Appearing Differently:
Disability and Transgender Embodiment
in Contemporary Euro-American Visual Cultures

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

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April 30, 2021

Budapest, Hungary / Vienna, Austria

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation contains no unreferenced ideas or materials previously written and/or published by other authors, and contains no material accepted for any other degrees in any other institution with the exception of what is covered in the agreement between Central European University PU and Utrecht University.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how contemporary cultural practices shape and reimagine the legibility and intelligibility of disability and transgender embodiment. Through an analysis of aesthetic practices, this research brings forth critical approaches to the connections between transness, disability, and visual culture. Observing that both transgender and disabled embodiment have a vexed relationship to the visual field and the "politics of visibility," this dissertation examines aesthetic practices from the last two decades across Euro-American contexts that mobilize new ways of seeing, sensing, and knowing trans and crip embodiment. Transgender and disability, as formations of embodiment, identity, and sites of knowledge production, are not often considered in relation to each other, or at times are even explicitly disconnected. This research emphasizes the importance of the affinities between transness and disability by exploring connections between transgender and disability studies. In addition, this dissertation demonstrates that it is in the realm of the aesthetic that complex affinities and entanglements can be explored, enabling disciplinary connections that are otherwise not obvious. Methodologically speaking, this research does not presume the givenness of "transgender" and "disability" as identity formations or bodily experiences that could be visually represented. Rather, this dissertation turns to the aesthetic to find tools to unsettle what we think these categories mean, include, and exclude.

Through the optic of trans-crip critique, and with aesthetic practices as interlocutors, this dissertation makes four interventions. Firstly, building on critiques of "politics of visibility," I propose to shift from a vocabulary of "visibility" to one of "*appearing*," foregrounding the performative force of the body in demanding new frames of visual and epistemological recognition. Approaching visual cultural practices as forms of appearing enables a consideration of how the trans and/or crip body is a troubling figuration for visuality, and allows us to refuse visibility as a naturalized premise for political subjectivity. Secondly, I argue that transness and disability exist in a relationship of *adjacency*, where both sites complexly implicate as well as transform each other. In my analysis of artistic practices, I show how the realm of the aesthetic usefully disrupts contemporary consolidations of "transgender" as separate from disability. Thirdly, I demonstrate how *rehabilitation* operates as a medical and cultural logic that both disabled *and* transgender subjects are enmeshed in, shaping how contemporary forms of "inclusion" materialize. I discuss how trans and crip critiques of rehabilitation are crucial for refusing normative modalities of repair and cure, yet also require a complex navigation of how to refuse the structures one is reliant on for care and support.

Fourthly, I emphasize the importance of *opacity* for transgender and disability aesthetics as both a visual and epistemological technique that allows us to conceive of a form of relationality that retains the unknowability of the "other." Taken together, these four contributions thus position contemporary trans-crip aesthetic practices as interventions into the normative visual and epistemological logics by which trans and disabled bodies are objects of knowledge. Reorienting how we see and know transness and disability, I demonstrate how the aesthetic practices under review in this dissertation demand new forms of social relationality that are capacious for re-imagining the frameworks of recognition through which functional diversity and gender diversity become meaningful.

Acknowledgements

Words will not suffice to show my gratitude to the countless of people who supported me through this project, through friendship, love, guidance, and advice. I will mention a few of them here.

First and foremost, thanks to all of my supervisors, Hyaesin Yoon and Hadley Z. Renkin at the Central European University, and Christine Quinan, Kathrin Thiele, and Rosemarie Buikema at Utrecht University, for guiding me through this project.

At the Central European University, my supervisors Hyaesin and Hadley have been nothing but supportive as I embarked on this project, despite the turbulent political times in Hungary that have marked these years. Your commitment to this research project and belief in its importance were crucial, especially when I was not sure where this project was going. The Department of Gender Studies at CEU has been a vitalizing academic home, and I feel incredibly grateful to its body of students and faculty that affirm the importance of critical interdisciplinary research. Also thanks to Jasmina Lukic for many insightful discussions which offered me tools for understanding my material. Special thanks to Nadia Jones-Gailani, for your encouragement and friendship. I could not have wished for a better environment for my first teaching experience than your class, where I learnt about the practice of feminist pedagogy.

At Utrecht University, my second doctoral home, I would like to thank Rosemarie for creating a space for me, and endless gratitude to Christine and Kathrin for enthusiastically taking on supervision of my dissertation. Each time we discussed this project, you enabled me to see my work in new ways. Your insightful thoughts and creative sensibilities run throughout these pages. I started the final writing phase at the same time as I started teaching in courses at UU's Graduate Gender Program, and I have learnt so much from my students and colleagues there, especially Layal Ftouni, Magdalena Górska, and Gianmaria Colpani. The community of the Graduate Gender Program offers such a nourishing and stimulating environment, and I feel incredibly grateful to have become part of it.

This project would not have been possible without having been so fortunate to engage with incredible interlocutors at key stages of my work. Special thanks go to Alison Kafer and Margrit Shildrick who offered critical, productive, and exciting feedback during my Comprehensive Exam, casting crucial perspectives on how this project could develop. Thanks to Eliza Steinbock for your support during the period when I hesitantly started writing this

dissertation, your voice and feedback gave me the tools and the confidence to believe I could get this done. My thanks also go out to the Fulbright Commission in the Netherlands for providing financial support to travel to New York University as a visiting scholar and to Nicholas Mirzoeff for welcoming me at the university. Unfortunately, our working relationship was cut short due to COVID-19, but I value my time there immensely. Also thanks to Gayatri Gopinath for making me feel welcome at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality and more generally during my stay in New York City.

This dissertation started as part of the "GRACE: Gender and Cultures of Equality" research project, and my appreciation goes out to the many colleagues and collaborators that I worked with during those first three years of the PhD. Many thanks go to my fellow UU PhD colleagues and other office-mates at Drift 15, who have made the process of writing incredibly pleasurable: Zerrin Cengiz, Laura Candidatu, Zheng Ying, Katrine Smiet, Claudia Minchilli, Vasso Belia, Adri Habed, Ruowen Xu, and Nisrine Chaer. The coffee and lunch breaks, full of laughter, gossip, and discussion, made Drift 15 a space for friendships.

Writing this dissertation in the isolation of the COVID-19 lockdown has been excruciatingly painful and has made me more aware than ever of how much my friendships sustain me. I would literally not have been here today were it not for my many friends and family both during my time in Budapest and in the Netherlands. A few people have been particularly important for me these years. Tegiye, you've been the perfect partner in crime, always happy to bring me back to the ground. Thanks to Magda for your friendship and for providing a home when I needed one, it means the world to me. I am so grateful for my Budapest family, particularly Ewa, Heather, Ana, Luiza, and Michael, for the ways in which our lives got woven together with so much care and fun. Many thanks to Julieta and for our morning writing sessions, they really kept me going during the rough patches. My deepest appreciation for Sue, for your creativity and all of your support, for helping me find comfort and strength in my body, and for blocking me from the wind on many bike rides. Thanks to Wisse and Henriette, to FH and Rense, our dispersed family, who infuse my life with so much humor. I feel incredibly grateful to have such a supportive and stimulating family, and special thanks to Wisse and Jet for taking care of me when it was most needed. Jess, you've been a source of strength and inspiration, and your contagious energy is just a gift that keeps on giving! Ida, I am the luckiest person to have crossed paths with you, and even luckier to know that we share a life. Words will not suffice to describe the amount of love, admiration, and gratitude I have for you, and I know that this work has only been possible because of our friendship during these years. Layal, you have been there for me from the first to the last words of this

dissertation, and I cannot imagine having pulled this off without your love and endless source of laughter. Your passion, generosity, and commitment to justice continue to inspire me every day.

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Introduction

In 2015, I encountered the video *Shape of a Right Statement* by performance artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang in De Appel gallery in Amsterdam. In this seemingly simple video work, Tsang wears a nylon cap on her head, commonly used to support a wig, and stands in front of a shimmering curtain inside a bar. For the duration of six minutes, she stares directly into the camera and delivers a statement detailing experiences of oppression and injustice. Specifically, she talks about how her language and her interaction with her environment are considered unintelligible by people around her, and probably by the viewer too. In fact, her language and style of interaction are taken as evidence for, using her own words, her being a "non-person." Tsang says: "The thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language / no matter how we previously thought or interacted." A few minutes in, a tear gathers in the corner of her eye and slowly rolls down her cheek.

When encountering the video, I was already familiar with Tsang's work, primarily through her 2012 documentary film *Wildness*, and how it was situated in transgender of color communities. With that in mind, I took the statement she delivered to refer to experiences of various forms of oppression that transgender people face, especially transgender women of color. Yet, the credits at the end of the video tell us that the statement is a re-enactment of transgender autism activist Mel Baggs's video statement *In My Language*. Baggs's statement, posted in YouTube in 2007, explored the forms of language and communication Baggs uses as a nonspeaking autist, and offers a forceful critique of ableist structures of oppression within which they fail to be perceived as a proper human subject.[1] Tsang's video appropriates Mel Baggs's words and infuses them with new meaning by uttering them from a different location: that of trans of color organizing and cultural production. Aptly titled *Shape of a Right Statement*, Tsang probes the viewer to see, listen, and sense if the statement feels "right".

Just a year before I saw this work, in 2014, *Time* magazine proclaimed that we were witnessing "The Transgender Tipping Point," a phrase used to describe the increasing visibility and recognition of trans rights in the United States, which arrived with a celebration of actress Laverne Coz on the cover of *Time* magazine. This development opened up questions by critics about how and why transgender recognition and representation arrived on the "horizon of intelligibility" now, and what actual material and transformative forms of justice were

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[1] Baggs used both they/them and sie/hir pronouns.

discernible for transgender people.[2] While more representation and visibility functioned as "common sense" goals and demands to remedy the violent histories of transphobia, a whole range of activists, writers, and artists generated a critique that pointed out the limits of a politics of visibility and its fraught relationship to transgender justice.[3] Circulating at that time, Wu Tsang's artistic practice, particularly *Wildness*, created an important contribution to these debates by offering visual productions attuned to the limits of representation, demonstrating that there is not one coherent "transgender movement" that can be transparently and innocently represented.

These debates took place alongside crucial steps towards transgender depathologization. Advocacy organizations stressed the urgency of developing health care practices that locate transgender discrimination in the oppressive structures of a gender-normative society rather than understanding gender nonconformity as a pathological state of being.[4] Rather than a focus on "correcting" an individual body, this anti-pathological understanding of transness aims to create more space for gender diversity in social and political structures. Such a shift in perspective mirrors concurrent developments in disability activism and studies, even if, in this case, the shift focused on creating distance from the weight of the label of mental disorder. As such, the language of disability was hardly at the forefront of debates of transgender depathologization and was at times even disavowed in that desire to move away from the stigma of disability. Under these circumstances, to see *Shape of a Right Statement* make an explicit connection between transgender and disability politics felt both provocative and important to further explore.

When I encountered Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement*, the powerful statement against the injustice of being positioned as a "non-person" resonated strongly with me. The work as such exposes the violent erasures of trans subjects from the realm of legible communicability. However, and paradoxically so, Tsang also refuses to reinstate a trans identity and experience that is "knowable" within the existing social order. As a white transmasculine person, I was grappling with the various ways in which the category of "transgender" was becoming

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[2] Susan Stryker and Aren A. Aizura, eds., *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3

[3] Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017)

[4] See for a range of examples the work of World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), Transgender Europe (TGEU), Global Action for Trans Equality (GATE): WPATH, *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender- Nonconforming People, 7th version* (Minneapolis: World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012): 4; Transgender Europe. "Joint Statement: Being trans is not a mental disorder anymore: ICD-11 is officially released.", accessed June 18, 2018, https://tgeu.org/joint-statement-being-trans-is-not-a-mental-disorder-anymore-icd-11-is-officially-released/; GATE, "Critique and Alternative Proposal to the 'Gender Incongruence of Childhood' Category in ICD-11." (Buenos Aires: Global Action for Trans Equality, 2013)

increasingly but complexly available for usage, recognition, and identification,[5] circulating both as a pathologized site of difference as well as an increasing celebration of "transnormative" subjects.[6] Invested as I was in fast-developing discourses of transgender liberation *and* disability justice, I missed the tools to wrap my head around the various ways transness both is and is not a form of disability, both in its medical and cultural framing as well as in personal bodily experiences. To me, it felt that *Shape of a Right Statement*, by troubling the visual signs through which transness and disability become legible, was probing into these affinities in ways that academic disciplines of transgender studies and disability studies were not yet able to.

This dissertation puts forth the argument that it is in the realm of the aesthetic that such complex affinities and entanglements can be explored, enabling connections between transgender studies, disability studies, *and* visual cultural studies that might otherwise not seem obvious when taking one disciplinary approach. Following Gayatri Gopinath's approach to aesthetic works as enacting "a practice of reading, one that both produces and renders apparent new modes of affiliation, relationality, and connection between bodies, times, spaces, objects of study, and fields of thought," I consider artistic and activist cultural productions to often have their own theoretical propositions, which we can learn with and bring into dialogue with particular theoretical constellations as well as our own arguments.[7] Seeing aesthetic productions not merely as primary material but also as theoretical interlocutors, I consider Wu Tsang's video to generate questions about the relationship between the statement delivered in her video and the different embodied locations of transness and disability that are called upon.[8] How does Baggs's statement about the oppression of autists relate to Tsang's world of trans of color organizing and artistic production? What modes of encounter, between trans and disability experiences, does this work enact? And, what resonances and affinities emerge from

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[5] Following a feminist methodology and epistemology, in which the researcher is not disembodied or disinterested but rather situated within the process of knowledge production, I make my personal entry point into trans-crip relationships explicitly in an attempt to clarify to the reader how I arrived at this dissertation topic. I consider this personal positioning both crucial and ambivalent. I remain wary of how personal positioning can also be considered to give legitimacy to scholarly inquiries, potentially reinforcing an identitarian logic of who can speak about what. As I hope to make clear through this dissertation, my aim is trouble the notion of "the trans subject" or "the disabled subject" as something we can transparently represent, which includes my own relationship to these categories.

[6] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics" in *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 67

[7] Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 16

[8] My consideration of cultural objects as theoretical interlocutors is informed by my training in cultural analysis. See: Mieke Bal, *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

their differential locations? These questions offer an opening to the research conducted in this dissertation by giving me a visceral sense of how aesthetic practices can reshape the ways we see and know transness and disability. By speaking Mel Baggs's words as if they are her own, Tsang's video straddles the line between being an appropriation of someone else's voice and work, and enacting a gesture of political affinity. Formally speaking, her work offers various non-conclusive ways of understanding the relationship between transness and disability: is it overlapping, dialogic, analogical, or one of equivalence? Consequently, it brings us to the question of how we can understand the "collective affinities," to borrow Alison Kafer's terminology, between transgender and disability aesthetics and politics.[9]

Appearing Differently

This dissertation examines how contemporary cultural practices shape and reimagine the legibility of the body in transgender and disability aesthetics, bringing forth critical approaches to transness, disability, and their connections. The aesthetic practices I examine in this thesis are situated in a Euro-American landscape of fast-developing contestations in transgender recognition, articulations of disability justice frameworks, and a growing awareness and vocabulary of both functional and gender diversity.[10] As such, this dissertation explores the

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[9] Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press), 11

[10] A note on terminology: Words to describe disability are notoriously inadequate, often because they carry the stigma of the pathologizing perspective from the medical contexts in which they emerged. In this dissertation, I toggle between disability, crip, and functional diversity.

Decades of work in disability studies has made it possible to use the word "disability" without the connotation of the expressed negation of the dis- prefix. Disability, then, does not refer to a lack of ability, but rather negates the system of compulsory able-bodiedness in which disability is produced (McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 2006). Moreover, I follow the reclamation of "crip" by theorists and activists, who use the contested history of that word as a confrontational force. As Alison Kafer suggests, "crip," like "queer," reflects a desire to "jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance." (*Feminist Queer Crip*, 15)

I also take inspiration from disability activists in Spain who use the term "functional diversity" (*diversidad funcional*). The term was introduced by Javier Romañach and Manuel Lobato at the Independent Living Forum in Spain in 2005. "Functional diversity" is not (yet) a term often used in other contexts, and I use it sparingly in this dissertation, but I appreciate how it politicizes the hierarchical classification of bodies according to standards of productivity. Function diversity refers to the diversity in how bodyminds can perform the same function in ways that are very different, using different bodily gestures and movements, technologies, networks of care providers, and so on. Romañach and Lobato explain it as following: "Due to having different characteristics, and given the conditions of the context generated by society, we are forced to do the same tasks or functions in a different way, sometimes through third parties. Hence, a deaf person communicates through the eyes and by signs or signals, while the rest of the population does so basically through words and hearing. However, the function that these perform is the same: communication." ("Functional diversity, a new term in the struggle for dignity in the diversity of the human being": 4)

The introduction of "functional diversity" is particularly useful in a European context, where the currently available words for disability usually still carry many negative connotations. Examples include the location of a "limitation" on the body such as the terms "*behinderung*" (German) or "*beperking*" (Dutch); the designation of "less valid", such as "*minusválido*" (Spanish); or the connotation of "disadvantage", such as "*handicap*" (French and Dutch). For a fascinating discussion of the etymology of "handicap" and how its

crucial role of these cultural productions in expanding and reimagining the affective, visual, and epistemological frameworks for seeing and sense-making of disability and transness by analyzing works in performance, video, sculpture, and installation art. These different mediums enable a diverse visual vocabulary that allows me to trace, as I discuss in Chapter 1, how the appearance of the body performatively reorients how we see trans and disabled embodiment. In what I refer to as trans-crip critique, I approach transgender studies and disability studies as two fields of study that have different genealogies of emergence and institutionalization, yet are deeply interconnected in their investment in exploring and exposing the social, cultural, legal, and medical construction and pathologization of non-normative bodily difference. More so, both disciplines foreground how bodily differences place a demand for capacious visual and epistemological frameworks, and point to the ways in which transness and disability can transform social and political relations.

The primacy of the visual and of visuality as markers of identity vis-à-vis trans and disability existence demand a close attention to how cultural practices can enact alternative modes of seeing sensing and knowing transness and disability outside the limits of legibility. As I will outline in more depth later in this introduction, both transness and disability have a complex relationship to bodily appearance in the field of vision, where disability and transness are understood to *look* a certain way. Thus, visibility, passing, and invisibility are terms that are used commonly in both contexts to refer to the visual qualities of transgender and disabled embodiment or to the importance of representation. I consider the terms "visibility and "invisibility" not to refer to clear-cut notions of whether or not transness or disability is visually evident, but rather to belonging to a particular epistemological regime of understanding transness and disability, and embodiment more generally. This dissertation therefore aims to dislodge that visual-epistemological regime and interrogate practices that expand the modalities available for seeing, sensing, and knowing transness and disability.

Consequently, by troubling bodily appearances in the field of vision, the aesthetic practices under review in this dissertation, I argue, do not aim to represent "transgender" and "disability" as coherent individual identities. Rather, they signal an understanding of transness and disability as sites for demanding new social relations. These new social relations, as I show in Chapters 3 and 4, create ruptures in the illusory coherence of sociality. As Henri-Jacques Stiker observes in *A History of Disability*, "an aberrancy in within the corporeal order is an

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emergence in competitive sports frames a liberal and individuated understanding of disability, see Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 146-150.

aberrancy in the social order."[11] These ruptures in sociality constantly risk being met with the violent forces of pathologization, correction, or normalization. Yet, this dissertation approaches transgender and disabled subjects not merely as subjected to violence and oppressive knowledge practices. Rather, I am interested in how transness and disability reshape the social order. I hope to explicate how the cultural objects under review in this dissertation show that trans and disability aesthetic practices disrupt the operations of the gaze, trouble the epistemological security of knowing what trans and disability is, and rearrange social and political relations. Hence, I approach the disorder that trans and disabled bodies create as a productive force, one that powerfully redirects our visual and epistemological approaches to embodiment.

This dissertation is guided by the following questions: *How do visual cultural productions disrupt the optical economy through which trans and disabled bodies become objects of knowledge?* and *How can aesthetic practices reorient how we see and sense transness and disability?* In the four chapters of this dissertation, these research questions will be approached trough different mediums of visual culture, each bringing forth a different theoretical constellation to explore the entanglement of transness and disability. The four key contributions or interventions that this dissertation makes are concerned with *appearing, adjacency, rehabilitation*, and *opacity*, which I briefly sketch out below.

Firstly, transgender and disability aesthetics challenge the "evidentiary" function of the body by troubling the function of visibility in relation to bodily difference and the transparent availability of the transgender and disabled body as an object of the vision-knowledge dyad. Through a reading of Judith Butler's theorization of the "space of appearance," I suggest shifting from a vocabulary of "visibility" to one of *appearing*, which foregrounds the performative force of the body in demanding both a multiplicity of visual frames of recognition as well as material infrastructures of livability attuned to the vulnerability of the body.

Secondly, building on Tina Campt's theorization of adjacency and Jasbir Puar's theorization of "becoming trans, becoming disabled", this dissertation considers how transness and disability exist in a relation of *adjacency* to one another. Here, I suggest that we can consider the epistemological and political affinities between transness and disability not as one of separate embodied locations that intersect, but a relationality whose proximity impacts and transforms the intelligibility of "transgender" and "disability."

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[11] Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 40

On a third level, this dissertation argues that trans-crip adjacencies can be discerned by scrutinizing how *rehabilitation* operates as a medical and cultural logic in which both disabled *and* trans subjects are enmeshed. I argue that crip critiques of rehabilitation are crucial for exploring contemporary forms of inclusion of transgender subjects. While these critiques foreground the erasure of bodily difference in the process of rehabilitation and inclusion, I also emphasize the role of the visual signs of the different body, which plays a crucial role in neoliberal structures of rehabilitation and inclusion.

Finally, I explore the importance of *opacity* in offering a textured resistance to frameworks of visuality that rely on transparency. Here, I position the question of the communicability of minoritarian subject positions with frameworks of neurodiversity to demonstrate how, through an opaque aesthetics, a way of relating to transness and disability emerges that harbors the unknowability of the "other."

These four interventions make up the unruly assemblage of how this dissertation explores the relationships between disability, transness, and visuality. Before providing a chapter overview, I will first offer a broad framing of the Euro-American context in which these aesthetic practices take place. I will then turn to the question of how I approach the entanglement of transgender and disability through trans-crip critique. Last, and building on this critique, I will conceptualize transness and disability in relation to the realm of visuality.

Transgender and Disability Politics in Euro-American Landscapes of Visual Culture

The cultural practices under review in this dissertation are broadly situated in across Western-European and North-American contexts. Despite the tremendous amount of diversity in the specific situatedness of the artists and activists whose work I examine, I here want to sketch the broader developments in transgender and disability politics that are pertinent for this dissertation's analyses. In particular, the last two decades show important changes in the cultural recognition of transgender issues, and in new approaches to thinking and practicing disability justice.

What is now common to label "disability" and "transgender" are formations of embodiment and identity that until only recently were referred to with terminology such as crippled, handicapped, transvestite, or transsexual. While changes in language and categories often take place through activist work that contests stigmatizing medical labels, there are varied ways in which these terms continue to be sites of identification or of reclamation. Changes in language do not only take place through a "bottom-up" process, but are enmeshed in changes

in the language used within medical frameworks, legislation, and policy and advocacy organizations. For example, David Valentine's ethnographic work on the emergence of the category of "transgender" in the United States during the 1990s demonstrates how service providers played a crucial role in institutionalizing the term "transgender" even though their target audience often did not identify with that label. Instead, the latter used terms such as gay, homosexual, transvestite, or transexual.[12] His research shows how the consolidation of "transgender" created an unproblematized distinction between gender and sexuality, and how the imagined purview of "transgender" ends up reproducing racial and class hierarchies, a dynamic that, as I discuss in Chapter 2, continues in the shape contemporary forms of recognition of "transnormative" subjects take.[13] Crucially, as Valentine writes, "transgender" "has been phenomenally successful in becoming institutionalized in an enormous range of contexts" and, following a Foucauldian analytic of power, the term does not merely reflect transgender experiences but also produces them.[14] Consequently, it is of crucial importance to pay attention to how the circulation of certain terminology, narratives, and images produce a framework through which transness becomes legible and visible, foreclosing other options.

The increased cultural visibility of transgender issues over the last two decades has undoubtedly put trans existence in public view. However, the right to gender determination and various protections of that right in social and public spheres remains a fiercely contested arena. It has been the subject of civil rights legislation, of specific anti-transgender bills, heated divisions between trans-exclusive radical feminists and trans-inclusive feminist communities, and has become a favorite target of right-wing authoritarian politics as well as Christian fundamentalism. In the realm of public representation, the U.S. saw a brief moment of optimism surrounding the above-mentioned "Transgender Tipping Point." In addition to Laverne Cox's role in the TV-series *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), other media representations that increased the popular circulation of transgender figures include Caitlyn Jenner's *I am Cait* (2015), *Sense8* (2015-2018), and *Pose* (2018-). Critics have pointed out how this new wave of popular trans representation departed from narrow representations of transgender people as psychopaths, murderers, or sexual predators that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s.[15] But they further emphasize that during this exact period of increased

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[12] David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 37

[13] Ibid., 19

[14] Ibid., 34

[15] Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: a quick and quirky account of gender variability* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 92; Anson Koch-Rein et al., "Representing Trans: visibility and its discontents," *European Journal of English Studies* 24, no. 1 (2020): 2-3

visibility, recorded violence against trans women of color was at an all-time high.[16] Moreover, the political backlash in the years following underscores the precarious nature of the optimism of a "tipping point". Within recent years, numerous anti-transgender bills have been proposed or introduced in the U.S., ranging from criminalizing health care professionals for subscribing puberty blockers and other gender affirming health care, criminalizing trans people who use the bathrooms that matches their self-identified gender, barring transgender children from participating in sport activities, or eradicating protections for trans people in prisons and welfare organizations.[17] In the U.K., transgender children are barred from accessing puberty blockers or surgery since a ruling in early 2021. So-called "anti-gender" campaigns across Europe illustrate how transgender rights and recognition are attractive for conservative politicians to use as scaffolding material for consolidating white supremacist and nationalist imaginaries organized around the Christian nuclear family.[18]

Changes in the legislative arena easily lend themselves to a sense of moving "forward" or "backward," but such a linear approach misses out on understanding how transgender issues serve as a mobilizing strategy of conservative and right-wing platforms, and how they, to use Aren Aizura's words, function as "a lightning rod for moral panics working through the contradictions of racial capitalism."[19] By moving beyond a linear (forward/backward) assessment of trans liberation, I want to highlight how the above-mentioned developments point to a broader cultural intelligibility of transgender subjects and issues. After all, it has become unmistakably clear that on all sides of the political spectrum and in popular discourse the circulation of images and vocabulary of transness has become more ubiquitous.

Within Western-European and North-American contexts more specifically, where there are degrees or gradients of transgender rights and recognition, the question arises what kind of narrative or image of transgender experience is consolidated in these cultural, legal, and medical accommodations. For example, until quite recently it was a common practice in various countries in Europe to force trans people to be sterilized in order to get access to legal gender recognition. While this eugenic policy is widely being eradicated, in most cases a

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[16] Tourmaline et al., *Trap Door*, xvi

[17] "Legislation Affecting LGBT Rights Across the Country," *American Civil Liberties Union*, last accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbt-rights-across-country; Aren Aizura et al., "Thinking with Trans Now," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 125

[18] Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017)

[19] Aizura et al, "Thinking with Trans Now," 126

mental health diagnosis is still required for changing identity documents.[20] Mandatory diagnosis reinforces the centrality of the optic of "gender dysphoria" in framing transgender experiences, in ways that reach beyond practices of health care.[21] This inevitably raises the question of who gets to access and therefore claim such rights, and what forms of gender diversity are foreclosed in the consolidation of trans subject positions. Critics such as Dean Spade and Jules Gill-Peterson have, for example, demonstrated how transgender recognition within legal and medical regimes privileges a white subject, and exclusions along axes of race and class - and, I would like to add, disability - bar many trans people from successfully narrating and showing, in other words, evidencing, their status as transgender.[22]

Alongside the increased public awareness of transgender issues, the last two decades have also seen crucial shifts in disability politics, albeit with very different degrees of public visibility and political attention. These shifts are part of a growing disenchantment with the capacity of disability legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S., 1990), the Disability Discrimination Act (U.K., 1995, which was replaced with the Equality Act in 2010), or the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) aimed to increase the livelihood of people with disabilities and to offer protection against discrimination. As researchers have pointed out, actions taken under disability legislation remain only marginally successful, and levels of poverty and discrimination have not decreased since these legislative frameworks were introduced.[23] What is more, following the social model of disability, these legislative frameworks are geared toward including disabled people into a productive workforce, focusing primarily on access to employment and public accommodations. Yet, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, the problems that arise in such a model of inclusion is that it aims to absorb disabled people into a status quo that remains fundamentally anti-disability in that it approaches embodiment only through a lens of labour productivity. For example, in the context of the rollback of the welfare state in places such as the U.K. and the Netherlands, disability policies are primarily aimed at reducing the amount of people dependent on disability benefits, which takes place through re-examining whether

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[20] For a recent overview of these legal and medical requirements, see "Trans Rights Europe & Central Asia Index & Maps 2020" *Transgender Europe*, available at https://tgeu.org/trans-rights-europe-central-asia-index-maps-2020/

[21] Dean Spade, "Mutilating Gender" in Susan Styker & Stephen Whittle (eds.), Transgender Studies Reader (New York/London: Routledge, 2006), 315-332

[22] Dean Spade, "Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender" *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 18 (2003): 15-37; Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018)

[23] Marta Russell, "What Disability Civil Rights Cannot Do: Employment and Political Economy," *Disability & Society* 17.2 (2002): 117-135; Frances Ryan, *Crippled Austerity: Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People* (London: Verso, 2019)

disabled people are truly disabled or if they can, somehow, participate in the workforce. With shifting economic relations and political interests, one's status as disabled is, from a policy perspective, never secure, and the burden of evidencing one's disability is part and parcel of the daily lives of disabled people.[24] As Alison Kafer suggests, the definition of disability cannot be divorced from the economic effects of such a definition, and the continuous attempts by governmental and supra-governmental organizations to define who is disabled and who is not (and thus, who is deserving of protection and who is not) point to the "fundamental instability" of the terms of disability.[25]

Moreover, a disability rights framework leaves little space for attending to how disability is entangled with the multiple crises of the "now." Bodily debilitation is a phenomenon that is produced and reproduced through ecological devastation, precarious forms of labor and global exploitation, the fast and slow deaths of racism, warfare, and global imperialism.[26] As critics have pointed out, these conditions debilitate bodies without always becoming perceptible in the visual and political frames of recognition of "disability."[27] However, a disability justice perspective, which is what this dissertation aligns itself with, enables us to rethink who the subject of disability justice is, how disability alters our understanding of political subjectivity and action, and work toward a multi-issue coalitional practice, one of which transgender liberation is certainly part.

All these changes point to the contemporary conditions under which both trans and disabled livelihoods are made precarious. In addition, they also demonstrate the recurring problem of transness and disability having to be shown and proven in order for people to be eligible for protection. Here, we can discern a distinction between, on the one hand, a rights framework that places a strong emphasis on the definition of transness and disability, resulting in the splitting of "good" and "bad" disabled subjects, "real" and "fake" transgender subjects, and, on the other hand, a justice framework that interrogates the structural production of inequality that affects trans and disabled people. If categories and representations of identities have a productive force in shaping how transness and disability become comprehensible, this

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[24] Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 10

[25] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 11

[26] Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 63-93; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the end of the social contract* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1998); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Helem Meekosha, "Decolonizing Disability: Thinking and Acting Globally," *Disability & Society* 26, no. 6 (2011): 667-682

[27] Puar, *Right to Maim*; Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005)

dissertation places emphasis on the importance of expanding the ways in which "transgender" and "disability" are legible and intelligible as objects of knowledge and vision. The realm of the aesthetic is a crucial domain here. Yet, before turning to the realm of the aesthetic, I first discuss how I approach trans-crip critique in order elaborate on how I consider the encounter between transgender studies and disability studies.

Trans-Crip Critique

While the core material of the dissertation consists of artistic and activist cultural productions, my analyses throughout this project foreground also a theoretical interrogation of the complex ways in which transness and disability implicate each other. As briefly mentioned above, transgender and disability studies are two fields of study that have different genealogies when it comes to their emergence and institutionalization but are at the very same time very much interrelated, especially when it comes to how they approach the non-normative body. In analyzing how trans and disability aesthetic practices disrupt the visual codes of how transness and disability are legible on the body, this dissertation aims to make a scholarly contribution by theorizing the entanglements of transness and disability. This includes bringing transgender studies and disability studies, together with disability justice frameworks, to bear on each other to highlight scholarly and political affinities. In order to do so, we first need to address the question: What are "transgender" and "disability" to each other?

There is no one perfect way to describe the ways in which transness and disability come together. Their relationship is at times analogical, where transness and disability are separate social identities that share similarities in their histories of oppression through medicalization and pathologization. Yet, one of the more obvious and also more contested ways in which transness and disability relate to each other is through the history of transgender's status as a mental illness. For example, in order to receive access to hormonal treatment or various surgeries that some transgender people desire or require, one must receive a diagnosis that is contingent on a narration of "being in the wrong body."[28] While recent changes to this diagnosis signal a shifting understanding and vocabulary of transness, one that attempts to

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[28] This diagnosis first entered the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) as 'Transsexualism' in 1980, later replaced by 'Gender Identity Disorder', and since 2013 known as 'Gender Dysphoria'. Similar changes in diagnoses have taken place in the International Classification of Disease (ICD), where 'Gender Identity Disorder' was replaced with 'Gender Incongruence' in 2018. The changes of this diagnostic framework demonstrate a shift from considering gender nonconformity as part of sexual desire, to it being part of an inherent "wrong body" feeling that requires bodily transition.

remove the "stigma" of the word "disorder,"[29] critics point out that these diagnostic frameworks continue to rely on dimorphic gender, heteronormativity, and the importance of genitalia as the benchmarks from which to identify transness.[30] What is more, a removal of the diagnosis could negatively impact transgender people's access to gender affirming health care, so the problematic process of diagnosing transgender is not so easily resolved.[31] When we look at disability legislation, transgender's status as a disability is also contested. Often, transness is not considered to be part of the scope of disability, or is even explicitly excluded, as is the case with the Americans with Disabilities Act, precluding transgender people from receiving rights and recognition through disability legislation.[32] This contradiction between medical and legal perspectives has spurred debates on whether or not transness should be considered a disability.[33] While transgender people might want to avoid such associations, it is precisely within frameworks of disability justice framework that we find critical tools for grappling with the harms of medicalization and pathologization while taking into account material experiences of debilitation, desires for bodily transformations, and necessary relationships to structures of care and support.[34] However, rather than examining if transness should be considered a disability or not, their medicalized relationality might best be approached by examining how structures of gender normativity and able-bodiedness coalesce and mutually constitute each other, reinforcing norms of bodily capacity with atypical embodiment as their constitutive outside.[35]

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[29] American Psychiatric Association, "DSM-5 Fact Sheets, Updated Disorders: Gender Dysphoria" (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013): 2

[30] Zowie Davy, "The DSM-5 and the Politics of Diagnosing Transpeople," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44 (2015): 1167

[31] Amets Suess, Karine Espineira, and Pau Crego Walters, "Depathologization" *TSQ*: 1. 1-2 (2014): 73–76.
    One potential way to circumvent this problem is the "informed consent" model, where trans people would be able to access gender affirming health care without needing a diagnosis.

[32] Kari Hong, "Categorical Exclusions: Exploring Legal Responses to Health Care Discrimination Against Transsexuals" *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 11, no. 88 (2002);
    Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017)

[33] Alexandre Baril, "Transness as Debility: Rethinking intersections between trans and disabled embodiments," *Feminist Review* 111, no. 1 (2015): 59-74; Jennifer L. Levi & Bennet H. Klein, "Pursuing protection for transgender people through disability laws," in *Transgender Rights* eds. Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Minter (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 74-92; Jeannie J. Chung, "Identity or Condition: The theory and practice of applying state disability laws to transgender individuals," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 21, no. 1 (2011): 1-45; Zach Strassburger, "Disability Law and the Disability Rights Movement for Trans People," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 24, no. 2 (2012): 337-375

[34] Eli Clare, "Body Pride, Body Shame: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement" in *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Aren Aizura & Susan Stryker (New York: Routledge, 2013), 261-265

[35] Such an approach would offer space for exploring a multitude of trans-crip relations, including a consideration of how disability or debility transforms access to receiving transgender-related health care. For example, activist Ellen Murray states: "When trying to access gender-affirming healthcare as a disabled person, it's common to find your disability used as a cause for concern by clinicians, often putting the brakes on your transition." In: Nathan Gale, "Oppression Squared: D/deaf and disabled trans experiences in Europe" *Transgender Europe* (2017)

One of the key interventions this dissertation makes is to foreground the importance of considering disability justice frameworks and transgender liberation projects as sharing corresponding subjects of concern and political goals. In doing so, I resist the splitting of transgender and disability politics, where associations with disability are considered as something "negative" that must be shed to achieve forms of transgender cultural recognition. This point might best be illustrated by considering two anecdotes, both from the Dutch context, which are demonstrative of the shifting ways in which transness and disability entangle and disconnect. In a television program that targets youths and was distributed at secondary schools in the Netherlands between 1989 and 1991, an episode from 1990 includes a segment that follows two trans women narrating their experiences. The show's presenter sympathetically tries to explain the phenomenon of "transsexualism" to the viewer: "Transsexuality is a disability. A sex change is a process of rehabilitation. It's similar to how someone who has always used a wheelchair is learning how to walk with crutches. But they will never become a real runner."[36] Compare this narration of transness through the deployment of disability with a different one, from decades later. In 2018, Utrecht University announced to open gender-neutral bathrooms in three of the university's buildings. While gender-neutral bathrooms already existed in most university buildings in the form of disability accessible stalls, one of the rationales behind the infrastructural change was to disassociate gender nonconformity from disability, so that being transgender is no longer linked to "negative associations," as stated in the university's news outlet.[37] While anecdotal, these two examples capture changing sentiments surrounding how transgender experiences, and how they relate to disability, are perceived and narrated within the public sphere. In the first example, the metaphorical usage of disability to explain transgender experiences leans on connotations of disability as a tragic occurrence to explain how being trans entails a life of hardship. Since 1990, decades of important work in transgender activism and transgender studies as well as in disability activism and disability studies, have challenged these recurring tropes of pity, tragedy, and hardship. Yet, the second example illustrates how transgender inclusion at times emerges through registers of able-bodiedness that reinstate the "negative associations" that surround disability.

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[36] Translated from Dutch: "Transseksualiteit is een handicap. Een geslachtsverandering is een revalidatieprocess. Het is alsof iemand die altijd in een rolstoel heeft gezeten, leert lopen met krukken. Maar echt hardlopen, zal het nooit worden." "Pauze-TV," AVRO, December 22, 1990, television broadcast. Archival material available at Stichting Beeld en Geluid.

[37] Annelies Waterlander, (2018, May 1). "Drie UU-gebouwen krijgen genderneutraal toilet." *Dub UU*, May 1, 2018, last accessed May 20, 2018, https://www.dub.uu.nl/nl/nieuws/drie-uu-gebouwen-krijgen-genderneutraal-toilet

What might be other ways of conceptualizing the entanglement of disability and transness? As I discuss in more depth in Chapter 2, this dissertation proposes to think of trans-crip "adjacencies" as an optic through which to approach this question. Adjacency, as formulated by Tina Campt, refers to elements that operate alongside each other and whose relationality impacts and transforms each other.[38] Adjacencies place emphasis on relationality rather than on "identifying with," which usefully opens up space to explore various entanglements of transness and disability without treating them as separate axes of identity that may or may not intersect. For the purpose of this dissertation, this means that each chapter explores trans-crip entanglements from a different angle by analyzing a different aesthetic medium. Due to my triangular interest in the relationships between disability, transness, and visuality, at times disability studies comes more to the foreground, while, at other times, transgender studies occupies a stronger presence. In reading these disciplines alongside and through each other, not only do their points of connection and disconnect become clear, but they also resonate as implicating each other and thus challenging their epistemological separation. Consequently, I follow Jasbir Puar's methodological and epistemological approach to the question of how transgender and disability relate to each other when she asks: "What kind of political and scholarly alliances might potentiate when each takes up and acknowledges the inhabitations and the more generalized conditions of the other, creating genealogies that read both as implicated within the same assemblages of power?"[39] As such, I consider disability to be part of the scope of transgender studies, and transness to be part of the scope of disability studies, with neither contesting the "proper" subject or object of either field of study.

Here, my deployment of trans-crip critique thus echoes a strand of subjectless critique in the tradition of queer theory. According to David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, what they call "subjectless" critique "disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent."[40] Cathy Cohen's seminal work on the radical potential of queer politics has already demonstrated how a rigid focus on the identification of the proper subject of "queer" would hamper a "transformative coalitional politics" of subjects who shared a similar relationship to power.[41] However, the premise of subjectless critique should not be mistaken for an erasure of trans and disability

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[38] Tina Campt, "Black Gaze, Black Skin, Black Feeling: A Conversation with Luke Willis Thompson and Tina Campt" (Lecture, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, March 30, 2019)

[39] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 36

[40] David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?", *Social Text* 84-85, Vol. 23, Nos 3-4 (2005): 3, emphasis in original

[41] Cathy Cohen "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437-465

subject positions. Rather, it warns against the reification of subjectivity outside its emergence in the dialectical tensions between subjective agency and structures of compulsory able-bodiedness and gender normativity. For the purpose of this dissertation, this shift in emphasis means scrutinizing how trans-crip critique and aesthetic practices disrupt and expand the visual and epistemological frameworks through which transness and disability become legible.[42] Trans-crip critique analyzes the contestation of "proper" and "improper subjects'" gathered under the sign of transgender and disability, while simultaneously paying attention to the materialization of the body under conditions of gender normativity, structures of compulsory able-bodiedness, and forces of debilitation.

Trans-crip critique synthesizes the capacious ways in which both disability studies and transgender studies are continually rethinking their object of study and mode of analysis. Within disability studies, these transformations are discernible in various interventions: feminist disability studies transformed disability studies by drawing on feminist theory,[43] crip theory infused disability studies with queer theory,[44] mad studies destabilized the centrality of physical impairment in disability studies,[45] and crip-of-color critique integrated analyses of racialization at the intersection between gender studies, queer of color critique, and disability studies.[46] These are not separate strands of theorizing but rather interconnected dialogues that build on each other, animated by a desire to pluralize and multiply the subjects that "disability" speaks to. Consequently, Julie Avril Minich suggests we think of disability studies as requiring a particular analytical approach rather than a clearly defined object of study: "The methodology

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[42] As such, this dissertation is not an empirical study of experiences of trans and disabled subjects. For research on this topic, see: Alexandre Baril, Annie P. Sansfaçon, and Morgane A. Gelly, "Digging beneath the Surface: When Disabilty Meets Gender Identity," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 9, no. 4 (2020): 1-23; Alexandre Baril and Marjorie Silverman, "Forgotten Lives: Trans older adults living with dementia at the intersection of cisgenderism, ableism/cogniticism and agism," *Sexualities* (2019): 1-15

[43] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies" *Signs* 30.2 (2005): 1557-1587; Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Kim Q. Hall, *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

[44] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006)*;* Merri Lisa Johnson, "Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure" *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 251-267; Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)

[45] Margeret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Therí A. Pickens, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)

[46] Christopher M. Bell, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal" in *Disability Studies Reader*, *2nd edition*, ed. Lennard Davis (London: Routledge, 2006), 275-282; Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020);

Jina B. Kim, "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's "Enabling Whom?"," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017);

Sami Schalk & Jina B Kim, "Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies" *Signs*, 46 no. 1 (2020): 31-55

of disability studies as I would define it, then, involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations."[47] For Minich, examples include studies that examine racialized disparities in health care, the struggle against police violence, or Audre Lorde's writings on cancer. In other words, these are works that might not be recognized as fitting the scope of disability studies or that use a vocabulary of racism and sexism instead of "disability." Yet, they do get to the heart of what a disability justice framework is concerned with in its crafting of an intersectional perspective on how interlocking systems of oppression produce physical and mental debilitation, and how various structures of oppression rely on ableist benchmarks of the white, modern, rational subject that position "different" bodies as less worthy.

We can see a similar productive rethinking of the subject within transgender studies. Sandy Stone famously asked transsexuals to "forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written."[48] Challenging decades of literature in which transgender people are objects of knowledge but not agents of knowledge production, transgender studies has created an academic framework in which transgender people find a position of articulation. However, such a position is not unified and the diversity and range of what "trans" indexes has provoked productive tension within the discipline as the question of what exactly links together a tremendously diverse range of people and their experiences under the banner of "transgender" proves unanswerable. This incoherency can be considered its critical force when used not to refer to a subject position but rather as an analytical approach concerned with gender diversity as it intersects with the regulation of atypical or non-normative embodiment. In the words of Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, "trans" can be understood as "a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly"[49]

Such a reassembling of the operations of gender is particularly highlighted through the theorization of the trans* asterisk, which both signals a breaking open of the category of trans to include the wide range of transgender experiences and an extension outward to create new

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[47] Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," *Lateral* 5.1 (2016): np

[48] Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back A Posttranssexual Manifesto" in *Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 232, emphasis in original

[49] Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *WSQ,* 36.3/4 (2008): 13

relations.[50] As Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein have suggested, "[t]he multipointed asterisk is fingery; it both points and touches."[51] Signaling both an encompassing inclusivity as well as multiplication, the asterisk encourages a mobile positioning of trans that displaces the all too dominant "being in the wrong body" narrative and, instead, complicates the possibilities of transgender ontology. Similar to how Minich articulates disability studies' methodology, for Hayward and Weinstein, "trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted."[52] In this sense, trans maps out the stakes of a possible ontology of transness: it "is the expressive provocation, the ontologizing movement itself."[53] As a result, the subject of transgender studies shifts when paired with a particular genealogy or arena of political organizing, such as abolitionist justice movements,[54] trans-of-color critique[55] and Black trans studies,[56] and studies of migration, state surveillance, and border securitization.[57] To critically scrutinize how aesthetic practices contest the emergence of a "transnormative" subject intelligible through registers of capacity and able-bodiedness, this dissertation relates the formation of transness to disability justice.[58]

Building on existing strands of subjectless critique in transgender and disability studies, this dissertation deploys trans-crip critique not as a study of transgender subjects, disabled subjects, or trans-disabled subjects. Rather, trans-crip critique in my eyes functions as an analytical approach that contends with the social and political conditions under which non-normative bodily difference becomes regulated and pathologized but also becomes intelligible, thus scrutinizing the necessity for reshaping frameworks of recognition. However, as the

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[50] For the purpose of readability, I use trans instead of trans* throughout this dissertation, but my deployment of 'trans' follows how the trans asterisk multiplies the subject of trans studies and its possible points of intervention into technologies of power.

