example is not based on my interviews but in an experience with a medical assistant at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. As a former employee of the LGBTQ Health Clinic, the MA learned better procedures for transgender patients, and forced her new department to adopt them when she began working there. This is what happens when you tell everyone what you research.

82. “Belinda.”

83. “Cam.”

84. Stephanie.”
85. “Ivy.”
86. “Piper.”
87. “Ethan.”
88. “Orchis.”
89. “Mandi.”
91. “Stephanie.”
92. “Ethan.”
93. “Ethan.”
94. “Cam.”
95. “Ivy.”
96. “Keagan”; Piper.”
97. “Ivy.”
98. “Ivy.”
99. “Ethan.”
100. “Keith.”
101. “Mandi.”
102. “Mandi.”
103. “Belinda.”
104. “Keagan.”
105. “Keagan.”
106. “Nadia.”
Despite, of course, the barriers to legal name change in birth certificates, drivers licenses, and social security cards that can vary widely state by state, making “matching” annoying in best case scenarios and impossible in worst case scenarios.
Chapter Six: Toward Ally Labor and an Ethic of Responsible Listening in 2018

“Now, some of the things you might hear on this call won’t be . . . PC. Like, they might say, ‘used to be a man,’ or ‘is really a woman.’ But they’re trying, and that’s the important part,” X, the nonbinary coworker I shadowed during a customer call at work explaining new trans-specific functionality said to me.1 I was horrified. This was the good company, that was trying, that had the best of intentions when implementing new gender-inclusive products? Even the best facilities with the most money and time to spend on training their employees still faltered, still talked about trans people (during a call with a trans person) as “used to be” or “biologically.” One internal employee misgendered the trans person who was helping him support a customer, during a call about trans-specific issues with customers. I could barely mask my rage. These are instances of what I have experienced in my non-academic position while completing this dissertation. It drove home the constraints of the models of allyship I have analyzed here—change takes time, but it happen, with work.

In this dissertation project, I have argued that current models of allyship, like the liberal allyship model and the radical solidarity model, are insufficient for productive allyship with transgender people. Combined with the history of trans tropes in American culture over the last thirty years, reliance on these flawed models of allyship results in passivity at best and hurtful behavior at worst. At a mass mediated level, as I examine in chapter two, I traced the evolution of trans tropes through the last thirty years, focusing specifically on how trans representation expanded in breadth and depth in the last decade. Problematic tropes of villainy and deception did not completely disappear but were resuscitated for use against trans people in a political
This dissertation started with a university context, that ally training programs, most commonly titled “Safe Zones” or the equivalent, were fundamentally flawed in the ways they understood and taught concepts of coexistence, which I theorized in chapter three as the liberal allyship model, especially when applied to transgender people. In doing the research for that chapter, I encountered many critiques of the liberal model, that not only responded to university ally training programs but the ways that the liberal model had spread to activist contexts. These activists and critics within activist communities responded with their own model of coexistence, which I call radical solidarity. In chapter four, then, I examined the understandings of solidarity perpetuated and modified in response to problematic constructions of liberal allyship and found that the vernacular theories of solidarity established closeness, emphasized using privilege to benefit marginalized groups, and stood against recognition for allyship behavior. Their standards for behavior, however, are unachievably high, requiring knowledge and actions beyond the capacity of most people.

In chapter five, I sought to remedy what I saw were significant problems that contributed to trans precarity, which I explained in chapter two. In the case of ally training manuals, which are rarely updated and instead shoehorn trans experiences into already-existing models touting visibility of allies above all else, I found that trans voices were not heard and considered. In the case of the radical solidarity discourses, the threshold for solidarity was far too high. To find some kind of balance between the universal and particular, I conducted interviews with transgender people about their experiences with allies and allyship. In so doing, I crafted a discursive space for these trans perspectives, enacting an ethic of responsible listening while co-
theorizing with my participants. My participants framed allyship as action, and so I theorized ally labor—complex practices without guarantee that seek to benefit transgender lives through a process of cis people leveraging their privilege to enable a better navigation of systems of oppression. I attempted to balance the need to respond specifically to unique trans needs with a universalizing impulse participants identified for cis people to understand basic trans issues and to treat them as people. While this is in no way a panacea for the distance between trans and cis people, it may contribute to improved understandings on the part of cis allies and different expectations of allyship from trans people.