[51] Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, "Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans* Life" *TSQ* 2.2. (2015): 198

[52] Ibid., 196

[53] Ibid., 198

[54] Eric A. Stanley & Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Chico: AK Press, 2011); Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011)

[55] Jules Gill Peterson, "Trans of Color Critique before Transsexuality" *TSQ* 5.4 (2018): 606-620; Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies of Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)

[56] Marquis Bey, "The Trans*-ness of Blackness of Trans*-ness" *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (2017): 275-295; C. Riley Snorton, *Black of Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Treva Ellison et al. "We got issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies" *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (2017): 162-169

[57] Aren Aizura, *Mobile subjects: transnational imaginaries of gender reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Toby Beauchamp, *Going stealth: transgender politics and U.S. surveillance practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Christine Quinan, "Gender (in)securities: surveillance and transgender bodies in a post-9/11 era of neoliberalism" in *Security/Mobility: Politics of Movement*, eds. Matthias Leese & Stef Wittendorp (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 153-169

[58] Jasbir Puar, *Right to Maim*, 43

important writings by Eli Clare and others demonstrate, considering the regulation and reproduction of non-normative bodily differences at the nexus of transness and disability points toward a multiplicity of overlapping concerns, coalitional political potential, and, also, contradictions.[59] As I explore in further detail in Chapter 3, to be able to comprehend this multiplicity we need "messier stories," which is precisely what trans-crip critique and aesthetics offer.[60]

Considering trans-crip critique as a form of subjectless critique has implications for my methodological approach to aesthetic analysis. The productive refusal of identifying the proper subject of transgender and disability studies can be reframed as a problematic for the study of visual culture: how and where do we locate transness and disability in cultural productions? Some of the aesthetic practices under review in this dissertation might not announce themselves to be "about" transness or disability. It is precisely this troubling of the visible signs of disability and transness that I am interested in; they expand the ways in which transness and disability disrupt forms of recognition structured by transparent understandings of visibility. Crucially, trans-crip aesthetic forms, in the way that I approach them in this dissertation, reassemble our methods for seeing and sensing bodily difference. This approach is informed by David Getsy's work on artistic abstraction, where he explicates how sculptural objects generate what he calls a 'transgender capacity' that attend to the dynamism and mutability of gender: "Transgender capacity is the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple. It can be located or discerned in texts, objects, cultural forms, situations, systems, and images that support an interpretation of recognition of proliferative modes of gender nonconformity, multiplicity, and temporality."[61] Getsy's contribution is crucial in rethinking how transgender aesthetics are not concerned with transgender as an identity formation or the visibility of the transgender subject in that he shows how the operations and transformations of "trans" can be seen and sensed through formal qualities of the art work.

Extending this approach to include both transgender *and* disability aesthetics, I approach the aesthetic not necessarily as the realm of visual signs of transness and disability but rather as an inquiry into how aesthetic forms are instructive for considering transness and

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[59] In addition to Eli Clare's foundational work of trans-crip critique, this dissertation leans on other important scholarship that has carved out space for exploring the nexus of transness and disability, including writings from Alexandre Baril, Jasbir Puar, Alison Kafer, Dean Spade, Cameron Awkward Rich, Alexis Shotwell, and Eva Hayward.

[60] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 175

[61] David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 64

disability on new terms. In other words, my approach shifts the focus from what we see in a work of art, to how the work of art makes us see in a different way. Keeping an eye on how bodily differences inflect aesthetic forms, this dissertation emphasizes a capacious approach to the aesthetic where transness and disability can be sensed and perceived in a multitude of ways. The importance of this lies, as I discuss in the next section, in the complex relationship trans and disability experiences have to visuality and the field of vision.

Trans and Crip Appearances in Visual Culture

In theorizing how trans-crip aesthetic practices trouble the optical economy through which transness and disability become intelligible, this dissertation engages with debates about transgender and disability representation and their relationship to "visuality." The work of scholars on transgender and disability representations has largely focused on the field of vision as a site of oppression where harmful stereotypes are circulated and perpetuated, or where the presence of transness and disability is put in service of reinforcing heteronormativity and norms of able-bodiedness. For example, critics point to how narrative film and literature regularly deploy transgender and disabled characters, who briefly disrupt the stability of the gender and sexual normative and able-bodied central characters, to, ultimately, fulfill a "prosthetic" function against which central characters can overcome their moment of crisis and emerge as normative, stable subjects.[62]

While building on these important interventions, this dissertation also approaches the realm of visuality slightly differently. In clarifying my usage of terms such as "visual culture" and "visuality," I lean on from Nicole Fleetwood's crucial work *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness* (2011), particularly for how Fleetwood conceives of the connections between visuality and the intelligibility of the subject. In her exploration of the relationship between blackness and the visual field, Fleetwood makes a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, studies that focus on positive/negative representations, the valuation of black visual arts, or post-black aesthetics, and, on the other hand, a "turn toward the relationship between subjectivity and visuality."[63] Situating her project in the latter domain,

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[62] David Mitchell & Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). See also: Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory*, and Jack Halberstam, *Trans**

[63] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 15

Fleetwood examines how the performative force of blackness inflects the construction of subjectivity in the visual field. I follow her shift from scrutinizing the accuracy of representations toward understanding visuality as a domain that both produces and troubles the intelligibility of the subject. Consequently, I approach the field of vision as a crucial site of contesting what Judith Butler calls the domain of intelligible bodies.[64]

This approach to visuality is indebted to how the field of visual culture emerged, which is often tied back to Hal Foster's publication *Vision and Visuality* (1988). In this seminal work, Foster defines the distinction between the two terms as follows:

"Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual—between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations—a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein."[65]

Building on this, we can thus approach visuality as the technologies by which the process of seeing takes shape and how what is visible and invisible is distributed. Foster underscored how, within a particular "scopic regime," the entanglement between vision and visuality is flattened: how we see, and what we see, is naturalized as simply the function of sight, rather than understood through its historical constitution.[66] What we gain from this definition is an understanding of the visual field that foregrounds the social and political underpinnings of visuality, which frames the analyses of the aesthetic productions in this dissertation.

Transness and disability have complex relationships to the field of vision, by which I refer to visual representations, the visual landscape of the public sphere, as well as the visual relationality built into our understandings of transness and disability. Scholars have scrutinized how disability appears as an unwelcome interruption in the visual field. In the public sphere, for example, disabled people have been designated as "out of place," an unwelcome sight, as

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[64] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x

[65] Hal Foster, *Vision & Visuality* (New York: New Press, 1988), ix

[66] Ibid, ix. Foster uses the term "scopic regime" here, which is often attributed to the film theorist Christian Metz.

Susan Schweik's research on the early twentieth century "ugly laws" in the U.S. illustrates, where city ordinances banned the presence of deformity, disease, or mutilation on the street.[67] The organization of infrastructure on norms of able-bodiedness means that many disabled people continue to be excluded from entering the visual field of various public spaces, an issue disability rights activists have used to amplify attention through direct actions, such as the "Capitol Crawl" that took place in 1990 to mark the importance of the ADA, where physically disabled people abandoned their various mobility devices and crawled up the steps of the U.S. Capitol. Since the presence of disability often appears through non-normative forms of bodily functions, appearance, movement, and interaction, Lennard Davis proposes to understand disability as "a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field."[68] Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts forward an anatomy of visual relationality that surrounds disability, arguing that, while "feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare."[69] In her analysis of this stare, she deconstructs how the visibly disabled body continues to unsettle our "routine visual landscape" and "compels our attention."[70]

Yet, following this critical approach to visuality, how the non-normative body stands out in our visual landscape is not a fact of the body but a function of how the field of vision is normatively constructed so that subjects whose personhood is uncontested are able to have a neutral, unmarked visual appearance. For example, we can consider the ways in which we distinguish, both in academic and vernacular discourses of disability, between "visible" and "invisible" disabilities, roughly indexing disabilities that are physical and a variety of other disabilities that are perhaps not immediately visually locatable on the body. Depending on access to health care and technologies such as prosthetics, disabilities can become less visible and people become able to "pass" as able-bodied. Yet, we must ask, from which perspective are disabilities visible or invisible? Under which scopic regimes do these distinctions make sense, and when do they fail to hold? The distinction continues to rely on the idea that one can "look" healthy or non-disabled, a notion that reinforces the "invisibility" of compulsory able-bodiedness that crip theory aims to dismantle by, as Robert McRuer suggests, revealing the repetitive construction that creates the appearance of invisibility.[71] The visible/invisible distinction remains useful for to explain some of the differences between the ways in which

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[67] Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 2

[68] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 129

[69] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 28

[70] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 20

[71] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 1

disabled bodies visually appear as "different", which has consequences for the phenomenological experience of disability. Yet, it also demonstrates how visibility offers a limited optic to account for how both visible and invisible disabilities are physical experiences that affect one's relation to accessibility and various forms of disability oppression, or one's possible "orientations," to borrow Sara Ahmed's phenomenological usage of that term.[72] Invisible disabilities, which could range from depression, to dyslexia, to multiple chemical sensitivity, have very "visible" effects. Moreover, many conditions might move between being visible or invisible on the body, such as cancer or epilepsy. Probing the limits of what these categories can include show the difficulty of reducing disability to the way in which a body looks. After all, if we approach disability as a phenomenon that emerges not from a body but from within a social, material, and political situation, a visual field in which certain differences come to matter, then neither is the visibility or invisibility of disability a characteristic of an individual body.

In the domain of transgender studies, similar debates around the visual politics of appearing take place. In legislation not dissimilar to the "ugly laws," U.S. cities introduced ordinances, through the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth century, that criminalized appearing in public "in a dress not belonging to his or her sex."[73] As Clare Sears has crucially pointed out, that the effect of such laws is not merely punitive: this "policing of normative gender" also constructed normative gender, as well as the gendered expectations of which appearances count as normal and abnormal within the public sphere.[74] Unsurprisingly perhaps, the visual relationality that surrounds transness is still strongly marked by notions of suspicion, illusion, and fraudulence, and media outlets and popular culture have often positioned trans and gender non-confirming people as objects of fascination and fixation. As Toby Beauchamp writes, the most common characteristic of how transgender people are framed is through attempts to uncover a secret and "to make visible what is otherwise tantalizingly hidden."[75] As such, the trans body, and identity, is persistently constructed as "an inherently deceptive object" that withholds information not visible to the eye.[76] Actress and activist Laverne Cox, in addressing that many trans women of color face violence by simply walking down the street, has explained how the mark of fraudulence makes appearing in public

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[72] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008)

[73] Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Fransisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2

[74] Ibid., 3

[75] Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*, 15

[76] Ibid., 2

a hazardous act.[77] And activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy encapsulates the experience as follows:

> "it's hard to live your entire life like that - always paying attention to people coming past you and how they look at you, worrying that once they go behind you, they are going to turn around and come back at you. So you learn to look in reflections - off of store windows, or windows on cars - just to be sure, because you never know."[78]

As this passage shows, concerns of passing, being read or being "clocked" continue to frame the question of appearance for transgender people. Instead of Garland-Thomson's stare, there is a flickering between passing as non-trans or being subjected to a detecting gaze that aims to find the visual clues as to what appears out of place. Of course, the contradiction here is that being seen *as* trans might be exactly what makes living as trans difficult.

How diversity in bodies look, sound, move, feel, and transform over time thus has its particular consequences for the visual field and the politics of appearing. This set of conditions makes it difficult to attribute power to either visibility or invisibility: the inclusion of the "Other" in visual representation does not have a direct or clear relationship to more power or less exclusion. In Peggy Phelan's words: "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying."[79] Evelyn Hammonds captures these potential limits when she writes:

> "An appeal to the visual is not uncomplicated or innocent. As theorists we have to ask how vision is structured, and, following that, we have to explore how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and speak in the world. […] But in overturning the "politics of silence" the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen."[80]

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[77] Democracy Now, ""A Backlash Against Our Existence": Laverne Cox Speaks Out on Violence Against Trans Women of Color", interview aired on October 7. 2019

[78] Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeCe McDonald in conversation with Toshio Meronek, "Cautious living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation" in *Trap Door* eds. Tourmaline et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 27

[79] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 6

[80] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2-3 (1994): 141

Here, Hammonds' words echo contemporary trans critiques of the "politics of visibility." This critical approach does not choose between visibility and invisibility but rather engages thoroughly with the question of how technologies of vision can be deployed for a critical troubling of bodily norms. As Eric A. Stanley pertinently asks: "what tactics of production and sabotage might bring about visual cultures that detonate the never-ending list of anti-trans violence?"[81]

In approaching visual culture as a contested site with myriad ways in which bodies function as visual evidence for identities, I expand on conceptual tools found in the work of Michel Foucault and Nicholas Mirzoeff, who have both highlighted the intimate entanglements of power, visibility, and knowledge. For Foucault, regimes of visibility function to regulate, constrain, or enable what is seeable and visible, and what remains out of sight. The question of visibility is thus central to Foucault's theorization of the nexus of knowledge and power.[82] Writing on how shafts in the workings of power in the eighteenth century are epitomized in the clinic and the prison, he understands these architectural formations as technologies of how things are made visible and thus become subjects of knowledge practices. In this turn from sovereign to disciplinary power, the former is exercised through authority and obedience, while the latter depends on disciplinary techniques that submit bodies to observation and produces them as subjects. Here, the mechanisms of power become invisible and their efficacy lies in the making the subject hypervisible.[83] The power relations between who sees and which subjects are made visible are structured along hierarchies of gender, race, and bodyminds positioned as abnormal, and the deviant body becomes knowable through visual regimes of scientific observation, public spectacle, and punitive surveillance, materialized in spaces in which "bodies and eyes meet."[84] Crucially, Foucault illuminates how the principle of visual recognition structures the operations of thinking, where bodies come to function as evidence, declaring scientific truths under the eye of the observer. In the context of contemporary gender politics, Preciado finds a continuation of how bodies function as evidence for identities in the

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[81] Eric A. Stanley, "Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 618

[82] John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing," *October* 44 (1988): 89-117

[83] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 187

[84] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 2003), xi

sense that we continue to rely on an "optical ontology," where the biopolitical fictions of gender "find their somatic support in individual subjectivity."[85]

For Nicholas Mirzoeff, "visuality" always denotes the regime of authority that controls what is "normal" and self-evident, and hence bound up with technologies of domination.[86] Mirzoeff locates the authoritarian claim over what is visible in the history of the slave plantation, and traces the necessity of technologies of visibility for imperial rule as well as its continuation in contemporary military-industrial complexes.[87] In these cases, visuality functions through the three operations of classifying, separating, and aestheticizing: the naming and mapping of bodies in space and in relation to divisions of labor; the creation of a disconnected social organization that prevents the political organization of subjects; and the aestheticization of the status quo to make it seem right.[88] It is precisely the operations of classification and aestheticization that converge in "visual taxonomies," where the taxonomical impulse of colonial modernity classifies subjectivity and bodies into categories marked with identity, and makes them visible as objects of knowledge and curiosity.

This entanglement of vision and knowledge has particular significance for formations of gender nonconformity and disability, with the taxonomical impulse of modernity forming the backdrop to contemporary visualizations of the body. As scholars and activists working in scenes of transgender and disability politics within Euro-American contexts have pointed out, transgender and disabled bodies are positioned as both hypervisibile and invisible, a production that takes place differentially through various visual regimes such as the medical gaze, practices of state surveillance, mainstream media spectacles, or neoliberal identity politics.[89] Contemporary artists and activists who create cultural productions in areas of transgender and/or disability visual cultures have to reckon with histories of violent technologies of being made visible, such as the spectacle of abnormality in freak shows.[90] As Eli Clare points out, the decline of the public acceptability of events such as freak shows at the beginning of the twentieth century went hand in hand with the medicalization of disability, which marks a shift in visual regimes and societal relationships of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time,

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[85] Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Phramacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 102, 103

[86] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-3, 24

[87] Ibid., 10-22

[88] Ibid., 3

[89] Benjamin T. Singer, "From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-normative Body Images," in *Transgender Studies Reader* eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 601-620; Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*; Tourmaline et al., *Trap Door;* Dean Spade, "Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape," *Temple Political and Civil Rights Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 353-373

[90] Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 55-78

however, it also demonstrates a continuation of being subjected to visual taxonomies.[91] In contemporary popular culture, particular topics of disability and gender non-conformity have a strong representational currency but often in the figures of exceptionalized subjects: the transgender woman successful at passing, or the "supercrip" capable of award-winning participation in competitive sport events, such as Oscar Pistorius.[92] Such representational tropes reinforce normative registers of gender and bodily abilities - and, as Jasbir Puar crucially highlights, are contingent on structures of whiteness - and continue to rely on technologies that deliver the unique visual pleasure of making a strange body knowable.[93]

In this vein, it is within the visual regime that the demand of cultural intelligibility is most aggressively imposed on deviant bodies.[94] But, following Mirzoeff, if the status quo is normalized through aestheticization, the realm of visual culture can also offer tools to break the operation of how bodies become knowable through visual technologies. If "visibility is a trap," as Foucault famously articulated, for Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, it is a "trap door."[95] In their edited collection on trans cultural productions and the politics of visibility, they argue that visibility can be a door that opens up access to recognition and resources while also functioning as a trap that accommodates trans bodies only on the terms of hegemonic modalities.[96] To frame how trans cultural productions navigate this tension, they use the image of a trapdoor to suggest that, within contemporary politics of visibility, there is a point of entry, or exit, to a place yet unknown, a "third term that acknowledges the others but refuses to be held by them."[97] Visual cultural productions, then, can grapple with the formations of "wrong" bodies, and refuse the path to becoming "right", and offer an alternative articulation. To do so, as Jack Halberstam argues, we require "different visual, aural, and haptic codes through which to figure the experience of being in a body."[98]

As I mentioned above, this dissertation suggests a shift from a vocabulary of "visibility" to one of "appearing." If visibility refers to the process of being seen, appearing refers to the performative ways in which the figuration of the body can interrupt ways of seeing. This turn allows me to explore how visual cultural productions can be considered a "space of

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[91] Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University press, 2015), 100-102

[92] Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 44

[93] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 61

[94] Kadji Amin, Amber Jumilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 228

[95] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200;
Tourmaline, et al., *Trap Door*, xxiii

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Halberstam, *Trans**, 89

appearance," where the body materializes in making a claim on the political. This approach engages with, and builds on, Judith Butler's argument that, for politics to take place, the body needs to appear.[99] In Chapter 1, I scrutinize Butler's theory in more detail by elaborating on what a space of appearance might look like from the perspective of transgender and disability aesthetics and politics and suggesting that it is the capacity for appearing that is at stake in artistic and activist cultural productions. However, in the art works I examine in this dissertation, the appearance of the body is not the same as the visual representation of a body. Rather, it is a close re-articulation of the terms of recognition of bodily difference. One primary avenue through which such a re-articulation takes place, as the different chapters in this dissertation will demonstrate, is by taking the body out of the visual economy of transparency, making the space of appearance becomes one of disappearance, opacity, or refusal. This is where I depart from previous work on disability and transgender in art and visual culture: I am not merely interested in how disabled and trans bodies are represented in visual culture, but in how visual culture itself can become a site of and for unsettling the legibility of the body. Because transgender and disability experiences are overdetermined by a visual emphasis on how bodies appear, my approach to aesthetics is one where I foreground aesthetics as a site of refusal. Refusal, as I elaborate on in Chapter 3, is a generative practice that rejects the conditions on which the body can appear and imagines an alternative. Crucially, aesthetic practices of refusal bring forth visual and sensory modalities to figure transness and disability. Hence, in my analysis of such aesthetic practices, I trace how artists and activists refuse a particular visual order of transness and disability in relation to normative morphology, bringing forth tools for figuring transness and disability in new ways.

Dissertation overview

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to examine how aesthetic practices critically shape and reconfigure an understanding of bodily difference in the context of transgender and disability politics and aesthetics. The four chapters in this dissertation explicate the entanglement of visual and epistemological frameworks of embodiment in view of the complex constellation of visibility as discussed above. The question that drives the chapters' discussions is the following: How can aesthetic practices reshape, that is, disrupt and undo, the normalizing ways in which we see and know bodily difference? While each chapter pays attention to a

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[99] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 78

different artistic medium to approach this particular question, a recurring red thread is how each chapter responds to the question of how transness and disability implicate each other. Rather than offering an overview that could offer a complete picture of what this entanglement of transness and disability looks like – a project neither possible nor, I would argue, desirable – I explore quite divergent strands of approaching this problematic. Encountering a different aesthetic intervention each time, this approach results in a different vocabulary of what "trans" and "disability" mean. However, as a recurring gesture in each analysis, I flesh out how disability studies and disability justice organizing offer insights that create productive affinities for understanding contemporary consolidations of what "transgender" means.

The choice of examining the entanglements of transness and disability primarily through visual culture is in part due to my interest in the particular relationships to the field of vision as outlined above. While the framework of affect theory does not feature on the foreground of this dissertation, it does inform my methodological approach and how I consider the performative force of the aesthetic practices under review. As mentioned, I do not consider cultural objects as passive entities suspended outside "reality" or social and political contexts, on which I impose my critical interpretations. Rather, they are, to use Ernst van Alphen's words, "active agents in the cultural and social world."[100] It would thus be misplaced to understand art works as privileging sensation over meaning, since they go hand in hand. Sensation functions as a "catalyst for critical inquiry,"[101] and, throughout this dissertation I use the verb "to sense" with its productive dual implication: as sensation and knowing, the affective labor of "making sense." I follow Rita Felski's emphasis on "affective critique," where, instead of examining how cultural objects demonstrate the workings of power, I am more interested in what forms of knowledges and attachments they enable and create space for.[102]

The selection of materials is driven by a motivation to examine how the visual landscape of what bodies look like might be expanded, and, in doing so, enact a refusal to accept the precarious forms of contemporary inclusion as enough, given how they are predicated on narrow and normative understandings or images of disability and transgender. The selection process reflects my own position of being as tuned in into both online and offline networks of academia and political organizing concerned with disability, queer, and trans politics and theory, which is where I have come across the work of these artists and activists. Their circulation and reception in various academic, artistic, and activist venues situated in Western

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[100] Ernst van Alphen, "Affective Operations in Art and Literature," *Res* 53/54 (2008): 25
[101] Ibid., 22
[102] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Europe and the United States is not evenly distributed: there are vast differences in their art institutional or academic valorization. Despite these significant differences, however, I consider them all as figures who move between elite art institutions as well as more politically oriented networks of organizing and critical debate. Bringing these works together here and staging conversations between them allows me to trace threads of trans-crip adjacencies. In this way, this dissertation contributes to mapping contemporary aesthetic practices that advance critical vocabularies of transness and disability and enable us to grasp their affinities.

In the first chapter, "Bodies as Evidence: Appearing and Aesthetics," I scrutinize how transgender and disability aesthetics might function as a "space of appearance" that challenges the frames of recognition through which transgender and disabled subjects become legible. As mentioned before, the chapter opens with a theoretical discussion of the notion of *appearing* through Judith Butler's theorization of the appearance of the body within popular uprisings against precarity. Butler proposes that within a political movement demanding infrastructures of livability, the material appearance of the body plays a particular role. It is the mobilization of bodily vulnerability itself that performatively invokes the political, rather than the specific articulation of demands. Butler usefully creates a line of inquiry into how the appearance of the body can transform the space of appearance, yet, I trace two issues in Butler's work that deserve further scrutiny: the figuration of the body, which remains a generic "body," and the under-examined role of visibility as a premise for political action. Extending Butler's notion of appearing to the realm of visual culture, I explore how the appearance of the body calls attention to the visual frames of legibility and intelligibility that circumscribe how bodies evidence political subjectivity through a discussion of two case studies: a photo-series titled *Screened-In* (2009-2011) by transgender activist Leslie Feinberg and *Becoming an Image* (2012-present) by performance artist Cassils. Both Feinberg's and Cassils's work qualify Butler's notion of appearing by examining the particular relationships of trans and crip subjects to the field of vision, demonstrating the capacity of the body to appear differently. Chapter 1's broad discussion of transgender and disability aesthetics serves to frame the following three chapters, in which I turn to more specific instantiations of trans-crip encounters across a variety of artistic mediums. Yet, rather than providing accurate visual evidence of the "presence" of transness or disability, these chapters aim to examine how transgender and disability aesthetics offer new ways of seeing and knowing bodily difference.

The second chapter, "Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* and the Performance of Trans-Crip Adjacencies," is interested in the question of how transness and disability might be considered as "adjacent" to each other. My entry point for this question is through an analysis

of the already mentioned video-performance *Shape of a Right Statement* (2008), by Asian-American artist Wu Tsang, in which she re-enacts the video statement *In My Language* by Mel Baggs, a non-verbal autism activist based in the U.S., which will be analyzed in Chapter 4. Tsang's re-enactment engenders an affective sense of uneasiness, particularly if we consider the problematic of being "spoken for" within autistic communities. But I suggest that this uneasiness is generative in how it speaks to the complex proximity of transness and disability. By articulating the words of Baggs's statement as if they are her own, Tsang stages an encounter between Baggs's world of autism advocacy and her own scene of trans of color cultural production. Situating Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* within discussions of appropriation in contemporary art, I argue that we lack the conceptual tools to understand how this gesture of appropriation enacts a form of trans-crip solidarity. Tina Campt's formulation of *adjacency* fills this gap, and I explore how working with the optic of trans-crip adjacencies allows us to refuse the historical and epistemological splitting of trans and disability politics. Hence, this chapter lays the foundation for thinking and practicing a form of trans-crip adjacency that challenges the epistemological coherency of the categories of "transgender" and "disability" without collapsing one into the other.

If Chapter 2 offers tools for thinking transness and disability through a lens of adjacency, the third chapter, "Refusals of Rehabilitation in Transgender and Disability Aesthetics," uses these tools for thinking through the problematic of "inclusion" at the nexus of transness and disability. The aesthetic forms discussed in this chapter are the sculpture and installation practices in Park McArthur's show *Ramps* (U.S., 2016) and Jesse Darling's exhibition *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* (U.K., 2018). The chapter opens with a discussion of critiques of *rehabilitation* as they emerge from disability studies and disability justice work by writers such as Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, Eli Clare, and Henri-Jacques Stiker. Central to these critiques is the notion that the integration of disability in society relies on a normalization practice that erases the difference that disability poses, an argument that can be extended to the inclusion of minoritarian subjects more broadly. I reflect on these debates in relation to the role of visuality, interrogating the vexed relationship between a cultural logic of rehabilitation and the ways in which the visual appearance of the "different" body can function as, to use Sara Ahmed's words, the sign of inclusion that makes exclusion disappear.[103] Through a close analysis of McArthur's and Darling's aesthetic practices, which challenge the terms on which inclusion takes places instead, I examine how sculpture and installation practices take the

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[103] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 65

presence of the body out of the visual economy to refuse rehabilitation and offer a complex visual vocabulary of how to communicate trans-crip woundedness in the moment of refusal.

While Chapter 3 explores the tensions that arise in the communicability of the "wounded" subject, Chapter 4, "Mel Baggs's Opaque Aesthetics," couples the question of communicability to the visual legibility of the body, particularly in the frame of the image. My inquiry here is concerned with aesthetic interventions in seeing and sensing embodiment in the domain of neurodiversity. This chapter revolves around a video piece titled *In My Language* (2007) by Mel Baggs, a non-speaking autism activist whose work has already been referenced earlier. *In My Language* attends to the differences between Baggs's perception of, and interaction with, the world, and a normative human language that misrecognizes Baggs's language as a form of non-communicability. In this chapter, I use Baggs's work as a launchpad to explore how a neurodiversity framework challenges key characteristics of political subjectivity, and how this has consequences for the relationship between disability and transness. Reflecting critically on clinical literature that considers trans identifications of autistic subjects an expression of autistic traits rather than "authentic" transgender identification, I argue for a "cripping" of the epistemological frameworks available for understanding the convergences of neurodiversity and gender diversity. In addition, my reading of Baggs's video examines how expressions of autism that are typically pathologized or subjected to behavioral therapy, such as Applied Behavior Analysis, including stimming, repetitive motions, multi-sensory attachments, or irregular eye contact, are reframed both as modes of communication and as aesthetic interventions, drawing on registers of haptic and kinesthetic visuality. This multi-sensory video thus creates an *opaque* aesthetics that consists of a textured resistance to ableist frames of legibility. Reading Baggs's work alongside writer and poet Édouard Glissant's work on the "right to opacity" as part of a "poetics of relation," a form of a/relationality emerges that goes beyond the common positioning of autists as "outside" of relationality and sociality, thus expanding how a diversity of bodyminds becomes intelligible.

Taken together, the chapters of this dissertation offer a wide-ranging intervention into rethinking and "re-sensing" the relationships between transness, disability, and artistic practices. *Appearing Differently: Disability and Transgender Embodiment in Contemporary Euro-American Visual Cultures* thus contributes to pushing the domains of transgender studies, disability studies, and visual cultural studies into new directions, emphasizing points of connection and affinity. It is my hope that this dissertation attests to the importance of trans-crip aesthetic practices and their capacity to generate new figurations of transness and

disability. This work is inspired by the urgency of crafting new modes of seeing and sensing minoritarian positions, and it affirms the desire that runs through these pages to see new horizons of transgender liberation and disability justice.

1. Bodies as Evidence: 'Appearing' and Aesthetics

Accompanying her 2018 piece *Evidentiary Bodies*, filmmaker Barbara Hammer writes: "Evidence, broadly construed, is anything presented in support of an assertion."[1] Created towards the end of a life-long career in which Hammer generated experimental forms of cinema that averted the male gaze, *Evidentiary Bodies* demonstrates her expansive interest that connects lesbian sexuality to a broader exploration of corporeality and illness. In the images of the three-channel video installation, a dual investigation of Hammer's life in film and her life with cancer is materialized through a collage of visuals from medical x-rays and clips from her earlier works, superimposed with photographs of Hammer's body. Combined with the haunting timbre of the cello soundtrack, the installation is a vulnerable exploration of living *with* a disease, as opposed to the rhetoric of fighting, and a yearning to communicate bodily experiences and affects. Hammer describes her video practice as being concerned with an attempt to thoroughly know and understand the other, and crucially, the impossibility of this endeavor. She writes: "I still long for that most intimate of sharing and although I can't crawl inside my lover's skin and experience her from the inside out, I can practice an empathetic listening, repeating back what I have heard and learned, sympathetically embracing 'otherness' and difference."[2] In the large body of work that Hammer leaves behind, she often turned to forms of what Laura Marks would call "haptic visuality", in which the images mobilize experimental connections between sight, sound, and touch.[3] Her empathic approaching of difference and relationality required those visual forms in order to reckon with the desire to communicate the multiple realities of the body while simultaneously harnessing the 'otherness' of the Other.

Hammer's formulation of "evidentiary bodies" has stuck with me for how it fittingly indexes the relationships between visibility, appearing. and aesthetics that I explore in this chapter. More pertinently, the phrase of "bodies as evidence" seems useful for thinking about the various and not always explicit or immediate ways bodies make statements, leave traces, articulate testimonies, or verify an event. And the question of what is evidentiary about bodies also points to the problematic of how bodies are expected to function as visual evidence for being part of broader grids of intelligibility, reified through how identity politics relies on

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[1] "Evidentiary Bodies: Barbara Hammer," Electronic Arts Intermix, last accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.eai.org/titles/evidentiary-bodies

[2] Ibid.

[3] Laura Marks, *Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 159-193

visibility as an epistemology. David Getsy calls this conundrum the "evidentiary protocols that characterizes the politics of visibility", where for example, in order to be recognized *as* transgender, aesthetic practices are assumed to make visible the process of gender transition.[4] Consequently, I want to explore how transgender and disability aesthetics also offer forms of appearances that both multiply and unsettle the evidentiary function of the body.

Such an approach is indebted to a poststructuralist critique of the relationship between knowing and seeing in which "evidence" is no longer "connected innocently to its root in *videre*, the Latin verb 'to see.'"[5] Central to poststructuralist critique is an unsettling of the positivist link between sight and evidence, and to frame that which is evident within a way of seeing, and thus denaturalize its status as "self-evident" or "common sense." In Michel Foucault's writing, the epistemological challenge was to scrutinize that which was self-evident and taken for granted and to situate it as a modality of seeing - and knowing - particular to the technologies and practices of making visible in a historical period.[6] As John Rajchman writes:

"In Foucault's idiom, *évidence* is related to the *acceptability* of a practice. It is part of what makes a 'strategy of power' *tolerable*, despite its difficulties. Thus, to see the events through which things become self-evident is to be able to see in what ways they may be *intolerable* or *unacceptable*. It is to try to see how we might *act* on what cannot yet be seen in what we do. It is, in short, a 'critical' art."[7]

In other words, to probe what appears as self-evident is also an attempt at imagining what is not yet seen. In this dissertation, the phrase "bodies as evidence" points to two issues: the self-evident appearance of how embodied difference is visually intelligible, and the role of aesthetics in affirming or contesting a "common sense" of how bodily difference is legible and perceived. By situating aesthetic practices in contemporary politics of visibility as one where minoritarian identities are caught in rhythms of neoliberal value production based on the visibility of "difference," this chapter demonstrates how transgender and disability aesthetics of appearance probe the "common sense" of how we see and know bodies. This chapter frames the chapters that follow in the rest of the dissertation, where I argue the aesthetic practices

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[4] David Getsy, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities. David Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons", in *Pink Labor in Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices,* eds. Erharter et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 49

[5] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 389

[6] John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing", *October* 44 (1988): 92-93

[7] Ibid., 94, emphasis in original

under review do not re-present "the trans body" or "the disabled body," but provide a visual vocabulary that unsettles a "self-evident" image of what bodies might look, sound, or feel like.

If bodies inadvertently function as evidence, I argue for the importance of grappling with the performative force of the appearance of the body. More specifically, I emphasize the capacity for the body to appear differently by refusing to provide the visual evidence of transgender and disability identities. As we will see, this refusal demonstrates an understanding of trans and disability not as (just) phenomena that materialize in identities or singular bodies, but as forces that re-articulate the interdependencies of the body and the social body. While the chapters that follow examine ways in which the body can trouble its appearance through re-enactment (Chapter 2), sculpture and installation (Chapter 3), or video practices (Chapter 4), this chapter frames those chapters by providing a theoretical framework that, firstly, addresses the political implications of the appearance of the body, and secondly, discusses the role of the aesthetic in apprehending bodily forms.

I use the notion and practice of "appearing" as an optic through which to grapple with the tensions underpinning how visible bodily presence is tied to the recognition of political subjectivity, and how aesthetic practices can dislodge regimes of visualizing "difference" and the burden of representation. The concept of appearing thus offers a productive friction with "visibility" by challenging the visual codes of legibility and the terms on which a body can appear. In order to discuss appearing as such, I turn to Judith Butler's theorization of appearing, where she explores the interconnections between political action and the appearance of the body. In my reading, I focus primarily on *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), where Butler usefully demonstrates the difference between appearing and visual or political representation, and her interest in inquiring into how the very possibility to appear is shaped by norms of recognition. By offering a theory of performativity that interlaces speech acts and bodily acts, Butler shifts from a theory of gender performativity to the right to appear for precarious populations more generally.[8] Building on Hannah Arendt's notion of the "space of appearance," Butler argues that the appearance of the body in itself performatively constitutes political action, rather than merely the articulation of political demands. In the context of global popular uprisings and street protests against austerity and precarity in 2011-2012, Butler suggests that a shared vulnerability of the body is the ground on which coalitional politics takes place. At the center of her theory is vulnerable embodiment, and the performative political potential of the body's appearance. While Butler hardly situates her analysis in relation

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[8] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015), 27

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to transgender and disability politics or aesthetics, I find many productive affinities between these domains. This chapter is thus an exploration of what it might mean that politics takes place the moment the body appears, and in doing so, I explore how Butler's conceptualization of appearing resonates with transgender and disability politics and aesthetics.

I make this discussion more tangible in two subsections where I discuss aesthetic practices that, firstly, reimagine what qualifies as the space of appearance, and, secondly, demonstrate a form of appearing that refuses the visibility of the body as central to an enactment of politics. The first case study is the photo series *Screened-In* (2009-2011) by "transgender warrior" Leslie Feinberg, in which zie documented life inside hir apartment during a period of illness and immobility. Through my analysis of Feinberg's photo-archive, my aim is not to offer a "paranoid reading," to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terminology, that would expose the issue of who has access to the space of appearance, but the reverse: how does a foreclosure of being legible as a political subject change the terms of appearance?[9] And how can visual culture function as a space of appearance? The second case study is the performance *Becoming an Image* (2012-present), in which the artist Cassils attacks and transforms a mass of clay. In total darkness, the audience hears the breathing of the performance artist and the thuds of their body hitting the clay. The performance is momentarily lit by photographic flashes that literally impress an image on the retina of the audience members, so that the image remains visible even when the performance has continued in darkness. I discuss how their work inquires into the possibility to appear while challenging the demand of visibility that is often part of scripts of transgender representation, which is the tension I draw out in my reading of Butler's theorization of appearing. Finally, the analysis of how to situate the concept of "appearing" in transgender and disability studies and politics leads to a consideration of aesthetics itself in the last chapter section, where I discuss how aesthetics functions as a site for unsettling normative figurations of the human.

Instead of advocating for the power of visibility or invisibility of certain bodies, I place emphasis on the notion of appearing in order to scrutinize practices that challenges the frames of recognition through we see and know bodily difference. Indeed, the question at hand here is not so much *if* bodies are represented, but *how* bodies appear. And as I explore throughout this dissertation, the appearance of the body is at times through its disappearance, its misrecognition, its traces, or its disintegration. My aim in this chapter is to trace how the appearance of the body can be an opportunity for re-articulating the terms on which bodies

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[9] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151

become legible, thus transforming the available scenes and modalities of appearing more generally. In this way, transgender and disability aesthetics have the capacity to intervene in the 'common sense' of visual epistemologies of the body.

1.1. A Theory of Appearing

The term "appearing" might seem a tenuous concept for an inquiry into trans and crip embodiment in visual culture. Usually connoting an "impression," the term always suggests what appears can fail to correspond with a reality "behind" the appearance, a fleeting moment that can again disappear. Appearance is "merely" an appearance, as opposed to substance. It is this unstable quality of the term that Judith Butler plays with in *Gender Trouble* when she writes: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the *appearance of substance*, of a natural sort of being."[10] Unsettling the opposition between appearance and substance, Butler recodes the substance of the body as itself a form of appearing. In her theory of gender performativity, it is through the appearance of the body that the body materializes, collapsing the distinction between an outward expression of gender and the substance of the body. Approached as such, the concept of appearing is a crucial anchoring point for this study for how it engenders an understanding of the body in its ongoing materialization, and places an emphasis on the process of becoming visible rather than a fixed notion of being. Butler offers a more sustained elaboration of the concept of appearing, via Hannah Arendt, in her more recent work, where appearing is central to contemporary political contestations of neoliberal precaritization.

"For politics to take place, the body needs to appear."[11] In these seductively simple words, Butler lays out her theory on how the appearance of the body is a requirement for the scene of the political to emerge. In her work, the appearance of the body always exceeds the singularity of the body, and instead indexes the interdependence that sustains the body in and through its vulnerability. Throughout her books *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), and *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013, with Athena Athanasiou), Butler theorizes the vulnerability of the body, and how such a view of the body has consequences for how we

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[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 43, emphasis mine

[11] Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *Transversal* 10 (2011): np

understand the political. I am particularly interested in how her notion of bodily vulnerability emerges in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, where vulnerability informs how the appearance of the body enacts a performative force. Butler situates her discussion in contemporary global forms of protests against austerity politics, particularly the street protests that took place in Gezi Park, Tahrir Square, and in the Occupy and Indignados movements. Vulnerability emerges here in a two-fold manner: structures that sustain the body are threatened through austerity measures, while the popular uprisings against precarity performatively invoke vulnerability through gathering in the assembly form. Butler's theorization of the performative power of embodiment extends her work on gender performativity, where she extended J. L. Austin's linguistic theory of speech acts into a theory of how gendered acts establish sexed bodies. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Butler takes the performative power of language to understand how gender comes into being through a discursive regime that structures the heterosexual and binary modes of gendered embodiment available to us. Bodies materialize coalescent with these gendered norms, performing the supposed truth of gender through its iterability.[12] The body, then, performatively produces the effects of gender, but can also subvert the ongoing construction of gender through bodily acts.

The question of what the performative power of bodily actions might be, in both supporting a particular regime of gendered embodiment as well as failing to reproduce it correctly, informs Butler's concern with the performative political potential of bodies gathering in mass demonstrations or assemblies on the street. While Butler locates a form of agency in the capacity of bodies to trouble the enactment of gender precisely in the moment of its appearance, potentially opening up and stretching what gendered life might look like, her theory consistently underscores the precarity and violence that accompanies doing gender in ways that are unintelligible. The political stakes, in contesting gendered norms through bodily actions, as well as in public assemblies fighting precarity, arise in the capacity of the body to appear, as well as the conditions that allow for a space of appearance.[13] In her analysis inspired by the recent waves of social uprisings, Butler proposes that what is interesting about the assembly form is not so much the articulation of particular political demands, but rather, the assertion of collective presence and bodily vulnerability. In this mobilization of bodily vulnerability, the body performs political action in itself, and articulates the demand for infrastructures that can support the body's vulnerability. For example, it demands access to public infrastructures such as the street, and it demands freedom from police violence. The

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[12] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 1-46
[13] Butler, *Notes*, 27, 87

body functions then as a means to a politics that supports the body, yet this demand for support shows how the body is never separate from those structure and technologies that would make support possible.[14] The bodily demand for liveable life is thus never a demand of an individual body.

In arguing that the appearance of the body is a political action, or, in fact, constitutes the space of the political, Butler is relying on Arendt's notion of the 'space of appearance'. In Arendt's work, the space of appearance emerges whenever people gather in speech and action.[15] Arendt writes: "I appear to others as others appear to me", and while she understands the space of appearance to emerge when bodies appear and act in concert, it is not just the appearance of the body that is sufficient.[16] As she states, when people gather, "it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever."[17] The space of appearance is called into existence through action, and disappears the moment action ends. While Arendt's notion of the space of appearance seems tailor-made for an analysis of demonstrations or public assemblies, Butler instead proposes that it is not so much the specific speech acts or demands or actions that define the space of appearance, but it is the performative force of bodily vulnerability itself. The appearance of the body, in its vulnerability and dependency, is the action that performatively invokes the political. Butler writes: "Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts liveable life at the forefront of politics."[18]

What makes appearing attractive as a concept with implications for the study of visual culture, is that it links the enactment of politics to the body, but emphasizes the appearance of the body in ways that are not codified by political and cultural representational categories of citizenship, which determine who can appear and which bodies are relegated to non-appearance. For example, in his study *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*, Nicholas Mirzoeff builds on Butler to consider the uprisings against police violence in the U.S as instantiations of the right to appear in the face of anti-black violence.[19] The both physical and virtual assertions of black life create a countervisuality that lays claim on the public in a way that dislodges how that space is structured by white supremacy.[20] Mirzoeff argues that these forms of appearance establish a common sensation that allows for a new way of seeing, to trace

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[14] Ibid., 129
[15] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 199
[16] Ibid., 198
[17] Ibid., 199
[18] Butler, *Notes*, 18
[19] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (Miami: NAME Publications, 2018), 18
[20] Ibid., 20

"new genealogies of the present that were not previously perceptible, as well as look forward to the possibility of another world(s)."[21] Appearing, then, is a form of performative politics that articulates a demand for a liveable life while simultaneously challenging the cultural and political representation categories of recognition that limit, normalize, or foreclose the possibility of that liveable life.

In translating Butler's formulation of appearing to my analyses of transgender and disability aesthetics, there are two questions that I raise here and flesh out further in sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2: How might the vulnerability of embodiment be qualified specifically in relationship to transgender and disability politics? And how can visual culture function as a space of appearance? Butler's contention with the vulnerability of a generalized notion of 'the body' needs to be qualified within a context of transgender and disability politics. As Butler points out, the contestations of precarity through the appearances of bodies on the street show us that the notion of an individual political subject of rights needs to be amended with an "alternative view of the body."[22] Such a view of the body would focus on the body's vulnerability by attending to its dependency on the relations, infrastructures, and networks and technologies of support which are erased through precarity politics. Vulnerability, then, is not "just a trait or an episodic disposition of a discrete body, but is, rather, a mode of relationality that time and again calls some aspect of that discreteness into question."[23] While Butler does not explicitly situate her conceptualization of bodily vulnerability within transgender or disability politics, there are resonances in how scholars, activists, and writers have advanced a critical understanding of vulnerability from the perspective of transgender and disability politics. The political significance of theorizing vulnerability does not lie in the universalizing conclusion that "all bodies are vulnerable." Bodily vulnerability is not an ontological trait of individual bodies, but attests to the historical structures in which a body is positioned. For politics to take place, vulnerability does not have to disavowed. Instead, it is exactly by focussing on the body's vulnerability, and hence the web of technologies and relations that form the body's support structure, that a politics with the aim of improving conditions of livability can emerge. This resonates with how trans and disabled bodies can only be understood as "vulnerable" insofar as the term refers to a condition of imposed vulnerability through austerity measures and legal and administrative regimes reproducing demands of

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[21] Ibid., 33
[22] Butler, *Notes*, 129
[23] Ibid., 130

gender normativity and able-bodiedness.[24] By emphasizing how lives are made vulnerable, trans and disability politics are able to focus on the structural conditions that impede on conditions of living, rather than leaning on vulnerability as, in Aren Aizura words, a "method to extract value in the form of spectatorial sympathy."[25] However, if, for Butler, the vulnerability of "the body" enacts a political demand for a livable life, for many trans and disabled subjects, encounters with vulnerability are in part due to being illegible as a subject, making it more important to qualify how the appearance of the body places a political demand to support the body in its vulnerability. I argue that the issue of the legibility of "the body" remains oddly unqualified in Butler's formulation of appearing. While her work on gender performativity, particularly in *Bodies That Matter*, emphasizes the constitutive exclusion through which a subject is formed against a "domain of intelligible bodies,"[26] the question of the legibility and intelligibility of the body fades to the background in her work on the right to appear. What does the appearance of the body mean, and look like, for subjects whose political subjectivity is already tethered to its foreclosure?