**The Trump Administration’s Earnest Attack on Transgender Rights**

Just because new tropes have been introduced does not mean that older tropes are fully supplanted or replaced. We cannot assume linearity or unbridled progress. I began this dissertation project in the spring of 2016, during the creation and release of the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (HB2), a piece of legislation in North Carolina that removed local LGBTQ anti-discrimination protections and ruled that people could only use governmental bathroom facilities that corresponded with their assigned sex at birth. In chapter one, I pointed to the moment in which HB2 erupted as a manifestation of ambivalent transgender tropes, that despite the progress that had been made in creating new ways for transgender people to be visible in the United States, HB2 had harkened back to antiquated “freak” tropes, but those had been met with significant protest. It was my hope that HB2 would only be a small blip in an otherwise progressive narrative, bolstered with Obama-era policy that expanded rights for many LGBTQ Americans. Then, Donald Trump was elected, mobilizing the deceiver and villain tropes seen most frequently in the 1980s-early 2000s.
The Trump administration has furthered an ambivalent reaction to trans visibility by making transgender people targets of discriminatory policy. While Trump campaigned on promises of support for LGBTQ people, representing himself as “a new kind of Republican leadership on LGBTQ rights,” his work in office since January 2017 “has revealed itself to be the ugliest, most explicitly anti-LGBTQ presidency in U.S. history.”  

During the HB2 debate, Trump, as a presidential candidate, disagreed with North Carolina’s policy, stating that trans people should “use the bathroom they feel is appropriate.” Once in office, Trump proved that he was not an ally to LGBTQ Americans, and certainly not to trans Americans. Along with Vice President Mike Pence, former governor of Indiana (in)famous for the state’s anti-LGBTQ policy, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, bigoted former Alabama Senator, Trump has used transgender people as a scapegoat for many of America’s problems. Visibility here serves an ambivalent function; it is the backlash to transgender visibility that has fueled further violence and discriminatory policy. This is also emblematic of the next target of the religious right: once same-sex marriage was legalized, “social conservatives needed a new fight to focus their fundraising apparatus against. They targeted the trans community.” Given that logic, it was and is politically advantageous for the Trump administration to scapegoat transgender people. Their newfound visibility has garnered “a harsh vigilante and state crackdown based in gender surveillance at bathroom doors.”

The ways in which Trump has responded to this heightened visibility are multitudinous. In some ways, transgender people have served as blatant scapegoats. One of Trump’s first actions in office was to overturn guidance that protected transgender youth under Title IX, replacing it with a two-page letter from the Departments of Justice and Education with no additional guidance included. Trump’s turn on HB2 came quickly after he was inaugurated,
dropping a lawsuit against North Carolina and revising Title IX guidance. The official rationale for the decision was to allow “states and districts more flexibility in their interpretation of Title IX and how they choose to accommodate transgender students.” However, the Justice and Education Departments revoked the guidance, failing to allow for a replacement with new guidelines for how to protect transgender youth.

The most prominent instance of scapegoating, however, lies in Trump’s transgender military ban. In three tweets, Trump announced his intention to ban transgender service members because of the “tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail.” The cost of transgender health care, however, is only one piece of the story:

Several House members planned to vote against the “minibus” spending bill, which determines the Pentagon’s spending and also includes $1.6 billion for Trump’s border wall, if it did not include an amendment to prohibit funding for transgender health care in the military. In an effort to appease his right flank, Trump — obsessed with the construction of a border wall — decided to not just target transgender health care but rather to issue a broad ban against all transgender people from serving in our Armed Forces.

This is to say that Trump’s desire to build a border wall caused him to throw transgender Americans under the proverbial bus. Additionally, the cost for the United States Military to cover transgender health costs, including transition, is incredibly low given the military’s overall budget: “The Rand study estimated that the move would increase active-duty-military health-care costs by between $2.4 million and $8.4 million a year, or by about 0.04 to 0.13 per cent.”

Transgender Americans serve as a scapegoat for cost-cutting measures. In order to satisfy the far right members of his party, Trump willingly sacrificed transgender people.

I discuss Donald Trump in this conclusion because my participants and I believe that Trump, his administration, and the Republican Party foreclose opportunity for listening and ally labor. The implications, then, for the theories I forward in this dissertation, are much different
than they were when I proposed this project. Many people took HB2 as an exigence to listen better, to provide better ally labor. Some of the same is happening in response to Trump’s policies, but simultaneously, the Trump administration is making trans existence even more precarious. Now, more than ever, people should be looking to provide ally labor for their transgender friends, family, and acquaintances. The need for listening is stronger. The responsibility cisgender people have for transgender people is larger. From small gestures like checking in on a trans friend when discriminatory legislation is passed, to larger-scale activism or structural change, allies should engage in improved and increased ally labor. The models for coexistence that are currently in place are insufficient for the enormous burden the Trump administration has put on transgender existence. An ethic of responsible listening can contribute to the improvement of transgender lives.

Constraints and Application

After writing and conducting research for the vast majority of this dissertation, I got a job in a healthcare field.¹¹ In my first eight weeks at this company, I saw firsthand how users of the product, from reception staff to nurses and physicians, were working to change their institutions’ perceptions and understandings of transgender people in order to better treat them in clinical settings. While my company had a small group of employees who battled hard to implement new documentation settings, like fields for legal sex, sex assigned at birth, and gender identity, getting the providers who used the software on board was an incredibly complex process that moved very, very slowly. Explaining why “preferred names” are important to the process of making trans people feel comfortable in health care settings, for example, took hospital organizations between 6 and 18 months to properly educate all of their employees who would be affected by that change.¹² Implementing a change that would correctly display patient pronouns,
too, was a long and arduous process. These changes, I learned, were undertaken by large hospital organizations that wanted these changes, not facilities that were taken kicking and screaming into better documentation for trans patients.

Change is slow. Change is hard. I have outlined a fairly lofty set of ideals for the ways people should interact with and make space for trans people and their perspectives in this dissertation project. I do not disavow the theories I have put forth here, but I wonder how quickly American cultural understanding of transgender people will change and progress. After all, we live in a country where white supremacy is having a resurgence, where Roe v. Wade is close to being overturned, and thousands of migrant children are being detained without their parents. But still, I hope there is a place for listening, despite the barriers that exist for it in 2018.

Given their existing frameworks for education, ally training programs are the best platform for implementing change. As I detailed in chapter three, there is plenty of room for improvement. Below, I have listed the improvements that would make the most difference to create more constructive ally labor with university contexts.

First and fundamentally, I suggest that ATPs separate LGB and T training sessions. As detailed in chapter two, combining these diverse perspectives of sexuality and gender identity gives short shrift to both.

Second, I suggest that ATPs balance universalizing discourses like “benefits everyone” with the particular issues trans people are facing. I describe both of these impulses in chapter five, but ATPs are currently lacking the latter. To balance the universal and the particular, I encourage the use of narratives from trans people—even stories from a few diverse perspectives might better educate ATP participants.
Third, I suggest that ATPs provide more comprehensive guides to their trainees, especially those in student-facing positions. ATPs are commonly directed at Student Life staff, and those staff members are the front line in dealing with dangerous student situations that could be accommodated through an ethic of responsible listening. As a teaching assistant, I was wholly unprepared to share university resources with students in crisis—no one who sees students on a regular basis should be so ill-equipped to deal with transgender-specific issues.\textsuperscript{13}

Fourth, I encourage that ATPs integrate some solidarity frameworks within their courses. Terms like solidarity and mutual aid should be circulated beyond activist practice. They could benefit the currently inward-facing perspective of ATPs.