Consequently, if we want to consider how the appearance of the body functions as evidence of political action, the problematic of the legibility and intelligibility of the body requires more attention. The question underpinning how Butler operationalizes "appearing" is how a field of appearance is contingent on a scheme of recognizability insofar as there are differential norms for how subjects have access to, or are recognized within, a space of appearance.[27] In this, Butler departs from Arendt's lack of attention to the presumed subject of political action, in order to focus on how the space of appearance has its conditions and regulations that exclude certain subjects from appearing.[28] She writes: "Why is that field regulated in such a way that only certain kinds of beings can appear as recognizable subjects, and others cannot?"[29] In my understanding of appearing, I want to shift focus from how the appearance of the body is contingent on a frame of legibility, predicated on a normative optic of the body, to how the appearance of the body might alter the visual coordinates of legibility themselves. The relationship between the appearance of the body on the one hand, and the legibility or intelligibility of the subject on the other, remain underdeveloped by Butler. This

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[24] Spade, *Normal Life*, xiv; Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 4

[25] Aren Aizura, "Affective Vulnerability and Transgender Exceptionalism," in *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities*, eds. Sarah Tobias & Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016): 124

[26] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, x

[27] Butler, *Notes*, 38

[28] Ibid., 75, 35

[29] Ibid., 35

is in part due to her focus on the assembly form, and the assertion of bodily presence in the street. We need to expand our imagination of what the space of appearance can be outside of a politics of the street or the assembly form, creating a multitude of appearances. For my purposes here, this means inquiring into how visual cultural productions function as a site of appearing.

In exploring how "appearing" resonates with transgender and disability aesthetics, there are two key issues I aim to underline. Firstly, how are appearances of the body and the conditions of appearance mutually constituted? If, for Butler, the sphere of appearance can be transformed and opened in new ways through "an insistent form of appearing", then what kind of practices of appearing can stretch the visual field of how bodies are recognized?[30] Secondly, and relatedly, what are ways of appearing that trouble a reliance on visibility for epistemologies of the body? I follow Athena Athanasiou's observation that "the challenge is to mobilize "appearance" without taking for granted its naturalized epistemological premises – visibility, transparency – that have been abundantly used to reify political subjectivity."[31] This matters in particular for minoritarian artists who face a demand of transparency and cultural intelligibility, motivated by an imperative to make their 'difference' visible and knowable.[32] How can artists and activist make the body appear in ways that resists its transparent function of providing evidence for political subjectivity? To address these questions, the following two subsections explore Butler's notion of appearing through two case studies: a photo-series by Leslie Feinberg titled *Screened-In* and a performance piece by Cassils titled *Becoming an Image*. While these two aesthetic practice are very different from each other in terms of medium and circulation, both point to new ways of appearing that similarly foreground the vulnerability of embodied life and simultaneously intervene in the particular relationships between transness and disability to the visual field.

1.1.1. Trans-Crip Sensibilities Leslie Feinberg's Screened-In

Building on the questions raised in the previous section, I turn to Feinberg's photographic work as an example which helps us understand a form of appearing that alters the space of

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[30] Ibid., 39

[31] Athena Athanasious and Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 195

[32] Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Perez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP Journal* 2.2 (2017): 228-233; Getsy, "Appearing Differently": 49

appearance itself. Feinberg (U.S., 1949-2014), who described hirself an "anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist," is considered a leading figure for transgender justice movements, whose writings were foundational for contemporary usages of the term "transgender."[33] Zie is most known for the semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), in which the main character, Jess Goldberg, simultaneously develops a working-class as well as a butch and trans consciousness, and works in political organizing at their intersections, consistently highlighting the importance of a politics of solidarity. Feinberg's interest in trans political organization rather than recognition is echoed in how zie conceptualized the term "transgender," where zie was "never been in search of a common umbrella identity, or even an umbrella term, that brings together people of oppressed sexes, gender expressions, and sexualities."[34] Rather, Feinberg's imagining of transgender liberation was brimmed with movement, change, and open-ended self-determination, and veered away from any attempt to capture an essence of transgender. As Susan Stryker points out, Feinberg used "transgender" as an adjective, not a noun.[35] "Transgender" was a call to action more than a call to identity, for anyone "who felt compelled to answer the call to mobilization."[36]

While Leslie Feinberg is often remembered for hir fight against oppressions based on gender, race, and class, zie was also acutely aware of how structures of oppression intersected with the right to access to healthcare.[37] In 2001, Feinberg wrote a short article for the *American Journal of Public Health* titled "Trans Health Crisis: For Us its Life or Death," detailing how the maltreatment of trans patients, or the refusal to treat them, leads to a health crisis. This work was informed by hir own experiences of facing discrimination in trying to access health care. When zie passed in away in 2014, Feinberg had been struggling with various infections in hir body for over three decades, largely untreated. Finally diagnosed with Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases in 2008, the little treatment that Feinberg received would be too late to improve hir health.[38]

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[33] "self", Leslie Feinberg, last accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/self/. While Feinberg used zie/hir, he/him, and she/her pronouns throughout hir life, I use zie/hir here as those are most commonly used in Feinberg's self-descriptions.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies" in *Transgender Studies Reader* eds. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4

[36] Ibid., 4

[37] Leslie Feinberg, "Trans Health Crisis: For Us its Life or Death," *American Journal of Public Health* 91.6 (2001): 897-900

[38] For hir own account of hir life with Lyme disease, see 'Casualty of an Undeclared War Series', on https://transgenderwarrior.org/casualty/

Feinberg's observations about transgender health care are more relevant than ever, both within hir U.S. context, but also outside of that. While the last two decades have seen changes in diagnostic vocabulary and movements towards depathologization, those who have (economic) access to transition-related health care still face many difficulties such as long waiting lists, enforcement of normative gender norms, various forms of discrimination, and health care providers who are incompetent in their knowledge about transgender experiences. But Feinberg's point did not just concern health care specifically related to gender transition, rather, the "health crisis" zie described is about the exclusion from practices of care more generally. Feinberg draws on the example of Tyra Hunter, an African-American transwoman who was injured in a road accident in 1995. The emergency responders made ridiculing remarks about her body and refused to provide the care and treatment she needed to survive, resulting in her death. As Feinberg importantly points out, the trans health crisis is not a crisis that would be solved by creating forms of recognition for transgender subjects, since this would fail to address the systematic exclusion of all those who do not fit "social and medical models of what is 'natural.'"[39]

In 2013, a year before hir death, Feinberg attempted to write author notes for the twentieth Anniversary Edition of *Stone Butch Blues*, hoping to place the novel within its historical context in light of the seismic shifts that have taken place in the realm of transgender politics. Instead, zie writes: "I'm so ill, however, that at the time of publication I am only able to write these three brief notes" and goes on to share brief reflections on the language we use to talk about transgender politics as well as the ethics of book revisions.[40] Feinberg's illness prevented hir from writing and actively engaging with discussions around changing understandings of the term "transgender."[41] During this same period, Feinberg starts to share an ongoing photography series on hir blog, titled *Screened-In*, available in the public domain.[42] Zie describes the result as "a disability-art class-conscious documentary of hir Hawley-Green neighborhood photographed entirely from behind the windows of hir apartment."[43]

One way to understand Feinberg's narration of hir illness and the isolation that it brought is to notice an increased distance to political engagement. But in my reading the *Screened-In* photography series, I argue that zie reassembles the terms of what constitutes the

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[39] Feinberg, "Trans Health Crisis", 899
[40] Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 20th Anniversary Author Edition, 333
[41] Ibid., 334
[42] The photo-series is available on
https://www.flickr.com/photos/transgenderwarrior/albums/72157627520720784
[43] "self", Leslie Feinberg

space of the political. To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that experiences of disability cannot produce isolation or that this was not a problem for how Feinberg desired to be engaged with activism and writing. As zie states in clear terms, the photographs "reveal the geographic and social isolation of severe illness and resulting disabilities."[44] Rather, my aim is to consider *Screened-In* as both a formation of transgender and disability aesthetics, as well as a site from which to re-articulate how we understand the relationships between vulnerability, the appearance of the body, and the political.
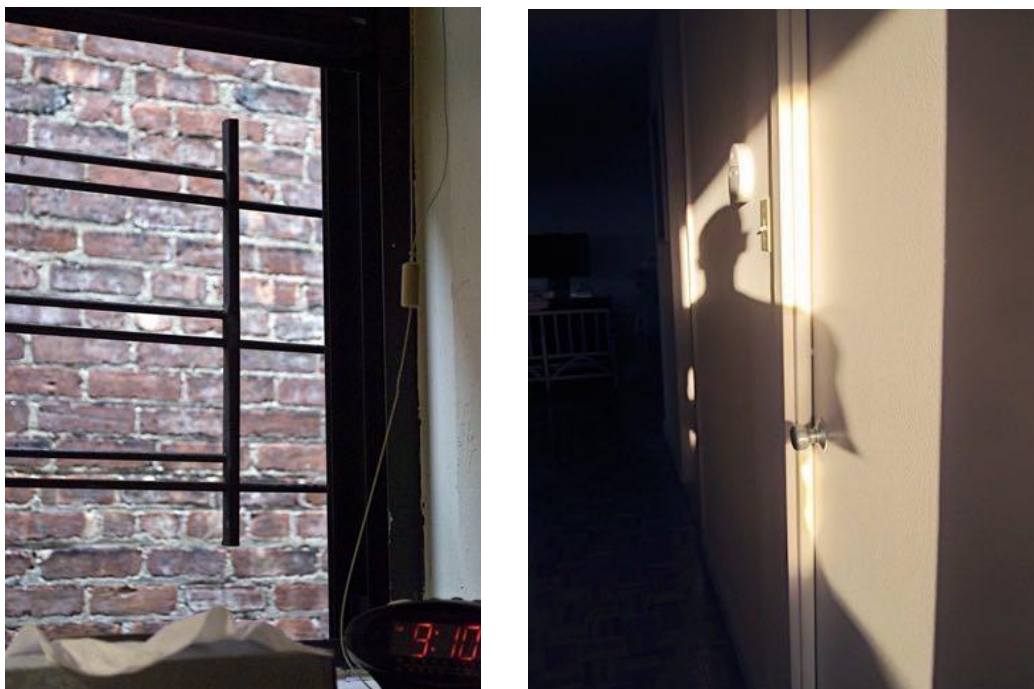
Figures 1-2. Leslie Feinberg's *walled in* (2009) and *Self-portrait in dawn light* (2011)

The album *Screened-In* consists of 119 photos all taken from the vantage point behind the screen or window of hir apartment (Figures 1-2). The first image, *walled in*, taken in June 18, 2009, shows an apartment window through which a brick wall is visible. It flags the affective sensorium of the project: the experience of feeling stuck between walls, closed off from the world. The last image was taken on July 15, 2011 and is the only picture that shows a trace of Feinberg's body through a shadow. *Self-portrait in dawn light* shows the outline of Feinberg's silhouette on a wall and a door frame, with the square of light indicating the window behind hir. There are hardly any appearances of the body in these photographs. Rather, the perspective of the images speaks to a particular embodied experience of immobility and

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[44] Ibid.

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isolation from which the pictures were taken. Most images show a combination of houses on the street, horizon, and open sky. A constant presence is the tracking of time passing through weather formations: there are sunrises, sunsets, snowstorms, mist, hot summer days, morning fog, full moons, and pink and orange twilight reflections. Little narratives emerge within a few images where some action seems to take place on the street: neighbors gathering in front of their houses, police cars parked outside a house where an eviction is taking place, street workers fixing a gap, or neighbors repairing their trucks. But the series does not aim to tell a story, but to share an embodied perspective from a screened-in life. The experience of disability is visualized through the quotidian intimacies of observation, peeking through a window and seeing an environment unfold around you. Feinberg merges the multiple meanings of "screen." Hir own life is screened off from the world, but also becomes a position from which to create an aesthetic sensibility for a particular vantage point for visualizing the world, using the window was a frame.

If politics takes place through the appearance of the body, as Butler suggests, *Screened-In* poses the question of what the appearance of the body looks like when appearing together in public is foreclosed. This question continues to be pertinent if we hold on to public assemblies and demonstrations as a prime locus for the performative enactment of an alternative political imagination. During recent waves of uprisings that have taken over North-American and European streets and squares such as Black Lives Matter, Women's March, and the Climate Strike, there has been an increasing attention to holding 'online marches' that take place through social media for those unable to physically join the demonstration. The development of a relationship between street politics and other forms of engagement has only become more pertinent during the COVID-19 lockdowns, attesting to the urgency of expanding our framework of what political agency looks like, and how to build a movement that can include multiple forms of appearing. As artist Johanna Hedva argues in her "Sick Woman Theory," many people are not able to enter the "space of appearance" and risk not being visible as political subjects: sick people, people with physical and mental disabilities, or people incarcerated in prisons all might be unable to enter the protests in its public formation.[45] Drawing on a feminist understanding of illness and disability, Hedva situates her theory in the Black Lives Matter protests in her neighborhood in Los Angeles in 2014. She writes: "I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose up my sick woman fist, in solidarity. […] So, as I lay there, unable to march, hold up a sign, shout

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[45] Johanna Hedva, 'Sick Woman Theory' *Mask Magazine*, np

a slogan that would be heard, or be visible in any traditional capacity as a political being, the central question of Sick Woman Theory formed: How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?"[46]

Consequently, practices in art and visual culture offer tools for creating an alternative visual vocabulary of appearing. Feinberg's amateur photo archive can thus be considered a precedent for a development in disability aesthetics that is oriented around an aesthetic sensibility that emerges from immobility: not being able to leave one's apartment or one's bed.[47] Removed from the scene of politics that is typically understood to be the street, such aesthetic practices reframe the "private" space of the apartment or the bed as a space of appearance itself. One can think of Liz Crow's *Bedding Out* (2012-2013), an art-activist performance in which she takes her bed-oriented life into public spaces to protest the cuts in welfare benefits in the UK.[48] Similarly, the work of U.S.-based artist Collander, specifically her video *sickbed* (2017), tracks the intertwinement between the everyday practices of getting through the day, as well as finding creative ways of making art and music from bed. The caption for *sickbed* reads: "My sick bed is ghost, dream, lover and wound."[49] These practices address the quotidian experiences of how disability informs practices of living, and can attune the viewer to reconsider what kind of bodily appearances qualify as performative enactments of the political.

Similarly, Feinberg's photo series creates a form of appearing that creates a record of a life made vulnerable through historical structures that foreclose trans livability. It offers an aesthetic sensibility that might be particular to a trans/disabled subject, but not limited or unique to that, and neither dependent on the showcasing of transness or disability on the body. There is no clear way to distinguish between Feinberg's work as a transgender activist or as a disability activist, since these interventions emerge in conjunction. In highlighting this often-overlooked archive of Feinberg's disability justice informed work, transgender politics does

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[46] Ibid., np

[47] This resonates with how Eunjung Kim, in her discussion of the violence of cure, invokes the bed as an in-between space that functions as a site of transformation: "In order to discuss the multiple meanings of cure in between times and categories, it is necessary to highlight the multiple meanings of disability. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha insightfully addresses the difficulty and importance of writing about disability in a multifaceted way: "It is so difficult to write both of what sucks about disability—the pain, the oppression, the impairment—and the joy of this body at the same time. The joy of this body comes from crip community and interdependence, but most of all, of the hard beauty of this life, built around all the time I must spend resting. The bed *is* the nepantla place of opening." *Nepantla* is a Náhuatl word meaning "torn between ways"; Gloria Anzaldúa conceptualizes it as an "in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries," in which transformations occur."" in *Curative Violence: Rehabilitation Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 17

[48] Documentation available on http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/bedding-out/

[49] The video "sickbed" is available on https://vimeo.com/203647965

not fade to the background, but we might arrive at a different perspective on transness. The political potential of transness has often been reified through tropes of mobility, allegorized as a "movement across" or the crossing of boundaries.[50] The trans-crip aesthetic sensibility of Feinberg's lingers in immobility and in being stuck, yet it would be misguided to not see political potential there. As Aren Aizura has argued, stuckness is "replete with liveliness and wild and directed impulses. We just need the right field of vision to perceive their power."[51]

Instead of exposing how trans and disabled subjects might not have access to a conventional space of appearance, I suggest the reverse, namely, that a foreclosure of being legible as a normative political subject opens up the possibility to reimagining the terms of appearance. Feinberg's work offers tools for rethinking what counts as a space of appearing, refusing to reify physical presence on the street as a precondition for the political performative force of the body. Building on this, I move into a discussion of how to mobilize "appearing" without relying on a demand for visibility. I stage this discussion through an analysis of Cassils's performance *Becoming an Image*, which centralizes the tension between the appearance of the body and the process of becoming visible. The performance thus explores the vexed relationship transgender subjects have to the visual field, and demonstrates a form of appearing that simultaneously challenges epistemologies of identity that rely on visibility.

1.1.2. Disintegrated Evidencing in Cassils's *Becoming an Image*

To witness the live performance of *Becoming an Image* is a disorienting experience. Guided into position by performance assistants, the audience is assembled in a circle around a 1000 kilogram block of clay.[52] The smooth surfaces and the contours of the massive clay block are barely made visible by the little flashlights that the performance assistants briefly use to put the spectators in their position. Standing in total darkness, the audience initially only senses the beginning of the performance by hearing the breath and bodily movements of Cassils, followed by the thuds of the punches and kicks landing on the clay block. We can sense an aggressive defiance to the intensity with which Cassils throws themself into a fight with the clay. While Cassils circles the block of clay, a photographer is conducting an equally elaborate

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[50] Aren Aizura, "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives" in *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition* ed. Trystan Cotten (New York: Routledge, 2012), 139-156

[51] Aren Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 219

[52] *Becoming an Image* was initially performed in 2012 in Los Angeles, but with continuing iterations in various places. I attended the performance on June 15, 2018, at Gösserhallen, Vienna.

choreography to capture the performance from different angles using a flash camera. In the midst of a performance saturated with movement and intensities, the sharp strobe flash of the camera creates an image for the audience, a moment of visibility that allows us to see what is happening in front of us in otherwise total darkness. The flash literally burns a still image on the retina of the spectator, allowing you to see a particular moment in which Cassils attacks the clay, jumps on it, grabs it, wrestles with it, or kicks it. The afterimage lingers for a few brief seconds, creating a mismatch between what the audience sees (a moment that has already passed), and the sounds of the body that have continued. As Eliza Steinbock suggests, this afterimage is paradoxically non-representational: light is used to "blind vision so that the spectator can see something beyond visuality."[53] Steinbock usefully points out the tension that Cassils puts forth in this performance: both inviting and troubling vision, the flash functions not so much in the service of making Cassils's body visible, but rather impresses a felt sensation of the shock of image making.

Cassils (U.S.) is a contemporary visual artist who works with their body as a medium, across performance, photography, video, sculpture and installation. Their work has been analyzed in relation to how they bring a queer perspective to bear on minimalist art practice, to how they address the violence of transphobia and gender norms more broadly, and how they investigate practices of survival. More specifically, *Becoming an Image*'s intense physical performance and the forceful duration of the afterimage are elements which have been typically been read within a context of trans practices of resilience.[54] Often, the violence that is part of the performance is considered to have an indexical relationship to an ongoing epidemic of violence against trans people.[55] As Jeanne Vaccaro states: "the performance generates a monument to trans and queer risk by evoking the vulnerability of transgender life and the violence threatening its survival, a violence that is physical, legislative, social, sexual, and historical."[56] However, in my reading of the performance, I focus less on their work as a commentary on violence against transgender people, and I move away from understanding the

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[53] Eliza Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes: On Imaging Trans Violence in Heather Cassils' Durational Art," *Photography & Culture* 7, no. 3 (2014): 262

[54] Ana Horvat, "Tranimacies and Affective Trans Embodiment in Nina Arsenault's Silicone Diaries and Cassils's Becoming an Image" *Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 2 (2018): 395- 415; Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes": 253-268

[55] K. J. Rawson, "Witness, Bystander, or Aggressor? Encountering Cassils," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 6, no. 1 (2019): 88; Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes": 258; Alex Teplitzky "Cassils Makes Work That Calls Attention to Violence Against LGBTQI Bodies" Creative Capital, last accessed April 13, 2021, https://creative-capital.org/2017/08/24/cassils/

[56] Jeanne Vaccaro, "Embodied Risk: Cassils" *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 1 (2018): 113

purpose of their practice to create a monument to trans and queer lives.[57] Rather, I argue that *Becoming an Image* puts pressure on exactly the possibility of providing evidence of transgender identity, thus offering a visceral exploration of how vulnerability and appearing. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, in the context of transgender cultural production, strategies for moving around the violence of representation are urgently needed. For transgender subjects, the appearance of the body in visual culture is fraught with encounters with gender norms that determine the visual legibility of the body. Bodily forms are taken as evidence for a gendered subjectivity, or, alternatively, the lack of "proof" means risking becoming illegible as a political subject at all. In asking how the process of appearing might be enacted differently, I consider Cassils's performance to speak to the difference between the appearance of the body, and the visibility of the body.

Becoming an Image offers a way of appearing differently by taking the material apparatus of "making visible," but for the purpose of unsettling visibility itself. The process of "becoming an image" is haunted by the violent ways in which trans bodies are captured in image and representation through the act of being photographed. As David Getsy argues, the problem of visibility in trans history makes for a double bind for trans cultural production: on the one hand, there is a need to assert one's presence in order to demand political recognition, while on the other hand, cultural narratives use representation as a "burden of proof" where there is visual evidence of the before/after transformation, often fetishizing the trans body.[58] The bodily transformation that takes in the time span of *Becoming an Image* displaces the transformation narratives typically central to scripts of transgender representation. If becoming trans is often predicated on fitting into the structure of gender binarism, and thus erasing the trace of transness, the performance troubles the possibility of a finalized image that allows the viewer to position Cassils's body along a trajectory of trans becoming. There are no moments that can provide a before or after image, only an open-ended becoming that defies to stick to the options laid out by gender binarism. The transformation of the body is not reduced to the signification of gender, or even a reveal of gendered body parts that, as Danielle M. Seid argues, cultural narratives typically rely on to "make public the 'truth' of the trans person's gendered

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[57] My shift in focus is against certain readings of Cassils's work, but also moves away from Cassils's own monumentalizing gestures. In addition, I am interested in a more complex discourse about violence against transgender people, since there is a great diversity in how transgender people appear, and with what kinds of consequences. Hence, the structure of transphobic violence needs to be understood in terms of how gender binarism operates differentially in conjunction with racism, homophobia, and sexism.

[58] David Getsy, "The Image of Becoming: Heather Cassils's Allegories of Trans Formation," in *Cassils* (Eindhoven: MU Eindhoven, 2015), 12

and sexed body."[59] Hence, Cassils's transformation unsettles dimorphic scripts of gender, and the trans body refuses to be objectified as an object of knowledge or fetishized fascination. Instead, the transformation that takes place tells a story about vulnerability through the body's encounters with others. By making the process of image-making a violent, disrupting moment, Cassils problematizes scripts of transgender representation. *Becoming an Image* is in this way a performative imaging of becoming: the image no longer refers to a stable object that offers transparent access to a depiction of a figuration of the body. Instead, the image is a material but fleeting experience, performative in how it moves the audience and their capacity to sense the body in front of them.

Figure 3. Cassils's *Becoming an Image* (2012-ongoing)

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[59] Danielle M. Seid, "Reveal," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 176

Consequently, the performance's intervention into the becoming visible of the transgender body is a form of appearing that challenges the centrality of visibility for epistemologies of the body. It affirms Butler's proposition that the vulnerability of embodiment places a political demand, yet expands the visual frames through which the appearance of the body takes form. Central to this form of appearing is the refusal of evidencing the trans body, and instead, a form of appearing takes place where disintegration is central to the becoming of the body. With each tactile encounter, the monolithic clay block is transformed, not exactly into an intelligible shape, but definitely into a different form and body. The impact of hands, feet, knees and elbows pushes the clay into all sort of directions (Figure 3). As the performance goes on, the tense muscles of Cassils start to mirror the increasing transformed clay, two fleshy objects impacting each other, both subjects and objects of violence. The performance is both an attack on the clay as well as an attack on Cassils's body. With each encounter, their muscles grow stronger but also tired. *Becoming an Image* shows how a body becomes a tool with which a sculpture is made, but it is the body that is sculpted itself in the process. This dual entanglement of disintegration and becoming - destruction and regeneration - lies at the heart of how Cassils's performance offers an understanding of the capacity to appear. Instead of providing monumental visible evidence that can testify to trans existence, *Becoming an Image* shows how appearing can occur through disintegration and dis-appearance.

Cassils's process of appearing is not about a singular body becoming visible, but about an interaction with an ensemble of bodies that explores the formal tendencies that subtend the body's visibility. One can sense their increasing exhaustion, hear them catching their breath and gasping for air. Smudges of clay stick on Cassils's body, and I can hear little pieces of clay flying around the room, as well as drops of sweat hitting the floor. The performance ends after roughly thirty minutes, when Cassils runs out of oxygen. Both bodies of the performance are left in ruins and in pieces, and as a spectator, you share an affective attunement to the labour and energy that has transformed these bodies. As Amelia Jones writes: "The clay presents itself as having been made, having been formed by an intense artistic labor; as I engage it, it enacts and enlivens my own sense of embodiment."[60] When I have later left the performance space, I notice that crumbles of clay are sticking underneath my shoe. I peel it off, roll it into a ball, and put the clay in my pocket. Ostensibly, this ball of clay bears little reference to what a transgender body looks like, but it demonstrates the material and immaterial traces left by the

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[60] Amelia Jones, "Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic "Work," and New Concepts of Agency" *TDR/The Drama Review* 59, no. 4 (2015): 20

performance, which created a shared subject of the performer's body, the body of clay, and the body of the audience. The piece produces an alternative formal register of how the body becomes visible, for both the performer and the audience. As Cassils shares in an interview: "[a]lthough it is made by my body, it is really a formal representation of violence. If we were going to ask the question "what does violence look like?" which is such an abstract question, then this index of a faithful attack which is, although it's made by my body, it becomes a sort of record of the possibility of multiple bodies."[61] In this way, Cassils creates a shared sensorium of vulnerability that shows the possibility for the body to appear - not whole, but in its disintegration - while simultaneously refusing the body's visibility.

Vulnerability, then, is not a descriptor for trans people as a vulnerable population, but instead, works here as a concept that indexes the vulnerability of appearing before others. In elucidating what *Becoming an Image* can teach us about "appearing," it is appropriate to call on the prompt that led to the development of this performance. Commissioned by the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, the first instantiation of the performance took place during the event "Transactivation: Revealing Queer Histories in the Archive," which sought to discuss "the 'Ts' and 'Qs' often missing from historical records."[62] The task of revealing queer histories or exploring what is missing and lost in the Gay and Lesbian archives lends itself to a logic of evidencing: to show proof of existence that can reckon with the bodies, lives, and experiences that have disappeared. But Cassils does not provide an alternative image that would be able to fill in the gap created by violent histories of erasure. Instead, the performance attacks the site on which bodily form might be transformed into gendered scripts of appearing. In this way, Cassils's performance troubles the process of evidencing identity and appearing itself, offering moments of flashes and disintegration instead.

Cassils's work links up with how contemporary Euro-American aesthetic productions addressing transgender issues find both visual and non-visual strategies for navigating protocols of visibility of both neoliberal identity politics as well as medical regimes. For example, in her writings on textile and fiber art, Jeanne Vaccaro dislodges the diagnostic visual modality by highlighting the handmade labor of transgender subjectivity.[63] The dual focus on crafts and crafting identity circumvents the pre-determined way of knowing trans bodies through diagnosis, and instead foregrounds a haptic epistemology where the trans body is not

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[61] E. Cram, "Cassils: On Violence, Witnessing, and the Making of Trans Worlds," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 6, no. 1 (2019): 119

[62] "Transactivation: Revealing Queer Histories in the Archive" ONE Archives, last accessed on April 13, 2021, https://one.usc.edu/program/transactivation-revealing-queer-histories-archive

[63] Jeanne Vaccaro, "Handmade" *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 96

known in advance but crafted through affective labour.[64] She writes: "Transgender life is made and remade as matter, identity, politics. The handmade generates new evidence of what a body and its difference might be."[65] Alternatively, artistic practices can shift the focus from how the trans body is made to how the trans body is unmade. In this vein, Jack Halberstam locates the potential of "unbuilding" gender in "anarchitectural" trans performance art which foregrounds unbecoming, thereby abolishing the frames through which the transgender body is viewed.[66] Similarly, scholars and artists reveal the potential of abstraction to allow for an aesthetic practice that refuses strategies of visibility.[67] Moreover, the ordering principles of visual representation might be turned on their head through what Nicole Archer calls "pattern-jamming", referring to aesthetic practices that trouble the patterns in both popular culture and legislation that mediate the terms through which transness passes into "proper view."[68] As Jeannine Tang argues, cultural patterns of narrating transness lean on including "teleological accounts of transitioning experiences and the normalizing redemption stories that define the putative 'transgender experience.'"[69] For minoritarian subjects whose marginalized status is legitimized by "the ways in which their very being threatens the order of things", aesthetic practices that mobilize and manipulate figures of patterns and create visual noise can "gesture toward and theorize the possibility of 'another way.'"[70]

This growing body of artistic practice and scholarship is creating important avenues for seeing, sensing, and knowing trans bodies otherwise. Cassils's *Becoming an Image* contributes to this body of work through their performative engagement with the apparatus of image-making, substituting a static, transparent image for a collective and affective experience of the making and unmaking of the body. It finds a way of working with the figuration of the body, yet does not offer visual signs of the body to function as evidence for a pre-determined notion of trans identity. In this way, the performance offers an important alternative to the ways in which the visibility of bodily difference is instrumental to contemporary forms of transgender inclusion. Transgender aesthetics respond to new regimes of transgender incorporation into

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[64] Jeanne Vaccaro, "Feeling and Fractals: Wooly Ecologies of Transgender Matter" *GLQ* 21, no.2-3 (2015): 275; Halberstam, *Trans**, 92

[65] Vaccaro, "Handmade," 97

[66] Jack Halberstam, "Unbuilding Gender" *Places Journal* (October 2018), np

[67] Getsy, "Appearing Differently," 43; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 110

[68] Nicole Archer, "Dynamic Static" in *Trap Door* eds. Tourmaline et al., 298

[69] Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures" in *Trap Door* eds. Tourmaline et al., 371

[70] Archer, "Dynamic Static," 314, 300

neoliberal modes of value production, what Dan Irving terms "normalized transgressions."[71] Responding to how frameworks of necropolitics fail to grasp how the 'excluded' are available for endless reincorporation through neoliberal subjectivation, Aren Aizura notes that "rather than excluding the disadvantaged […] capital incorporates their needs, desires, into its fabric."[72] However, what is at stake is not only the incorporation of transgender politics through assimilation into neoliberal citizenship structures, but how trans visibility itself is turned into value, when premised on linear narratives of self-actualization rather than broader notions of transformative justice. As Emmanuel David points out in his analysis of transgender assimilation into corporate capitalism and commodity culture, "trans visibility has the potential to produce social, political, and economic value."[73] What is at times considered an unprecedented form of transgender emancipation in contemporary Euro-American contexts has to be situated in a dynamic of inclusion that turns 'difference' into what Jasbir Puar calls a "prized capacity," part of a "more generalized transformation of capacitated bodies into viable neoliberal subjects."[74] Taking cue from this critical literature on how transness is incorporated into neoliberal citizenship structures, I want to highlight how the ability to convert the 'evidence' of transgender bodies into a political currency is contingent on a narrow and normative framework of recognition and legibility. Hence, aesthetics practices that unsettle this framework, such as Cassils's *Becoming an Image*, provide a much-needed intervention that challenges the demand for visibility and expands the visual codes of how gendered embodiment can be articulated. If the visibility of trans bodies, and difference more broadly, inevitably get caught in logics of neoliberal value production, the question at hand is not so much how to articulate resistance against this process, but how to diversify and disaggregate the ways in which the body can appear.

By developing "appearing" as a process that can trouble the visual field of the intelligibility of "difference," my aim is to contribute to an understanding of the performative potential of embodied life, in its various (dis- and re-) appearances, at the nexus of aesthetics and politics. Both Feinberg and Cassils's aesthetic practice demonstrate the need to qualify Butler's theory of appearing within the particular relationships that transgender and disabled subjects have to the field of vision. Framing aesthetic practice as a form of appearing allows

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[71] Dan Irving, "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive" *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 38-59

[72] Aren Aizura, "Trans feminine value, racialized others, and the limits of necropolitics" in *Queer Necropolitics* eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kunstman, Silvia Posocco (London: Routledge), 142

[73] Emmanuel David, "Capital T: Trans visibility, corporate capitalism, and commodity culture," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2017): 30

[74] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 54, 47

us to expand the norms of recognition that structure the space of appearance, and attend to the political demands enacted by vulnerable embodiment. These important interventions offer us a useful entry point into a consideration of the aesthetic as concerned with the appearance of the body. The work of Feinberg and Cassils demonstrates, as I explore in the next section, how aesthetic practices offer tools for new ways of seeing and knowing bodies, in ways that unsettle normative figurations of the human.

1.2. Transgender and Disability Aesthetics

So far, I have outlined how Judith Butler's notion of "appearing," where the vulnerability of embodiment places a political demand for liveable life, is pertinent for transgender and disability aesthetics and politics. This becomes clearer once we qualify how transgender and disability aesthetics can create forms of appearing that challenge traditional parameters of performative politics reliant on (street) presence and visibility. Aesthetic practices play a crucial role in instantiating new forms of appearances, ones that can re-orient the ways in which we see and sense bodily differences. Consequently, I understand transgender and disability aesthetics to be concerned with appearances of the body that challenge traditional frames of legibility and recognition. I am interested in the capacity of aesthetic practices to instantiate bodies and subjective outside of normative figurations of the human while taking the appearance of the body as a key site of contestation. My aim here is to inquire into how aesthetic practices can attend to transness and disability as embodied experiences but also phenomena that can re-articulate the relationship between the body and the social. Hence, I ask, how can aesthetic practices explore transness and disability in a way that does not limit or essentialize what these positions can be?[75]

Crucially, as I flagged in the introduction to this dissertation, this means I approach the aesthetic as a site of refusal. The aesthetic practices discussed in the following chapters are less concerned with delineating how transness and disability could or should be visualized or represented, but rather, are interested in how they enact a refusal of a particular visual order of transness and disability in relation to normative morphology. This aesthetic refusal takes on different forms in the cultural productions I analyze, where artists and activists unsettle the "locatedness" of the body through performative practices of re-enactment (Chapter 2), use

[75] This formulation is indebted to Dana Seitler's question of what a 'queer aesthetic' might be, in: Seitler, "Making Sexuality Sensible: Tammy Rae Carland's and Catherine Opie's Queer Aesthetic Forms" in *Feeling Photography* eds. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 47

sculpture and installation practices to interrogate the terms on which "different" subjects are included into a social order (Chapter 3), or trouble the transparency of the image through opaque visual sensory practices (Chapter 4). These practices call on the body's sensory systems to become sensible to transness and disability in new ways. In order to frame those analyses as being concerned with transgender and disability aesthetics, I want to elaborate my conceptualization of the aesthetics. Transgender and disability aesthetics, as I approach it in this dissertation, is not about providing insight into "experiences" of transness or disability, and neither is it a project of overturning registers of disgust into beauty. Rather, transgender and disability aesthetic practices offer modalities of seeing and knowing bodies differently, disrupting the visual epistemologies central to modernity's celebration of transparency and fascination with the liberal human's "others."

In doing so, I move away from a definition of aesthetics as a philosophy of beauty towards a broader understanding of aesthetics as the capacity to intervene in the "common sense." The difference between these two approaches can be illustrated by taking Tobin Siebers's *Disability Aesthetics* as an example. In this book, Siebers argues that disability is ubiquitously present in art history but rarely recognized as such. In particular, he proposes to think of the complex representations of the human body in modern art as a form of disability aesthetics. Central to modern art, he argues, is the embrace of disability as "a distinct version of the beautiful."[76] He writes: "To what concept, other than disability, might be referred modern art's love affair with misshaped and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh?"[77] While the relationship between deformity, the wound, or brokenness and aesthetics has not gone unnoticed in art history, Siebers contributes to this field by specifically introducing disability as an aesthetic value central to modern art rather than breaking with it.[78] While people with disabilities are routinely disqualified on aesthetic terms, such as disfigurement or deformity, Siebers attempts to illustrate that such aesthetic terms are in fact central to modern art. What seems useful about this approach is that it allows a reckoning of how aesthetic practices relate to disability even if they do not explicitly or on their own terms deal with disability as an identity.[79] However, by redefining modern art as primarily concerned

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[76] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 35

[77] Ibid., 4

[78] See for example Hal Foster "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic." *October* 78, no. 4 (1996): 106–24.

[79] It is worth noting that this is also where Siebers's theory of disability aesthetics get muddled. Defining aesthetics as "the way that some bodies make other bodies feel", Siebers does not limit his consideration of the aesthetic domain to artistic or cultural artifacts or practices, but includes human bodies as aesthetic objects as well. This definition of aesthetics conflates three 'bodies': the body of the artist, the body of work, and disability

with disability aesthetics - "modern art comes over time to be identified with disability" - Siebers includes disability into a traditional understanding of aesthetics as primarily pertaining to beauty.

A very different approach to aesthetics, one attentive to how aesthetics is a site of contestation for how we see, sense, and know bodies, might be developed from the vantage point of a political perspective on aesthetics. In the work of Jacques Rancière, the realms of politics and aesthetics are intimately connected and are both tied to his concept of the "distribution of the sensible," which refers to a "mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought."[80] For Rancière, a dominant order is sustained through the regulation of the distribution of the sensible, which sets out the parameters of which people and which phenomena have political importance. This bears resonance to the question of how and when the appearance of the body evidences political subjectivity, as addressed in this chapter. Politics, then, takes place when the field of the sensible is redistributed, "when ways of being, saying, and doing are reconfigured to make room for the emergence of new modes of subjectivization and inscription within a common world."[81] Rancière's understanding of aesthetics transcends a philosophy of beauty as well as a framework of aesthetics as limited to artworks, but refers more broadly to the coordinates of the visible and the sayable. But this does not mean there is not a role for artworks. The role of art, and aesthetic practices more broadly, in instantiating politics is less about artworks with explicit political goals and a set of

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as an aesthetic value. This conflation has as a consequence that it remains unaddressed how 'disability aesthetics' might be qualified differently if we are taking as a subject matter disabled artists, art works that take up disability as a thematic, or the aesthetic organizing principle that 'disability' indexes disfigurement and deformity in art. What is at stake in this conflation becomes clear in one of the few examples where he discusses the work of an artist explicitly working from a position of disability. One such example is the work of fiber sculptor Judith Scott. Scott's sculptures are various shapes and sizes but all recognizable by the various threads and materials that are wrapped around a no longer visible core object. Scott is internationally renowned and her fiber sculptures have been exhibited in numerous galleries and museums. Scott was born with Down syndrome and was institutionalized for the first decades of her life, but later enrolled in the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland (US), where people with developmental disabilities are supported in their artistic practice. For the cover of her book Touching Feeling, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick chose a photograph of Judith Scott embracing one of her fiber sculptures, appreciating how Scott's work has an "haptic absorption" that helps her think through her concepts of texture and touch. In Tobin Sieber's discussion of this oeuvre, Scott's experience of disability is framed as at odds with aesthetic principles. For example, he writes: "What makes the fiber sculptures even more staggering as works of art is the fact that Scott has no conception of the associations sparked by her objects and no knowledge of the history of art." This apparent fetishization of the disabled artist as supremely capable is based on a understanding of aesthetics from the position of able-bodiedness. By arguing that Scott had no self-understanding of being an "artist" and no intention to make "art", Siebers erases the possibility of disability aesthetics to expand the political potential of aesthetics. He is invested in applying 'disability' to traditional notions of art, but not so much in the reversal: examining how disability might challenge what we even understand to be aesthetics. (Siebers, 16, 25)

[80] Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 82

[81] Raji Vallury, "Politicizing Art in Rancière and Deleuze: The Case of Postcolonial Literature" in *Jacques Rancière: history, politics, aesthetics* eds. Gabriel Rockhill & Philip Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 229

intended outcomes, such as, for example, more awareness about oppression, but is more concerned with the capacity to make a cut in the common sensory form, which may have a variety of outcomes. From this perspective, aesthetic practices can unsettle the given of the common sense by "inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities."[82]

The political stakes of aesthetic practices are echoed by Kandice Chuh's proposition for an aesthetics "after Man"[83] In her book *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, Chuh demonstrates the centrality of the aesthetic in formulations of liberal humanism, exemplified by Kant's theory of the simultaneous subjective and universal character of aesthetic experience, and argues that the aesthetic has been integral to the production of human's others unfit for subjectivity.[84] But instead of rejecting the realm of the aesthetic for its consolidation of a liberal understanding of the human, Chuh argues that it is the aesthetic encounter that also can engender a disidentification with (neo)liberal humanism.[85] She writes: "If modernity is understood to be characterized by a compulsory aesthetic othering, mining the radical unpredictability of art and being - before its designation as "art" and "human" - bears promise for reconciling otherness itself."[86] In this way, Chuh proposes that the realm of the aesthetic is a rich site, as well as method, for enunciating alternatives to (neo)liberal humanism through the apprehension of "uncommon sensibilities."[87] We can transpose Chuh's proposition to a consideration of transgender and disability aesthetics by looking at the ways in which scholars and artists use the aesthetic encounter to unsettle normative figurations of the human. As we saw with the example with which I opened this dissertation, the statement by Mel Baggs (re-enacted by Wu Tsang) called forth the experience of being designated a "non-person," and called for a reckoning with, to use their words, "the many shapes of personhood." This is not a demand for being included into normative figurations of the "human," but rather, exposes it limits and demands alternatives. Indeed, from the vantage points of transgender studies and disability studies, the 'human' has been a fraught orientation point for overturning structures of oppression, given its projection of nonhuman or animal status onto disabled and gender

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[82] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 139
[83] Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), xi
[84] Ibid., xi-xii
[85] Ibid., xii, 22
[86] Ibid., 19
[87] Ibid., 3

nonconforming bodies.[88] Instead of trying to overturn the exclusion from the realm of the human into inclusion, some of the most productive work takes place when we can take the potentiality of the inhumanness of trans and disability to open up new understandings of embodiment, subjectivity, and relationality. Practices in trans and disability aesthetics can engender a "turn away from the demand of full humanity," a demand that, as Puar suggests, is circumscribed by an ableist frame of legibility.[89] What emerges at these intersections is an exploration of how the designation of "unfit" for human subjectivity can be a departure point for exploring how nonhuman positions offer a vocabulary for grasping material becomings. As Dana Luciano and Mel Chen suggest, "the figure of the queer/trans body does not merely unsettle the human as norm; it generates other possibilities - multiple, cyborgian, spectral, transcorporeal, transmaterial - for living."[90] For my purposes here, an aesthetic turn away from (neo)liberal understandings of the human does not just necessitate affirmations of the nonhuman or the inhuman, but can attune us to forms of embodiment, relations, forms, and sociality outside its normative form. By unsettling and expanding how transness and disability appear, the aesthetic practices in the next chapters take the figuration of the body as a key site of contestation.

Transgender and disability aesthetic practices can serve an epistemological function by re-articulating how we know the world, disrupting the fields of the sensible, and making bodies, objects, forms, and textures intelligible in new ways. Crucially, the body is no longer an exceptional, singular form that provides evidence of trans or disabled identities. Instead, these aesthetic practices take transness and disability as forces that re-articulate the body's embeddedness in the world, enabling a consideration of trans and disability conjunctures and affinities. As Dana Seitler proposes:

"The aesthetic encounter, in other words, is one in which we may glimpse our relatedness in the world, where we may fantasize about our affinities and affiliations, not with the aim of producing clarity or coherence about those affiliations but by means of which their very gathering mobilizes new ways of making sense of ourselves in the

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[88] Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017); Hayward & Weinstein, "Introduction"

[89] Dana Luciano & Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ* 21, no. 2 (2015): 187; Puar, *Right to Maim*, 29

[90] Luciano & Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?", 187

world or, at the very least, acts as a counter to the forms of alienation experienced every day by non-majority subjects."[91]

In other words, encounters with practices in transgender and disability aesthetics mobilize transness and disability as forces that can make sense of the world in new ways. Hence, I follow Gayatri Gopinath's emphasis on aesthetic *practices* rather than just aesthetic forms, because of the performative force they enact in making an intervention into the world rather than rendering the world apparent.[92] By engendering an outlook that resist the absorption of the "difference" of the trans/disabled body into the social body, the cultural productions under review in the following chapters demonstrate a critique of a subject oriented towards normalization and rehabilitation. What they offer instead are new ways of understanding the sociality of the body, and consequently, they help us approach new forms of social relationality.

My analyses in the following chapters build on this understanding of aesthetics and explore how trans/crip appearances challenge us to rethink how we see and know formations of transgender and disability. The next chapter, "Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* and the Performance of Trans-Crip Adjacencies," explores how a video-performance by Wu Tsang deploys techniques of re-enactment and appropriation that prompt the viewer to sense trans-crip adjacencies that disrupt the contemporary consolidations of "transgender" as separate from disability.

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[91] Seitler, "Making Sexuality Sensible," 52
[92] Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 16

2. Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* and the Performance of Trans-Crip Adjacencies

Figure 4. Still image of Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* (2008)

In her video installation *Shape of a Right Statement*, (2008) Wu Tsang stares directly into the camera and speaks to the viewer: "The thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language". The tight nylon cap on hear head, commonly used to support a wig, and the shimmering golden curtain behind her figure contrast with the static delivery of the statement, confusing the viewer's interpretation of the genre of practice as well as time and space where this takes place (Figure 4). For the duration of the six-minute video, Tsang shares a statement about how normative language and communication create exclusionary structures of personhood. Her voice is monotone and oddly stable, and her pronunciation and emphasis of each word is automated, as if the voice is not coming from Tsang's body but from elsewhere. Something does not sound entirely "right." In the middle of the video, the pace changes, and with slight pauses in between, Tsang utters these sentences: "I smell things / I listen to things / I feel things / I taste things / I look at things." She goes on to state that she has to direct these actions - smelling, listening, feeling, tasting, looking - to the "right" things and not to the "wrong" things, or else people doubt she is a proper person. In this way, the statement formulates a critique on a definition of a subject whose boundaries are circumscribed by proper sociality through right and wrong attachments and relations, a definition upheld through a reliance on, and exclusion of, the many Humans's "others." The visceral assertions are seemingly simple, but from the credits at the end of the video the viewer learns that the "I"

who was speaking is different from what appeared at first sight. The words are taken from the video statement *In My Language* from Mel Baggs, a US-based autism activist who uploaded their video to YouTube in 2007.[1] Tsang's video plays on loop, allowing the viewer to re-watch Tsang's re-enactment of Baggs's statement, scrutinizing the delivery of the statement, understanding how and when the words make sense, or not.

Watching *Shape of a Right Statement* on loop, I felt and thought that Tsang's re-enactment generates something both discomforting and generative. Baggs's statement concerns their own experiences of exclusion as a non-verbal autistic person, who is often considered to fail to approximate human language and subjectivity. They are a strong advocate against the oppression of neurodiverse people. By taking their words and re-enacting them, Tsang's video-performance can seem appropriative, perhaps even repeating the violence that Baggs so strongly advocates against. Yet, Tsang's work raises important questions: How does Baggs's statement speak to the world that Tsang is positioned in, whose artistic work typically explores the cultural practices of marginalized subjects along lines of race, gender, and sexuality? If Tsang creates a relationship between two sites of identity and politics that are not obviously connected, how might this relationship be characterized: one of recognition, or perhaps solidarity?

Evidently, *Shape of a Right Statement* has spurred my thoughts about the affinities between transgender and disability politics, inquiring into both why transness and disability are not often explored in conjunction in artistic practices, and what this move might enable for understanding transness and disability in aesthetic, political, and epistemological terms. This chapter elaborates my interest in teasing out the consequences of what Tsang's art work generates: a relationship of affinity between minoritarian subjects in a time where the concretization of identity categories is sedimented in art and activism. If 'trans' and 'disability' nominally refer to separate axis of identity, indexing particular arenas of academic inquiry, advocacy work, aesthetic practices, or political activism, I approach these here trough a conceptual lens of 'adjacency'. I understand the concept of adjacency to refer to how elements operate alongside of each other, whose proximity touches without totally merging. Adjacency is an aesthetic frequency that shifts focus from indexing the parameters of our embodied situatedness in the world, to the relationality established between minoritarian positions. Instead of locating precise points of intersection, an approach that would privilege the formation of a trans-disabled subject, I take cue from the formal qualities of *Shape of a Right*

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[1] Mel Baggs uses they/them pronouns.

Statement and trace the ways in which disability and transness speak to each other. In *Shape of a Right Statement*, Tsang's re-enactment technique recirculates activist material from an ostensibly different political scene, that of neurodiversity activism, and brings it to echo with her world of trans of color activism and art. This move engenders an effect of dislocation that opens up a site for rethinking what alliances between minoritarian political attachments can look like. For me, such a rethinking is informed by José Esteban Muñoz's work on "brown feelings", in which he articulated the ways in which aesthetics practices can map minoritarian becomings.[2] He writes: "In some cases aesthetic practices and performances offer a particular theoretical lens to understand the ways in which different circuits of belonging connect, which is to say that recognition flickers between minoritarian subjects."[3] In this chapter, I conceptualize this "flickering between minoritarian subjects" as a form of adjacency, building on Tina Campt's theorization of adjacency as a form of proximity that demands accountability to its relationality.[4]

I further argue that adjacencies appear through affective infrastructures of belonging that exceed what can be delineated as "one's own experience." Adjacency thus circumvents ownership logics of who can say what, or who can produce what kind of art, and instead pays attention to past and future alliances that refuse to isolate minoritarian subjects. The confusion and misalignment that accompanies *Shape of a Right Statement* creates a transitive site in which the terms of race, gender, and disability are brought into proximity and are re-articulated through their relationality. Moreover, adjacency can name these affinities whilst preserving their partial opacity, offering a sense (both as knowledge and sensation) of adjacency rather than a categorical ordering.

In what follows, I argue that Wu Tsang's aesthetic practice embodies a tension between shared experiences of oppression and the problematic of "speaking for." In addition, the video-performance *Shape of a Right Statement* explores the relationality and proximity of transness and disability that opens up a site for understanding trans-crip adjacencies. My analysis is guided by the following research questions: How does a disjuncture between embodiment and verbal enunciation, performed through re-enactment, straddle the tension between appropriation and affiliation? And, secondly, making these formal techniques bear on how transness and disability are made sensible in relation to each other, how does disability speak

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[2] Jose Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position", *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 679

[3] Ibid.

[4] Tina Campt, "Black visuality and the practice of refusal", *Women & Performance* 29, no. 1 (2019): 80

to transness? I take her work to be instructive for a shift from "speaking from" or "speaking for" towards a "speaking with," which keeps the spatial coordinates of locations of speaking in the background but puts emphasis on the relationality established between them.

This chapter opens with an examination of Wu Tsang's *Wildness* (2012), a documentary-film that explores the life inside and around the Silver Platter bar in Los Angeles and the various groups of people that are attracted to the bar's nightlife and community. *Wildness* signals Tsang's interest and investment in the politics of representing and visualizing something as complex and incoherent as a "queer of color community." In addition, *Wildness* illuminates how Tsang approaches the entanglement of aesthetics and politics, and her attempt to capture the messiness of affinities, pleasure, and solidarities on the margin. My discussion of *Wildness,* then, serves to flag how Tsang's aesthetic practice works with the concept of adjacency.

This leads to an analysis of *Shape of a Right Statement*, where I pay specific attention to the tensions that Tsang's re-enactment of Mel Baggs's statement brings forth. In doing so, I map a shift in critical debates about appropriation in art, from it being engaged with as a subversive practice of appropriating hegemonic forms, to a term that signals the act of representing experiences that are not one's own. This crucial shift has left us with a lack of critical tools to understand how artistic practices of appropriation that draw on experiences of oppression can also enable gestures of solidarity. Tina Campt's (2019) theorization of adjacency fills this gap, and allows us to understand Tsang's appropriation of Baggs's work as enacting a form of trans-crip adjacency.

In the last section of the chapter, I turn to the question of what insights are enabled by approaching transness and disability as adjacent to each other. In challenging the historical and epistemological splitting of transness and disability, adjacency offers a constructive way of approach trans-disability relationalities that attends to challenging their epistemological coherency without collapsing one into the other. In particular, and building on scholarship on queer and trans necropolitics (Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013), I want to question how the coupling of transgender embodiment or political organizing with other sites of identity is part of a "common sense" along lines of sexuality, race, ability, and citizenship. I lean on Jasbir Puar's (2017) work on "becoming trans" and "becoming disabled" in which she demonstrates how transness and disability implicate each other in complex ways. She suggests moving from "epistemological correctives" to "ontological multiplicity" - a shift that I understand to open up a critical distance between the categories of identity that inform both aesthetic and political practices, and various bodily experiences. In this way, the performance of trans-crip

adjacencies challenges a representationalist approach to identity, in both its visual and political sense, and troubles the "proper" belonging of a subject to a category of identity. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that the re-enactment that takes place in *Shape of a Right Statement* is a generative force that misaligns and dislocates identity, allowing for a modality of 'speaking with' to emerge that multiplies our vocabulary of minoritarian becoming and belonging.

2.1. Wu Tsang's Impossible Images

Before focusing on the articulation of trans-crip adjacencies in *Shape of a Right Statement*, I want to situate that work more broadly in Wu Tsang's practice by examining the documentary-film *Wildness*. While *Wildness* is about a queer and trans of color community, it zooms in on the contradictions and difference that make themselves felt both in the cultural and political organizing that is the subject of the film, as well as in its aesthetic form. Here, "adjacency" offers an optic: firstly, for approaching the relationality between the various subjects and populations in the film; secondly, for how Wu Tsang is invested in creating aesthetic forms that attend to affinities between marginalized subjects; and thirdly, for how Tsang's work positions and implicates the viewer.

Wu Tsang is an Asian-American artist working primarily across film, performance, and installation art, who first received widespread attention for *Wildness*. While Tsang's recent work is often more experimental and hybrid in form than this narrative documentary-film, *Wildness* remains illustrative for how Tsang's work has crafted an intervention into the cultural, academic, and political representation of minoritarian subjects, with particular focus on transgender, queer, and racialized subjects. Released just before a new wave of optimism surrounding transgender representation and justice in the United States (the "Transgender Tipping Point" of 2014), Tsang's *Wildness* offers an aesthetic exploration that mirrors the argument made by critics and artists, namely that increased visibility of marginalized communities (primarily white and transnormative subjects) results in or runs alongside of the increased violence and vulnerability that mostly trans women of color and immigrants face.[5]

I am interested in *Wildness* for how Tsang takes on a subject matter that has received so much exposure in media and politics, and carefully tries to complicate the way in which trans subjects are constructed as objects of visualizing and knowledge practices. This stems

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[5] Tourmaline et al, *Trap Door*, xvi

from her desire to produce what she calls an "impossible image."[6] The critical intervention made by Tsang is that impossible images can give a fuller sense of the difficulty of capturing a phenomena in visual form. In an interview, Tsang explains how her work responds to a dominant discourse and practice of visibility that tends to ascribe power to being visible or being invisible: "We either are fighting to be seen, or we are invisible, or we refuse being seen. For me it's really unproductive. There are so many other ways of existing and making images outside of that."[7] Tsang's practice disaggregates how images make space to relate to each other, proposing "another way of inhabiting images" that works with the impossibility of a pure form of communication: "In being seen by another, there's always an incompleteness to that understanding."[8] I take the "impossible image" to signal a desire for collectivity and solidarity that works with, rather than sidelines, the fraught terrain of representation, in both its aesthetic and political meanings. It is the impossibility of capturing a community or a movement through a pure form of seeing, but also the impossibility of speaking for a different position or experience that one feels in solidarity with. And as Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, Dean Spade argue in response to how queer abolitionist movements are dismissed as "being impossible," "Impossibility may very well be our only possibility."[9] Tsang's impossible images are part of an aesthetics of adjacency that I map in this chapter, which troubles the proper belonging of images, utterances, and articulations.

Wildness is illuminative for how Tsang addresses the politics of representation and solidarity in a time where transgender issues have an unprecedented visual currency. Premiered at MoMA's Documentary Fortnight in 2012, the film tells a story about The Silver Platter, a bar located in MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, and home to the weekly performance party series named "Wildness," that Wu Tsang and her collaborators Ashland Mines (Total Freedom) and Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda (NGUZUNGUZU) organized from 2006 to 2008. These are all young artists who start drawing a young, artistic, predominantly people of color community into a bar that at the moment of their encounter has had a Latinx gay, transgender, and sex worker crowd as its regular clientele since the 1960s. This encounter might fall into typical narratives of either late-capitalism urban gentrification or an LGBT community

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[6] Wu Tsang, "How Wu Tsang Is Rejecting The Confines Of Identification and Language," interview by Niloo Sharifi, *Sleek magazine*, November 14, 2017, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/wu-tsang-interview-identity-fact/

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Wu Tsang. *We Hold Where Study*. 2017", Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/290550

[9] Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement With Everything We've Got," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011), 36

establishing a 'safe space', but Tsang refuses both those stories and instead creates space for the viewer to feel the contradictions and complicity that come with belonging to a community. In a magical realist twist, the docu-film is narrated by the bar itself, and her voice speaks with the parental authority of witnessing the transitions in the neighborhood and the different waves of crowds that enter her space, creating a perspective that transcends Wu Tsang's two-year long "documentation." *Wildness* opens with shots of evening L.A. streets, and as we come closer to approaching the Silver Platter, the bar's voice-over in Spanish sets up the encounter between Wu and the bar: "Time is borrowed… and it changes everything. Faces, relationships, and neighborhoods. There are not many like me left. And I wonder… what will become of me? How can I explain my legacy? I'm a beacon, guiding my young out of the darkness. This story is one of those journeys. Told through my youngest: Wu. And the Wildness they brought to me." The bar, voiced by Marianna Marroquin, a Guatemalan transgender community activist, speaks poetically and tenderly about her "children" and the joy, beauty, and chaos of their activities. The character of Wu (played by Wu Tsang), young and naive, looks up at the glowing neon sign of the Silver Platter with an expecting look of defiance and hope, coming to a space that both is and is not familiar, but holds the promise for new relations and individual and collective transformation.

Through head shot interviews and footage from various evenings inside the bar, we start to see how the owners, Wildness organizers, hosts and regular patrons of the bar all demonstrate very different attachments to bar, but share an unequivocal desire to care for the space that the bar holds. There is a notion that the colorful, glimmering space inside can be or should be kept safe behind its grey outside walls, and *Wildness* traces how the bar is vulnerable through all the various ways in which the "outside" world enters – violence, gentrification, or banal bureaucratic issues. The gleaming space of the bar is not disconnected from all the social and political violence that its clientele faces; the poverty that holds the working class in its grasp, the increasingly stringent immigration regimes that require careful navigation, and the violence against trans people, especially trans women of color, that figures both in brutal murders as well as slower, more insidious forms of violence. When the *LA Weekly* runs an enthusiastic review of the Wildness parties, a new wave of people, mostly affluent, white hipsters, start attending the bar, highlighting the potential displacement of the transgender and gay Latinx crowd. But the film shows that Wu does not have an innocent position in these developments, and instead foregrounds how the beauty and joy of the Silver Platter goes hand in hand with experiences of failure.

Wildness bears an indexical relationship to Jennie Livingston's award-winning *Paris is Burning* (1990), a documentary about Black and Latinx drag ball culture. *Paris is Burning* became a central anchoring point for conversations in queer theory about gender, sexuality race, and class through optics of performativity and queer subcultures. About twenty years later, *Wildness* mirrors this cultural and academic impact by critically commenting on the transformations of queer subculture in the early twenty-first century. While Livingston's *Paris is Burning* offered a rich documentation of the ball room scene in late 1980s New York City, it also became the subject of a sustained critique concerning the power dynamics of Livingston extracting value from an already quite vulnerable population. Critics raised ethical concerns about the ethnographic style of the film, which creates the impression of an objective documentation of 'reality' without reference to the implicatedness of the camera and filmmaker, and failing to attend to how notions of reality and 'realness' are layered and complex experiences central to how ballroom culture parodies and subverts white heteronormativity.[10]

Tsang demonstrates an awareness of how *Wildness* is inevitably oriented by *Paris is Burning*, and pays careful attention to her position, being both an insider and outsider of the community that she encounters. As a trans person of color, the identity labels might be the "right" ones for Tsang to be the filmmaker who desires to create a cultural production with this community as its subject. Yet, Tsang shows that this is not an identity category that she can innocently represent, nor one that refers to a coherent community. Differences of language, class, and citizenship status make themselves felt. Instead of attempting to document this vibrant world full in the most accurate or fair way possible, the film is as much a testimony to the problem of representation itself. In a reflection on *Wildness*, Tsang writes:

> "In deciding to make a film about my experiences there, I was torn between my desire to 'give voice' to an under-represented movement (critical trans resistance) and the problems of representation itself – the burden of speaking on behalf of experiences that were not entirely my own. […] But the material revealed truths that didn't necessarily fit with my ideas of what a 'cohesive' resistance movement looked like (if ever there were such a thing), and these were sometimes hard to look at. The project grew into an

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[10] bell hooks, 'Is Paris Burning?,' in *Black looks: race and representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 151; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94

unwieldy story, barely holding all the vibrant and conflicting pieces together, just like the bar itself."[11]

Forced to let go of a romanticized notion of documenting a transgender resistance movement, Tsang highlights the tension between the vibrant and messy truths and the attempt to speak on behalf of those experiences. And with Tsang's sentiment of failure comes a critical appreciation of how that desire to speak for, to re-present, stems from a firm investment in a shared but differential struggle against oppression. Adjacency, here, takes shape through feeling part of experiences that are not entirely one's own but that one has a stake in.

Wildness takes a novel approach to how minoritarian communities and forms of political organizing might be represented by sketching out the impossibility of innocent knowledge production, and the unraveling of the categories we presume to organize the world. The film offered a site of reflection and entry point for a new strand of queer theoretical work oriented around "the wild," here considered as that which troubles the "natural" and "normal" order of race, gender, and sexuality.[12] Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o suggest turning to wild modes of thought that function "as a disruptive force, breaking free of the need to produce queer policy or trans modes of governance and instead offering critique in a utopian mode."[13] Rather than creating an "update" on how the status of the Other can be best circumscribed and known, wildness "names, while rendering partially opaque, what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins."[14] It is with this partially opaque exploration of communities for which the label 'transgender' is both correct and a misnomer, that *Wildness* leaves the viewer with a sense (both as knowledge and sensation) of processes of marginalization and resistance without necessarily creating an order.

The production of impossible images, then, abandons the ideal of seeing better in favor of a bewilderment of seeing, which becomes a red thread in Tsang's practice. The title of Tsang's first major solo-exhibition at Gropius Bau in 2019, "There is no nonviolent way to look at somebody", echoes how she explores the power relationship that inherent of the act of looking and being looked at. Just as there are, following Donna Haraway, no innocent knowledge practices, there are no innocent visualizing practices. But if there are no nonviolent

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[11] Wu Tsang, "Wildness," in *Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness* (Tate Modern,2013)

[12] See: Jack Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," *Social Text* 121, vol 32, no. 4 (2014): 137-148; Jack Halberstam & Tavia Nyong'o, "Introduction: Theory in the Wild," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 453-464; José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020)

[13] Halberstam & Nyong'o, "Introduction: Theory in the Wild," 457

[14] Ibid., 453

ways of looking at somebody, Tsang takes the impossibility of that premise and demonstrates how the realm of the visual can bewilder us *to see the way we look* in new ways. Impossible images thus make a double move: these are aesthetic practices that engender a new way of seeing, but one that also inevitably brings about an observation of how we look.

Tsang's impossible images return in *Shape of a Right Statement*, where her video-performance makes us look, and look again, re-assessing what we see. This double move allows her to challenge how the object of the gaze is also the object of knowledge, and to trouble the visual signs of gender, race, and disability.

2.2. Aesthetics of Appropriation and Adjacency in *Shape of a Right Statement*

What is it to reside without settling?
- Fred Moten[15]

Subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it might be a visual clue.
- Donna Haraway[16]

Shape of a Right Statement was performed and filmed in front of the shimmering curtain of The Silver Platter during the period that Tsang hosted the Wildness parties, and follows a similar engagement with the question of representation raised in the docu-film *Wildness*. *Shape of a Right Statement* is Tsang's only explicit engagement with the topic of disability, but follows key themes and formal principles that are recurrent in her practice: a layered critique of visibility politics, a crafting of solidarity between people that are in various ways positioned as non-persons, and an inquiry into the embodied locations that we speak from. *Shape of a Right Statement* takes artistic-activist material articulated from a site of autism advocacy, and recirculates those utterances in a context of queer and trans of color aesthetics and political organizing. By examining how this video-work opens up a re-thinking of the affinities between disability and transness, I consider *Shape of a Right Statement* as a "performance of adjacency," both in terms of how the performance technique of re-enactment critically appropriates the position of the speaking subject *as* a gesture of solidarity, and in how disability and transgender politics are positioned in a relationship of adjacency. In this and the following section, I explore

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[15] Fred Moten, *All That Beauty* (Seattle: Letter Machine Editions, 2019): 25
[16] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 586

two questions that *Shape of a Right Statement* raises for me: How does a disjuncture between embodiment and a modality of speaking, performed through re-enactment, straddle the tension between appropriation and affiliation? And, secondly, making these formal techniques bear on how transness and disability are made sensible in relation to each other, how does disability speak to transness?

For *Shape of a Right Statement*, Tsang places herself in front of the camera and performs a statement in which she details particular experiences of oppression. She says:

"Far from being purposeless / the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me. / Ironically / the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as being "in a world of my own" / whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings / people claim that I am "opening up to true interaction with the world." / They judge my existence / awareness / and personhood on which of a tiny and limited part of the world I appear to be reacting to. / The way I naturally think and respond to things / looks and feels so different from standard concepts / or even visualization that some people do not consider it thought at all / but it is a way of thinking in its own right. / However the thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language / no matter how we previously thought or interacted."

With her gaze fixed on the lens, her words interrogate how her language, thought, and personhood are disavowed due to her failure to approximate normative and dominant language, thought, and personhood. The language she uses to describe her way of being in the world is lively and dynamic: it is about "moving", "reacting physically", "constant conversation", "interacting", "responding". This affective and immersive depiction of her communication is juxtaposed with its oppressive positioning as "purposeless", "non-communicative", "mysterious", "puzzling", and "confusing". For the duration of the six-minute video, her voice is monotone, oddly stable, with here and there a strange emphasis on a particular syllable. The almost mechanic qualities of the voice make it feel as if it is coming from elsewhere. But as the video continues, the emotional resonances of the statement also become increasingly visible. Tsang's eyes start watering, and as she reaches the end of the statement - "There are people being tortured / people dying / because they are considered non-persons" - a tear rolls down her cheek. When the statement ends, the image cuts to a shot of the curtain of the Silver Platter superimposed with the text "Original text by Amanda Baggs" and a URL to the YouTube

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page of Baggs's video *In My Language*. The video plays on loop, allowing the viewer to watch the statement again, this time with the knowledge that the words originally came from Mel Baggs.[17] If it might have gone by unnoticed on the first viewing, the statement's specific references to the treatment of autistic people are now more obvious: "In the end I want you to know / that his has not been intended as a voyeuristic freak show / where you get to look at the bizarre workings of the autistic mind." Baggs's presence takes on a more pronounced shape, voiced through Tsang's re-enactment. Re-watching Tsang's video-performance of Baggs's words, the viewer tunes into the oscillation between what appears as Tsang's experience, and what appears as a misalliance between the words and the body that is uttering them.

Straightforward in its scope, yet not in its consequences, *Shape of a Right Statement* opens up the question how these two locations of speaking, Baggs's autism advocacy and Tsang's trans of color aesthetics, relate to each other. In taking over the "I" position of uttering Mel Baggs's statement, Tsang risks the gesture of appropriation: of Baggs's voice, and of the particular experiences of oppression that are narrated in the statement. In order to flesh out how appropriation plays an important role in *Shape of a Right Statement*, I want to briefly discuss the nature of the material by Baggs. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, Baggs's *In My Language* is a two-part video statement, posted on YouTube in 2007.[18] The first part, as they describe it, is in their "native language", while the second part is both a translation and an explanation. The first part of the video is highly haptic; we hear Baggs hum and sing as they interact with various objects in their apartment. In the second part, a computerized text-to-speech voice reads out Baggs's statement, which explicitly questions the viewer's capacity to become attuned to what Baggs's is visualizing in the video: "I find it very interesting that failure to learn your language is seen as a deficit but failure to learn my language is seen as so natural." The statement is both an account of a personal experience of the world as well as a political manifesto about oppression of autistic people and the linguistic structure of that exclusion. Baggs's video is a moving and powerful attempt at showing a world that is inaccessible for the presumed neurotypical viewer while also refusing the fantasy of legibility, and in that lies a complex double move that Baggs makes. Through their modes of explaining and translating, we can see and hear and feel snippets of their experience of the world, while realizing there is something that we will not understand and something that will not be transmitted in the translation. Their world appears, but it will not be re-presented in normative language.

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[17] Mel Baggs was formerly known as Amanda Baggs.

[18] Mel Baggs, "In My Language," 14/01/2007, YouTube, accessed October 29, 2020, , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc

Tsang's re-enacts only the second part of Baggs video, the "translation," arguing that the prosthetic voice gave her a "point of entry", channeling the able-bodied voice that Baggs creates using computer software, which is ultimately not in their language.[19] In *Shape*, Tsang explicitly straddles a line between re-enactment as a form of affiliation and as an act of appropriation, and demonstrates her ability to come close to what is difficult.[20] Baggs's video is a powerful manifesto in which they assert their humanity while simultaneously rejecting the normative model of the human that fails to recognize autistic people. When asserting their communicative capacities, autistic people are often discredited, something that Baggs reports to be confronted with continuously. Specifically with regard to questions of voice and speech, a pertinent example is the US-based advocacy organization called Autism Speaks, a major health non-profit organization led primarily by non-autistic people, whose work centers around improving the conditions of families with an autistic child. Critics point out that Autism Speaks takes a curative approach to autism, positioning the condition as a problem to be solved. Various writings of autistic people, relatives of autistic people, and autism or disability justice activists, point out that Autism Speaks does not "speak for" them, illustrating that the advocacy organization fails to enjoy legitimacy among the people they claim to be advocating for.[21] The organization's motto - "Autism Speaks. It's Time to Listen" - appears odd and painful in this context, and requires a qualification of how autism might speak, who would do that speaking, and what kinds of practices of listening might be attentive.

By appropriating the voice of Mel Baggs, Tsang takes the risk of affirming these ableist processes. Yet, Tsang finds resonances between how Baggs describes the exclusion they face for not communication in a normative way, suggesting that there is "something shared between people of very different historical oppressed groups that has to do with being incommunicable or considered "nonpersons."[22] Tsang's desire to explore the "something shared" of oppressed groups echoes Muñoz's affirmation of the power of aesthetic practice to make "different circuits of belonging connect" where "recognition flickers between minoritarian subjects."[23]

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[19] Wu Tsang, "Adjacencies: Wu Tsang in Conversation with Thomas J. Lax," in *Not in My Language* (Cologne: Verlag der Huchhandlung Walther König, 2015), 35

[20] In various conference and workshop settings where I discussed *Shape of a Right Statement*, there would be a concern on behalf of an audience member, protesting this art work for its appropriation of someone else's work. My detailed engagement in this chapter with the question of appropriation is partly informed by those conversations, and elaborates my position in this debate.

[21] For a selection of activist writings specifically on the issues surrounding Autism Speaks, see Anne McGuire, *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 135

[22] Tsang, "Adjacencies," 34

[23] Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," 679

Shape of a Right Statement embodies a tension between shared experiences of oppression and the problematic of "speaking for" experiences not one's own. In both artistic and activist scenes, the expectation that one should speak "from one's own position" is raised from time to time, often related to controversies arising where financial or cultural gain is made out of an experience that the creator is not said to have had experienced. I will briefly discuss one example of such a controversy here, because it offers an entry point into examining debates about appropriation, and lead us to a formulation of "adjacency."

A recent example that points to the tension between appropriation and solidarity is the discussion that arose around the video piece *Autoportrait* (2017) by Luke Willis Thompson, specifically after Thompson's nomination for the 2018 Turner Prize. I briefly discuss the controversy around *Autoportrait*, for it serves to flag key issues that matter for my reading of adjacencies in *Shape of a Right Statement*. *Autoportrait* is a silent video portrait of Diamond Reynolds, whose upper arm bears a tattoo of the name "Philando" and identifies her as the partner of Philando Castile. In July 2016, Diamond Reynolds live-streamed the moment when Philando Castile, sitting next to her in the car, was fatally shot by a police officer. Created in collaboration with Diamond Reynolds, Luke Willis Thompson, a New Zealander of Fijian heritage, sees the production of *Autoportrait* as a companion film for her video that globally went viral on social media, asking what kind of image could be made in relation to that documentation of violence.[24] During the opening of the Turner Prize Exhibition at Tate Britain in London, curatorial collective BBZ, which centralizes and celebrates queer people of color in its work and events, staged a protest where the participants wore t-shirts with the text "Black Pain is Not For Profit", and explained that the protest was a symbolic stand "against the utilisation of black death and black pain by non-black artists and arts institutions for cultural and financial gain."[25] In response, a statement from Tate read: "These films were made in the shadow of the Black Lives Matter movement and the artist sees his works as acts of solidarity with his subjects."[26]

Protests such as those against Thompson's art work raise important questions that will undoubtedly have an influence on the course of curating, discourse, and framing in contemporary art. I want to highlight two issues that emerge from the Thompson controversy

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[24] Luke Willis Thompson, "Untitled", lecture at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, March 21, 2018

[25] BBZ (@bbz_london), Instagram photo, September 25, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BoJQKUkn9bD/?igshid=2i4yfemordmu, accessed October 29, 2020

[26] ''Black Pain Is Not for Profit': An Activist Collective Protests Luke Willis Thompson's Turner Prize Nomination', https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/luke-willis-thompson-turner-prize-1356151, accessed October 29, 2020,

and that are relevant for my analysis of *Shape of a Right Statement*. Firstly, a central concern put forward is the aestheticization of black trauma in *Autoportrait*, individual and collective, and the usage of black pain as a raw material to be extracted for cultural and financial profit. Arguing that the subject matter is not his to take on as a material in his art, the artists and writers responding to Luke Willis Thompson's art work push him to reconsider how he relates to subject matters that he is not intimately familiar with through his own embodied location in the world. Second, Thompson produced his work in response to violence against black lives and considered his practice to either make visible the violence of white supremacy, or to be in some form of solidarity with those affected by anti-black violence. Contestations about the appropriation of experiences that do not corroborate one's "own experience" and yet emerge from intentions of solidarity put pressure on the question of who can speak from what position, and how aesthetic gestures of solidarity are possible across lines of race, gender, and other axis of difference and power.

I suggest that, in both literature on artistic appropriation and in feminist theories of politics of location, we lack a concept and vocabulary that can attend to that feeling of resonance that Tsang works from, the notion that something is shared in experiences of oppression. Contemporary concerns raised about the appropriation of experiences of suffering are quite different from previous debates around appropriation practices in contemporary art. During the 1980s, appropriation arose as a counter hegemonic tactic through which artists appropriated and reused images from popular culture or mass media. Many artists who advanced "appropriation art" did so out of a feminist critique, such as Barbara Kruger's images and texts which challenge the semiotics of objectification of women.[27] According to David Evans, the phenomenon of appropriation art was immediately accompanied by a multitude of critical writing, often following an argument about appropriation as an inherently subversive activity.[28] Theoretically, critical engagements with appropriation art often leaned on Walter Benjamin's writings on the destruction of the aura of art in technologically reproducible art forms such as photography, Roland Barthes's theory of the workings of myth and the appropriatability of signs, or Guy Debord's idea of 'détournement', the hijacking of hegemonic words or terms turned into subversive messages.[29] Moreover, appropriation was a central

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[27] Robert S. Nelson, "Appropriation," in *Critical Terms for Art History* ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 165

[28] David Evans, "Seven Types of Appropriation," in *Appropriation*, ed. David Evans (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 13

[29] Ibid.

underlying concept to postmodernist debates parody and pastiche, which revolved around the question of the political potential of appropriation, and its critical relationship to the past.[30]

However, as the Thompson controversy signals, a different set of questions and issues dominates discussions about art and appropriation, no longer indebted to postmodernist discourses of parody and critique, or the subversion of hegemonic media forms, but concerned with how experiences of oppression have an artistic currency, one out of which cultural and financial gain can be made. There is a lack of attention in scholarly work on appropriation on the differences between, on the one hand, relationships of appropriation between critical artists and hegemonic media forms, and on the other, between artists and activists that in some way or another are located on the margins. Below I will suggest a way of filling that gap. What contemporary discussions on appropriation illustrate is a concern with the question of who owns what histories as well as culturally shaped experiences, and who can turn these into forms of representation. In the contemporary realm of aesthetic production, "appropriation" no longer signifies a critical practice of destabilizing hegemonic forms of meaning production, but refers to a practice of exploitation that becomes the subject of critique and heated debates. This new meaning can be discerned in Candice Hopkins's discussion of what she calls the "appropriation debates" in contemporary art, where she offers this definition: "Appropriation take place when there are imbalances of power, when one attempts to represent the other or feels that it is indeed one's right to do so."[31] This shift of understanding of the role of appropriation in contemporary art thus raises the question of the power relations involved in producing art works that represent the position of the other.

These questions go to the heart of feminist theory and concerns about politics of location: how one's embodied experience and situatedness in the world shapes one's capacity to speak about, and from, that experience. Debates on feminist epistemologies have brought forth conceptual tools for understanding feminist production of knowledge, such as Adrienne Rich's politics of location, Sandra Harding's standpoint theory, and Donna Haraway's situated knowledges.[32] Concerned both with arguing against the ideal of neutral objectivity in

[30] Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 93; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17; Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in *Appropriation*, ed. David Evans (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009),189

[31] Candice Hopkins, "The appropriation debates (or the gallows of history)", in *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value,* eds. C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 83

[32] See: Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (Virago: London, 1986), 210-231; Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"?" *The Centennial Review* 36, no.3 (1992), 437-470; Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no 3 (1988), 575-599

knowledge production, as well as the question of how create liberatory feminist knowledge practices across, and in recognition of, differences, this field of inquiry has advanced critical reflections on how ones location in the world informs experience, perspective, and the formation of knowledge about the world. One of the outcomes of feminist epistemological thought is a strong emphasis on the speaking subject.[33] Peta Hinton calls this an "enunciative politics," which insists on being accountable for the "who" that speaks, and prevents speaking from a neutral perspective "from above", or from or about other subject positions.[34] Linda Alcoff calls the latter "the problem of speaking for others", referring to the strong current in feminist scholarship as well as activism to proclaim the political illegitimacy of speaking for others.[35] Alcoff identifies two common responses to this problem, the first being to reduce the evaluation of the speech to an assessment of the speaker's location "where that location is seen as an insurmountable essence that fixes one, as if one's feet are superglued to a spot on the sidewalk."[36] The second response is to refrain from attempting to speak for others completely, to recognize difference and to only speak "one's own truth."[37] The major problem with refraining completely from speaking for others, aside from the fact that it might be motivated by a desire to find a practice immune from criticism, is that it undercuts the possibility of political efficacy and the potential of coalitions and solidarity.[38] Dissatisfied with both these responses, Alcoff advances a critical practice of speaking carried by a practice of accountability and responsibility, and evaluated by not merely by the location of the speaker or the content of the speech, but what the actual effects of the words are on the world.[39] Location bears on meaning and truth, but location is not a fixed essence that absolutely authorizes one's speech.[40] As Donna Haraway formulates it, "[t]he standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent" positions."[41]

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[33] Norma Alarcón, "The theoretical subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo- American feminism," in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149

[34] Peta Hinton, "'Situated Knowledges' and New Materialism(s): Rethinking a Politics of Location" *Women: A Cultural Review* 25. no. 1 (2014): 105. Hinton points out how the contradictory status of the subject in a feminist form of enunciative politics, since it "demands a self-presence of that speaking subject and its identity - the same claim for self-presence which informs the rational subject's capacity to stand back from the world in order to take measure of it."

[35] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 6

[36] Ibid., 16

[37] Ibid., 17

[38] Ibid., 22, 17

[39] Ibid., 25-26

[40] Ibid., 17

[41] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 584

Debates about forms of cultural appropriation on the margins in part stem from the centrality of the speaking subject as an anchor for political organizing. But a too rigid politics of location leaves little room for understanding how the queer re-enactment by Wu Tsang purposefully appropriates Mel Baggs's speaking position *as* a modality for a politics of solidarity. How might *Shape of a Right Statement* demonstrate a critical practice of appropriation that scaffolds a gesture of solidarity? Extending Alcoff's suggestion to evaluate speech in its effect on the world, I take the work of Tsang as instructive for a shift from "speaking from" or "speaking for" towards a "speaking with," which keeps the spatial coordinates of speaking in the background but puts emphasis on the relationality established between them.[42] In order to theorize how aesthetic practices on the margins resonate, I turn to Tina Campt's concept of "adjacency," which offers a vocabulary for attending to this form of relationality.

In her work on black visuality as a practice of refusal, Campt addresses the above-discussed controversy around Luke Willis Thompson's *Autoportrait.* She suggests that his position as a New Zealander of Fijian heritage puts him in "a place of *adjacency* rather than identity with the forms of anti-black violence his piece so poignantly evokes."[43] Campt describes the place of adjacency as follows: "It is the adjacency of indigeneity and diasporic formation linked by a vicious history of imperialism and colonization that tethers black subjects to Pacific Islanders. […] It is the adjacency of sitting next to your partner in a car and witnessing his murder, then attempting to talk down the officer who shot him, while capturing it on a cell phone, and broadcasting it live to the world to bear witness to both your loss and your refusal to silence his slaughter."[44] In this formulation, the adjacent is a space that can operate on vastly different yet intimately connected scales and temporalities, both in how historical structures of oppression touch each other, as well as the physical proximity of sitting

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[42] This resonates with the problem of speaking and representation that filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha raises in both her writing and her visual productions. In a conversation with Nancy N. Chen, Trinh discusses the power relations inherent in documentary filmmaking and anthropological knowledge production and the poetic strategies she uses to avoid commodification of knowledge or the object of her film. In explaining her attempt to materialize a reflexive methodology that allows for multivocality to emerge in her work, she proposes the technique of "talking nearby" instead of "talking about." For Trinh, speaking nearby is a speaking that "does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place." She explains: "A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it." Trinh recognizes that the capacity for speech to not objectify or claim a subject is precarious, but foregrounds how speaking nearby is a challenge, an attitude, and a way of positioning. While Trinh's work has been instructive for my thinking here, I choose to focus on the concept 'adjacency' for how it underscores the relationship of proximity between two elements. I consider this a useful optic for thinking through minoritarian politics, also those that might not explicitly be about speaking, enunciation, articulation, or language. See: Nancy C. Chen, ""Speaking Nearby": A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha", *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82-91

[43] Campt, "Black visuality," 85, emphasis in original

[44] Ibid., 85

CEU eTD Collection

next to someone and witnessing their being and their loss. To be adjacent is thus not just to be "next to" each other, but in relation to each other, and to have that relationality impact and transform each other.[45]

As such, adjacency refers to how elements operate alongside of each other, whose proximity touches without totally merging.[46] Adjacency is an aesthetic frequency that shifts focus from indexing the parameters of our embodied situatedness in the world, anchored in individuation, to the relationality established between minoritarian positions and structures of feeling. Adjacency's orientation is towards solidarity on the margins, without the center as the anchoring point. This echoes José Esteban Muñoz's interest in ways of being and becoming that can "resist the pull of identitarian models of relationality", and his call to develop non-identitarian models for becoming attuned to how subalterns speak, are heard, or are felt.[47] His question - "How might subalterns feel each other?" - can be taken up as an inquiry into the political but also physical and affective resonances between marginalized subjects.[48] I take Tina Campt's formulation of adjacency over identity to offer urgently needed political modalities of speaking that focus on "where" the speech goes rather than the "who" that speaks.

Returning to the performance of adjacency in *Shape of a Right Statement*, we can scrutinize how Tsang's embodied position functions as a shape through which speech moves, creating a site for articulating trans-crip adjacencies. This become particularly evident in how Tsang engages re-enactment as a performance technique to create a site for articulating a complex relationship to Baggs's work. As mentioned earlier, the rhythmic and tonal qualities of Tsang's voice and delivery come across as odd, and already give the impression as if her voice is coming from somewhere outside her body. In approaching Baggs's prosthetic voice, Tsang uses a performance technique she calls "Full Body Quotation," which she describes as a form of mimetic re-speaking, in which the performer does not just re-speak the text but also the tone, breath, accent, idiom, and other markers of how voice is carried in embodied and affective ways.[49] This technique thus expands from a focus on the contents on the words, to an

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[45] Tina Campt, "Black Gaze, Black Skin, Black Feeling: A Conversation with Luke Willis Thompson and Tina Campt" (Lecture, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, March 30, 2019)

[46] It is Tsang's aesthetics of adjacency that Munoz calls on when he describes her documentary-film *Wildness* as a form of "brown commons" where brownness designates not (just) the racialization of a Latinx position, but the "co-presence of other modes of difference, a choreography of singularities that touch, in contact, but do not meld."

Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 138

[47] Muñoz, "Feeling Brown," 677

[48] Ibid.

[49] Wu Tsang, in Chloe Wyma, ""I Dislike the Word Visibility": Wu Tsang on Sexuality, Creativity, and Conquering New York's Museums'

approximation of the formal and embodied qualities of inhabiting those words. Tsang suggests that in using this performance technique in *Shape of a Right Statement*, she can work with material that she has a "complicated relationship" to, and that "[t]he full body quotation techniques is a way to perform our ambivalences."[50] Full Body Quotation highlights how that embodied quotation necessitates bringing the content to circulate and change meaning in a different context and a different location of speaking. Tsang visualizes this different location of speaking by bringing the performance into the space of drag culture. The shimmering golden curtain of the Silver Platter behind her figure make the words resonate with a typical scene of queer performativity, but in doing so, also expand what 'drag' traditionally indexes. She says: "I was thinking about drag performances somehow being channels. [I]t's about the voice moving through you, coming inside you, passing through."[51] As Jian Chen suggests: "Tsang treats her own racially trans engendered body like a technological medium affected by, or even instrumentalized, by the external force of Baggs's computerized voice."[52] Here, drag performance exceeds what Elizabeth Freeman has called the "centrality of *gender*-transitive drag to queer performativity theory", not only to incorporate racialized and crip embodiment, but also to dislocate the unity and containment of the individual subject.[53] Fred Moten, a long-time collaborator of Wu Tsang, captures this expansive use of drag when he writes: "Sometimes, the refusal of self-determination is a drag. Luckily, the refusal of self-determination is in drag."[54] As such, the performance of adjacency establishes not a relationship between two subject positions, but rather, a relationality that problematizes the processes by which these are sites of individuation.

In her body becoming a host for another person's words, Tsang makes Baggs's prosthetic language physically resonate, bringing a critique of disability oppression to bear on trans of color politics, and vice versa. A trans of color position is re-cast as a form of "language" and sensibility that is misread through dominant conceptions of the subject and sociality, that cannot enter or translate into, to use the words from Baggs's statement, "standard concepts" and "visualization" as a legitimate way of being, thinking, and acting. In the disjuncture between the visual signs of the body and the embodied experiences evidenced in the statement, *Shape of a Right Statement* makes race, gender, and disability move through each other.

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Wu Tsang, in Alex Greenberger, "Take Me Apart: Wu Tsang's Art Questions Everything We Think We Know About Identity" *ARTnews,* March 19, 2019, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/wu-tsang-12224/

[52] Chen, *Trans Exploits*, 40

[53] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*: Queer *Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 63

[54] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 214

Straddling the complicated line between appropriation and solidarity, Tsang's video-performance enables us to re-think what shared experiences of oppression, histories, affects, and political attachments make transness and disability adjacent to each other. How does this aesthetic performance of adjacency offer a different optic, a different way of seeing, how transness and disability resonate with each other? I explore this question further in the next section.

2.3. Trans-Crip Adjacencies

Shape of a Right Statement asks the viewer to relate to trans of color sociality as adjacent to a neurodiverse sociality. Baggs's statement on the oppression of neurodiverse people is re-spoken as a more general statement against the oppression of what Baggs and Tsang call "non-persons." If Baggs's video demonstrates how their way of being in the world cannot fully be captured by dominant and normative modalities of language, communication, and subjectivity, Tsang takes this to indicate how a trans of color sociality similarly both escapes and exceeds the linguistic and visual modalities available to us as frames of recognition. Tsang's appropriation of Baggs's voice aims to shed light on how, to a certain degree, transness is misrecognized in what they call "standard concepts and visualization." Taking cue from the distinction made by Tsang and Baggs between what is expressible "in their language" and what enters "standard concepts and visualization.", I want to consider how both transness and disability might not only be understood as embodied and affective experiences but also forces and formations that can defy their adequate capture in representational categories of identity. Tsang directs us to see how "transgender" itself is not a self-evident truth of the body, but contends with a category of identity that is complexly bound up with regulation, subjectivation, and the organization of knowledge.

From a position of adjacency, Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* refuses to reify the trans/disabled subject as the nucleus of a politics of affinity of trans and disability, but instead speaks to how they can be articulated without collapsing them into each other. As Tsang and Baggs express at the end of *Shape of a Right Statement* and *In My Language*: "Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized / will justice and human rights be possible." The challenges posed by *Shape of a Right Statement*, is how those many shapes of personhood are recognized not just in the form of political recognition, but also epistemological and visual. In the dislocation of identity positions - raising the question of whether this statement emerges from a position of transness, or disability, or both - Tsang puts pressure on the belongingness

of subjects to categories of identities. In other words, the question I believe Tsang's work poses does not only concern how trans and disability relate to each other. More crucially, Baggs's provocation about the dissonance between their own language and the "standard concepts and visualization" that Baggs's feels are *not* in their own language creates an opening for Tsang's video performance to unsettle the coherency of "transgender." Tsang's work offers a felt sensation of an attempt to utter oneself into a discourse that does not feel entirely one's own. We can ask, then, how transness operates in facilitating the divide between being considered a "non-person" or becoming intelligible as a person. What are the "many shapes of personhood" and can they be captured in the category of "transgender"? What are the modalities of utterances and visual frames of legibility that create the "shape of a right statement"?

The consolidation of "transgender" as a clear-cut delineated category of identity both enables and disavows ways of thinking transness alongside other contestations of identity. It thus requires a rethinking of how 'transgender' as a category of knowledge production and political organizing has produced a series of effects that has consequences for how we imagine affinities, proximities, solidarities on the margins. In part, adjacency offers an optic to approach the relationship between minoritarian positions that allows for a reimagining of the entanglement of identities. The language of intersectionality, as an analytic but also as a visual metaphor, can paradoxically reinstated the visualization and notion of the separability of discrete identities.[55] Solidarity can then reinforce the containment of difference through what Jasbir Puar calls "epistemological correctives" in the struggle for rights, rather than the adjacency of "speaking with," as I described above. According to Tina Campt, adjacencies are about seeing oneself in relation to each other, and becoming accountable to the demand of that relationality.[56] Campt's formulation of adjacency over identity offers an impetus for considering why certain forms of coupling of transgender with political struggles, identity categories, or knowledge production, are more obvious than others.