Fifth, I recommend that ATPs move to applied, situational training either as a complement or as an additional course to a focus on basic terminology. Reinforcing many of the items above, a focus on action and on context-specific, applied response could benefit people who encounter trans students and staff on an everyday basis, and these practices could extend past trans-specificity into support for other marginalized groups.

Sixth, and most importantly, ATPs can only do any of this work with more resources. I cannot force university budgets to suddenly manufacture funding for diversity trainings, but in an ideal world, these programs would be implemented alongside other forms of education in the same vein. Programs focusing on education on axes of race, gender, sexuality, and disability could contribute to better campus climates.

I entered this dissertation attempting to help and support transgender people, inspired by the trans folks in my life. In some ways, this project has been a many-year process of ally labor, one capped with interviews that allowed for a (slightly structured) ethic of responsible listening. If the participants of my study were to read this, I hope they would recognize themselves in this
work. Without the resources I outline in my sixth point, I fear that ally training programs can never implement changes. To that, I echo my participants, who urge those who are willing to listen to do their research and learn on their own. Read some narratives online. Google it. Hopefully, people can help trans people navigate systems of oppression, one act of ally labor at a time.
Notes

1. This is not a participant of my study, thus they are not given a pseudonym, but this anecdote was necessary to include.


8. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “....victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail. Thank you,” Twitter, July 6, 2017, 6:08 a.m., https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/890197095151546369


11. To be clear, my job has nothing to do with the implementation or development of transgender-specific healthcare software. I volunteered to participate in an initiative, but generally, the development of these parts of the software is propelled by other volunteers, many of whom are transgender, who are not taken off their “real” jobs to do this important work. All of this labor is optional and extra.

12. Preferred names is not a term I would use, but it’s the one they decided on, and frequently the preferred name displays in quotation marks as if it weren’t real. Now that’s a lot to unpack.

13. This is not to say that I dealt with transgender students in crisis as a teaching assistant, but I was completely unprepared to help students who were dealing with mental illness crises despite teaching at the university for six years.


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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview #:  ________
Date:  _____________

Instructions: Thank you for participating in this study. Today I will be asking you a series of questions about your experiences with cisgender people and allyship; specifically, what makes a good ally and your understandings of alliance. I want you to think about the people who have been allies to you in the past, who have supported you in some way, and how you think people could be better allies to you in the future.

I would like for you to provide as much detail as you feel comfortable with. Everything you share with me in this interview will be confidential. I am going to begin recording our interview now and this audio recording is going to be used for transcription purposes. After transcription has occurred the audio file will be destroyed. During the transcription process any names that you provide in this interview will be changed to pseudonyms and any identifying information will be changed. Your name will not be associated with this interview or the transcript in any way. Please remember that this interview is voluntary and you can stop participating at any time.

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:

Gender you identify as? _______________________

What pronouns do you use? ___________________

Race/Ethnicity: ____________________________

Age: _________________________

Out status: Do the people close to you know that you’re trans? {clarify: friends, family, workplace/employer}
1. How would you define or explain “ally”?
   a. What does an ally do?
   b. What makes a person an ally?
2. Can you tell me about a time when a cisgender person was a good ally (to you or someone else)?
   a. {follow up with requests for more “good ally” stories}
3. Can you tell me about a time when a cisgender person was a bad ally (to you or someone else)?
   a. {follow up with requests for more “bad ally” stories}
4. What can cisgender people do to better support transgender people?
   a. What about to support you, specifically?
5. What do you think is important in an ally?
   a. What traits would an ideal ally have?
   b. What are some actions that might qualify as “allyship”?
6. If you could give every cisgender person you came into contact with a list of things not to do, what would be on it?
7. What do you most want cisgender people to know about you?
   a. To know about transgender people?
8. What else would you like to add that you feel is important to this interview that you didn’t get a chance to tell me about?

Thank you for participating in this study.