Scholars have examined the production of the seemingly "common sense" ways in which the purview of transgender contains certain subjects, histories, and genealogies of thought, and excludes others. Most pertinently, trans of color critique demonstrates the ways in which transgender studies has relied on a medical archive of transsexuality in which whiteness functioned as its invisible standard, and where technologies of gender transition

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[55] Jasbir Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess':
Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49-66
[56] Campt, "Black Gaze"

became intelligible by erasing black trans and trans of color histories.[57] Consequently, transgender studies has produced parameters of transness which render trans of color lives even more invisible and marginal, making questions of racialization appear as as seemingly disconnected.[58] In addition, we can discern the emergence of a "transnormative" subject welcome to both gay and lesbian organizing as well as nation-state imaginaries, a process that occurs against and through the repudiation of the improper racialized subject.[59] As Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton argue:

"[i]t is necessary to interrogate how the uneven institutionalization of women's, gay, and trans politics produces a transnormative subject, whose universal trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization largely remains uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects."[60]

Haritaworn and Snorton direct us to complicate the benchmarks used to make a transgender subject position intelligible. This echoes Dan Irving's argument that there is a persistent emphasis on "productivity" in transsexual and transgender advocacy, so that demands for medical interventions or social recognition are in the service of facilitation the development of a productive working body, ready to participate in, and reproduce, the capitalist mode of production.[61] Crucially, the *category* of "transgender" itself is part of the production of this transnormative subject. In his ethnography of the rapid dissemination and institutionalization of the category of transgender in New York City in the 1990s, David Valentine shows how "transgender" not only became an optic through which to understand certain non-normative genders as distinct from sexuality, but also produces the subject with it names.[62] The imagined future enabled *by* this category excludes the poor, the disenfranchised, and racialized subjects.[63] For "transgender" to emerge as an intelligible category of identification, attached to LGB, it is separated and sanitized from race and from its genealogy of black, person of color, poor, and sex-worker led political organizing that actually inaugurated what is now termed a

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[57] Gill-Peterson, "Trans of Color," 615

[58] Ibid.

[59] C. Riley Snorton & Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife", in *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 67

[60] Ibid.

[61] Dan Irving, "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive," *Radical History Review,* no. 100 (2008): 38–59.

[62] Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 14

[63] Ibid., 6

contemporary transgender movement.[64] The category of "transgender" thus enables certain subjectivities, but also produces a series of exclusions that form its constitutive outside.

To this interrogation of the consolidation of a transnormative subject, it is crucial to add an optic of disability and to scrutinize how able-bodiedness functions as a structuring principle for becoming trans. It is thus useful to locate a biopolitical dissonance between 'transgender' and Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) politics, particularly in their relationships to regimes of medicalization and pathologization. While homosexuality and non-normative sexualities have historically been pathologized and functioned as a site for medical knowledge production and construction of deviancy, this relationship has changed in the last decades. The erasure of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 was considered a movement away from considering homosexuality as an illness. Notwithstanding the cultural and ideological effects of this diagnostic and medicalized understanding of homosexuality, the removal of homosexuality from the DSM did not have consequences for retaining crucial access to health care. This is in part by the relationship to medical regimes looks quite different from the perspective of transgender politics. While transgender political organizing is geared towards depathologization, there remains an ongoing need for accessing hormones or surgeries that transgender people might want or need to obtain. A clean and total break from medical forms of knowledge production is thus harder to enact. The most recent diagnostic frameworks of "Gender Incongruence" (ICD-11) and "Gender Dysphoria" (DSM-V) continue to function as discursive sites that produce a cultural framework for understanding transness, whether or not trans people actually desire or receive this diagnosis. If LGB emancipation can be narrativized as a process of shedding its history of pathologization, trans subjects are still complexly entangled with medical regimes, unable to follow the path set out for becoming healthy and proper citizens. The biopolitical regulation of transness might thus be better approached in proximity to disability.

However, the relationality between transgender and disability politics has not always been apparent, or has been disavowed. This becomes most evident in the ways in which becoming trans can be considered a process of overcoming any associations with disability, and specifically, mental disorders. Given the process of being positioned as disabled, most notably through medical diagnoses such as Gender Dysphoria in the DSM, as well as cultural associations with mental disorders, transgender and genderqueer people have resisted the

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[64] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 22

pathologizing connection between non-normative gender expression and disability.[65] The most often cited reason for campaigning for trans depathologization is the stigmatizing impact of the psychiatric diagnosis and its attack on people's decisional autonomy. Moreover, transgender activists reject the label of mental illness, which continues to have cultural repercussions for the ability of transgender people to assert their humanity.[66] But, as Josephine Krieg argues, action geared towards depathologization due to its stigmatizing impact can reproduce a medicalized understanding of mental health issues as pathological, without pointing to the societal causes of stigmatization.[67] The structures of compulsory able-bodiedness that place such a diagnosis in the realm of negativity in the first place are not commented on, or are potentially further entrenched in this move. Eli Clare echoes this sentiment when he writes: "I often hear trans people [...] name their transness a disability, a birth defect. They say, "[...] I simply need a cure.""[68] Similarly, Mitchell and Snyder have argued how the disabled body can serve as "the raw material out of which other socially disempowered communities make themselves visible".[69] In the medical regulation of gender as well as in the trans activist responses to it, we can trace how ableism informs both processes of the pathologization and the depathologization of transgender identity. In the medicalized approach, the pathologization of transgender experience is a process through which the transgender subject can re-assert able-bodiedness and able-mindedness by achieving normative gender congruence. Conversely, in the political project toward depathologization, medical and psychiatric diagnoses remain a site of stigmatized disability that transgender subjects attempt to move away from. In both cases, structures of compulsory able-bodiedness remain intact.

The question that arises here is: How to reimagine the proximity of transness and disability in a way that does not reproduce the terms of compulsory ablebodiedness? This requires abandoning the idea that the mark of disability is a negative association that should be shed in becoming trans, but also, being careful not to simply conflate the terms and suggest that transness was just disability all along. In her chapter "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled," Jasbir Puar scrutinizes the web of power relations in medical and legal frameworks that make disability and transness become positions that both implicate and

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[65] Davy, "The DSM-5," 1173
[66] Suess et al, "Depathologization," 74
[67] Josephine Krieg, "A Social Model of Trans and Crip Theory," *lambda nordica* 3, no. 4 (2013): 44
[68] Clare, "Body Pride," 262
[69] David T. Mitchell & Sharon Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 6

exclude each other.[70] Disability becomes the disavowed material from which a transnormative subject emerges, and disability becomes a category of potential bodily capacity through the reproduction of gender normativity.[71] As a consequence, attempts at epistemological frameworks in which transness and disability come together can remain quite categorical, where "disability" and "transgender" are coherent categories that precede their potential meeting points.[72] Instead of formulaic thinking "based on the assumption of the equality of each vector to the other and absence of each in the other", Puar suggests moving from "epistemological correctives" towards "ontological multiplicity", where becoming trans and becoming disabled are implicated in the same assemblages of power that undo the fantasy of discrete categories.[73] The epistemological coherence of transness and disability as distinct identity markers and experiences, is both produced and maintained by power (institutional and discursive) and is the basis for a politics that seeks to relate transgender embodiment and disability either by analogy or overlap. Moreover, the imagined political alliances of trans and crip politics are then encapsulated in the intersectional "trans-disabled subject" or the "disabled trans subject" which can perform the work of a "gestural intersectionality" that then precludes accountability to broader alliances and affinities.[74] Refusing to isolate trans and disability as separate and distinct conceptual entities, Puar asks: "What kinds of political and scholarly alliances might potentiate when each acknowledges and inhabits the more generalized conditions of the other, creating genealogies that read both entities as implicated within the same assemblages of power rather than as intersecting at specific overlaps?"[75] There are numerous examples of political organizing that work through such trans-crip adjacencies, including bathroom activist projects such as "Stalled!" and "PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms)" that foreground coalition forms of political organizing.[76] In addition, we can think of the work of Sins Invalid, a critical disability performance arts group

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[70] Examples she discusses include how disability and transness are split from each other in psychiatric and diagnostic frameworks as well as in disability legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

[71] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 34, 49

[72] For an example of work at this intersection which aims to show the points of similarity between transness and disability, see Alexande Baril's article "Transness as Debility," where he proposes to consider transness a form of disability. While Baril advances an important argument that challenges the splitting of trans and disability, he holds on to transness and disability as separate axis that meet in intersectional encounter and that share overlapping experiences of bodily debilitation. But instead of scrutinizing how bodily experiences of transness are also a form of disability, I am more interested in understanding trans-crip adjacencies within a broader biopolitical management of bodies.

[73] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 36

[74] Puar, 'Disability', 78

[75] Puar, 78

[76] For literature on bathrooms as sites for coalition organizing, see Alison Kafer, "Accessible Futures, Future Coalitions," in *Feminist Queer Crip*; and Christina Crosby and Janet Jakobsen, "Disability, Debility, and Caring Queerly," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 77-103

that challenges normative bodily forms through "an unashamed claim to beauty" and who understand disability to materialize in connection to "all communities impacted by the medicalization of their bodies, including trans, gender variant and intersex people, and others whose bodies do not conform to our culture(s)' notions of "normal" or "functional."[77] In these examples, political organizing relies on trans-crip adjacencies due to a shared relationship to operations of power rather than overlapping identities. In scholarship, critics such as Eli Clare, Mel Chen, Robert McRuer, Melanie Yergeau, Alison Kafer, and Dean Spade offer tools for grappling with the entanglement of racialization, queerness, and gender normativity with compulsory able-bodiedness. In these practices and writings, transness and disability are not collapsed into each other, nor taken as separate axis of intersectional identities, but as part of an epistemological interrogation that aims to understand how they implicate each other in the construction of intelligible subject categories.

At this juncture, it is useful to return to the questions raised by Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement*, particularly for how it affirms trans-crip adjacencies in troubling the visual and epistemological capture of experiences that toggle between minoritarian and dominant discourses and languages. Taking cue from the video-performance's formal qualities and techniques (re-speaking and inhabiting another voice), I take the video as instructive for considering how insights from disability studies and disability justice organizing might usefully inform our thinking about transness, and possible forms of resistance to the transnormative consolidation of "transgender."

Within disability studies and disability justice organizing, the relationship between the mattering of the body and the categories commonly used for identity is always complicated. A key working principle within this area of debate is an appreciation of how "disability" as a category of identity has an incoherent relationship to the bodies it would refer to. "Disability" in itself can signify a whole range of types of embodiments and experiences. Moreover, when we use the category of "disability," we need to be aware of how it refers to forms of embodiments and experiences that might never enter the framework of intelligibility that "disability" pivots on.[78] Consequently, critics have pointed to the inadequacy of the concept of disability, particularly when taking into account how "disability" as a category of identity in

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[77] "Mission"
https://www.sinsinvalid.org/mission
[78] The work of Julie Livingston, Jasbir Puar, Nirma Erevelles, and Helen Meekosha's, for example, directs us to the global politics of disability and to reckon with the fact that most disabled people will not be diagnosed or interpellated as a "disabled" subject.

fact obscures global processes of debilitation.[79] In other words, a category such as disability enables us to see - structures of oppresion or a group of people who have shared experiences of oppression - but it can also occlude other formations of bodily debilitation that are ostensibly part of the same workings of power from becoming visible. Again, the question is how and where intelligibility relies on a constitutive outside. This poses both a set of problems, but also opportunities, and I hope it will become clear how this debate might become useful for how we approach the category of "transgender."

The usage of "disability" as a common denominator for what is estimated to be 15% of the world's population poses the question of what is included and excluded from this category, and in what ways it is useful to capture both a phenomenological and a political experience.[80] Within the United States, where an active disability rights movement emerged in the 1960s, the category of "disability" enabled a sense of collectivity and unity for an extremely diverse group of people. Simi Linton captures this dynamic when she writes: "We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes, following our guide dogs, puffing and sipping on the mouth sticks that propel our motorized chairs. We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system. We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group."[81] Hence, the category of disability is valuable for purposes of social movement organizing, but also policy and legislation aimed at combatting the oppression of disabled people. What is held in common under the category of disability is not a shared physical or mental state, but an experience within a social, material, and political structure that excludes non-normative bodyminds. The category that is commonly understood to refer to an identity - allowing a subject to state "I am disabled" - is then not so much an individual property, but always refers to a relationship, whose meaning arises from an encounter in a particular context.[82] It has been argued that the fact that "disability" does not signify a coherent or homogenous shared identity poses a problem.[83] For example, people worry the protected class might be too broadly defined to be protected through legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S.), the Equality Act (UK), or the United Nations Convention on the Rights

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[79] Puar, *Right to Maim*; Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*

[80] World Health Organization, "Disability and Health", fact sheet available at https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health

[81] Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 4

[82] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits" 593

[83] Lennard Davis, "The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category" in *The Disability Studies Reader,* ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013) , 271

of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). But instead, we can consider the incoherency of disability as a useful tool for grappling with the wide and varied ways in which bodies are debilitated by structural systems that continue to define bodily capacities through an optic of productivity. Critical disability studies and disability justice organizing have created an invaluable space for crafting of a position against political logics of cure, accommodation, and visibility, and against productivity as the benchmark for who is included in the body politic.[84] The politicization of disability thus always extends beyond disability and asks broader questions about how non-normative and pathologized subjects relate to the terms of recognition through which inclusion takes place.[85]

The way in which disability studies advances a critical unsettling of the relationship between the mattering of the body and the identity categories used to inform or regulate those experiences, is useful for scrutinizing the contemporary consolidation of what the category of "transgender" includes. In other words, disability as rethought in critical disability studies and justice movements allows us to reframe "transgender" beyond a limited and limiting understanding of disability and consequently normative frames of legibility through medical pathologies and legal frameworks of rights. Recalibrating transness in line with an incoherent definition of disability, as discussed above, has crucial implications for challenging the biopolitics of control of trans subjects against and beyond regulated bodily normativity, cure, and accommodation, and towards ontological multiplicity.

Wu Tsang's re-enactment of Mel Baggs's statement is articulated in a time where a rapid visual and cultural celebration of transness starts to take place that further consolidates the transnormative subject, partially through its distancing from the pathologizing associations of mental illness. In inhabiting Mel Baggs's words, Tsang pushes back against the ways in which transness is split from disability and demonstrates their entanglement. On the one hand the work offers a site from which to trace how disability informs our understanding of trans existence as tethered to regulatory forms of cure and control and therefore only becoming intelligible if it follows a normative expression of subjectivity and personhood. On the other hand, Tsang's work enacts an emancipatory vision, where disability and transness materialize as incoherent and opaque modes of being and becoming in the world.

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[84] Kelly Fritsch, "Cripping Neoliberal Futurity: Marking the Elsewhere and Elsewhen of Desiring Otherwise," *Feral Feminisms* 5 (2016): 11-26

[85] To be clear, the tension I am mapping between the category of disability and the bodily experiences, as well as social and political relationships if power, it refers to, is not unique to "disability." I do not think other categories of identity *do* signify a coherent or homogenous group with shared characteristics. Rather, this tension is simply more explicit and pronounced in the example of disability, and the value lies in extending this to how we consider identity categories more generally.

Moreover, Tsang's re-enactment challenges not just for our epistemological frameworks of understanding "disability" and "transgender," but also our visual frames of recognition. Extending Baggs's statement to her aesthetic practice that contests the politics of visual representation, Tsang troubles the visual signs of the body, prompting the viewer to ask: Which bodies do these categories refer to, and what would they look like? How does the statement bear on transness, or disability, or both? To treat the categories of disability and transgender as incoherent means that the answer to these questions is also unsettled. In other words, the productive destabilizing of the *intelligibility* of disability and transgender goes hand in hand with the destabilizing of the *legibility* of transness and disability. In a context where "wrong" bodies are made "right," *Shape of a Right Statement* asks us to pause and assess by which parameters a "right" frame of legibility is established. We can thus understand her performance to interrogate the frames of recognition through which transgender becomes intelligible and legible, but also to gesture towards another possibility, one that keeps open the linkages of trans politics with minoritarian struggles.

Through an analysis of Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement*, this chapter has explored the complex ways in which transness and disability implicate each other. I demonstrated that Tsang's video-performance required a reconsideration of appropriation art, since an analysis solely based on power relations (either as subversion of hegemonic forms or as exploitation of another person's suffering) is not adequate for grappling with Tsang's performance of adjacency. Her work posed the question of how transness and disability become legible and intelligibly, opening up a site for interrogating how categories of "transgender" and "disability" enable certain visions while foreclosing others. The next chapter continues this line of inquiry into trans-crip adjacencies through a specific focus on how to conceptualize transgender and disability *inclusion*. I approach that question using a critical deployment of "rehabilitation," in order to examine how contemporary forms of inclusion are contingent on either the erasure or performance of the visual mark of difference. As we will see, this analysis is also medium-specific: Chapter 3 turns to sculpture and installation art in which the body visually and figuratively does not appear, but questions can be raised about the terms and conditions that grant the non-normative body the right to appear *as* a different body.

3. Refusals of Rehabilitation in Disability and Transgender Aesthetics

This chapter is broadly interested in the problematics of inclusion and exclusion as they figure in disability and transgender aesthetics. However, I approach these terms not as opposites or as mutually exclusive. Instead, this chapter explores how the inclusion of non-normative subjects into the "social body" is always already implicated in practices of exclusion. As Puar writes of the oscillation between disciplinary power and societies of control, the question is not "whether to include, but how."[1] And, I would like to add, the struggle for disability and transgender justice is neither a question of being excluded or included: rather, the question is how to contest the practices of inclusion that are conditional on the capacitation of bodies for the normative reproduction of societies. The work of Park McArthur (U.S.) and Jesse Darling (U.K.), the two artists whose exhibitions anchor this chapter, enact a politics of refusal that exposes the limits of inclusion contingent on a *rehabilitative* logic. In this chapter, I turn to their aesthetic practices to scrutinize the underlying assumptions and frameworks of *intelligibility* that underpin inclusion, and to imagine the terms of social transformation differently.

I situate McArthur's and Darling's work in a time of increased attention to disability, as part of a post-ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), post-Equality Act, and post-UNCRPD (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) era in which we see the solidification of disability-specific protective legislation and policies, and transgender anti-discrimination laws. Across Western Europe and North America, there have been various attempts to include transgender rights into existing anti-discrimination legislation. These developments run parallel to an increase in cultural representation, more media attention to transgender and disability as forms of identity politics, and a focus on "diversity" becoming more entrenched in policy, institutions, and education. Within the contemporary art world, the last decade has witnessed an increase of exhibitions and other programming that address issues of disability and transness. However, alongside more formal forms of integration, we also see the increasing prevalence of anti-transgender legislation in the United States and normalization of transphobic discourse in the United Kingdom and a rollback of the welfare state and increased austerity measures. The impact of such acts is disproportionately high among disabled and transgender people in terms of poverty rates, access to employment, and health care provisions and demonstrates the precariousness of developments toward inclusion.

[1] Jasbir Puar, *Right to Maim*, 21

Attending to these political and cultural contradictions, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue that while neoliberal forms of inclusionism embrace bodies that appear different in how they look, act, function, or feel, this inclusion generally serves to reify a normative construct of subjectivity, and thus continue to exclude disability.[2] They contend that "mere inclusion within neoliberalism is not enough […] without an active encounter with the alternative materialities such bodies and minds bring into being."[3] The aesthetic practices under review in this chapter grapple with this encounter, addressing both the problematic of inclusion of the "different" body, and the different ways in which disabled and transgender embodiment materializes and can be made "sensible." As such, this chapter opens with a discussion of "rehabilitation" as a particular form of inclusion that has shaped how disabled people are considered to "fit in" within the social body. Critiques from disability scholarship and activism demonstrate a critical reconsideration of how rehabilitation functions as a socio-cultural logic that reproduces the status quo and erases the difference of the non-normative subject. As such, these critiques can be extended to the realm of transgender politics in order to consider how forms of inclusion rely on a logic of rehabilitation. Moreover, I contribute to these discussions by bringing the concept of rehabilitation to bear on how visual signs of difference function within modalities of inclusion. While rehabilitation flags a "return" to health, capacity, and functionality, in contemporary neoliberal contexts where "diversity" is a popular term to invoke, rehabilitation functions not so much through an erasure of difference, but through a celebration and exceptionalization of these visual signs of difference. Thus, the rehabilitation of bodies takes place not by erasing the non-normative body's mark of difference but precisely through a celebration of it. This is what Jasbir Puar calls "piecing," or passing as not passing, where we see "the commodification not of wholeness or of rehabilitation but of plasticity."[4] I bring Puar's discussion of piecing into domains of visuality, inquiring into how aesthetic practices address the function of bodily wholeness under neoliberal forms of inclusion.

In the previous chapter, I explored how Wu Tsang's performative practice of re-enactment creates adjacencies across transgender, racialized, and disabled positions. There, I discussed the generative force of disorientation in those aesthetics practices, which materializes in unsettling the correspondence between the visual legibility of the body and the speech acts made from that body. This chapter builds on these previous discussions around the problematic

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[2] David T. Mitchell & Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 4

[3] Ibid., iv

[4] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 46

of legibility and intelligibility in disability and transgender aesthetics by turning to aesthetic practices of sculpture and installation in which the body does not "appear," visually and figuratively speaking. Instead, closer attention is paid to the conditions that grant it the right to appear *as* a different body. I argue that, by taking the body out of the visual economy, both Park McArthur and Jesse Darling unsettle the liberal satisfaction of consuming the "different" body: "the trans body", or "the disabled body." As such, their exhibitions reflect on the ways in which artists might be called on to represent these demographics within elite art institutions while, instead, asking critical questions about how difference is included and absorbed into institutions.

This constellation of developments discussed so far demands a critical response: how to think of "inclusion" in a moment of these political and cultural contradictions? More specifically, how does the surge of artistic encounters with disability and transgender as forms of identity relate to continuing forms of legal and social exclusion? As mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation, this thesis emphasizes the place of the arts in activating critical thought and engagement, and in exposing forms of exclusion not only within the art world but also within society at large. There is a common conception that social justice struggles play out in the realm of political organizing, lobbying, or, more broadly, the realm of Realpolitik. In this chapter, I want to emphasize the role of art as a site where social justice struggles are not confined to the logic of either resisting or accepting rehabilitation but can attend to the messiness of material (in)accessibility, the imbrication of the desire, or refusal, of repair with the rights to access and recognition as subject in an ableist and gender conforming society.

Given this aim, the chapter continues by asking what a refusal of this schema of rehabilitation might look like of two artists who are dealing with such contemporary forms of inclusion. This starts with an analysis of an exhibition by artist Park McArthur, titled *Ramps* (2016). McArthur's installation consists of various wheelchair ramps that were made for her to enable her to access various art institutions in New York. By putting these technologies of inclusion under review, *Ramps* offers a critical commentary on a politics of accommodation that ignores the power relations imbedded in these forms of inclusion. As such, I situate McArthur's work within a development of a disability justice framework through which artists and activists are shifting the subject of disability from an emphasis on independence toward interdependence.

While McArthur offers critical tools for grappling with contemporary forms of inclusion, the question of refusal remains to be addressed in more specificity: how does one refuse inclusion in the exact moment one is reliant on structures of support? This question is

particularly pertinent for both disabled and transgender subjects who might continue to rely on medical structures of support that simultaneously reinforce a schema of rehabilitation. To explore this issue, I turn to the exhibition *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* (2018) by artist Jesse Darling. Darling's installation work revolves around the mythical encounter of Saint Jerome and a wounded lion, a story about domestication and assimilation, and uses this encounter as an entry point into exploring the encounter between wounded subjects and structures of care and support. Attentive to various prosthetics that come from the material experiences of living through gender transformation and disability, Darling creates a unique combination of disability and transgender aesthetics. In my reading of their exhibition, I discuss how critiques from disability activism and scholarship might bear on contemporary forms of transgender inclusion. I suggest that Darling's exhibition summons us to be critical of the normalizing force that is part of forms of transgender inclusion - the process of erasing gender deviancy in the service of making able, gender-normative trans subjects - and that we need to critically analyze not just the phenomenon of rehabilitation but that of "transgender rehabilitation" specifically.

The chapter's final section explores how inclusion is not just premised on a rehabilitative logic, but is also contingent on a particular frame of visual intelligibility. Here, I extend Jesse Darling's aesthetic engagement with the wound and suggest that, in addition to the important question of how the wounded subject can appear and be recognizable as such (in order to receive practices of care and support), we can explore how the wound itself can recalibrate the frames of intelligibility.

3.1. Refusing Rehabilitation: Inclusion and its Discontents

The term "rehabilitate" has a double meaning: it means a restoration to health as well as a return to "normality."[5] It is a term that carries a loaded history within disability politics, but is also used often in connection to incarcerated populations and drug users, and it broadly signifies a trajectory from a state of deviancy towards a return to an assumed prior state of normal order as well as reintegration within society. While rehabilitation is often thought of as a process that concerns individuals, it is a cultural schema that enmeshes individuals into a movement toward improvement. The etymology of "habilitate" comes from "to make able" or "to capacitate," and the prefix re- indexes the return of one's former condition.[6] Depending on the context, the process of restoring this former condition takes place through the acquisition

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[5] Oxford English Dictionary, "rehabilitate, v."
[6] Oxford English Dictionary, "habilitate, v."

of skills, regaining a particular status of mental or bodily health, overcoming of debilitation, or a repair of a damaged object. However, rehabilitation is a relative concept and process whose starting point and end point are not anchored in an individual subject but emerge from the social body in which that subject is deemed abnormal.

In the following discussion, I want to explore how rehabilitation is an appropriate optic through which to understand the problematic dynamic of "inclusion" of minoritarian subjects in terms of how difference is absorbed into the normative body politic. I review critiques on rehabilitation as they emerge in critical disability studies, since they offer tools for understanding rehabilitation as a cultural schema that, often hand in hand with the normalization of the minoritarian subject, drives integration and inclusion. In doing so, I flesh out two key points of contention that will frame the analysis of the aesthetic practices of Park McArthur and Jesse Darling further on in the chapter: firstly, the vexed relationship between a cultural logic of rehabilitation and the ways in which the appearance of the body demonstrates the visual signs of difference; and, secondly, the possibility of refusing the rehabilitative logic that underpins the inclusion of both trans and disabled subjects into the social order.

In the realm of disability politics, rehabilitation is a close neighbor of cure and is often understood as the process that precedes and leads to cure. At the center of the logic of cure lies a notion of defectiveness that is located in the body and in need of eradication.[7] Both activists and scholars have critiqued the violence that this logic brings to people with disabilities. Alison Kafer argues that compulsory able-bodiedness relies on a "curative imaginary" in which disability can only be understood in relation to an expectation of intervention.[8] Within a normative future, cast as free from disability, "the only appropriate disabled mind/body is one cured or moving toward cure."[9] In a similar vein, Eunjung Kim's work on "curative violence" shows how cure denies a place for disability and illness as a different way of living and often places real physical violence on people with disabilities, justified in the name of cure and eradication of disease, regardless of whether or not a cure is available.[10] After all, cure detracts attention away from the possibility to find solutions in social structures to address obstacles that disabled people experiences in the present.[11] Activist and writer Eli Clare evocatively discusses the conundrum of "grappling with cure": "Cure saves lives and ends lives, propels eradication and promises us that our body-minds can change. It is a tool in the drive to

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[7] Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection,* 26
[8] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 27
[9] Ibid., 28
[10] Kim, *Curative Violence,* 14
[11] Ibid., 6; Clare, *Exile and Pride,* 122-123

normalize humans, to shrink the diversity of shape, form, size, and function among us."[12] Within a curative logic, rehabilitation and eradication do similar work: they align the individual body to the health of the social body, either through its rehabilitation, and thus integration, or through its elimination, what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the "eugenic logic" at the heart of modernity.[13] The removal of illness, then, is not just about curing an individual body but about curing the social body that contains, or is affected by, the sick individual.

Having said that, it is important to distinguish between rehabilitation as an ideology or socio-cultural logic and as instances of desiring rehabilitation and cure. Indeed, in response to the violence of rehabilitation and cure, disability rights movements have often developed forms of disability pride that contest the supposedly self-evident associations of defectiveness and lack with disability. But there are many forms of disability, such as, for example, chronic pain, where the desire for cure can live alongside the political struggle against the cultural and medical positioning of disabled people as defective. Moreover, a model of disability pride can, at times, leave little room for an understanding of the sense of loss and mourning that can accompany bodily transformations, which is especially pertinent given that most disabilities are acquired during one's life. Alison Kafer speaks to this seeming contradiction when she writes: "I want to make room for people to acknowledge—even mourn—a change in form or function while also acknowledging that such changes cannot be understood apart from the context in which they occur."[14] A moving example of how to think these together can be found in Christina Crosby's memoir *A Body, Undone*, in which she narrates the experience of learning to live on after a sudden accident through which she becomes a quadriplegic. Refusing the narrative arch of "overcoming", she writes: "To focus on intractable pain, then, or grief at the loss of able-bodiedness, as I do here, may be thought to play into a pathologizing narrative that would return disability to 'misshapen' bodies and 'abnormal' minds."[15] But, as she shows, a recognition of how our bodies and minds are "undone" keeps a place for grief and a desire for cure or intervention while understanding how, within a curative imaginary, the process of rehabilitation is inevitably intertwined with a desired normative body politic, something Crosby critiques in her memoir.

This chapter does not attend to the psychic and affective landscape of the desire for rehabilitation or the grief for the loss of bodily functions, as important as that is. Instead, I place

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[12] Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection,* 69

[13] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "The Case for Conserving Disability," *Journal of bioethical inquiry* 9, no. 3 (2012): 340

[14] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 6

[15] Christina Crosby, *A Body, Undone*: Living on after great pain (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 7

focus, as per the aesthetic practices discussed here, on the socio-cultural logic of rehabilitation and its enforcement of certain modalities of inclusion in the social body. A critical genealogical study on the emergence of a culture of rehabilitation in Europe and the implications that has for the place of disability in society, can be found in Henri-Jacques Stiker's *A History of Disability*. Originally published in French in 1982 and translated into English in 1999, his work takes a Foucauldian approach that offers insight into the development of a cultural logic that underpins the move from exclusion towards inclusion. According to Stiker, a shift takes place in post-WWI Europe that represents a "new awareness of disability."[16] This new awareness of disability introduces an attitude where what is lost can and must be replaced, symbolized in the development of prosthetic limbs for war amputees. What he terms "the birth of rehabilitation" introduces a discourse of return, which indeed refers to an assumed prior "normal" state.[17] Disabled people move from a position of outsiderness to becoming a problem to be solved: the lack of the disabled body synecdochically came to stand in for a lack in the social body that needed to be addressed through restoration, incorporation, and insertion into society.[18] For Stiker, the violence of this drive for reintegration is located in how rehabilitation is always on the terms of normative society: "[r]ehabilitation marks the appearance of a culture that attempts to complete the act of identification, of making identical. This act will cause the disabled to disappear and with them all that is lacking, in order to assimilate them, drown them, dissolve them in the greater and single social whole."[19] Measures that were developed in the twentieth century, such as legislation and institutions aimed at including disabled people into normative structures of education, work, and living, were responding to observing the exclusion of disabled people from society. However, as Stiker argues, these were based on "a will to make disappear," and were geared toward the effacement of disability.[20] He writes: "The disabled person is integrated only when the disability is erased."[21] In other words, we can understand the drive toward integration to be accompanied with a movement toward normalization. Extending Stiker's observations on the cultural logic of rehabilitation, the inclusion of the minoritarian subject into the social body relies the erasure of the visual signs of difference. The inclusion of various subjects who appear "different" does not challenge the make-up of the social order. Rather, it reinforces social conformity.

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[16] Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 121, 123
[17] Ibid., 122
[18] Ibid., 124
[19] Ibid., 128
[20] Ibid., 150
[21] Ibid., 152

While Stiker's argument useful for delineating a cultural logic that is both persistent and malleable across societal changes, it pays little attention to when and how a culture of rehabilitation fails to be successful. This might be in part due to his focus on the historical development of disability's position in Western societies from antiquity to the late twentieth century. His analysis ends when disability rights movements began to emerge in conjunction with other social movements and initiated new ways of thinking about bodily difference. This leaves us to ask, then, whether there are ruptures in the cultural logic of rehabilitation, or moments where refusal and resistance arise? This question seems especially pertinent to ask given how Stiker's work is informed by the methods and theories of Michel Foucault. Stating that "Foucault has left a whole continent unexplored: physical disability," Stiker frames *A History of Disability* as a study that takes on what Foucault's work on madness and mental illness left unexamined.[22] However, if disability is constructed through norms and practices of rehabilitation, Stiker hardly includes a discussion of how resistance takes place at the nexus of power and knowledge. However, when following Foucault, resistances emerge within the relational character of power, which means that subjects are not doomed to submit to the power rehabilitation and normalization but can find moments of fracture and re-routing that affect the circulation and reproduction of a culture of rehabilitation.[23]

We can see examples of how, with the emergence of disability rights movements and disability justice movements, the difference between which will be explored in section 3.2, a culture of rehabilitation has been challenged. For example, the anti-psychiatry movement contests the supposed deviancy of the behavior that is brought under psychiatric diagnoses, arguing that psychiatry is a method of control. Deaf Culture advocates refuse rehabilitation into hearing culture and focus on appreciating and developing Deaf Culture's own languages. The disappearance of difference through "making identical" is put under pressure by various disability social movements. As Margrit Shildrick states, "rehabilitation to normative practice or normative appearance is no longer the point; instead, the lived experience of disability – with its embodied absences, displacements, and prosthetic additions – generates, at the very least, its own specific possibilities that both limit and extend the performativity of the self."[24] This push against rehabilitation opens up the possibility to differently valuate the difference that disability can pose, and refuses the demand for a normative appearance of the body.

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[22] Ibid., 92
[23] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]), 95-96
[24] Margrit Shildrick, "'Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?': Embodiment, Boundaries, and Somatechnics," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 14

Yet, it is precisely the ways in which the multiple schemas of rehabilitation are enacted on and through the appearance of the body that needs further scrutiny. What makes "rehabilitation" a particular form of inclusionism is its emphasis on the construction of bodily normativity: a return to health, functionality, and capacity. But if, according to Stiker, post-WWI rehabilitation practices shifted toward "returning" the body to normal, or at least, towards the appearance of a normal body, late twentieth century and early twenty-first century practices of inclusion have a different relationship to the visible signs of difference on the body. Which is why it is important to extend the consideration of rehabilitation and inclusion to the realm of visibility and aesthetics.

In socio-cultural and legal contexts where there is a strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion, the visual appearance of the non-normative body can do the work of signaling successful inclusion. As Sarah Ahmed states: "Perhaps the promise of diversity is that it can be both attached to those bodies that 'look different' and detached from those bodies as a sign of inclusion (if they are included by diversity, then we are all included). The promise of diversity could then be described as a problem: the sign of inclusion makes the signs of exclusion disappear."[25] Ahmed usefully demonstrates how the appearance of the "different" body performs the function of evidencing that inclusion has taken place or is even complete. Crucially, the difference that marks that different body cannot be fully erased in order for it do the work of signaling inclusion. Unlike Stiker's observation that rehabilitation attempts to make identical, at times the visible mark of difference is not erased but celebrated and exceptionalized. This is similar to what Jasbir Puar calls "piecing," which she describes as the capacity to "pass as not passing."[26] Building on Snorton and Haritaworn's delineation of the "transnormative" subject, as discussed in Chapter 2, Puar suggests that trans exceptionalism no longer only relies on passing through the concealment of gender deviance, but on "piecing": a new form of citizenship "galvanized through mobility, transformation, regeneration, flexibility, and the creative concocting of the body."[27] Piecing, then, is the transnormative overcoming of debility wherein which the capacity of flexibility is foregrounded. For example, in piecing, the trans subject does not pass as gender-normative male or female but passes as trans. Following Puar's argument, rehabilitation does not necessarily rely on the erasure of difference, nor on the performance of wholeness and bodily integrity. The visual mark of

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[25] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included*: *Racism and diversity in institutional life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 65

[26] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 49

[27] Ibid., 45

difference stands not in opposition to rehabilitation but is part and parcel of how the difference of minoritarian subjects is absorbed into the body politic. For example, the demonstration of bodily capacity during Paralympic events follows a logic of rehabilitation while it continues to depend on the visible presence of disability. In this case, rehabilitation relies on the visible demonstration of rehabilitation, of overcoming a state of woundedness with the wound still on display. As such, we can describe contemporary logics of rehabilitation as relying on the visual mark of difference that comes to evidence the process of inclusion. While Puar does not situate her discussion of passing and piecing in the realm of visibility or the aesthetic, the notion of passing is fundamentally concerned with how the body appears and how the visual signs of gender, race, and disability are read on bodies. Extending the tension between "passing" and "piecing" to the realm of aesthetic practices, then, requires closer attention to how to how the visual signs of difference are negotiated.

I take "refusal" of inclusion, rather than resistance, to offer a salient optic through which this conundrum can be explored, because it reflects a generative practice of imagining otherwise rather than a mere oppositional stance. Refusal as a political gesture and a practice has been recently theorized within black studies and aesthetics as a modality of resistance, but one that refuses the terms available for intelligible performances of resistance. Tina Campt defines it as "the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles."[28] Through her discussion of aesthetic practices that address black precarity, she delineates how refusal is about the practice of imagining what kind of vocabulary becomes possible once we refuse to embrace "the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented."[29] A practice of refusal, according to Campt, centers on refusing to "recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible."[30] Or, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney formulate it in *The Undercommons*, it is an exploration of being together through the "refusal of what has been refused."[31] Crucially, this notion of refusal engages "negation as generative" by rejecting the terms one is faced with and imagining them otherwise.[32] It is the creation of possibility. By disrupting, as Lilian G. Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan argue, "the vicious dialectic of assimilation and resistance," refusal is an attempt

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[28] Campt, "Black visuality," 80

[29] Campt, "The Visual Frequency," 25

[30] Campt, "Black visuality," 83

[31] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 96

[32] Campt, "Black visuality," 83

to operate outside of the binary between resistance and conformity.[33] Instead, it interrogates the terms on which those two forms of (dis)engagement are premise and refuses to accept those as the only possibility.

The question that remains to be explored is what a refusal of the cultural logic of rehabilitation can look like. In my analysis of the work of artists Park McArthur and Jesse Darling, I explore the role of aesthetics in addressing the refusal of rehabilitation in relation to disability and transgender embodiment. Both artists are attuned to the importance for trans and disabled subjects to gain access to various spaces, resources and practices of care while simultaneously offering a critique of the normalizing force of practices of inclusion. The refusal to rehabilitate and the desire for care are complexly imbricated in these questions of rights, recognition and access in a society that is primarily structured around the exclusion of trans and disabled bodies yet formulates a conditional inclusion on the basis of repair, productivity, and capacity. McArthur's and Darling's exhibitions articulate such a critique, asking: How does one refuse the structures one relies on? As I discuss in more detail below, the exhibitions *Ramps* and *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* enact a refusal by scrutinizing various technologies of inclusion, including physical access technologies such as ramps, prostheses, such as mobility aids or devices for altering one's gender appearance, and more "immaterial" technologies such as the epistemological and visual frameworks of the museum. In their installations, both McArthur and Darling deploy these access devices, mobility aids, or prosthetics not in service of rehabilitation or as an aid toward repair. Rather, they recalibrate them to account for a non-sovereign account of embodiment and subjectivity. As we will see, their aesthetic practice of refusal allows for a reconsideration of how an ableist and gender normative social order absorbs the difference of trans and disabled subject.

3.2. Against Accommodation: Park McArthur's *Ramps*

We, very unreasonably, will be held. We are one another's means without ends.
- Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, "The Guild of the Brave Poor Things"

[33] Mengesha & Padmanabhan, "Introduction to Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform," *Women & Performance* 29, no. 1 (2019): 3

In their book *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism and Peripheral Embodiment* (2015), Mitchell and Snyder grapple with what they call the "aftershocks" of neoliberalism, where forms of formal integration and social visibility of disabled people run alongside of continuing forms of exclusion. More pertinently, as signaled in the previous section, the increased visibility and discourse of inclusion alters the way in which exclusion can enter a field of recognition. In terms of representation, this form of inclusion finds its manifestation in the figure of the "able-disabled"[34]. This term, offered by artist and activist Cheryl Marie Wade in 1994, refers to how disability becomes intelligible through its approximation to able-bodiedness, sidelining material experiences of disability and illness. Situating this phenomenon more explicitly in a neoliberal landscape, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder take the figure of the able-disabled to represent "latter twentieth-century champions of social normativity now held out to a select group of upstanding disabled citizens."[35] Mitchell and Snyder locate examples of this in figures such as Aimee Mullins and Oscar Pistorius, athletes whose signs of bodily supplementation demonstrate a medicalized and technologized culture in which bodily limitations are not merely overcome but also "overcompensated", creating a spectacle of "machine-like capacity" that not only enables the body of the athlete, but also enables forms of ablenationalism that use the figure of the able-disabled as a symbol of success in a widespread distribution of productive and unproductive bodies.[36] The strong symbolic function of the figure of the able-disabled has influenced the visual registers through which bodies appear as productive or unproductive, endowed with skills and capacity or not, as an example of normative citizenship or a failure of it.

The exploration of the imbricated relationship between the somatic body and the social body lies at the heart of Park McArthur's aesthetic practice. Currently living and working in New York City, McArthur's work addresses themes of disability and debility, interdependency, and relationships of care. Looking at the contemporary landscape of Euro-American artists and activists offering new visual vocabularies from the vantage point of disability, we can situate McArthur's practice alongside, among others, Carolyn Lazard's video, installation, and performance work on chronic illness, Constantina Zavitsanos sculpture and performance work on debt and dependency, and Christine Sun Kim's sound and illustration art exploring deafness. What marks these artists is the ways in which their work has circulated in elite art world

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[34] Cheryl Marie Wade, quoted in Susan Wendell, "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illness as Disabilities", *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 22

[35] Mitchel & Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability*, 55

[36] Ibid., 57

infrastructures in the last decade, making disability an explicit feature of possible encounters in biennales, group or solo shows, and public programming at museums and galleries.[37] This trend might also be considered a shift away from how disability aesthetics have traditionally circulated in the art world, often explicitly framed *as* disability arts, primarily through dance and theater companies, or through the optic of "outsider art."[38] Artists navigating that world of disability arts are faced with the expectation that art offers insights into the experience of disability or an emphasis on the extraordinary capabilities of untrained artists, potentially reinforced the "able-disabled" logic as described above. But the development I am tracing marks a moment of a different kind of cultural recognition of disability in the art world, which in turn invites critical thinking about processes of inclusion, accommodation, and accessibility. For example, Carolyn Lazard wrote a guide titled 'Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice' (2019), targeted at art spaces who desire to create more equitable and accessible spaces based on principles of disability justice. Lazard elucidates how accessibility, when it emerges from disability justice, expands the traditional juridical definition of accessibility into an intersectional approach.[39] From this perspective, instituting accessibility is not just a procedure of following a checklist of ADA or UN CRPD requirements, but is about asking a broader question of how access to a space is structured by economic, cultural and social exclusions. As Lazard writes, "Disability Justice movements understand disability to be unevenly distributed, primarily affecting black and indigenous communities, queer and trans communities, and low-income communities."[40] In developing critical discourse around accessibility, Lazard and other artists and activists create a site from which to interrogate the physical, structural, and conceptual barriers that cultural spaces have historically had or continue to uphold.

By situating their aesthetic practices within a disability justice framework, these artists can be considered to be part of a new direction in disability activism and scholarship that emerged in the US in the 2000s. "Disability Justice" was coined by the Disability Justice Collective in Oakland, California, whose members overlap with the performance art group Sins Invalid.[41] What characterizes disability justice movements is a rethinking of the subject of

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[37] In addition to gallery shows, examples include Park McArthur's exhibition *Projects 195* at MoMA (New York City 2018-2019), and Christine Sun Kim's and Carolyn Lazard's works in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

[38] Alice Wexler and John Derby, *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2020)

[39] Carolyn Lazard, "Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice," (Reading: The Standard Group, 2019): 6

[40] Ibid., 6

[41] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 11

disability politics vis-à-vis the disability rights movement, whose single-issue focus often remained limited to a masculine, physically disabled subject whose disability is consolidated by white privilege and economic mobility.[42] Starting from the vantage point of those who are marginalized by the disability rights movement, disability justice organizing prioritizes cross-disability solidarity, emphasizing the wide range of bodily experiences (with or without diagnosis) that should inform a critical disability politics, as well as coalitional alliances across social movements. Instead of independent living, disability justice advocates foreground liveable lives based on interdependency; likewise, instead of accessibility, disability justice demands forms of liberation beyond access.[43] As Mia Mingus explains, instead of fighting for access for the sake of access, or for a few privileged disabled people to gain access to a system that does not function for many disabled people, a disability justice framework asks what liberation looks like outside of assimilation.[44] Key concerns informing a disability justice framework include: the ways in which ableism is a function of, and upholds, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and dimorphic gender structures; a focus on environmental justice; the relationships between disability and U.S. incarceration; the production of disability through capitalist exploitation of labor; and the debilitation created globally by austerity, war, and settler colonialism.[45]

The shift from disability rights to disability justice is joined by a turning away from the social model of disability within disability studies. As Alison Kafer notes, the social model's reliance on clear-cut distinctions between "impairment" and "disability," as well as "disabled" and "non-disabled", ignores how these are not self-evident facts but political and relational phenomena that are contested and contestable.[46] Kafer calls on disability studies to re-politicize disability, and to address how disability intersects with other categories of difference.[47] These critical directions in disability activism and studies inform contemporary art and cultural

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[42] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 65

[43] Sins Invalid, "10 Principles of Disability Justice," Blog Post, last accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice

[44] Greg Macdougall, "Beyond Access: Mia Mingus on Disability Justice," Blog Post, November 30, 2013, last accessed April 21, 2021.

[45] Liat Ben-Mosche, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Bell, *"Introducing White Disability Studies"*; Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Helen Meekosha, "Decolonizing Disability: thinking and acting globally," *Disability & Society* 26, no. 6 (2011): 667-682; Clare, *Exile and Pride*; McRuer, *Crip Theory*; Sins Invalid, *Skin, tooth, and bone: the basis of movement is our people: a disability justice primer*; Block et al, *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community, Justice, and Decolonizing Disability* (Springer: Dordrecht, 2016); Pickens, *Black Madness*; Sarah Ray and Jay Sibara, *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018)

[46] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 10

[47] Ibid., 17

productions, where many artists take the body out of the visual economy, refusing the liberal satisfaction of including and showcasing "otherness", and instead investigate the structural conditions through which disability is forged as an embodied experience. I take Park McArthur's work, and her 2014 show *Ramps* in particular, as an example of this.

For example, in the epigraph of this chapter section, Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos offer a vignette of the experience of disabled embodiment that is grounded in interdependency and relationality, declaring the "unreasonableness" of having to be held. Invoking the language of "reasonable accommodation" of disability legislation, McArthur and Zavitsanos turn that goal on its head. Their unreasonableness refuses the myth of individual autonomy, and of disabled people being in excess, of requiring support, of asking too much, of being surplus.[48] Their statement pushes back against the political goal of demanding and asserting independence, a key characteristic of the disability rights movement. Instead, it offers a vocabulary of interdependency, indebted to experiences of disabled people, but also necessary for populations made vulnerable under neoliberal conditions of living more generally. By foregrounding the body's need for support structures, and the need to rely on one another, we see a relational understanding of the body that places a demand on the physical and social environment. How does this understanding of the body's interdependency affect how we understand its integration into a social body through forms of inclusion and accommodation?

McArthur's sculpture, installation, and performance practice generally does not offer any figuration of the disabled body. Instead, it makes the body appear by examining the interdependent structures that a body relies on for support and care. For example, her 2013 piece *Carried and Held* is a wall caption that consists of a list of names, starting with the artist's own name, followed by over 250 individuals. The list is an inventory of all the people that have carried and held Park McArthur to enable her to cross a physical boundary. The list is ever-growing and holds open the anticipated future moments of encounters between McArthur and other individuals. By taking the formal qualities and genre of a wall caption, which typically accompanies an installed art work, *Carried and Held* references the constellation of her body and the social and physical relations that allow it to move through the world, day by day. The art work that is implicitly brought to be present, then, is the labor of all those who carried and

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[48] Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, "The Guild of the Brave Poor Things" in *Trap Door* eds. Tourmaline et al., 238

held Park McArthur's body, an intertwinement of dependency and care work that McArthur insists on making visible throughout her practice and writing.[49]

McArthur's aesthetic practice is a powerful example of how the problematic of inclusion and exclusion can be addressed by taking the individuated body out of the visual economy. In particular, sculpture and installation art allow for a capacious space for making qualities of embodiment appear. The capacity of sculptural objects to engender new meanings of the body lies in how the physicality and three-dimensionality of a sculpture invokes a bodily relationship to the work. The viewer shares the space with an object, can circle around the object, move closer or farther away. The measure of the scale of the object is grounded in the phenomenological experience of one own's body. A viewer can be tempted into a tactile engagement, or at least, perceive texture and depth, as well as imagine the sensation of the quality of the material. When sculptural objects do not reproduce the human form, they have the capacity to generate an attunement for expanding our understanding and imagination of how bodies look, feel, and sound. In the same way that design or fashion conjures a particular body for its use and interaction, sculptural objects can defamiliarize how we hold, use, or interact with objects, and thus allow for a reconsideration of what a normative body looks like.[50] Because sculptural objects can invoke embodiment without directly representing bodies, they are a rich site for minoritarian artists to explore alternative figurations of the body.

Form matters for minoritarian artists, in part for its capacity to offer resources for resisting the violences of the linear gaze or interpretive probing that can often fix minoritarian subjects into a stereotypical narrative.[51] In the sculptural practices under review in this chapter, aesthetic form becomes a crucial part of how the artist addresses structural violences rather than subsidiary to the content, too. Scholars working on "queer abstraction" and "queer formalism" have explored the value of these art forms for creating a heterogenous account of experiences of gender and sexuality.[52] Once freed from an expectation to offer a mimetic

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[49] See, for example: Park McArthur, "Carried and Held: Getting Good at Being Helped," *iJFAB: International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 5, no. 2 (2012): 162-169; Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, "Other forms of conviviality: The best and least of which is our daily care and the host of which is our collaborative work," *Women & Performance* 23, no. 1 (2013): 126-132

[50] Gordon Hall, "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 56

[51] Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, And the Violences of the Social", *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 227

[52] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Getsy, *Abstract Bodies*; Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 58-71; Lex Morgan Lancaster, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction," *Discourse* 39, no.1 (2017): 92-116; Lancaster, "Feeling the Grid: Lorna Simpson's Concrete Abstraction" *ASAP Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): 131-155

representation of queerness or gender variance, artists use abstraction or formalism to develop a visual vocabulary that can attest to the mutability of gender and queerness outside of a representational logic. As artist Gordon Hall puts it, sculptures can function as "object lessons": We do not just see objects, but objects can teach us how to see.[53] An encounter with a sculptural object can create an experience of stillness, disorientation, humor, an overflowing sensation, absorption, blockage, dynamism, and/or a sense of indeterminacy. These affective experiences might not announce themselves as being about queerness or gender variance, but they can bring forth a re-visioning of how we understand and identify gender and sexuality. Objects have this capacity, as Hall phrases it, "[n]ot because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see *everything else*."[54]

While such investigations into abstraction and form are less explored in the realm of disability aesthetics, these are useful resources for understanding how disability can become sensible and intelligible without resorting to the autobiographical presence of the artist as the sole form of evidence for making structural violences visible. Returning to the figure of the "able-disabled", we can consider how contemporary art practices attempt to advance a different image of disability, one that attends to bodily vulnerability while simultaneously circumventing direct representations of the body. Park McArthur's practice is an instantiation of such an approach, and her work both materially and conceptually creates a way of seeing that, as I explore in further detail below, unravels neoliberal forms of inclusion.

Within these new directions in disability in mind, I now turn to Park McArthur's 2014 show *Ramps* with an interest in how her aesthetic practice takes both the physical and political conditions that need to be in place for the body to appear as the material from which to articulate a critique on practices of inclusion and integration. This concern is most forcefully articulated in *Ramps*, where McArthur takes the physical, visual, and political terms on which bodies can appear as the raw material for her art work. *Ramps* consists of approximately twenty flat objects in a geometrical grid inside the gallery space of ESSEX STREET, located in New York City. As the title of the show indicates, the objects are all ramps, with the function of bridging the gap between the street level and the entrance of a building. All these ramps were created or provided by art institutions on Park McArthur's request, between 2010 and 2013. Each ramp is a materialization of an encounter between McArthur and an institution that is inaccessible for wheelchair users. Most of these institutions were art schools, museums, and galleries, mapping the geography of McArthur's position as an emerging artist navigating the art scenes

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[53] Hall, "Object Lessons," 47
[54] Ibid., 47, emphasis in original

of New York City. For *Ramps*, McArthur requested to take the ramps on loan. Any acquisitions of the ramps would include a sum of money reserved for installing a new ramp at the organization. McArthur gave the art institutions a sign, "Ramp access located as Essex Street," to put as a placeholder for the duration of the show. The sign plays on New York City's legal requirement for inaccessible buildings to indicate nearest ramp access, and instead directs visitors to the show at Essex Street gallery, where the presence of the ramp indicates the absence of accessibility at the institutions to which they belong. McArthur asked all the cultural spaces to call her in case someone visited their building and requested ramp access, but she did not hear back from any of the organizations.

As art objects, the ramps bear the name of the institutions they came to belong to, for example, *Apexart* (2010) or *Whitney Independent Study Program* (2013). The caption for each piece also includes the address of the institution, indicating the particular physical infrastructure that necessitated the creation of the ramp, and that currently houses them. McArthur turns the structural inaccessibility of art institutions, as well as the labor that went into instituting accessibility, into the art work itself.

Figure 5. Installation shot of Park McArthur's *Ramps* (2014)

Figures 6-7. Installation shots of Park McArthur's *ESSEX STREET (pink)* (2013) and *ESSEX STREET (white)* (2013)

The grid-like arrangement of the ramps hints at a common characteristic whose order is challenged by the diversity of sizes and material properties (Figure 5). They range from sturdy objects that were designed to fulfill the function of a ramp, to fragile planks that have collapsed in their provisional role as a ramp. At the center of the grid lie *ESSEX STREET (pink)* (2013) and *ESSEX STREET (white)* (2013) (Figures 6-7), both belonging to the gallery in which *Ramps* takes place. *ESSEX STREET (pink)* still shows its hinges from its previous function as a cabinet door, and the white laminated chipboard of *ESSEX STREET (white)* has crumbled off at two of the corners. The wheelchair tyre marks and the crack in the board offer the visualization of an event of failed accessibility. This range speaks to discrepancies in institutional resources and, perhaps, willingness, as well as the improvised nature of instituting accessibility. The installation highlights how this form of accessibility exists due to an individualized process of complaint and accommodation.

As sculptural objects, the ramps have a phenomenological address, in that they are objects that shape the possible "orientations" of the body.[55] They bear traces of the lived experiences of bodily movement. Turned into art objects to be viewed rather than used, they orient the viewer to wonder how they take presence as objects in the world: how did they come

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[55] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2

into being, how have they been used, and how do they support bodily movements? The simplicity and repetition of *Ramps* convey a visual similarity to a tradition of minimalist art works that consist of grid-like installations, such as Carl Andre's floor tile pieces or Donald Judd's stacked squares. The latter works are often made with industrial standardized materials such as bricks or tiles, displaying order and neutrality, "untainted" by the personal. McArthur refuses the masculinity and celebration of standardization associated with minimalism, an art form often striving toward a disembodied aesthetic. Instead of erasing the body from view, *Ramps* offers an aesthetic that is attuned to the material dependencies of the body, making embodiment present through a process which Taraneh Fazeli describes as "cripping minimalism."[56] McArthur draws attention to the ramps's geometry and their formal qualities, but allows those, in a post-minimalist gesture, to convey an archive of social dynamics and articulate a political analysis. For example, while a ramp could easily be taken to be a quintessential symbol for instituting the social model of disability, geared as it is towards eliminating the various barriers that create disability, *Ramps*, instead, takes this sign of accessibility to articulate a critique on a politics of accommodation. By centralizing the physical properties of inaccessibility of art institutions, as well as the labour that goes into the process of making cultural spaces accessible, *Ramps* draws on a history of institutional critique, but also moves from an institutional critique toward a conceptual critique of the transaction of access. In viewing the ramps, *Ramps* directs us to see not just the limits of how these institutions were made accessible, but rather the limits of the notion of accessibility itself. McArthur calls attention to the "fetish" of accessibility within disability rights movements and highlights the need to develop a more critical attunement to disability and relationships of dependency rather than merely the question of how those on the "outside" can be brought "inside" the institution.[57] McArthur articulates this point as follows:

> "I want to articulate why accommodation is such an insufficient concept. So much of structural access, be that an elevator, or a ramp, or signage in braille, or affirmative action, or a loan, is a minimal relational proposition: a ramp can get a person in and out of a place, but what about what happens inside? I don't want to be accommodated, I

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[56] Taraneh Fazeli, "Accessibility in and Beyond the Quagmire of the Present," in *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies* eds. Alice Wexler and John Derby (New York: Routledge, 2020): 24
[57] ESSEX STREET "Park McArthur 'Ramps' at Essex Street, New York'" Press Release (2014)

want to help change the very systems and structures that view my presence as an act of accommodation."[58]

In other words, a politics of accommodation reinforces a fantasy of inclusion that ignores the power structure underlying the accommodating relationship. Tracing how the term "accommodation" comes from *commodus*, McArthur considers the etymological range of meanings that accommodation relies on: both the process of "fitting", "adapting to", and "offering service."[59] The process of being included occludes the ways in which a structure of power is reinforced in that very moment. To understand the relationship of accommodation as a process of "fitting" calls to mind Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "misfit": a feminist materialist approach to the encounter between the flesh and the world, between subject and environment.[60] Misfitting refers to an "incongruent relationship" between two elements, where the problem resides in their encounter in a specific context rather than in essential qualities of the elements.[61] Misfitting makes one a misfit, but "[m]isfits can also be agents of recognition who by the very act of misfitting engage in challenging and rearranging environments to accommodate their entrance to and participation in public life as equal citizens."[62] Hence, Garland-Thomson sees the productive potential of misfitting in how the misfit challenges their environment to accommodate to a wider range of human form and function, which is preferable over a curative approach to disability where the disabled person is expected to change in order to adapt to the world.

The terms offered by Garland-Thomson appear to make a distinction between a political project of making the world "fit" a broader diversity of bodies, where space is made for disability, or the continuing exclusion of diverse bodyminds and the negation of disability. Yet, taking cue from Park McArthur, we can consider the relationship of "fitting" and accommodation from a different angle. It is precisely the accommodation of difference which absorbs and negates the challenge that the difference poses. This might seem contradictory if we look at how, through disability legislation and advocacy work, it appears that it is society who adapts to disability: through adaptations in the physical infrastructures such as curb cuts and ramps, expanding educational institutions to include a diversity of bodyminds, or creating

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[58] Daniel Palmer, "Against Accommodation: Park McArthur" *Mousse Magazine,* February 1, 2015
[59] Ibid.
[60] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept", *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 592
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 603

accessible work places. But by adapting that social and physical world to include people with disabilities, it is the latter who are adapting to the status quo of society. In asking what happens once we are "inside", McArthur points to how accommodation remains insufficient if it means access to an environment and tools for a reproduction of life that is measured by ableist terms of productivity and functionality. From a disability justice perspective, the process of accommodation can keep intact a system that is ill-served to grapple with vulnerability and interdependency. This critique of accommodation links up to Stiker's observation that, in a culture of rehabilitation, "disability cannot be confrontational position, a force for social change … the disabled should always adapt to society such as it is."[63] Through her aesthetic practice, Park McArthur takes up the task of carving out a confrontational position, and invites us to reimagine the terms on which public participation and "functionality" are understood and valued.

This position of critique emerges also when we look at *Ramps* and learn that this work is informed by the book *Beyond Ramps* by writer and activist Marta Russell (U.S.). Vinyl letters on the gallery wall take us away from the installed ramps and direct the visitor to a URL of the Wikipedia entry about Marta Russell, which Park McArthur created and wrote in late 2013 just before the opening of *Ramps*. Published in 1998, Russell's *Beyond Ramps* proposes to move away from understanding disability as a minority identity, and instead considers it as a phenomenon that is produced and reproduced in economic relations. Russell points out how disability rights legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) is designed to facilitate greater participation in a capitalist labor relations so that people with disabilities rely less on welfare provisions.[64] *Beyond Ramps* highlights the limits of accessibility within a capitalist system in which welfare structures are dissolving, pointing to the contradiction of, for example, disability legislation aimed at accessible work places and job protection, which provides access to a structure of economic injustice that deteriorates the living conditions of most (disabled) people.[65] Russell's call to go beyond ramps is thus also a call to move beyond single-issue identity politics: to reckon with the importance of difference, yet to center economic justice as a common political goal. She writes:

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[63] Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 137
[64] Russell, "What disability civil rights cannot do"
[65] Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the end of the social contract* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1998)

"The challenge for reviving social solidarity is to build upon mutual respect and support without dismissing or diluting difference. For instance, to move beyond ramps, we must first agree that ramps are indisputably necessary. That would be making a common political "home," blending difference into commonality."[66]

Through a materialist analysis of the political and legal apparatus of disability rights, Russell foregrounds how her argument is not just relevant for disabled people. Rather, Russell considers the oppression of disabled people to signal what is to come for a much broader segment of the population who do not meet the requirements of neoliberal mantras of productivity, flexibility, and self-reliance.

Russell's *Beyond Ramps* analysis also offers necessary tools for demonstrating the persistent compulsory able-bodiedness that underpins frameworks of disability rights. We can look at, for example, the terminology of "reasonable accommodation" that is present in the ADA and the UN CRPD, which stipulates that adjustments are necessary and possible provided they do not impose a "disproportionate or undue burden."[67] This formulation keeps intact the premise that disabled people pose a burden to the status quo, the degree to which can either be accommodated through reasonable adjustments, or not. Park McArthur works with, rather than erases, the challenge that the "unreasonableness" of disabled embodiment poses, namely the challenge to rethink the centrality of independent and self-sovereign embodiment in our understanding of subjectivity. I take McArthur's practice to enact a refusal to the valuation of disabled people on terms on functionality, independence, and capacity for labor while taking the material experiences of disability as an entry point into offering new understandings of embodiment and what kind of relationality we need to sustain a diverse form of living. Such a proposition requires a rethinking of what inclusion means and does, and McArthur's practice stimulates a rethinking of the power relations embedded in inclusion. McArthur's *Ramps* echoes Russell's call to go beyond ramps by placing the physical infrastructures of inclusion under examination. As such, her installation raises crucial questions: What happens after the requested ramps are placed? What happens when we get inside? What happens after we become recipients of accommodation? The flimsy and fragile ramps orientate the viewer to become attuned to how mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion function as two sides of the same coin.

Instead of seeing disability as placing an (un)reasonable demand for accommodation, it places a demand to recalibrate our frameworks of justice. McArthur calls on us to desire more

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[66] Ibid., 233
[67] United Nations, "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2 - Definitions"

than being recipients of accommodation and to imagine inclusion differently. To do so, she suggests to invert the logic of accommodation, proposing that "we will no longer accommodate the structural oppression that is accommodating us through tactics of inclusion."[68] To be "against accommodation" then, is not to reject the much-needed accessibility in physical spaces as well as social structures. It is to take an anti-assimilationist stance towards a project of inclusion that absorbs and nullifies the potential critique that emerges from the positions of minoritarian subjects.

McArthur's critical interrogation of accessibility and accommodation links up to critiques of inclusion that have emerged from queer theory, specifically around the emergence of nation-state inclusion of sexual non-normative subjects. Key scholarship that established such a critique includes Lisa Duggan's work on "homonormativity" and the formation of a gay constituency that supports and reproduces heteronormative domesticity and consumer culture.[69] Duggan's homonormativity explores the ways in which neoliberal economic policies and their manifestations in the realm of cultural politics meant a limited inclusion of gay subjectivity into the frame of civil rights and capitalist consumerism. In addition, Jasbir Puar's work shows how "homonationalism" relies on performances of queer exceptionalism, demonstrating how a position of "outsiderness" is absorbed and mobilized in support of neoliberal and nationalist notions of citizenship and subjectivity.[70] Puar further expands on Duggan's concept of homonormativity to expose the ways in which nation-states have mobilized the rhetoric of liberal sexual politics as threatened by Muslim communities in order to buttress stricter migration policies and racist policing and warfare. In both of these foundational contributions in queer theory, the subject is included through the consolidation of capitalist and national citizenship. My trans-crip critique of inclusionism builds on this strand of queer anti-assimilationist thought, which resonates with critiques of neoliberal forms of inclusion and regulation of disabled and transgender subjects.[71] Yet, I also want to emphasize how, from the vantage point of trans-crip critique, inclusion remains structured by medical and psychiatric regulation. Even if these, as identities, could be depathologized, the relationship to medical regime and its regulatory apparatus, remains present through necessary relationships

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[68] Palmer, "Against Accommodation"

[69] Lisa Duggan, *The twilight of equality? neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 50; Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics,* eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 179

[70] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxiv

[71] Jasbir Puar, "Crip Nationalism," in *The Right to Maim;* Mitchell & Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability*; Nat Raha, "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 632-646

to practices of care. This means that practices of refusal and resistance are particularly tricky and important to analyze, since it becomes a question of how to practice refusal in and through the systems one relies on. Hence, further examination is necessary to understand how to be "against accommodation" while relying on structures of care and support. To explore the problem of how to practices refusal in the moment of making oneself visible and recognizable as a subject in need of support and care, an issue at the core of trans-crip adjacencies, I turn to the work of Jesse Darling, and in specific, their exhibition *The Ballad of Saint Jerome*.

3.3. Jesse Darling's *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* and Transgender Rehabilitations

Years passed and I forgot about singing, forgot about pain. Forgot about the men with their tubes and their fingers and the boys. Started to think I could be one of them, even. Had a friend who saw it on me. Hooked me up with the little striped vials and taught me how to drive the needle in. I felt better. Carried the boys around inside me, wore them in my blood. Walked with my head up. My words became muscular and instead of melodies my hands found ways to shape the things I couldn't say aloud. The shapes travelled the world in crates like circus animals and brought home money for food. Working the metal was like the instrument I'd never learn to play: hissing of steel and humming of clay. Songs in space and silence, quick with the rhythm of the world.

- Jesse Darling, *Letter #4*

Taking cue from Park McArthur's critique of accommodation, I further explore the problematic of inclusion by examining aesthetic practices that inquire into refusals of the power relations embedded in processes of inclusion and exclusion. If inclusion is contingent on reinforcing a particular frame of recognition of the subject, how do we relate to the messiness of attempting to refuse this modality of inclusion while also needing care and support? To explore this issue further, I turn to the aesthetic practice of Jesse Darling. In the remaining two sections, I focus on two ways in which Darling's installation practice addresses this issue and is able to generate new coordinates of visibility and vulnerability. First, I examine Darling's work with an eye on how their reworking of prosthetic objects speaks to exploring a non-sovereign form of embodiment from the vantage point of queer, trans, and disability politics. In doing so, I return to the question of rehabilitation as discussed earlier in the chapter, and I

explore how critiques of rehabilitation that emerged from the domain of disability politics can be brought to bear on the inclusion of transgender subjects, creating a form of "trans rehabilitation." I then, in Section 3.4, discuss how Darling's aesthetic practice creates tools for reimagining the terms of inclusion and technologies of appearing through what I call "wounded epistemologies."

Jesse Darling is an artist based in London and Berlin, working in sculpture, installation, video, writing, and drawing. Their work tracks the politics and poetics of how bodies move through the world, drawing on cultural scripts of self-sovereign embodiment as well as their own experiences. A central theme in their aesthetic production is an exploration how markers of gender, race, and dis/ability are not just bodily or identitarian formations, but a cultural grammar that gives coherency to institutional practices and social imaginaries. Similarly, and much like Park McArthur, they visualize the corporeal vulnerability of embodiment, but also the precariousness of larger bodies: of empire, of technology, of symbols of sovereignty, and of institutions tasked with providing support and care. In their installations as well as in their writing, interviews, or Instagram posts, Darling is reflexive about their position as a subject moving through registers of whiteness, queerness, disability, and transness. Darling's work is also notable for an ambivalent and poetic exploration of healing and transformation. In the epigraph of this section, in a snippet of writing for the literary newsletter *Close*, Darling narrates the sensations of moving through experiences of care practices from "men with their tubes" and bodily transformation through a friend teaching them how to inject hormones to "carry the boys around." These technologies of care and gender transformation inform what kind of visual vocabulary Darling uses to tell a story about disability and transgender embodiment, resulting in an installation practice that creates a score for listening to different ways in which the body can appear. In 2018, some of these shapes made their way into Darling's exhibition *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* at Tate Britain, London, as part of the *Art Now* exhibition program, which I will analyze below.

As Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Pérez point out, minoritarian artists, or artists concerned with structural conditions of social violences, are often assigned the task of conveying information that testify to those violences rather than pushing aesthetic boundaries.[72] Indeed, as I explained in Section 3.2, an emphasis on form matters for minoritarian subjects because it allows one to resist being fixed into stereotypical narratives. Instead, form facilitates heterogeneous accounts that can make us see subjectivity and

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[72] Amin et al., "Queer Form", 227

embodiment differently. As such, it would be oversimplified to use artists' biographies as the sole lens through which to understand their aesthetic work. For these reasons, I want to avoid considering Jesse Darling a "native informant" of what it means to transition or to live with paralysis, and whose work evidences those experiences.[73] Instead, I take their work to create an aesthetic intervention into the technologies and frames of recognition that shape the way we see and know experiences of transness and disability. As Jesse Darling explains: "I attempted to remove my own story from the work […] I have already partially withdrawn, or at least I have attempted a refusal."[74] At the same time, they also describe their work as "partial self-portrait."[75] Simultaneously a refusal of biographical presence and a partial self-portrait, there is no clear-cut translation of Darling's biographical markers into artistic consumption. This partial refusal is Darling's strategy for navigating the demand for visual legibility, and they find a way to make their own embodied location present in the art works without offering transparent access or conclusive generalizations about disabled and/or transgender people, similar to what McArthur does for the disabled subject in her work.

In the installation *The Ballad of Saint Jerome*, Darling circumvents the question of biographical presence by centralizing two other figures whose mythical encounter frames the exhibition: Saint Jerome and the lion. The visitors are introduced to the myth of Saint Jerome through the wall text and a booklet that accompanies the exhibition, which consists of a correspondence between Jesse Darling and Reverend Christina Bradley, a transgender Christian activist and a retired healthcare chaplain. The encounter between Saint Jerome and the lion narrates a story about wildness becoming domesticated. Saint Jerome, a fourth century Christian scholar, was in a monastery when confronted by an aggressive lion. Instead of fleeing the scene or trying to kill the lion, Jerome recognized the lion was wounded and in need of care. He approaches the lion, removes a thorn from its paw, and heals the wound. The lion loses its wildness and becomes a tamed companion of Jerome.
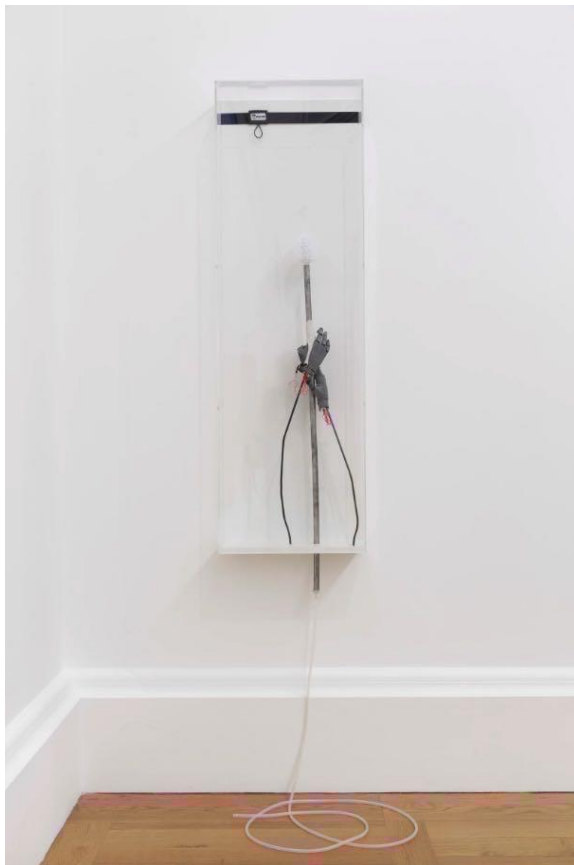
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[73] Ibid., 227

[74] Saelen Twerdy, "'Speaking from a Wound': Jesse Darling on Faith, Crisis, and Refusal," *Momus*, January 9, 2018

[75] Isabella Zamboni, "On Broken and Glorious Things: Jesse Darling," *Mousse Magazine*, January 15, 2019

Figures 8-9. Installation shot of Jesse Darling's *Sphinxes of the Gate* (2018): *Wounded sentry* (2018) and *Pet sentry* (2018)

Figures 10-11. Installation shots of *Regalia & Insignia (The staff of Saint Jerome)* (2018) and *Icarus bears the standard* (2018)

Darling materializes this mythical encounter by making the figurations of the lion and the wound present in various ways. For example, two lion figures flank the entrance of the exhibition space, their bodies made of steel rods and packing foam (Figures 8-9). One has a gag ball in the mouth and the other a watering tube: a queer digression from the mythical iconicity of the sphinx. Instead of invoking the grandiosity of sphinxes, these de-monumentalized figures suggest that practicing and receiving care requires entering a relationship of submission and domination. Guarding the exhibition, the BDSM and clinical scenes of the lions signal the central motif at play in this installation: the entanglement of technologies of healing, desire, control, and transformation.

The Ballad of Saint Jerome performs an iteration of the encounter between St. Jerome and the wounded lion, which attends to the tension between becoming intelligible as a subject in need of support and the normalizing force of accommodation. I want to pay particular attention to how the exhibition draws the viewer into exploring themes of bodily vulnerability and non-sovereignty, as they emerge from reckoning with the materialities of disability, gender, and sexuality. The gallery space features about twenty sculptures and installations that,

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generally, have a level of detail that invite the viewer to come closer and linger. Illustrations framed as religious icons show subjects such as Icarus and Batman as failed figures, whose masculine hubris and desire for transcendence is fallible. Darling describes the centrality of vulnerability and failure in their aesthetic practice as a form of "traumatized optimism," in that "nothing and no-one is too big, rich, tough or powerful to fail."[76] This sense of a fundamental potential for error woven through structures of sovereignty is mirrored in Darling's use of materials. The object labels that list the details of the works show a recurring usage of plastic, steel, aluminum, and synthetic materials. These materials typically have an industrial as well as artificial quality in that they are reproducible and more durable than their "natural" counterparts. But in Darling's materialization, these hard materials are given a soft quality, integrated into provisional gestures or demonstrating their potential for collapsing or unwinding. Often, the joke takes place through the interaction between the title of the work and the objects and their materials. For example, if the title *Regalia & Insignia (The staff of Saint Jerome)* (2018) hints at objects that operate as emblems and symbols of sovereign status, this ambition is subverted by the toilet brush functioning as a staff and a packing strap (used, for example, by FTMs to go stealth) hovering above as an insignia (Figure 10). Similarly, *Icarus bears the standard* (2018) replaces a flag pole with a crutch, and instead of flying a flag, the crutch holds a feather pillow ensnared by a strap-on harness and a dog harness (Figure 11). In this way, objects of faith or emblems of sovereign status are repurposed through technologies of gender, desire, and disability.

Darling's installation thus pierces through the fiction of sovereign embodiment by creating figures out of objects that are extensions of the body, be it for routing desire, transforming gender, or offering physical support or mobility. The material and conceptual tool at work here is the prosthetic. Some of these prosthetic objects are more immediate and obvious than others. The FTM packing strap, a variety of crutches and mobility canes, and a strap-on harness are integrated in the sculptures in ways that go beyond their ostensible purposes, already blurring conventional understandings of the instrumental relationship between prosthetics and the body. This sets the scene of noticing a variety of objects as also forms of prosthetics: a dog muzzle, a gag ball, a dog harness, and ephemeral medical prosthetics such as ECG stickers or band aids. Recalling Gordon Hall's discussion, in Section 3.2, about how sculptures can function as "object lessons," objects, through affective experiences, teach us how to see differently. They help us reshape the ways in which bodily differences become

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[76] Jesse Darling, "Work in Progress: Jesse Darling" *Frieze,* Blog Post

meaningful. As such, and following the anti-sovereign optimism about vulnerability that runs through the exhibition, I understand these prosthetics to refuse to monumentalize or exceptionalize trans-crip capacities of transformation and flexibility, be it through passing or "piecing." They are not put in service of an ideal of bodily integrity, nor do they attempt to restore or hide a wound; instead, they are animating a refusal of those terms. By transforming, reshaping, and repurposing the various prosthetics we could use to "pass," to achieve normative gender appearances or to move the body in the "right" way through the world, Darling's sculptures and installations animate our capacity to confuse and alter the terms on which we appear. Darling's usage of prosthetics thus perform a refusal of rehabilitation, and, in doing so, generates an alternative conception of embodiment, one not aimed at restoring capacity, productivity, or functionality but at embracing non-sovereignty.

In their exploration of such a non-sovereign embodiment, Darling offers a unique convergence of disability and transgender aesthetics that poses the important question of how these subjects are similarly positioned vis-à-vis structures of care and control. If this work enacts a refusal of rehabilitation, we can wonder how rehabilitation is not just a concept pertinent to disability activism and scholarship, but is worth extending to the realm of transgender activism and scholarship. What is needed for a vision of justice that is attentive to how transgender inclusion takes place on the terms of normative subjectivity, is a critical interrogation of transgender inclusion as a form of "transgender rehabilitation," where the body is brought into an arch of a debilitation to overcome. Again, the question here is not to be included or excluded but to pay attention to the normalizing force of inclusion and the erasure of the material differences that trans subjectivity bring forth. In doing so, my aim is to highlight how insights from disability studies and activism are crucial for informing transgender politics today, even if these affinities are at times disavowed.

While Stiker excluded any consideration of gender, sex, and sexuality from his study, his analysis of rehabilitation bears resonances to how transgender subjects are integrated into the social body. A central aspect of the recognition of transgender subjects is the expectation that they move through a process of rehabilitation toward a normatively gendered subject. The process of rehabilitation is one of acknowledging disability and overcoming it. This is why access to health care related to bodily transformations, such as hormones or surgery, continues to rely on receiving a psychiatric diagnosis. That said, over the last decades, the vocabulary and reach of diagnosis has changed radically. Many of those changes are the results of the labour of transgender activists and advocates who take the DSM and the ICD as a target of

contestation for how they regulate and determine one's access to health care resources.[77] As such, becoming transgender is gradually less framed as a disorder to overcome. Rather, following a social model of transness, it is perceived as a problem of "incongruity" between the subject's experience of gender, and the location of that subject within the social body. The DSM-V's 2013 introduction of "Gender Dysphoria" and the ICD-11's 2018 introduction of "Gender Incongruence" speaks to this development. I, however, argue that this shift does not necessarily move away from a rehabilitative logic, since the premise remains that becoming transgender entails an adaptation to "fit" better in the social body. In other words, the negation of difference integral to rehabilitation is also a negation of the possibility that, from the position of difference, a challenge can be articulated to the terms on which inclusion takes place. It excludes possibility of imagining "trans becoming" in a different way, one attuned to the "ontological multiplicities" as discussed through Puar's work in Chapter 2, or the possibility that gender non-normativity might pose a challenge to gendered culture more broadly.

Another exemplification of trans rehabilitation is discernible in how certain children who defy norms of gender and sexuality are brought into a rehabilitative schema of transness. This can be considered as part of the consolidation of the "transnormative" subject, as discussed in Chapter 2. For example, in the Netherlands, for a long time considered a frontrunner in transgender healthcare, we see the emergence of a discourse of learning the "signals" of transness in children to the benefit of parents and teachers who aim to support the gender-variant children in their families or classrooms.[78] By learning the signs, caretakers can bring children into the structures of care and support that will affirm their gender confusions and guide their path to a successful gender identity. These structures of care and support have a crucial role in alleviating psychological and physical stress and suffering. But it is also pertinent to pay attention to the consequences and implications of this development, which remains largely focused on singling out and exceptionalizing abnormalcy in order to rehabilitate into a gender identity that can be consolidated with the projection of heteronormative life and does not disrupt the bonds of heteronormative kinship. Moreover, a rehabilitative logic fails to grasp how there is not one end point to bodily transitions. Rather, transness requires an account of the body in its ongoing materialization. To use Eliza Steinbock's words, "trans ontologies are process-oriented, rather than object-oriented," which necessitates methods that can account for

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[77] Spade, "Resisting Medicine"; Davy, "The DSM-5"
[78] See, for example, "Online Training: Jong en Transgender", Movisie

their movement and change.[79] A social model of transgender will neither be sufficient for grappling with narrow forms of transgender inclusion, nor for instituting transgender liberation in which gender diversity is capacious for ontological multiplicity. Following Alison Kafer's call for a friendly departure from the social model of disability in favor for the politicization of disability, I foreground the importance not of the inclusion of transgender people to "fit" into social structures, but rather, the importance of politicizing gender variance.[80]

Transgender rehabilitation, then, refers to the process of erasing gender deviancy in the service of making able, gender-normative trans subjects. If, following the logic of rehabilitation as outlined in this chapter, the rehabilitation of the trans subject signals a repair of the social body, then it is crucial to scrutinize how this rehabilitation is contingent on fitting in with normative ideals of citizenship. As Toby Beauchamp argues, the possibility of appearing as a transgender subject is "read through ideals of whiteness, economic privilege, able-bodiedness, and heterosexuality" which "requires the simultaneous maintenance of a nonnormative and suspicious category that can produce the safe citizen as its contrast."[81] Similarly, Puar asks, "[w]hich debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, available and valuable enough for rehabilitation, and which cannot be?"[82] The possibility of "successful" trans rehabilitation is a function of race and class, but also disability. For example, as I explore in Chapter 4, people with cognitive disabilities who express trans identifications are routinely dismissed based on the perception that their gender deviancy is an expression of disability rather than an "authentic" non-disabled trans identity. Hence, being able to show the "signs" of transness in order to be absorbed into a rehabilitative trajectory is often reserved for white, able-bodied subjects, who, aside from their gender variance, are crucially non-deviant.

We can thus see similarities in how both disabled and transgender subjects are implicated in a socio-cultural logic of rehabilitation. These are not perfect similarities, and, at times, their entanglement is messy. Here, "mess" might be an appropriate term for grappling with an alternative to rehabilitation's drive for resolution. The complexity of rehabilitation and inclusion at the nexus of transness and disability politics requires aesthetic forms that do not resolve this messiness but help us understand it further. As Fred Moten points out in his discussion of art exhibitions about new vocabularies for gender:

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[79] Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 12
[80] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 8-10
[81] Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*, 49
[82] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 13

"I mean, really, the history of the modern subject, as codified by Kant, is about the cleaning up of mess. It's about the eradication of swarm, and of fuzz and buzziness. He just hates that shit. And politics is meant to regulate that. But what if this got to be a mess that the museum chose to present, rather than clean up? There's a poetics of the mess, you know?"[83]

Noting that a poetics of the mess does not offer a sovereign subject, Moten touches on the capacity of art to offer an alternative experience of subjectivity. This is echoed in the book *Brilliant Imperfection* by Eli Clare, where he reflects on oscillating between his desire for medical interventions to alter his gender appearance while simultaneously articulating resistance to the notion that his disabilities need to be "fixed." At the nexus of transness and disability, the force of rehabilitation can become incoherent, as does resistance to it. As Clare writes: "How can I reconcile my lifelong struggle to love my disabled self exactly as it is with my use of medical technology to reshape my gendered and sexed body-mind? I'm searching for a messier story."[84] We do not need a solution for contradictory understandings of bodily wholeness and integration. Instead, we need a messier sense of wholeness, which is precisely what Darling's work seems to offer.

3.4. Wounded Epistemologies

Again, I return to the key question of legibility and intelligibility raised in the beginning of the chapter: how does inclusion operate through a particular frame of recognition, both politically and visually, and how might this be challenged? Jesse Darling's installation addresses this problematic through an invocation of the wound, exploring its material experience, its communicability, and the demand it places on the social. Following Darling's narration and visualization of the wound, a non-patholigizing approach to trans-crip subjectivity as one related to woundedness emerges.

In their correspondence with Reverend Christina Beardsley, Darling reflects on the how the myth of St Jerome gives them an entry point into thinking about how the entanglement of care and control matters for them as a queer, "wounded" subject:

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[83] Fred Moten in *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* eds. Burton & Bell (New York: New Museum, 2017): 274

[84] Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection,* 175

"The story goes that when the lion showed up amongst the scholars, they all went for their crossbows, because the lion was acting rowdy. Jerome alone held back his brothers: 'Stop! This lion is just wounded.' I used to think of this parable as the most romantic of queer love stories: to be seen as one 'is', in one's woundedness, and defended against those who see the wound as frightening or threatening—surely this is what everyone wants? But now I'm not sure."[85]

The myth spurred Jesse Darling to explore the complex nature of how gestures of care are implicated in relationships of power, so much so that the moment bodily vulnerability is recognized it becomes the moment of captivity and control, something McArthur also touches on in her *Ramps* installation. As Darling suggests, there is a cost to making one's wound visible and being recognized as such:

"To fix the wound is to initiate a hierarchical relationship of dependency and compromise: a means to exercise and maintain control. Jerome, for me, becomes a stand-in for all those who claim knowledge and exercise sovereignty: the patriarch, the imperialist, the supremacist, the taxonomist and the practitioner of the medical/psychiatric/diagnostic industrial complex. He becomes a symbol for the academy, the church and the museum – all of which preserve the status quo in gloved hands, a soft violence."[86]

Narrated as such, Jesse Darling takes the parable of St. Jerome and the lion to index a relationship that is established more generally in the encounter between wounded subjects and structures of sovereignty, at the heart of which are the healing and disciplining forces of knowledges practices and their institutionalization, dissemination, and taxonomic control. By invoking the imperial and racial order of modernity, Jesse Darling points to the colonial impulse that undergirds both gestures of dispensing care, and the bringing of otherness within the purview of knowledge and science.

Given these conditions, Darling asks how to make the wound visible and knowable. How to show a state of "woundedness," when attending to the wound makes one enter a web

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[85] "Jesse Darling in Correspondence with Reverend Dr. Christina Beardsley" *Tate Britain*, available at https://bravenewwhat.org/content/1-work/3-texts/1-art-now/art-now.pdf

[86] Jesse Darling, "Jesse Darling: The Ballad of Saint Jerome," *Tate Etc.* https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-44-autumn-2018/jesse-darling-art-now

of power relations in the process of accommodation? The capacity to show one's wound and be recognized in one's state of brokenness runs as a red thread through the exhibition. For example, *The lion signs "wound"* (2018) shows an illustration on paper inside a shrine-like box of a lion with human-like hands, signing the British Sign Language sign for 'wound' (Figure 12). Next to the illustration, a plastic hand reaches out toward the glass, with one finger gloved in a latex sheath, its contact point leaving a scorched mark on the surface. The lion's wounded paw traverses into hands using D/deaf communication, into a prosthetic hand reaching out. These gestures not only inquire into the communicability of the wound, but also the contradictory status of touch and reaching out - ambivalent in their dual capacity of care and violence. In other words, Darling refuses to anchor the wound as a precursor in healing-oriented trajectory, and rather foregrounds how the wound functions as a demand to rethink the visual and epistemological perspectives that attend to bodily vulnerability. This becomes evident in how Darling centers the wound in the exhibition space. Visible from nearly all angles of the gallery space, a white wall is placed towards the end of the room, with a gaping hole in the center (Figure 13). Not having a title or a label or any visual similarities to Darling's sculptural objects, this piece of "negative" art is not just a critical deconstruction of the white museum wall but generative in how it centralizes the wound as an epistemological framework.[87] If, following the religious undercurrent of Darling's exhibition, the gallery space functions as a church for vulnerable bodies, then the altar is replaced by the wound itself.

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[87] I use the term 'negative' here to refer to the usage of space, not negative affects.

Figure 12. Installation shot of Jesse Darling's *The lion signs "wound"* (2018)

Figure 13. Installation shot of *The Ballad of Saint Jerome*

As such, Darling's figuration of the wound brings to the fore the problem of considering trans and disabled subjects as wounded subjects, which requires grappling with the oscillation between desiring bodily transformations while refusing the imperative of repair. Crip critiques of rehabilitation, as discussed above, offer a non-pathologizing vocabulary of woundedness that attends to the negative affects of bodily debilitation, which include moving through structures of gender normativity. Eva Hayward captures this entanglement as follows:

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For some transsexual/transgender subjects, originary gender assignments can feel disabling, even wounding. I'm speaking about this kind of traumatic experience, not about transgressive exceptionalism in which gender/sex changes prompt revolutionary potential. I am simply returning to my bodily knowledge - carnal logics - of pain and possibility, my own experience of becoming transsexual as a welcomed cut.[88]

By casting transness as an experience of relating to one's woundedness, Hayward's intervention offers a queering of bodily integrity both through the wounding of gender assignment as well as the desired "cutting" of the body. Her textured account demonstrates the careful navigation it requires to of the disabling effects of gender without reinscribing disability as an inherent site of negativity. Rather, refusing rehabilitation, Hayward juxtaposes a model of (surgical) gender transition revolving around revolutionary possibility - premised on the celebration of bodily capacity and flexibility - with one where bodily possibility and pain go hand in hand. These are trans-crip "forms of becoming not located in […] wholeness."[89]

Darling's installation shows how visibility and vulnerability have a dual relationship for subjects wounded by social violences but are also going through bodily transitions of gender and disability, which often entails or require showing and living with one's wound. There is a vulnerability that accompanies the process of becoming visible, which is the nexus that Jesse Darling conceptualizes as the entanglement of care and control practiced through a "soft violence." But instead of creating a space that heals the wound or celebrates wholeness of bodily integrity, Darling uses the wound as an epistemological intervention.

Darling's use of the wound as an epistemological intervention is twofold. Firstly, the wound offers an optic for contending with the complex relationship between becoming trans and disabled and the cultural logic of repair and rehabilitation, and the possibility of refusing the power relations that an imperative to heal bring along. Secondly, if the desire or need to show one's wound is bound up with care and control, it allows us to ask how the wound itself disrupts sociality around it, so that the wound changes the process of making knowable and visible the wounded subject itself. This latter point becomes explicitly in the three pieces *Epistemologies (limping cabinet)* (2018), *Epistemologies (shamed cabinet)* (2018), and *Epistemologies (collapsed cabinet)* (2018) (Figures 14-16). Their titles unequivocally put pressure on processes of knowledge production, in this case through the taxonomic form of the

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[88] Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.3 (2008): 71
[89] Ibid., 72

museum cabinet. All three pieces are classical glass cabinets that are in some way physically unsettled and vulnerable. Leaning into the corner of the gallery space, *Epistemologies (collapsed cabinet)* has crashed to the floor. Its bent and extended steel legs provide only minor support, and a twisted crutch is propped up into one of the corners. Inside the cabinet we can see plastic birds, which have all slid down into one corner. Riffing on the genre of cabinets of curiosities, the synthetic birds invoke the museum cabinet as emblematic of cultural and scientific projects of collecting, naming, and classifying the world. The bent and extended legs of the cabinet signal a wounding as well as a wilding of the museum: they destabilize its imperial premise of classification and exposure. However, in this visual refusal, they also animate the capacity to bring into being alternative images that re-assemble the meanings of support structures.

Figure 14. Installation shot of Jesse Darling's *Epistemologies (limping cabinet)* (2018)

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Figures 15-16. Installation shots of Jesse Darling's *Epistemologies (shamed cabinet)* (2018) and *Epistemologies (collapsed cabinet)* (2018)

In addition, these queered and cripped cabinets create a non-mimetic relation to visual taxonomies by resisting the demand to showcase a legible object of knowledge. Nudging to Sedgwick's work on shame as a queer affect and the centrality of sexuality to epistemology, the "shamed" cabinet, with its angled legs, destabilizes the capacity for its displaying function to offer a self-evident truth. Together with its "limping" companion, these cabinets display two-ring binders. The binders contain concrete slabs, filling up a space the shape and size of what would usually be a stack of paper sheets. The concrete slabs visualize the negative space inside the binder, a symbol of collecting and cataloging. The cool and rough texture of the concrete gives a sense of absorbency and withholds the usual function of the binder to allow information to become organized and visible. This non-mimetic aesthetic refuses to accept that visual taxonomies capture the reality of bodies and subjectivities as opposed to creating them. Instead of mirroring the demand for transparency, the work dodges and side-steps this visual modality, and exposes the tensions and contradictions inherent in making one's wound visible. By challenging the epistemological function of the museum cabinet, Darling puts technologies of seeing and knowing bodies themselves under review. The cabinets offer both a fragile and textured presence that explore not only the wounded body but the potential of the wound itself, from which the desire for, and the expectation of, bodily wholeness is complicated. Or, in their own words: "[…] as a failing body I joined the collective failure of all bodies, and from this position full of holes I stream out toward the holes in others and in this way, we might breathe

one another, feed one another, flow through one another and sometimes fill up."[90] From their position "full of holes", Darling casts woundedness as the structural physical debilitation of bodies, making a political emphasis on the overturning of the wound into repair misplaced.

The wounds in *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* are different from the ones we might expect to encounter in art settings, which typically appear as either live performances or documented representations of the wounded body through cut or pierced flesh, the leaking of blood or other bodily fluids. In those cases, the spectacle of the corporeal wound invites an affective and mimetic response to pain. For example, in her writing on the appearance of the wounded body in performance art, Amelia Jones suggests that the wound is a mode of signification that functions as "a violation of bodily coherence that we feel could happen to *us*."[91] Jones argues that the wound "makes pain, and the body itself, into a representational field."[92] In other words, it is through the visible sign of the wound that pain becomes readable and knowable to another person. In making pain visually recognizable, the wounded body can move the spectator in feeling with the wounded subject, a recognition and imagination of the feelings another person is going through. Jones suggests that, in a non-sentimental mode of empathy, the wound can be politically useful, but only if it is "understood as occurring on/in a body that could just as well be *mine*."[93] In considering the wound as an entry point for an empathetic relationality, Jones emphasizes how the proximity to the cut in the flesh places an affective demand on behalf the viewer. However, this perspective leaves aside the question of how the visual field of recognition is already framed by structural conditions of violence. Not all wounds are considered on equal terms, or impress themselves on another with an equal affective force. What we find in Jesse Darling's installation are subjects grappling with how to make their wound recognizable but also with how to use the wound to alter the frames of recognition. We can reorientate from the spectacles of the wounded subject to thinking about the demand that the wound can place on sociality around it.

The question of the communicability of the wound has been explored in a different context by Wendy Brown, who argued forcefully against woundedness as a basis on which to construct identity politics or claims of recognition. Such a form of politicized identity "enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and

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[90] Twerdy, "Speaking from a Wound"

[91] Amelia Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning", *parallax* vol 15.4 (2009): 50, emphasis in original

[92] Ibid., 53

[93] Ibid., 55, emphasis in original

inscribing its pain in politics," amounting to what she calls "wounded attachments."[94] For Brown, woundedness, while a condition historically inflicted on those marginalized from the humanist ideal of normative subjectivity, becomes conflated with identity, so much so that one's politicized identity ends up mirroring sovereign notions of subjectivity through an "eternal repetition of its pain."[95] The wound becomes fetishized, and cut off from the historical conditions which have created the site of pain and hurt. Brown argues that a reaction to injury cannot form a basis for politics and woundedness must thus be overcome as an ontological identity ("I am") in favor of a collective desire ("I want").

Brown's analysis is instrumental for understanding the risks of taking injury as a site for political organizing. Yet, the wound as a politicized phenomenon can also be approached from a different angle. Inscribing pain into politics is not just performed on behalf of wounded subjects; it is also the frame of intelligibility that shapes how subjects can make a claim of recognition. For example, Alexander Weheliye points out that institutional bodies such as the United Nations make "particular forms of wounding the precondition for entry into the hallowed halls of full personhood."[96] He suggests a rethinking of the centrality of pain in political organizing, arguing that social movements are less concerned with "claiming their suffering per se (I am) than they are with using wounding as a stepping stone in the quest (I want) for rights equal to those of full citizens."[97] Crucially, Weheliye's pertinent critique points out that only certain forms of woundedness become intelligible in the process of gaining rights or recognition. We can transpose his argument to the context of disability and transgender rights if we understand the medical, legal, but also epistemological frameworks available to delineate a particular form of woundedness that makes one intelligible as a disabled or trans subject.

Contrary to clinging on to the wound in such a way that it solidifies a certain identity, Darling uses the wound toward a wounding of the field of recognition itself. Transgender and disabled subjects are not exceptionally wounded subjects but do often face a demand to make their wounds visible and to reveal a truth of one's body. In Darling's recalibration of the force of the wound, it does not just demand to receive care and support; places a demand on the social to reconfigure how care is practiced. In this way, we can see how the wound can be operative outside of the logic of the self-sovereign subject.

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[94] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 74

[95] Ibid., 76

[96] Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 76

[97] Ibid.

This chapter demonstrated how trans-crip aesthetics complicate notions of bodily integrity, woundedness, and repair, thus offering alternatives to neoliberal modes of inclusion and cultural logics of rehabilitation. While queer anti-assimilationist theory and practices have created crucial foundations for criticizing 'inclusion' as a political demand, I have emphasized the specificity of what shape refusal can take from a trans-crip position, where the communication of one's wound and a demand for care continue to be part and parcel of political organizing and identity formation. Hence, it is important to situate the questions posed by the aesthetic practices of Park McArthur and Jesse Darling within disability justice and transgender liberation frameworks. I closed this chapter with a discussion of the communicability of the wound, emphasizing transness and disability as (non-exceptional) sites of woundedness that place a demand on the social to articulate alternative visual and and epistemological frameworks of recognition. The next chapter builds on the issue of the communicability by placing this question in the context of neurodiversity. I turn to the video work of autism activist Mel Baggs, where the issue of communicability becomes pertinent for scrutinizing how normative forms of language and interaction are used as boundary-making structures between autistic and allistic (non-autistic) people. As we will see, Baggs deconstructs the visual signifiers of autistic interaction that are routinely used as evidence for their exclusion from personhood and recasts them as aesthetic interventions. The next chapter thus continues the investigation into troubling how the "different" body appears as an object of seeing and knowing, this time with a focus on the medium of the moving image and its capacity for affirming an opaque form of aesthetics.

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4. Mel Baggs's Opaque Aesthetics

How does neurodiversity, as a framework for thinking of neurological diversity as human variation rather than pathology, interrogate the ways in which we perceive and understanding bodily difference? How can normative modalities of seeing and sensing become attuned to autistic subjects who are consistently positioned as lacking 'human' qualities of language, subjectivity, and sociality? How do we attend to that question without reinstating a demand for evidencing those very qualities, and reinforcing an ableist frame of recognition? And how does the realm of visuality offer tools for approaching these questions?

In this chapter, I think through these questions with reference to a video titled *In My Language*, created by blogger and autism activist Mel Baggs in 2007. In this video, Baggs shares their experiences of what it means to experience the world as a non-verbal autist, as well as their experiences of the oppressive ways in which autism is commonly perceived.[1] This two-fold interest is mirrored in the two different parts of the video, as the accompanying text on Youtube explains: "The first part is in my 'native language,' and then the second part provides a translation, or at least an explanation. This is not a look-at-the-autie gawking freakshow as much as it is a statement about what gets considered thought, intelligence, personhood, language, and communication, and what does not."[2] In the part of the video that is in their "native language," the viewer can see Baggs interacting in various ways with their environment. In the second part, Baggs uses text-to-speech software to deliver a reflection and manifesto about how their non-verbal style of communication is often taken as evidence of their inability to communicate. By addressing the presumed non-autistic viewer like myself, Baggs stages an encounter between a minoritarian language and a majoritarian perspective, probing the possibilities and limits of translating one into the other.

In the previous chapter I examined installation practices in which the physical representation of the body was absent in order to challenge the frames of recognition on which practices of inclusion rely. This chapter turns to what might typically be understood as a medium of "direct" representation of embodiment, moving image practice, to inquire how images of non-normative embodiment might be critically approached within transgender and disability aesthetics. Through my analysis of *In My Language*, I suggest that Baggs's video powerfully redirects practices of seeing and sensing embodiment, asking the viewer to assess

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[1] Mel Baggs used both they/them and sie/hir pronouns.
[2] Mel Baggs, "In My Language", YouTube video, 8:36, January 15, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc

how our/their visual and more-than-visual engagement with this video translates into knowledge about, and relation to, Baggs's embodied experience of the world. My analysis is guided by the question, what are possible modalities for seeing and sensing non-normative embodiment? In order to do justice to the many complex interventions made by Baggs's video, and their relevance for transgender and disability aesthetics, this chapter approaches this question through four sections.

The chapter opens with an in-depth reading of *In My Language* in which I introduce the video and the wide impact it has had in activist, artistic, and scholarly domains, and I detail how the video powerfully unpacks and challenges the persistent idea that (non-verbal) autists lack language. I demonstrate how Baggs, in making a claim to the human, exposes the ableist frame of legibility that circumscribes the category of the human, particularly when it comes to linguistic communicability. In the context of my overarching interest in the ways in which transness and disability implicate each other, Baggs's video also functions as a launchpad to explore the conjuncture of disability and transness as it takes form in the framework of neurodiversity, where transness is disarticulated as a coherent claim of political subjectivity. As I discuss in the second section, neurodiversity challenges key tenets of how politics and sociality take shape, and, building on Melanie Yergeau's insightful work on "neuroqueerness," I scrutinize how neurodiversity inhabits a disorderly relationship to gender as a structuring principle of subjectivity and sociality, thus "cripping" epistemologies of transness.

The third section returns to an analysis of the video *In My Language*, where I examine particular bodily expressions of autism that are commonly subjected to normalization therapy, such as repetitive motions, stimming, multi-sensory attachments, or irregular eye contact.[3] Juxtaposing the pathologization of autistic communication in clinical literature with Baggs's video, I suggest to reframe these as aesthetic interventions that engage new ways of seeing and sensing embodiment. In two subsections, I analyze how the video, firstly, refuses a transparent "accessibility of the image" and rather offers an opaque resistance to the interpretation of Baggs's life-world, and secondly, draws on registers of haptic and kinesthetic visuality to dislodge the primacy of a visual semiotic understanding that reduces visual signs to cognitive meaning-making rather than registered through sensory resonances. Taken together, my analysis of *In My Language* aims to show a form of engagement with bodily difference that is not overdetermined by a project of understanding and knowing the "different" other. The problematic of understanding and knowing as a precondition of relation is explored in more

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[3] Kristin Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens: Autism, Gender, and Reimagining Disability", *Signs* 33, no. 4 (2008)

depth in the last section of this chapter. The oppression of autistic subjects invariably takes place through being positioned as "arelational," and I consider Baggs's work to show that in order to dismantle those structures of oppression, we need to rethink what "relation" can mean and look like. To think through this, I read Baggs's work alongside of the work of writer and poet Édouard Glissant. I want to bring Glissant's work, specifically *Poetics of Relation*, into this discussion to address the topics of opacity and relation that the chapter so far has built up to. In staging this encounter, I discuss how Glissant himself, in the chapter where he discusses the "right to opacity", fleetingly invokes autism to juxtapose it with opacity, thereby demonstrating that unlike autism, a position of opacity is part of relation. Yet, autism is a site of relationality, and one that can be considered *through* Glissant's notion of relation. Reading Glissant against himself, through Baggs's work, can expose the resonances between Baggs's opaque aesthetics and Glissant's "right to opacity" as a way to resist the violent force of epistemological elucidation.

If opacity provides a form of resistance to an epistemological mandate of knowing and understanding the other, it also enables a different way of relating to difference. Opacity can function as an aesthetic intervention that alters not only how we are legible or illegible as subjects, but that can also redirect how we read, see, and know the world. Eric A. Stanley captures the stakes of my interest in opacity when he writes, "at the center of the problem of recognition lies the question, how can we been seen without being known?"[4] What is thus perceived as "arelational" traits of autism might usefully be understood as a different relationality all together, one that calls for a form solidarity that affirms the otherness of the other.

Finally, before moving into the chapter, I want to briefly reflect on the difficulty of writing about Baggs's work, and the various translations across linguistic and sensory registers that take place in that move. In putting into words that which is explicitly communicated in a different language than the normative language I use in this dissertation, I am acutely aware of the failure of words to 'grasp' what is at stake. *In My Language* is a video work that has literally moved me - profoundly - and that directs me to perceive it not through a linear gaze or through semiotic interpretation but rather haptic and kinesthetic visuality. In this way, this chapter is also a translation of affect into text. What comes out of this is a close reading that verges on the obsessive, in which I make various returns to the video to "make sense" of its interventions,

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[4] Eric A. Stanley, "Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 618

but also use the video as a launchpad to enter discussions that surround it and that are instructive for expanding parameters for seeing and sensing embodiment.

4.1. Mel Baggs's *In My Language*

Mel Baggs (1980-2020) was a disabled writer and artist based in Vermont, U.S., and used the language of "genderless" and transgender to describe themself.[5] As a non-speaking autist, Baggs used a variety of communication devices in their communication as well as aesthetic practice, as we will explore in more depth below. In various ways, Mel Baggs appears as a different figure from the artists whose work I addressed in the previous chapters. In the latter case, the works of Cassils, Wu Tsang, Park McArthur, or Jesse Darling move in infrastructures of elite art institutions, receiving forms of cultural and financial recognition and valorization. Mel Baggs's position as an activist and a writer looks quite different, with their work mostly existing on online platforms such as YouTube and Wordpress and circulating primarily within disability justice networks. The videos on their YouTube account address topics related to the oppression of autistics but also document very quotidian activities, such as boiling water or walking on a sidewalk. Similarly, many posts on their blogs detail basic struggles concerned with new health issues, excruciating encounters with medical professionals, or a call for help in the face of financial troubles. The interaction that takes place in the comment sections on their two blogs indicate that they are frequented mostly by people within neurodiversity communities and networks. Yet, over the years, Baggs's critical work in advancing an alternative form of autism advocacy made Baggs a key figure in neurodiverse thinking that had a wide impact, even enjoying what Faye Ginsburg considers a "celebrity crip" status.[6] At the time of their sudden passing in the spring of 2020, obituaries by fellow neurodiversity activists as well as mainstream media outlets underscore the role Baggs has played in advancing a framework for neurodiversity that challenged the hierarchies of categorizing autistic people based on their proximity to normative human behavior.[7] One blogger gave credit to Baggs "for

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[5] Mel Baggs, "Language Preferences: Genderlessness," Blog Post, last accessed April 14, 2021, https://cussinanddiscussin.wordpress.com/2018/09/16/language-preferences-genderlessness/

[6] Faye Ginsburg, "Disability in the Digital Age," in *Digital Anthropology* eds. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Berg, 2021), 111

[7] See, for example, Harrison Smith, "Mel Baggs, influential blogger on disability and autism, dies at 39," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/mel-baggs-influential-blogger-on-disability-and-autism-dies-at-39/2020/04/29/bbb0fdd2-8a24-11ea-ac8a-fe9b8088e101_story.html; Neil Genzlinger, "Mel Baggs, Blogger on Autism and Disability, Dies at 39," *New York Times*, April 28, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/health/mel-baggs-dead.html?fbclid=IwAR0eDcvWaEu3-rVAhwOiH4qLAeOfjjgMsAqjnXMBbhuV0Bi91zIhfH91udA#click=https://t.co/tyYOoCPRTd

teaching us that so-called non-verbal folks were capable of having deep, internal lives full of intellect, care, sexual appetite, the ability if not potential to communicate, and most importantly, the soul that so many before denied Mel, and others like them."[8] Another wrote that her "entire generation of autistic people felt like we knew ourselves because of hir."[9] The lasting impact of Baggs's work remains present to us through their videos on YouTube as well as through the two blogs on which Baggs primarily shared their writing, "Ballastexistenz" (invoking the Nazi designation of lives unworthy of life) and "Cussin' and Discussin': Mel being human in a world that says I'm not."[10]

While much of Baggs's work circulated primarily within neurodiversity and disability justice networks, their video *In My Language* circulated far beyond that. *In My Language* is a 9-minute video that was shot inside Baggs's apartment in Vermont, US, and posted on YouTube on January 14, 2007. In the midst of widespread panicked sentiments about an "upsurge", "outbreak", or "epidemic" of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Baggs's video described their experience of living with autism and brought to the fore a different way of thinking about autism.[11] Baggs's work offers a neurodiverse perspective that goes against a dominant current of thought in both scientific literature as well as popular imagination that continues to define autistic people through something that is missing: a lack of communication, incapacity for sociality, or inability to display or feel emotions. As a non-speaking person often labeled as "low-functioning," Baggs's writings and videos challenged the categories that positioned their way of being in the world as less than human.[12] Picked up and re-circulated by CNN and other news platforms, *In My Language* went viral and currently

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[8] Michael John Carley, "R.I.P Mel Baggs 1980-2020," last accessed April 14, 2021, http://www.michaeljohncarley.com/index.php/rip-mel-baggs.html?

[9] Chavisory, "In thanks for the legacy of Mel Baggs," last accessed April 14, 2021, https://chavisory.wordpress.com/2020/04/14/in-thanks-for-the-legacy-of-mel-baggs/

[10] Available here: https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/; https://cussinanddiscussin.wordpress.com/

[11] Morton Ann Gernsbacher, Michelle Dawson, and H. Hill Goldsmith, "Three Reasons Not to Believe in an Autism Epidemic", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13, no. 2 (2005): 55

[12] While Baggs is sometimes referred to as "low-functioning" (on their Wikipedia page, for example), they did not use this label for themselves. See, Mel Baggs, "Losing," in *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement*, ed. Stephen K. Kapp (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 77-86. The distinction between "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" autists has been the subject of critique. See, for example, Stuart Murray, "Autism Functions/The Function of Autism," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2010). Moreover, the language of "functioning" seems to do the work in reinstating hierarchies of autism, particularly since Aspergers Syndrome came to be included in the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

has over 1.5 million views.[13] The video has also entered the same institutions of the art world that would otherwise seem far removed from the scenes in which Baggs's work is taken up.[14]

This breadth of circulation and attention demonstrates how *In My Language* cuts through classifications of genre, belonging simultaneously to video-autobiography, activism, and art. The video has the DIY aesthetic of home videos that engenders an intimate scene typical for how YouTube creates a platform for anybody to share their quotidian observations and documentations. In addition, the video borders on the genre of life-writing by people with disabilities by offering deeply personal auto-biographical performance of living with autism, but also defies the conventions of that genre by refusing to "overcome" disability.[15] Instead, the video ends as a collective manifesto against the oppression of neurodivergent people. Moreover, *In My Language* mobilizes poetic connections between image and sound that make it fit seamlessly in an exhibition space. The many resonances of *In My Language* attest to its powerful refiguring of connections between technology, language, visuality, the politics of difference. In my reading of *In My Language*, I want to highlight how this video statement creates a tension between offering an explanation of Baggs's experience of living with autism, but also simultaneously withholding full access to that experience. This tension, as we will see later on in the chapter, is crucial for the way in which *In My Language* enacts a reimagining of both visuality and relationality. By reimagining visuality, I am suggesting a rethinking of the visual beyond an ocular-centric experience to engaging the multi-sensory evocations of disability aesthetics. Consequently, a reframing of visuality as such shifts from transparency to opacity, and has profound repercussions on how we consider relationality with the "different" other. In order for those two interventions to become clear, I will first show how *In My Language* addresses the limits of what is defined as "human" capable of linguistic communicability.

In My Language opens with a shot in which we look at the back up Baggs's upper body as they stand in from of the window in their apartment. As their body gently rocks back and forth, we hear them singing and humming, and their hands flap in various directions. The next shots show various engagements with objects inside the apartment, such as Baggs's fingers

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[13] Chris Gajilan, "Living with autism in a world made for others," *CNN*, February 22, 2007. Last accessed April 27, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2007/HEALTH/02/21/autism.amanda/index.html; David Wolman, "The truth about autism: Scientists rediscover what they think they know," *Wired magazine*, February 25, 2008. Last accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.wired.com/2008/02/ff-autism/

[14] For example, 'In My Language' was part of the exhibition 'Requiem for the norm: Lorenza Böttner' at Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona, and was integrated into Mark Leckey's video work 'Prop4aShw', featured in the 55th Venice Biennale.

[15] For a consideration of 'In My Language' as a form of autobiography, see, Jenny Bergenmar, "Translation and untellability. Autistic subjects in autobiographical discourse," *LIR Journal* 6 (2016): 68-70

brushing over the computer keyboard, the dangling of a string of beads, Baggs's face brushing against a magazine, the flapping of a piece of paper, or Baggs's hand circling around a drawer knob. Some gestures, movements, and sounds might be understood as "stimming," a term for self-stimulated repetitive behaviors that is part of the diagnostic criteria for ASD and refers to repetitive movements that Applied Behavioral Analysis aims to curb or "re-direct."[16]

Mid-way through the video, a black screen with the words "A translation" in white appears, after which we turn to a close-up shot of Baggs's fingers twirling through a stream of water coming out of a faucet. In this second part of the video, text joins the images both through subtitles and a computer-generated voice-over:

> The previous part of this video was in my native language. / Many people have assumed that / when I talk about this being my language / that means that each part of the video / must have a particular symbolic message within it / designed for the human mind to interpret. / But my language is not about designing words / or even visual symbols for people to interpret. / It is about being in a constant conversation / with every aspect of my environment. / Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings. / In this part of the video / the water doesn't symbolize anything. I am just interacting with the water / as the water interacts with me.

The text thus casts the first part of the video as being in their language, which operates differently from how me might commonly understand "language" as a semiotic system, where meaning is created across signs, symbols, and signification. The shots of Baggs's tactile interaction with their environment show not words or symbolic messages, but a "constant conversation" between the environment and Baggs. The translation continues by addressing how their language is taken as evidence for a lack of communicative skills, and how this lack of normative language places them in a "world of their own":

> Far from being purposeless / the way that I move / is an ongoing response to what is around me. / Ironically / the way that I move / when responding to everything around me / is described as "being in a world of my own" / whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses / and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings / people claim that I am / "opening up to true interaction with the world."

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[16] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 89-134

/ They judge my existence / awareness / and personhood on which a tiny and limited part of the world I appear to be reacting to. / The way I naturally respond to things looks / and feels so different from standard concepts / or even visualization / that some people do not consider it thought at all / but it is a way of thinking in its own right. / However the thinking of people like me / is only taken seriously / if we learn your language / no matter how we previously thought or interacted.

Baggs then returns to various objects that we encountered in the first part of the video, such as the computer keyboard and magazine they brushed their fingers and face against. In those shots, our encounter with Baggs's interaction was primarily in registers of tactility, sound, and motion, which were privileged over the more 'functional' usage of such objects. This juxtaposition is mirrored by a continued foregrounding of the distinction between "my language" and "your language":

I smell things / I listen to things / I feel things / I taste things / I look at things. / It is not enough to look and listen and taste and smell and feel, / I have to do those to the right things / such as look at books / and fail to do them to the wrong things / or else people doubt that I am a thinking being / and since their definition of thought / defines their definition of personhood / so ridiculously much / they doubt I am real person as well.
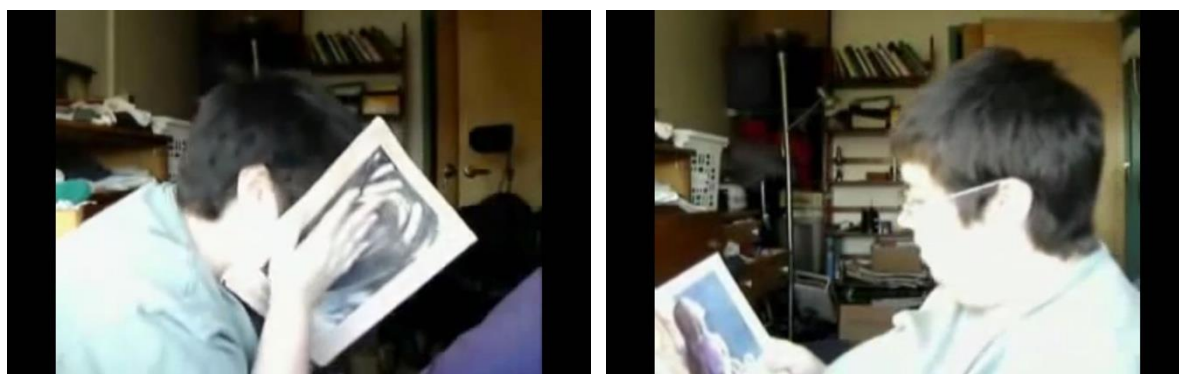
Figures 17-18. Screen captures of the first and second part of Mel Baggs's *In My Language* (2007)

In the images that join this text, Baggs visually demonstrates the 'proper' interaction with their environment that was missing in the previous part of the video, by, for example, looking focused out of the window instead of flapping their hands at it. Baggs shows that they are able to follow the script of normal interaction with the world in order to avoid falling outside of the

"definition of personhood." So, they look inside of the magazine in a reading position, instead of brushing their fingers over the cover, flipping the pages through their fingers, opening the magazine in the middle and smelling the pages, feeling the texture of the material on their skin (Figures 17-18). All of these interactions are meaningful, but not all are considered a "language," or show evidence of one's status as a "real person."

The statement continues to address the deeply entrenched and normalized assumption that non-verbal autists do not have a language or communicative skills, and that the only evidence of these capacities could be demonstrated through learning normative human language:

> I find it very interesting by the way / that failure to learn your language / is seen as a deficit / but failure to learn my language / is seen as so natural / that people like me are officially described / as mysterious and puzzling / rather than anyone admitting that it is themselves who are confused / not autistic people or other cognitively disabled people who are inherently confusing. / We are even viewed as non-communicative if we don't speak the standard language / but other people are not considered non-communicative / if they are so oblivious to our own languages as to believe they don't exist.

With their language misrecognized as a lack of language, and their existence dismissed as unknowable and puzzling, Baggs points out the double standards for evaluating what qualifies as language and as personhood. In the final lines of the video statement the emphasis shifts from a reflection on Baggs's language, towards a collective critique of how autists are positioned as "non-persons":

> In the end I want you to know / that this has not been intended / as a voyeuristic freak show / where you get to look at the bizarre workings / of the autistic mind. / It is meant as a strong statement / on the existence and value of many different kinds / of thinking and interaction / in a world where how close you can appear / to a specific one of them / determines whether you are seen as a real person / or an adult / or an intelligent person. / And in a world in which those determine / whether you have any rights / there are people being tortured, people dying / because they are considered non-persons / because their kind of thought / is so unusual as to not be considered / thought at all. / Only when the many shapes of personhood / are recognized / will justice and human rights be possible.

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Neither a freak show nor an attempt at approximating normative thought and interaction, Baggs shares that the aim of their video is to show the "existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction." *In My Language* is a rich and layered cultural object in which several interventions are made. I unpack two of those here - the problematization of the boundaries of the human subject, and the status of language - and will bring them to bear on the questions of visuality and relationality as flagged in the introduction to this chapter.

A central question raised by Baggs's video concerns the status of "personhood." *In My Language* addresses how a certain definition of language and communication is considered a precondition for being perceived as a human subject. Conversely, their statement questions how a perceived lack of language is taken as evidence for being a "non-person." Melanie Yergeau, a scholar whose work has been instrumental in developing scholarship about autism from an autistic perspective, has similarly examined the relationship between language and subjectivity. In her book *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, she asks how a particular narration of autism is hegemonic in positioning autists as the constitutive opposite of humanness, language, and rhetoricity.[17] If language and rhetoricity are considered as defining features of humanness, the assumption that "autistic people are not rhetorical" thus also leads to the assumption "autistic people are not human."[18] The boundaries of the human, then, are often considered to be circumscribed by language, and Baggs's video shows the tension between proving their personhood on that basis of approximating the human ("autists also have a language") versus refusing the terms of exclusion on which humanness is defined, and thus offering an alternative valuation of variation and difference. *In My Language* affirms the foreclosed category of the human, but in doing so, also challenges that category and its importance for enactments of justice.

As such, I consider Baggs to break open the status of the "human" as a universal subject by demonstrating its emergence through constitute exclusions. In making a claim to the human, Baggs exposes the boundary work that maintains the human. We hear Baggs's computerized text-to-speech voice say that "human rights" are only possible if the "many shapes of personhood are recognized." Speaking from a position of not being considered full human or a life worth living, Baggs is acutely aware of the limits of this naturalized category and the risk of reinstating the human as the standard by which people are measured and classified. To claim the value of their existence as a "real person" based on an equivalence in their capacity to think

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[17] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism,* 2
[18] Ibid., 11

and interact might not challenge the hierarchy of disability and ability that underpins the dehumanization they face. This is what Eunjung Kim calls the problem of an "ability-based determination of a being's legitimacy."[19] Because it is difficult to think of human subjectivity without "resorting to abilities, values, and legitimacy," Kim suggests abandoning the human as the anchoring point for dignity and recognition.[20] The importance of abandoning the human as a framework for intelligibility lies not only in preventing the reproduction of the racist, colonial, and ableist practices that buttress a notion of the human as endowed with agency, rationality, capacity and language. It also lies in articulating a framework of existence and recognition that can function as an alternative to the oscillation between dehumanization and claiming one's humanity "back." Baggs's *In My Language* pushes us to think about a form of justice for the "many shapes of personhood" that lets go an ableist frame of legibility of what a valuable human life looks like, feels like, and sounds like. Hence, their video is not (just) offering an alternative narrative of what autism is, but also challenges the epistemological and visual frameworks through which we understand and define subjectivity.

This leads me to the second intervention made by the video that I want to highlight: Baggs's reconfiguration and politicization of language. A key motif in *In My Language* is the juxtaposition of their experience of the world and the perception on behalf of the generic viewer, addressed with both "people" and "you". Their thought is not legible as thought, their interaction is not legible as interaction, and their language is not considered language. Baggs highlights how their interaction with and perception of the world is only understood as a lack or absence of 'normal' qualities. The computerized voice, made with text-to-speech software, makes Baggs's statement intelligible to the hearing viewer, but also makes the viewer's distance to Baggs's own language more felt. Within the framework of normative language, Baggs's way of being in the world cannot become legible except through how it affirms a social order where non-verbal autistic people lack proper communication. As Baggs states: "The thinking of people like me / is only taken seriously / if we learn your language." Crucially, the video turns the dynamic of this power relationship around: the viewer is positioned not just as a "normal" person but specifically as a non-autistic (or, allistic) viewer, who lacks the ability to perceive and understand Baggs's rich language and perception of the world.[21] *In My*

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[19] Eunjung Kim, "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects." *GLQ* 21, no. 1-2 (2015): 296
[20] Ibid., 304
[21] Allism is the contrasting term of autism and refers specifically to non-autistic people in contrast to neurotypical, which refers to non-neurodivergent people more broadly. Melanie Yergeau explains the relevance of the term "allism" as follows: "Allism's popularity arose, then, out of desire to theorize the privilege of those not marked autistic. In service of this need, Judy Singer and Jim Sinclair independently coined the term neurotypical (NT) in the early 1990s […] [h]owever, neurotypical quickly outgrew its relation to autism and

Language switches between Baggs's own "native language" and the hegemonic language to make the point that the language that normally seems unquestionably universal is actually particular. There are limits to this hegemonic form of language, and as a viewer, we are jolted into an awareness of those limits and how they prevent us from understanding Baggs's language. Accordingly, *In My Language* powerfully demonstrates that when Baggs communicates in normative language in order to be considered an intelligible subject capable of sociality, their own language and way of relating is lost. Baggs has to translate their experience into hegemonic language to make this shift: an approximation to the human in order to unsettle the very structure on which our understanding of the human is based. And if their video would serve to provide evidence to viewer that they are 'just as' human, Baggs challenges the requirement that their language should have become commensurable in the first place to prove that point.[22]

Because of how Baggs makes these interventions, I understand their video to be a "minor text," echoing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature. In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari develop their theory of minor literature based on the oeuvre of Franz Kafka, who as a Jew residing in Prague and writing in German, inhabited a language that was not his own and made it "vibrate with new intensity."[23] While what qualifies as "language" itself is expanded in the video, Baggs demonstrates how normative human language is imposed from above, and that it is not their own language in the sense that it feels unfamiliar, restrictive, and unable to capture what their own language is able to describe and sense. Yet, through their deployment of the language that is not their own, and by bringing it into proximity to their own "native language," Baggs also changes our experience of normative language and defamiliarizes it. For example, in the video we see, in their native language, Baggs's fingers brush back and forth across the computer keyboard. Later, the same keyboard

nonautism. […] Allism as a marker, as a concept, then, functions as a mechanism for regarding the neurotypes of the nonautistic—for calling attention to both a neurological ideal and a neurological ideology. Allism's derivation mimics that of autism, where the Greek *autos* is meant to signal self, and the Greek *allos* is meant to signal other. Allism heralds, then, a kind of relationality and privileging of human sociality, much like autism privileges a divergent kind of relationality, one in which sociality is figured as self- and object centered, or wherein sociality isn't figured at all." Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 169-170

[22] In a blog post titled 'Holding Onto My Humanity' they make a similar argument: "I've been struggling with how hard it is to hold onto full consciousness that I'm a human being equal to other human beings. […] Right now can be almost unbearably painful. Because I am aware of my full humanity, or as aware of it as I can generally get. And that means being aware of how much of an unperson I am, and others like me are. And by the way — if you see me as a person *because I've proven it to you*, but people otherwise just like me who haven't proven it are not people to you, I'm not *actually* a person to you either. Real people's personhood is not conditional." Emphasis in original.

[23] Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19

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is used to type a sentence, which is then spoken in a computerized voice: "It is only when I type something in your language that you refer to me as having communication." By bringing together these multiple registers of language, and the incomplete translations that takes place across them, Baggs calls on the viewer to feel the limits of "our" language.

A minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, relies on three elements: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation."[24] Listening to this and contextualizing in our context here, we can become attuned to how Baggs, as a non-verbal person, speaks to the viewer in a language that is not their own, and infuses it with their own language. As the computerized voice speaks to "us" in "our language," the video conjoins it with their sensory interaction, thus deterritorializing language in multiple ways through visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and haptic techniques. The standard structures of interpretation through meaning and symbolism are made strange. In addition, while their video is deeply personal, detailing quotidian experiences in their intimate home-environment, it cannot *not* be political, cannot *not* turn every statement, gesture, and formal quality into a political intervention that changes the way we think and perceive fundamental concepts of human subjectivity and language. Thus, while on first sight this video might be understood as documenting the vernacular in the life of an autistic person, the work powerfully locates the political in the vernacular. This is most visible in how Baggs's video intervenes in the registers of language and dismantles the hegemony of human verbal communication. By doing so, it exposes the predominance of an ableist and limited definition of the human based on linguistic communicability. Lastly, their statement, narrated from an "I" position, takes on the shape of a collective enunciation, moving from a genre of autobiography towards a manifesto against the oppression of "non-persons," yet leaves open the future form of such a collective. This is, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, not a process of 'speaking for' a minority. Baggs's writing and video productions do not represent or speak for "the autistic community" or "the neurodiversity movement." But *In My Language* does enact collective enunciation that forges the means for what Deleuze and Guattari call "another consciousness and another sensibility.[25] Hence, the video statement does not represent a minority, but rather, it examines and undermines the logic of how a minority is constructed and perceived. Instead

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[24] Ibid., 18
[25] Ibid., 17

of delineating a minoritarian subject position, the minor functions as a method that exposes the major logics by which we understand minoritarian subject positions.[26]

At this juncture, I want to emphasize the problem of visual access that is raised when interpreting Baggs's video. As a minor text, *In My Language* exposes the fraught frames of recognition through which only particular forms of sociality appear as evidence for humanness. I already briefly highlighted Baggs's interventions in rethinking both the status of the human subject and language, thus highlighting how *In My Language* pushes the viewer to come to terms with the ableist frames through which we know and define both. By creating a statement against the oppression of neurodiverse subjects, Baggs calls for the recognition of the "many shapes" of personhood. How might we take up this call for recognition, and the process of interpretation that accompanies it? What are alternative ways of recognizing the many shapes of personhood, and how do we see, read, feel, and know them? I will explore these questions in more depth in the remaining sections of the chapter, where I discuss the question of the "accessibility of the image" in greater detail and show how Baggs's work scrutinizes the demand for transparency that underpins attempts at "understanding" the minoritarian subject. I will then also show how Baggs's work engages an opaque aesthetics in accounting for the multiple ways in which personhood can be visualized and enacted in relation.

But before going into these questions, I first need to further situate Baggs's work within a broader neurodiversity movement and flesh out particular interventions that are relevant for this chapter's interest in opaque aesthetics. A neurodiversity framework challenges the ideal of political subjectivity anchored in an independent speaking subject who communicates a state of woundedness. This has consequences for rethinking the relationship between disability and transness, particularly when we consider how coherent gender (trans or non-trans) can be considered part of a normative sociality that autists do not identify with. In addition, I will discuss how neurodiversity can usefully articulate alternative trans/crip epistemologies that are able to challenge the centrality of knowledge production and "understanding" in relationality.

4.2. Neurodiverse Subjects and Trans/Crip Epistemologies

I was introduced to Mel Baggs's video through Wu Tsang's re-enactment video-performance, *Shape of a Right Statement*, discussed in Chapter 2. In that chapter, I have

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[26] Hentyle Yapp, "Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5, no. 1 (2019): 154

examined how Wu Tsang brings a statement about autism to bear on her world of trans of color cultural production. In my reading of *Shape of a Right Statement*, I argued that Tsang's work created a visual and epistemological space for rethinking the relationship between disability and transness, and I explored how insights from disability studies and activism are pertinent for critically exploring the consolidation of the category 'transgender'. In turn, now, it is Tsang's re-enactment that shapes how I see Baggs's video as available for a queer reading. By "queer reading" I aim to refer to how Baggs's work speaks to non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, as well as a "queering" of normative sociality, that is, normative social interaction, relationality, and affective attachments. Melanie Yergeau's work, particularly her book *Authoring Autism*, has laid crucial foundations such a queer perspective on neurodiversity, in which she is not only interested in how autism and queerness implicate each other, but also how to use queering as a verb to describe autistic subjects as bodies that defy and queer social order. She writes: "The autistic subject, queer in motion and action and being, has been clinically crafted as a subject in need of disciplining and normalization.[27]" In what follows, I want to explore the queerness of autistic subjects further, shedding light on a particular form of trans-crip adjacencies that challenge the coherence of gender as well as the role of knowledge production.

Mel Baggs's work is situated in a surge of literature, creative work, and activism that since the 1990s is organized around the concept of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity, as a term that emerged within autism activist networks, establishes a framework in which neurological difference is considered an aspect of human variation and diversity rather than a pathology.[28] The framework includes a range of conditions such as autism, ADHD, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, depression, or schizophrenia. A neurodiversity framework follows the path set out by minoritarian social movements that claim an identity around which activism and advocacy is organized. From this perspective, autism is not a neutral medical condition in need of intervention, but part of a neurodivergent minority deemed abnormal in an ableist society, facing oppression, prejudice, and exclusion. Neurodiversity pushes back against the clinical construction of neurological disordered subjects as in need of a normalization of their behavior.

In affirming the importance of difference and variation, neurodiversity reiterates central tenets of the disability rights framework: disability is not a self-evident bodily truth but a social, medical, and political construction, and by valuing different ways of being in the world we can

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[27] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 26

[28] The term 'neurodiversity' is attributed to a 1999 article by Judy Singer, "'Why Can't You Be Normal for Once in Your Life?' From A 'Problem with No Name' to the Emergence of A New Category of Difference"

begin to overturn a dominant perspective that can only consider an impairment of the mind as a form of loss and lack. By understanding neurodivergency in social and political terms rather than psychiatric and medical ones, this framework for understanding the body and mind follows a social model of disability.[29] Yet, as I explore here, neurodiversity also offers a radical challenge to how we understand the subject of disability politics, bringing out dissonances between neurodiversity and disability studies. Within the development of the disability rights movement, mental and cognitive disabilities have often been occluded by a focus on physical disability. Similarly, as Kafer points out, the discipline of disability studies "has focused little attention on cognitive disabilities, focusing more often on visible physical impairments and sensory impairments."[30] Critics of the lack of attention to these topics within disability studies propose to consider "able-mindedness" together with the concept of compulsory ablebodiedness.[31] While there is an increase in critical literature on cognitive disabilities and neurodiversity, we might consider the challenge that neurodiversity poses to disability studies, before subsuming it within it.

If the social model of disability maintains a distinction between impairment as a bodily phenomenon and the production of disability as a social phenomenon, neurodiversity can politicize impairment in new ways by foregrounding the politics of material bodily variation in sensation, perception, communication, language, and cognition. In doing so, the social model's distinction between impairment and disability becomes unsettled. These bodily dimensions of neurodivergency cannot be separated from the social, and more importantly, they also have consequences for how we understand the social and the political itself. Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese, scholars advancing a neurodiversity framework, suggest that the discomfort in disability studies to take up cognitive disabilities as its subject matter is due to the lingering conception that physiological differences in the realm of perception and

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[29] This framing of neurodivergency is not without controversy. As Leon Hilton points out, the crafting of a political category of 'neurological difference' includes a vast range of variation in social, cognitive, sensory, and linguistic capacities. A neurodiversity framework risks creating its own "bad subjects" whose existence relies heavily on care and support of psychiatric institutions, and who are less easily assimilated into a diversity model. Hilton proposes to develop a capacious conceptualization of neurodiversity without minimizing or failing, to use his words, "to account for the more difficult and painful dimensions of what I have been calling autistic life-worlds." in "Minding Otherwise: Autism, Disability Aesthetics, and the Performance of Neurological Difference" Thesis (New York University, 2016): 187

[30] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 12. See also Benjamin Fraser on the invisibility of cognitive disability within canonical disability theories, *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics*, 33-38

[31] Although the term 'ablemindedness' risks reinstating a strict division between body and mind, critics argue that the use of the term helps to think disability differently. See Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 16. For scholarship that uses the term 'bodymind' to avoid this problem, see Margaret Price's *Mad at School*, Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined*, or Christina Crosby's *A Body, Undone*.

cognition constitute "a threat to what most makes us human."[32] Neurodiversity, they argue, "can help us to remain attentive to a different sensibility — indeed a different way of being in, and perceiving, the world — while at the same time reminding us of the need to construct the category of the human in the most capacious manner possible."[33] What emerges from this understanding of neurodiversity is not a claim to the human based on equivalence - where neurodivergent subjects are "just as" human as neurotypical subjects - but a challenge to the boundaries of the human stemming from the materiality of neurological differences. Hence, Erin Manning considers neurodiversity to offer a fundamental challenge to "how life is defined and valued", demanding to "honor complex forms of interdependence and to create modes of encounter for that difference."[34] We can thus further scrutinize this challenge to how life is defined, and explore the difference that a neurodiversity framework makes in how we understand the subject as it is constructed within social movements or political organizing.

Neurodiversity activism builds on principles of the disability rights slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us" and challenges the legitimacy of autism advocacy work that is represented by non-autists. In the realm of autism activism, this means a shift from parent-led or expert-led autism organizations, such as Autism Speaks, to activist groups that center the voices, experiences, and perspectives of autists, such as Autism Network International (ANI) and Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). Yet, if the standard modality of representational politics is based on a particular individualist norms of cognition and communication, a neurodiversity framework also changes what self-advocacy looks like by recognizing a wide range of styles of thought, interaction, and communication. For example, non-verbal autists, such as Mel Baggs, may use augmented communication technologies to approximate a normative standard of speech, and in doing so, expose the already exclusionary register in which one becomes intelligible as a political subject. To repeat Baggs's words: "It is only when I type something in your language that you refer to me as having communication."

Moreover, in relying on a web of support as well as mobility and communication technologies to do the political work of self-advocacy, neurodiversity work demonstrates the tension between the interdependent relations that form the material practices of living, and the capacity to be hailed as an individual political subject of rights. The reality of interdependency is not exceptional to neurodivergent subjects, but it is disavowed in the normative construction

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[32] Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese, "The Superior Half of Speaking": An Introduction," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no 1 (2009): np

[33] Ibid.

[34] Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 5

of the subject. As Erin Manning argues, the figure and ideal of the neurotypical subject forms "the very backbone of a concept of individuality that is absolutely divorced from the idea that relation is actually what our worlds are made of. The neurotypical does not need assistance, does not need accommodation, and certainly does not need facilitation. The neurotypical is independent through and through."[35] Hence, while neurodiversity emerges in the 1990s in tandem with a broader rise of identity-based rights discourses typical for a neoliberal context where individual rights are tied to vocabularies of collective identity, it also develops a strand of thought and action that undoes the stability of the subject of rights. That intervention is important for the purposes of this chapter, because it poses the question of how bodily differences can reshape how difference becomes intelligible and politicized in the first place. How does one become readable as a political subject while challenging some key tenets of how politics and sociality usually take form?

Those key tenets are concerned with how the normative construct of the subject is based on particular characteristics that, if absent, bar one from being qualified as one. Activists and scholars scrutinize how our commonly held notion of a political subject is premised on qualities of voice and language, as well as agency and animacy.[36] The expansion of disability studies and activism to include a wider diversity of disabilities such as cognitive disabilities poses a challenge to how knowledge production and political organizing is done. As Jasbir Puar writes: "Efforts to 'diversify' and multiply the subjects of study of disability have led to an impasse as the notion of the subject itself is already revealed to be a disciplinary construct of ableism, especially in the realm of cognition, agency, and 'voice'—all challenges to any political platform that is fueled predominantly through representational mandates."[37] By challenging an ideal of a subject based on individualism and independence, neurodiversity puts pressure on what Micki McGee terms the "defining feature of personhood: the ability to give voice to one's position and advocate for one's own needs."[38] In other words, to take neurodiversity seriously necessitates a rethinking of the persistent notion of the political that relies on a speaking subject who can communicate a state of woundedness, make it a site of knowledge-production, and articulate political demands on that basis. Instead of finding ways to be accommodated into that model of subjectivity, neurodiversity offers a rich rethinking of the parameters by which we evaluate what appears as political agency and relationality. For Yergeau, this then

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[35] Ibid., 6
[36] Kim, "Unbecoming Human"; Chen, *Animacies*
[37] Puar, *Right to Maim*, 14
[38] Micki McGee, "Neurodiversity," *Contexts* 11, no. 3 (2012): 13

constitutes also a welcome *queering* of proper personhood, one that can embrace the challenge of an incommensurability of identities and sociality. In autism she locates an "asocially perverse" motioning that, while often perceived as a form of nonsociality, is "inherently relational in that it defies, reclaims, and embraces the expansiveness that countersocialities can potentially embody."[39] Continuing on how neurodiversity challenges normative understandings of the subject, we can specifically explore trans-crip adjacencies through two challenges to normative sociality: namely in the realm of gender and the politics of knowledge production.

At the nexus of neurodiversity and gender diversity, transness and disability transform each other. One expression of this can be found in the remarkable co-occurrence of neurodivergency and transness, where atypical expression of gender are above-average among autists and other neurodivergent subjects, a phenomenon noted by many scholars as well as clinical practitioners.[40] However, much of the psychiatric literature that explores the "comorbidity" of Gender Identity Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder struggles to piece together what exactly the relationship between gender and autism is, yet continues to focus on the etiological question of whether or not we can consider Gender Identity Disorder a function of Autism Spectrum Disorder. This mirrors a broader cultural interest, historically but also contemporary, in the notion that there is a strong relationship between improper gender and autistic children. For example, after psychiatrist Leo Kanner coined the term autism in 1943, a dominant perception in the 1950s and 1960s was that the behavior of autistic children was a result of so-called "refrigerator mothers" who lacked the maternal warmth needed for a child's normal development.[41] The theory of improper gender rears its head again with contemporary neurological approaches to autism, most prominently in the work of clinical psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen. Baron Cohen is associated with influential theories about (the cause of)

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[39] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 18-19

[40] See, for example: John F. Strang et al., "Increased Gender Variance in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43 no. 8 (2014); Laura A. Jacobs et al., "Gender Dysphoria and Co-Occuring Autism Spectrum Disorders: Reviews, Case Examples, and Treatment Considerations," *LGBT Health* 1 no. 4 (2014); Joyce Davidson & Sophie Tamas, "Autism and the Ghost of Gender", *Emotion, Space, and Society* 19 (2016); Collier M. Cole et al., "Comorbidity of Gender Dysphoria and Other Major Psychiatric Diagnoses," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 26 (1997) pp. 13-26; Bernd Kraemer et al., "Comorbidity of Asperger Syndrome and Gender Identity Disorder," *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 14 (2005) pp. 292-296; Annelou L. C. de Vries et al. "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Gender Dysphoric Children and Adolescents," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 40 no. 8 (2010), pp. 930-936; Anna I.R. van der Miesen et al., "Gender Dysphoria and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Narrative Review," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28 no. 1 (2016), pp. 70-80; Gerrit I. van Schalkwyk et al., "Gender Identity and Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 88 no. 1 (2015): pp. 81-83

[41] Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 3-4

autism, including Theory of Mind (and its accompanied notion of "mindblindness," which I explore further below), and the "extreme male brain" theory. The latter posits that brains are sexed and can be divided into two categories: systematizing (male) and empathizing (female), and thus takes essentialist notions of gender to argue that autists generally have an extreme version of a male brain.[42] Moreover, due to the construction of autism as a form of gender failure, it is often hard for autistic subjects to fit the diagnostic criteria of transness, be it through the earlier diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (DSM-4), or the current diagnoses of Gender Dysphoria (DSM-5) or Gender Incongruence (ICD-11). As Kristin Bumiller points out, gender dysphoria is then rather treated as a "developmental disturbance" where trans identification is understood to be evidence of "the preoccupations with peculiar interests or the failure to understand social cues, or a manifestation of a distinct psychopathology."[43] A person's desire for particular gendered behaviors or objects are considered obsessive behavioral traits that are symptoms of autism rather than desires that can convey an "authentic" gender experience.[44] The task of the clinical practitioner is to separate the expressions of gender from the expressions of autism, driven by the lingering conception that atypical gender expressions are secondary to, and a function of, autism. Conversely, gender expressions that are "stable" and "persistent" are no longer autistic behavioral traits but evidence of Gender Dysphoria.[45] What emerges from this clinical approach of understanding the co-occurrence of neurodiversity and atypical gender expressions is that autistic "functioning" is framed within an ableist register of subjectivity and measured through proper gendered sociality.[46] Coherent gender expressions, trans or non-trans, continue to function as supporting evidence for an approximation of able-bodied subjectivity. Observing this body of literature, I want to underscore the importance of "cripping" the available models of gender dysphoria, in order to create more capacious ways of understanding the convergences of neurodiversity and gender diversity.

These psychiatric and clinical perspectives stand at odds with the self-narration of the experience of gender by autists, many of whom consider learning normative gender performances one aspect of behavior normalization.[47] For autistic activists whose work

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[42] Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Male and Female Brains and the Truth About Autism* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 120

[43] Kristin Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens," 978

[44] Tey Meadow, *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 80

[45] Strang et al. "Initial Clinical Guidelines for Co-Occurring Autism Spectrum Disorder and Gender Dysphoria or Incongruence in Adolescents," *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 47, no. 1 (2018): 110

[46] Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens," 978

[47] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*; Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens'

addresses the intertwinement of neurodiversity and transness, being transgender has less to do with identifying with a gender other than one's assigned gender, but more an absence of a meaningful relationship to gender at all.[48] In a review of first-hand accounts drawn from online surveys, blogs and published autobiographies written by autists, Davidson and Tamas trace how gender is experienced as a set of unclear social cues, leading many to reject the demands of gender.[49] Mel Baggs uses the term "genderless" to describe themself, explaining that they do not experience having a gender identity. They consider their genderlessness to still make them part of the trans community by virtue of facing transphobia and needing the trans community for survival.[50] Similarly, neurodiversity activist Lydia X. Z. Brown refers to themself as "gendervague" and they explain that they cannot "separate their gender identity from their neurodivergence."[51]

Consequently, then, the high occurrence of atypical gender expressions within neurodiverse communities can be understood as signaling a troubling of gender as a structuring principle of sociality and subjectivity, rather than a personal confusion about knowing one's own gender identity. When autistic activists such as Mel Baggs and Lydia X. Z. Brown argue that neurodiversity and gender cannot be isolated into separate axes of identity, they point to the fraught attempt at understanding neurodiversity and atypical gender expressions as clear-cut distinct phenomena between which a causal relationship can be established. Neurodivergency casts the coherency of gender into doubt. While we could understand the co-occurrence of autism and transness as a formation of subjects who occupy identities such as "disabled" and "transgender," the intervention I am tracing here is better approached as a disruption that frays the order of gender, revealing what Susan Stryker calls the "naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject," and instead establishing "different codes of intelligibility."[52]

By confounding how gender upholds as a social convention, neurodiverse writers and activists dislodge work to gender from the common sense. Rather than improving the tools and concepts we have for knowing gender, or, elucidating the parameters within which we can understanding atypical gender expressions, neurodiversity activists want to decline the

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[48] Davidson and Tamas, "Autism," 63

[49] Ibid., 59

[50] Mel Baggs, "Language Preferences: Genderlessness," Blog Post, last accessed April 14, 2021, https://cussinanddiscussin.wordpress.com/2018/09/16/language-preferences-genderlessness/

[51] Lydia X. Z. Brown, "Gendervague: At the Intersection of Autistic and Trans Experiences," Blog Post, https://www.autistichoya.com/2020/05/gendervague-at-intersection-of-autistic.html

[52] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1 (1994): 249

demands of gender, thereby refusing to take intelligible gender appearances as an entry point into normative sociality. What strikes me as the radical challenge that emerges from this *refusal* of gendered sociality, is the notion that instead of knowing gender better, allowing for a position of *not* understanding gender offers a more capacious relationship to the diversity of experiencing and sensing the world. Taking a cue from perspectives on gender in neurodiversity movements, we might learn to be less concerned with the project of acquiring better knowledge about a minoritarian position, that is, understanding disability and transness in the 'right' way, which would then remedy the injustices of pathologizing knowledge practices. On the contrary, the aim of "knowing" itself can be eschewed from its position as a logical precondition for moving toward challenging oppressive structures.

Crucially, this facilitates moving towards a new form of relation and solidarity, one not contingent on a project of understanding the difference of the other. Such a project is approached in Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson's work on "cripistemologies," which aims to explore crip ways of knowing that simultaneously challenge the security in disability studies to assume non-innocent practices of 'knowing from' and 'knowing about' disability.[53] Rather than considering crip epistemology to reflect a modality of thinking emerging from a minoritarian position such as that of disability, "cripping epistemology" serves to question the role of epistemology in connection to minoritarian aesthetics and politics. It challenges not only the conventional parameters of knowing and the politics of knowledge production, but also, as Jasbir Puar notes, "the mandate of knowing itself, of the consolidation of knowledge."[54] The thread of unintelligibility that I trace in Baggs's visual production, and in critical neurodiverse work more generally, is significant for discerning aesthetic practice that engages the material specificities of trans-crip positions and conjures ways of relating to that position, without assuming epistemological transparency. In my reading of Baggs's *In My Language*, following in greater detail now in the next section, I want to highlight this tension between the politics of knowledge production and the politics of relation. Acknowledging a radical diversity in the notion of "knowing" itself leads to space to reflect on what kind of knowledge we consider necessary to form a relation to those positioned as "different" and "other."

4.3. *In My Language*'s Unruly Visions

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[53] Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, "Cripistemologies: Introduction," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 130

[54] Jasbir Puar in Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson, "Proliferating Cripistemologies: A Virtual Roundtable," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 163

I have so far suggested that Mel Baggs's work enacts a critical rethinking of how the human subject is circumscribed by a normative definition of linguistic communicability. And more broadly, I have discussed how perspectives within neurodiversity offer a cripping of epistemologies of gender, thus bringing forth an articulation of transness that privileges gender incoherency over transgender identity as a structuring principle of subjectivity. In the rest of the chapter, I now return to *In My Language* in order to explore how the video also enables a different way of seeing. With "a different way of seeing," I refer to how the video brings forth a tension of the accessibility of the image and how the video operationalizes a haptic and kinesthetic visuality, two interventions that I consider as crucial to how *In My Language* affirms opaque aesthetics. Before entering those discussions, I want to briefly discuss the centrality of "seeing" itself in scholarship about autism, which will serve as a contrasting understanding of neurodiverse visions.

In clinical research about autism, the eyes play a key role in determining someone's capacity to process social interaction through understanding facial expressions. This research is based on the "mindblindness" theory of autism, also known as Theory of Mind, primarily developed by clinical psychologist and autism researcher Simon Baron-Cohen. Theory of Mind refers to "the capacity to attribute mental states to oneself and to others and to interpret behavior in terms of mental states."[55] Mental states, here, include thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, desires, and intentions that "self-evidently" structure behavior.[56] Theory of Mind is not so much a theory as it is an approach that casts a universal understanding of what motivates behavior and sociality as either present or absent in individuals. You either "have" a Theory of Mind or you do not, and its definition is contingent on a negative relation to autism, as Eve Sedgwick summarizes: "Theory of Mind is the thing that autistic individuals don't have, and autism is the thing that people who don't have a Theory of Mind have."[57] According to this strand of scientific literature, those who "have" Theory of Mind are understood to have "an access to sociality."[58] Baron-Cohen's use of the metaphor of 'mindblindness' underscores how this perspective is only able to approach autism (and by extension, blindness) as a lack, rather than a different engagement and sensory experience of the world that is meaningful and produces

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[55] Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 55

[56] Ibid., 1

[57] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 146

[58] Ibid., 146

knowledges.[59] Moreover, from the perspective of autists, the idea that one can be certain about another's state of mind seems tenuous, and might be a characteristic of non-autists that causes problems exactly when they try to interpret autistic communication.[60] The idea of Theory of Mind can be turned on its head, as Jared Blackburn does when he writes: "Because Autistic people see most normal people as seeming to assume everyone is like themselves, and would react as they would in the same situation, normal people may often seem to lack 'Theory of Mind' ('ToM-less NTs') to many high functioning Autistic people. On the other hand, normal researchers are tempted to assume lack of or deficiency in 'Theory of Mind' when Autistic people don't automatically jump to these conclusions."[61]

Within the mindblindness theory of autism, the lack of normal eye contact is one of the key features of "social abnormalities in autism."[62] The capacity to understand another person's mental state is contingent on eye contact, where the eyes are understood as a window into the mind. This theory emphasizes how eye contact, and understanding the direction of the gaze, are key for reading intention, interest, motive, and desire.[63] The diversity of cultural meanings that are attached to eye contact leads Baron-Cohen to propose that there exists a "language of the eyes" with its own "syntax" and "vocabulary" (one that Baron-Cohen interestingly discusses primarily through poetry and literature rather than his clinical research).[64] Yet, despite the rich vocabulary of meaning that can be attributed to the eyes and to the gaze, only conventional interpretations are meaningful and demonstrate one's capacity to know another person's mental state. An example is the widely used "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" test, also developed by Simon-Baron-Cohen, in which the subject is asked to look at a picture of a set of eyes and describe what the person is thinking and feeling. For example, a picture of a set of

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[59] For a critical breakdown of the metaphor of 'mindblindness', see Janette Dinishak and Nameera Akhtar, "A Critical Examination of Mindblindness as a Metaphor for Autism" *Child Development Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (2013): 110-114

[60] For example, Katja Gottschewski writes: "Automatic and instant processing of facial expression is something which often works really well, and something I sometimes miss, but it can also get into the way. NT people have often misinterpreted my facial expression and assumed that I was unhappy when I was perfectly happy, or that I was unconcentrated when I was concentrated, or that I didnt have feelings at all, etc. This can be quite annoying. It seems that this is hard to control for many NTs because it happens automatically and often unconsciously. Its certainly important for autistic people to learn something about facial expression and body language. But it's also very important for NTs, especially those who have some connection with autistic people or other people with unusual expression, to learn to be more conscious about their automatic processing, and to learn that some people express themselves differently."

In: "A discussion about Theory of Mind: From an Autistic Perspective from Autism Europe's Congress 2000" *Autonomy: the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* 1 no. 6 (2019): np.

[61] Jared Blackburn, in "A discussion about Theory of Mind: From an Autistic Perspective from Autism Europe's Congress 2000": np

[62] Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness,* 62

[63] Ibid., 105

[64] Ibid., 108, 109

eyes gazing out of the frame is accompanied with four options: "annoyed, hostile, horrified, and preoccupied."[65] Aside from the obvious confusing overlap of these affective states, the troubling aspect of this test lies in that by demonstrating that people with cognitive disabilities do not follow normative eye conduct, it seeks to prove that their lack of awareness of another person's mental state means that autists live in a self-centered world without empathic skills. The idea that eye contact is a prime form of social connection is buttressed by the assumption that at lack of eye contact is a lack of relation. Averting one's eyes, or not understanding with certainty another person's mental state, trouble normative sociality, but need not be a refusal of relation. Such a limited understanding of how seeing leads to meaningful cognition and social interaction misses out on alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and relating. Indeed, as Melanie Yergeau reflects: "In avoiding the eyes of others, I am indeed missing out on things. In this regard, researchers are right: there is much that I do not learn or experience when I avert my eyes. And yet—there is much that I do learn, do experience, do feel and intimate and express and attract and repel."[66]

Figure 19. Screen capture of the second part of Mel Baggs's *In My Language* (2007)

Consequently, I want to contrast the clinical approach to autism as a form of mindblindness with the different ways of seeing that autistic expressions engender. In doing so, I take inspiration from Gayatri Gopinath's notion of "unruly visions" as an alternative model of visuality. In her work on queer diasporic aesthetic practices, Gopinath closes her book with a discussion of a portrait photograph by Hashem El Madani of a cross-sighted boy. The boy's "uncorrected vision" and "deviant orientation" encapsulates the queer optic she traces in her research into aesthetic practices that challenge the scopic regimes of colonial modernity.[67] The

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[65] Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, 190
[66] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 211
[67] Gopinath, *Unruly Visions,* 174, 7

aim of aesthetic practices, Gopinath argues, is not to normalize "deviant vision", but to trace how "unruly vision can open up ways of seeing and sensing the world that would be unimaginable through a normative lens."[68] Similarly, I want to suggest that also Mel Baggs's eyes are queerly oriented (Figure 19). They defy their role in normative social interaction and re-assemble the possible meanings, attachments, and intentionality attributed to interactions of seeing. As such, *In My Language* invites the viewer to see with Baggs's, to follow the direction of their eyes. Yet, as we will see, exploring Baggs's unruly visions also requires a re-orienting of the process of looking and how we interpret what we see.

4.3.1. Accessibility of the Image

One prime characteristic of *In My Language* that stands out is its tension between how normative sociality is accessible, or not, for Baggs, and how the video in turn problematizes how Baggs's world becomes accessible to the viewer. As I examine here, Baggs's unruly vision consists of troubling the presumption of how the frame of the image offers transparent access.

In examining a video that is available on YouTube, it is important to highlight the multiple dimensions of accessibility. For example, scholars have noted how Baggs's video work is a prime example that demonstrates the accessibility of media and communication technologies and platforms such as YouTube offer tools for an unprecedented form of self-advocacy. Faye Ginsburg situates Baggs's within a particular conjuncture of the emergence of disability justice movements and the development of media technologies, creating a paradigmatic transformation where people with disabilities create media practices that "enables their self-representation in ways that expand our collective sense of personhood and publics."[69] And while Baggs's video work testifies to the productive use of media technologies and their increasing accessibility, Baggs uses this platform precisely to put forth a problematization of self-representation and access. This entails shifting notions of accessibility. Accessibility refers to the availability or quality of something that can be used by a variety of people with functional diversity, and in both its official and vernacular use, becoming accessible means making a structure (or technologies, buildings, language, objects, time scheduling, publics) that would otherwise exclude those who do not fit normative human morphology easier to use. Yet, we can change the direction of this notion accessibility, and ask how the position and experience of those excluded becomes accessible to those who usually do not face accessibility problems.

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Ginsberg, "Disability in the Dogital Age," 102

For the purpose of my discussion of Baggs's work, this also means inquiring into the problematic of visual access.

I frame my discussion in relation to how Baggs's *In My Language* is often interpreted to provide access to a language and a world otherwise unavailable to its neurotypical viewers. I discuss two examples of this interpretation here, that point to how the video is understood to demonstrate the difference between autistic and neurotypical forms of perception, and how makes autistic perception accessible to the viewer. I depart from these interpretations in order to argue that the key intervention of *In My Language* is not its accessibility, but its opaque resistance to interpretation. Consequently, in my reading of *In My Language*, I see the image as no longer to be taken as offering a transparent site of access. Rather, *In My Language* shows how the image is a form of translation in itself that challenges a direct transmission from vision to knowledge.

In Erin Manning's work on neurodiversity and autistic perception, the video functions as an example that demonstrates the difference between autistic and neurotypical forms of perception, communication, and relation. Manning's work has been instrumental in bringing a neurodiversity framework into academic domains of affect theory and philosophy, including autistic knowledges and life-worlds that are often seen to be at odds with academic conventions of knowledge production. In her writings, neurodiversity activists and writers such as Tito Mukhopadhyay, DJ Savarese, Larry Bissonnette, Sue Rubin, and of course Mel Baggs, are frequent companion thinkers. Manning subverts the premise that language, as discussed in the previous section, is a precondition for being considered a human being, and demonstrates that normative language and symbolism function as a filter that might make social interaction easier, but also take away from the richness of perception, sensation, and relation. Thus, she argues that language subtracts from the "wealth of relation that is pure experience."[70] In her book *The Minor Gesture*, she elaborates on this notion of experience:

> "Autistic perception is the opening, in perception, to the uncategorized, to the unclassified. This opening, which is how many autistics describe their experience of the world, makes it initially difficult to parse the field of experience. Rather than seeing the parts abstracted from the whole, autistic perception is alive with tendings that create ecologies before they coalesce into form. There is here as yet no hierarchical

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[70] Erin Manning, *Always more than one: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 164

differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and nonhuman, between what connects to the body and what connects to the world."[71]

Manning's description of autistic perception resonates with how autists describe their interaction with and sensation of the world.[72] However, I want to scrutinize the distinction made between a form of horizontal access to the world "before" the hierarchical imposition of language and symbolism, that is unavailable to neurotypicals. While Manning does point out that a rigid neurodiverse versus neurotypical binary fails to hold and that autistic perception is not exclusive to autists, her argument foregrounds the notion that autists have unmediated access to the world.[73]

My concern with this argument is that this approach can reinforce the idea that a cultural production like Baggs's *In My Language* provides access to this unmediated form of perception and relation that would otherwise be unavailable to the viewer. This sentiment is echoed in another interpretation of the video, this time in an article by Julián Gatto. In analyzing *In My Language* through Karen Barad's work on diffraction, this author suggests that "[h]ere, non-humans don't act as mirrors, as reflections of human-made concepts or symbols. Instead, they are de-anthropomorphised, dislodged from 'normative language' and met on common ground."[74] According to this line of interpretation, Baggs's language circumvents human exceptionalism and allows them to interact with the world on a more equal footing. In turn, the viewer can witness this because the images offer insight into their way of interacting with the world. Gatto writes: "[t]he absence of hidden metaphors or symbolism in Baggs's images encourages us to engage with the world on the same terms as they do, opening a space for radical availability."[75] As this formulation shows, there seems to be an assumption that Baggs's language consists of a material proximity and directness, and that their images offer a glimpse inside a world otherwise unknown to the neurotypical viewer. And while I agree that Baggs's video invites the viewer into their world - their apartment and their language - this line of interpretation leaves me with unresolved questions. How exactly does this video create space

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[71] Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 8

[72] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 55

[73] For example, Manning writes that "autistic perception does not belong exclusively to autistics" (*The Minor Gesture*, 8), and that "neurotypicals are in fact neurodiverse, also immediately perceiving relation." (*Thought in the Act*, 9).

[74] Julián Gatto, "Towards a Diffractive Cinema: The Video Works of Amanda Melissa Baggs (1980–2020)", *Another Gaze Journal* 4 (2020), np

[75] Ibid., np

for this "radically availability"? Does Baggs's world really become available to the viewer on the "same terms", or is something else taking place?

Consequently, while I do not fully disagree with this line of interpretation, I do want to take a friendly departure from it, for it risks romanticizing a more direct and more material access to the world on behalf of the neurodiverse subject, that the neurotypical subject does not have access to. But more importantly, it ignores the crucial and fascinating tension that I believe Mel Baggs highlights in *In My Language*, which concerns the status of interpretation itself. Traditional visual semiotic interpretation falls short in reckoning with this video, because the very metrics of signification and symbolism are unsettled. In the scenes that unfold, rather than making their world accessible to the viewer, Baggs sketches the limits of what is translatable from their language to normative language, and in doing so, questions the very tools that we use to read, see, and understand the other who appears as "different."

Instead of understanding this video as demonstrating the difference between autistic and neurotypical forms of perception and relation, where both become visible and sensible to the viewer, I prefer to place emphasis on how Baggs challenges the terms on which perception and relation become sensible at all. While they demonstrate a different way of sensing the world, they do not necessarily make it "radically available". This is a tension between, on the one hand, providing an entry point for a neurotypical audience to access a world that is otherwise unknown, and, on the other hand, creating a felt obstruction to transparent vision. If *In My Language* offers a pedagogical exercise at all, it lies in my view not so much in what is made available, but in what is withheld to a majority of its viewers. Hence, I argue that *In My Language* uses the language of the transparent image to invoke a withholding, where the image does not provide transparent access. As I explore further in my discussion on "opaque aesthetics," I do not consider the video's intervention as a refusal of relation. On the contrary, refusal might be now seen as an enactment of relation, but one based on knowing that there is a limit to the project of understanding.

4.3.2. "A constant conversation": Haptic and Kinesthetic Visuality

Abandoning a visual semiotic interpretation, *In My Language* redirects the viewer to become physically attuned to Baggs's sensory engagement with the world. In this subsection I discuss how the video enacts a multi-sensory form of visuality that creates a way of seeing that is simultaneously as way of sensing, both through haptic and kinesthetic registers, and in doing so, recasts the ways in which autistic expressions become meaningful.

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Returning to a part of the video which I discussed in the earlier in the chapter, let me look into how Baggs first invokes and then refuses the desire for interpretation in more detail:

Figures 20-21. Screen captures of the second part of Mel Baggs's *In My Language* (2007)

Many people have assumed that / when I talk about this being my language / that means that each part of the video / must have a particular symbolic message within it / designed for the human mind to interpret. / But my language is not about designing words / or even visual symbols for people to interpret. / It is about being in a constant conversation / with every aspect of my environment. / Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings. / In this part of the video / the water doesn't symbolize anything. / I am just interacting with the water / as the water interacts with me.

Baggs invokes here the desire to see the image as a placeholder of a deeper meaning "behind" the visual signs. As they narrate/translate: their fingers interact with the water, and the water interacts with them, but there is no symbolic message within. In guiding the viewer to the "constant conversation" between the water and Baggs, *In My Language* develops an attunement to what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call "surface reading."[76] In the context of literary studies, Best and Marcus are interested in a practice of reading what is on the surface, that which is "evident, perceptible, apprehensible", without turning it into an indication of a hidden depth from which a truth needs to be wrested.[77] Surface reading, in Baggs's video, are not so much about staying on the level of the surface, but rather, it undoes interpretive logics of symbolic signs that rely on a surface/depth distinction. Baggs's video plays with the viewer's tendency to assume that what is perceptible on the surface have a hidden component that would

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[76] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21
[77] Ibid., 9, 13

elucidate what this "really means." Interestingly, in doing so, Baggs takes the visual premise of how the "symptom" works - a visible outward sign that points to an invisible interiority - and deconstructs the readability of their embodiment in both normative language as well as the optic of "disorder."

As such, unsettling the surface/depth distinction poses a challenge to the all too prevalent assumption that with autistic subjects, something remains hidden: a puzzle to be solved, a mystery that needs to be explained. And if this project of elucidation fails, it can only affirm the expectation that there must be nothing there, or as Baggs hears their medical professionals declare, "nobody home."[78] As Yergeau argues, the characterization of autism is based primarily on what it lacks and contrasts, where autism is that "which contrasts with language, humanness, empathy, self-knowledge, understanding, and rhetoricity. […] Contrariness, antithesis, enigma—these are not autism tropes, but arguably autism's essence."[79] Characterized by something hidden waiting to be revealed, any perceptible expression of autistic subjects are taken as symptoms, a sign that gestures somewhere else. The concept of a symptom relies on a surface/depth distinction: a presence that indicates an absence. In her study on the rhetoricity of autism, Yergeau writes that "My rhetorical moves are not rhetorical moves, but are rather symptoms of a problemed and involuntary body. […] Appearing to know myself or others is merely *appearing* to know myself or others. I can appear, but I can never know. I have symptoms, and they have rhetoric."[80]

By encouraging the viewer to remain on the textures of the surface rather than following the visual signifier to point to a presence or absence elsewhere, *In My Language* can be situated within a tradition of image-making practices that works through the sensory register of haptic visuality. As theorized by Laura Marks, primarily in her book *The Skin of the Film*, the haptic indexes a tactile form of visuality where the "eyes themselves function like organs of touch."[81] The haptic is here defined in contrast to optical visuality, which necessitates distance for perception, and separates the viewing subject and object.[82] The haptic, as a modality of touch, collapses this distance and separation, and brings the viewer and object of vision in physical proximity. Building Gilles Deleuze's theorizing of sensation, the haptic allows Marks to foreground the embodied aspects of vision, and to resist the associations of vision with a disembodied form of knowledge production.

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[78] Mel Baggs, "Aspie Supremacy Can Kill," Blog Post, last accessed April 15, 2021,
[79] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism,* 2
[80] Ibid., 31, emphasis in orginal
[81] Marks, *The Skin of the Film,* 162
[82] Ibid.

It is important to note that Marks does not reinstate the haptic as *more* trustworthy than vision or as less oppressive than visual dominance. Indeed, the point here is not to argue for haptic visuality as a better account of the world, which would risk a similar romanticization of material proximity I discussed above. Rather, the haptic indexes different engagement with how we sense the world, leading to a different process of meaning-making and knowledge production. As María Puig de la Bellacasa observes in her writing on touch and vision: "Haptic speculation doesn't guarantee material certainty; touching is not a promise of enhanced contact with 'reality' but rather an invitation to participate in its ongoing redoing and to be redone in the process."[83] In other words, rather than the distancing inbuilt in vision, the haptic engenders a positioning on behalf of the viewer to physically respond to the making and unmaking of the world. Crucially, this position unsettles the dominance of visual semiotic interpretation that seeks to create order out of vision, and creates space for epistemological uncertainty within an expansive embodied register of the visual. As Marks writes: "[H]aptic visuality is not the same as actually touching, and […] a look that acknowledges both the physicality and the *unknowability* of the other is an ethical look."[84] To see the other and simultaneously appreciate their unknowability is a way of seeing that is instructive for expanding our frameworks for sensing bodily difference.
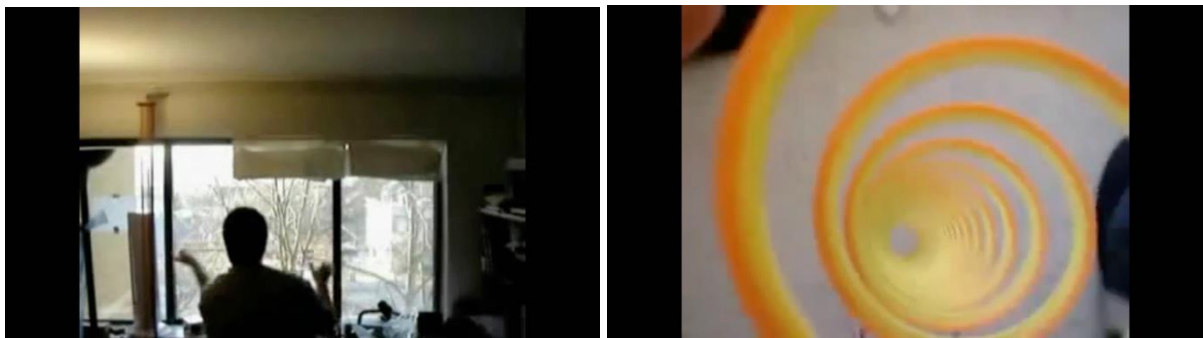
In the case of *In My Language*, Baggs's tactile interaction with their environment encourages the viewer to perceive visual signs and symbols through the registers of touch rather than a symptomatic reading, making us aware that we need not fully know how that interaction is meaningful for Baggs. We can discern how the images of their fingers swirling through the stream of water call on haptic vision (Figures 20-21). The viewer is prompted to see and feel Baggs's "constant conversation" with their environment. In this way, the haptic is already part and parcel of their non-verbal language. In experiencing the image as a physical encounter, the haptic attunes the viewer to the making and unmaking of embodiment in its physical environment, engendering a sensory relationship to bodily difference while retaining a degree of unknowability.

Considering how visuality can engage the viewer through an epistemology of touch, *In My Language* attunes the viewer to what might be called a "kinesthetic" visuality. As I have shown above, the haptic is relatively well-theorized for its importance in minoritarian

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[83] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 118

[84] Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xviii, emphasis mine

aesthetics, and it is also an obvious sensory register that is called upon in Baggs's *In My Language*, particularly exemplified by the physical images and sounds of touch and texture.[85] But the video is also instructive for something else, a kinesthetic visuality that foregrounds physical movement as well as the bodily perception of movement. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines kinesthetis as "the sense of muscular effort that accompanies a voluntary motion of the body" as well as "the sense or faculty by which such sensations are perceived."[86] Kinesthesis is thus not just the visual perception of another body's movement, it is a felt sensation through the body. In connection to my discussion of Baggs's video, kinesthetic visuality exceeds the cognitive awareness of the motion of another body, and registers how bodies respond to the world through motion as well as how bodies move each other.

Figures 22-23. Screen captures of the first part of Mel Baggs's *In My Language* (2007)

Indeed, accompanying all the shots of Baggs's tactile interaction with objects, the video is rich with movement and vibration. The opening shot is infused with a humming tone with which, as Baggs later states, they "sing along with what is around me." There is a profound synchronicity between the hum and the motion in this shot, as we see their body repetitively rocking back and forth, simultaneously flapping their hands (Figure 22). The continuation of the humming in the next shot, where Baggs moves a metal string across a surface, creates a patterned rhythm that seamlessly blends together with the repetitive sound of the metal string grazing across the surface. Another shot echoes such repetitive motions, but this time the camera is positioned inside the movements of a plastic 'slinky', a helical-shaped spiral tube that unravels and gains momentum through motion (Figure 23). The oscillating motion of the

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[85] Theorizations of the haptic I have in mind here include: Leon J. Hilton, "Minding Otherwise: Autism, Disability Aesthetics, and the Performance of Neurological Difference," Thesis (New York University, 2016); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Rizvana Bradley, "Introduction: other sensualities", *Women & Performance* 24, no. 2-3 (2014): 129-133

[86] Oxford English Dictionary online, "kinaesthesis, n." accessed April 16, 2021

object spurs the viewer into a physical resonance of the back and forth movements. Here, bodies, sounds, and objects are brought into a relationship of resonance through repetition and imitation. Baggs's "constant conversation", where they interact with their environment, and the environment interacts with them, activates bodily sensations of movement and motion. Again, symbolic interpretation will not suffice to make sense, literally, of these bodily movements that resonate with the viewer.

For theorists like Marks, kinesthetic visuality and haptic visuality are overlapping registers that help us understand how the medium of film engages sense experiences[87]. Senses cross over and work together in our embodied experience of film. For example, sound it not just heard, but felt as material vibrations on the body.[88] Yet, a distinction between haptic and kinesthetic visuality matters for grappling with the various ways in which bodily movement specifically is policed and pathologized.

As such, the importance of understanding kinesthetic visuality lies in how bodily gestures and movements are not neutral, but always already politicized. We can think of how certain bodily movements are perceived as either 'normal' or 'threatening' as a function of racialization by looking at the status of bodily movements in the context of police violence in the U.S. As Mel Chen writes, "The systemic encoding and legitimation of murder by police is made most stark given the standard police injunction "Don't move" (understood in movies, perhaps no less accurately, as "Freeze"), such that movement itself becomes an act of resistance or aggression."[89] This becomes even more pertinent at the conjunction of blackness and neurodivergence, where the motions of black autistic men come to be coded as "dangerously erratic."[90] People who express non-normative sensoriums or bodily movements risk committing what Chen calls a "gestural wrong."[91] The policing of bodily comportment signals the necessity for developing capacious ways of sensing bodily difference.

In considering the kinesthetic resonances of non-normative bodily gestures as part of disability aesthetics, I respond to how bodily movements of autistic subjects have been pathologized through their coding as symptoms of disorder. For example, the two main

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[87] Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 163

[88] See also: Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017)

[89] Mel Chen, "Agitation," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117 no. 3 (2018): 562

[90] Leon J. Hilton, "Avonte's Law: Autism, Wandering, and the Racial Surveillance of Neurological Difference," *African American Review* 50 no. 2 (2017): 223 Other critical work that explores the intersection of blackness and neurodivergence includes: Tanja Aho, Liat Ben-Moshe, and Leon J. Hilton, "Mad Futures: Affect/Theory/Violence," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2017): 291-302. and, Therí A. Pickens, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). Examples include the police shootings of Stephon Watts in 2012 and of Charles Kinsey in 2016.

[91] Chen, "Agitation," 563

diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 for Autism Spectrum Disorder are "deficits in social communication" and "repetitive patterns of behavior."[92] The latter includes "an unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment" and "repetitive motor movements."[93] The repetition of stimuli from the environment, also known as "echophenomena" includes the imitation of sounds, words, phrases, facial expressions, as well as movements, such as hand-flapping or rocking one's body.[94] Crucially, these gestures and motions are pathologized as movements that go nowhere, lacking of awareness or intention. As Yergeau analyzes, such movements and motions fail to demonstrate "goal direction and voluntariness" to be considered social action at all.[95] The pathologization of neurodiverse bodily movement as a form of non-action stands at odds with how autistic critics recode these expressions as a queer sociality between bodies, objects, and environment.[96] In the words of autism activist Phil Schwarz, "What is so intrinsically wrong about hand-flapping, about narrow and unusual interests, about an aesthetic sensibility attuned to repetition or detail rather than holistic gestalt, or objects rather than people?"[97] Indeed, the "aesthetic sensibility" that we glean from *In My Language* points us to an expansive reimagining of how the appearance of the body can recalibrate how bodily difference provides evidence for subjectivity. In recoding symptoms that supposedly point to an absence of awareness or intention, the viewer is encouraged to dislodge visual symbolism in favor for a multi-sensory visuality. Taken together, Baggs's refusal of transparent accessibility and their take-up of haptic and kinesthetic registers of visuality engender a different way of seeing and knowing trans-crip embodiment. At this juncture, what remains to be explored is the centrality of opacity in these aesthetic interventions.

4.4. Making Sense: A/relational Opaque Aesthetics

In the previous sections, I juxtaposed clinical and neuroscientific understandings of autism's expressions with a consideration of how *In My Language* creates an aesthetic intervention that engenders new ways of seeing and knowing bodily difference. In the final part of this chapter, I want to now extend my consideration of the aesthetic interventions made by *In My Language* and frame them more explicitly as a part of an 'opaque aesthetics'. In doing

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[92] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders,* 5th edition (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 50
[93] Ibid.
[94] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 193
[95] Ibid., 42
[96] Ibid., 179
[97] Phil Schwarz, quoted in Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 199

so, I bring Baggs's work into conversation with the work of Martinican writer and poet Édouard Glissant, particularly his engagement with "opacity" and "relation" in his seminal work *Poetics of Relation* (2010, originally published as *Poétique de la Relation* in 1990).

I have suggested that, by troubling the accessibility of the image and engaging forms of haptic and kinesthetic visuality, *In My Language* conjures a way of seeing and sensing that harbors the unknowability of the other. These interventions can be considered a form of opaque aesthetics, both in their visual qualities and in how they interrupt transparent meaning-making. As a material quality of an object, opacity registers the play with visibility that neither obstructs light completely, nor allows it to pass through entirely. Always defined in relation to transparency, opacity conjures a degree of obstruction that does not avert, but rather heightens the sensory engagement of the viewer. These material qualities inform how opacity functions as an appropriate term for describing resistance to practices if knowledge that rely on transparency. By obstructing a smooth translation of visual signifiers into knowledge, opaque aesthetics can trouble taken-for-granted modes of understanding difference, without resorting to invisibility or anonymity as strategies for challenging the problem of becoming legible as a political subject.[98]

To look at the work of Mel Baggs through a framework of opaque aesthetics might signal a set of problems that go to the heart of how autism is constructed in both clinical literature and popular representations. As described above, autistic subjects are often framed as opaque subjects in various ways, both in popular media and in scientific literature: to themselves by virtue of a lack of self-awareness, to others, who do not understand what an autistic person is thinking or feeling, but also for others by virtue of a lack of empathy, relation, and sociality. The essence of autism, in how it has been clinically defined as a disorder, precludes individuals "from accessing self-knowledge and knowledge of human others."[99]

In Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* we see this narrow understanding of autism surface when he attempts to reclaim the value of opacity precisely by distinguishing it from autism. He writes: "The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of relation, in freedoms."[100] In order to clarify the potential of opacity in enabling

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[98] My understanding of opaque aesthetics is informed by Christina Leon's work on the topic. In her work on the performance art of Xandra Ibarra, León defines opaque aesthetics as "an aesthetic strategy that formally deploys opacity to impede the viewer's ability to know her or see her as evidence of racialized sexuality." Christina León, "Forms Of Opacity: Roaches, Blood, and Being Stuck in Xandra Ibarra's Corpus," *ASAP Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 372

[99] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 8
[100] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 190

relation rather than closing down its possibility, Glissant uses autism as the formation that can stand in for opacity's opposite. In this formulation, opacity enables relation, unlike autism, the pinnacle of non-relation that constitutes an unapproachable obscurity that resists solidarity. Opacity becomes a workable political concept by shedding its negative association with obscurity onto autism. While one could argue that the invocation of autism is a minor detail within Glissant's work, it speaks clearly to how autism is more commonly positioned as outside of relationality. Critics have pointed out how terms such as "arelationality" or "asociality" are often used interchangeably with autism itself.[101] Yet, what I want to suggest here is that autism and opacity *can* be considered alongside each other. I argue that a critical understanding of autism within a neurodiversity framework bears resonances with Glissant's conceptualization of opacity and relation, and bringing them together helps to understand how "opaque aesthetics" conjure an important way of relating to minoritarian subjects.

Situated in his work on the (trans)formations of language and identity in Caribbean creolization, Glissant leans on the visual concepts of transparency and opacity to critique the colonial underpinnings of an epistemology of knowing and understanding the other. In his book *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant calls for "the right to opacity" in order to engender an ethical relationship to the multiplicity, alterity, and unknowability of the world. Asserting the right to opacity is for Glissant a way of resisting the appropriative logic that is an essential feature of the project of "understanding" people and ideas from the vantage point of Western thought, whose colonial universalisms function as the standard by which difference is understood and measured.[102] He writes: "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce."[103] In opacity Glissant finds a way of relating through difference without bringing difference into a regime of knowability that demands transparency, so that to be in solidarity with the other "it is not necessary for me to grasp him."[104] In a conversation with filmmaker Manthia Diawara, Glissant reflects further on his idea to reclaim the right to opacity:

"There's a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparency and projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of transparency of the ideas

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[101] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 18
[102] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189
[103] Ibid., 190
[104] Ibid., 193

proposed by the West? […] I said that as far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque. That doesn't stop me from liking that person, it doesn't stop me from working with him, hanging out with him, etc. A racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I don't understand."[105]

In other words, what Glissant claims here is that to accept and harbor the opacity of ourselves and of the other is to maintain a form of autonomy in the face of colonial epistemologies. This autonomy is not the same as individuation, as is evident in how he describes the passage of diaspora as one from "unity to multiplicity", as the moment where one "consents not to be a single being."[106] Instead, opacity enables a poetics of relation that does not merge and blend its components, but weaves them as a fabric, and to understand opacity "one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components."[107]

My attraction to Glissant's notion of opacity lies initially in its unsettling of the vision-knowledge dyad, which bears strong resonances with how Baggs refuses a transparent translation of visual signifiers into knowledge. As I have explored above, *In My Language* confronts the viewer with the fact that attempting to understand their experiences based on a normative epistemological framework will fall short. And as many other scholars demonstrates through their usage of the concept of opacity, its productive force, particularly in an aesthetic practice, lies in grappling with how to create visual cultural productions that resist their possible reading as a form of evidence of a reality of a minoritarian position.[108] For minoritarian artists, the imperative to bring one's difference into the realm of the knowable for the audience upholds a epistemology of transparency that under the banner of "understanding" can reaffirm hierarchies of difference that bring otherness into a grid of comparison and reduction. Hence, for Glissant question was no longer to claim the "right to difference," but how to relate to difference without reducing difference to the logic of elucidation.[109] This is a pertinent question for minoritarian subjects for whom their difference becomes a reified framework through which to become legible and visible.

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[105] Manthia Diawara, ''One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28 (2011): 14

[106] Ibid., 5

[107] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190

[108] Such scholars include Jack Halberstam's work on 'queer darkness', Nicholas de Villiers's work on opacity as a queer strategy that resists a conceal/reveal structure of sexuality, Zach Blas's writing and artistic practice on 'informatic opacity' that resists capture by biometric technologies, and Christina Leon's work on 'opaque aesthetics' that resist heteronormative and racialized optics of seeing minoritarian subjects.

[109] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189

But focusing only how opacity resists a transparent form of understanding would miss out on how opacity figures in Glissant's commitment to the question of relation. Relation is described by Glissant as the "open totality evolving upon itself," as one that resists a totalitarian hierarchy.[110] As it moves opaquely through the text, refusing reification, relation for Glissant is the realization and expression of totality's diversity and fluidity.[111] With the notion of relation, Glissant then attempts to describe the universe's multiplicity, without falling into abstract universalisms. Hence, the notion of opacity is important here for retaining a quality of impregnable difference within relation.[112] Unable to be reduced or pinned down into identifiable elements, relation is primarily expressed in movement:

> Relation relinks (relays), relates. Domination and resistance, osmosis and withdrawal, the consent to dominating language (*langage*) and defense of dominated languages (*langues*). They do not add up to anything clearcut or easily perceptible with any certainty. The relinked (relayed), the related, cannot be combined conclusively. Their mixing in nonappearance (or depth) shows nothing revealing on the surface. This revealer is set astir when the poetics of Relation calls upon the imagination. What best emerges from Relation is what one senses.[113]

"Relation," in this passage, consists of the interactions between dominating and dominated languages. Or, to place this question within Baggs's framework, the "poetics of relation" call on the viewer to sense the relaying of language, in both is conventional and minoritarian forms. Following Glissant, relation thus cannot be "revealed" or perceived with "certainty." It is best sensed, Glissant writes. In this quote, the "relaying" of relation refers to how it emerges but also produces, part of an ongoing movement. I understand the importance of sensing relation to be part and parcel of how relation and unknowability go hand in hand. This comes back in how Glissant grapples with the notion of understanding, particularly as it is expressed in the verb *to grasp (comprendre)*:

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[110] Ibid., 192

[111] Ibid., 94, 192

[112] As Fred Moten points out, the tension between relation and difference seems to reinstate a metaphysics of separability in Glissant's work. While Glissant himself writes that relation does not act on "elements that are separable" and that being does not pre-exist relation, it does remain unclear where the inevitability of relation leaves how we understand individuation to take place. (Glissant, 172)

[113] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 173-174

> [T]he verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality.[114]

In the original French version of *Poétique de la Relation*, the difference between "understanding" and "giving-on-and-with" is the distinction between "comprendre" and "donner-avec." In her translator's introduction to *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing reflects on the linguistic underpinnings of this difference, and their various resonances that might get lost in translation. Wing writes:

> The French word for understanding, *comprendre*, like its English cognate, is formed on the basis of the Latin word, *comprehendere*, "to seize," which is formed from the roots: *con-* (with) and *prendere* (to take). Glissant contrasts this form of understanding - appropriative, almost rapacious - with the understanding upon which Relation must be based: *donner-avec*. *Donner* (to give) is meant as a generosity of perception. (In French *donner* can mean "to look out toward.") There is also the possible sense of yielding, as a tree might "give" in a storm in order to remain standing. *Avec* both reflects back on the *com-* of *comprendre* and defines the underlying principle of Relation. *Gives-on-and-with* is unwieldy, but unfamiliar tools are always awkward.[115]

For Glissant, relation and the "right to opacity" thus require switching from "grasping" to "giving-on-and-with." The process of understanding does not disappear, yet, his work offers a sensory approach to the process of understanding, foregrounding understanding not (only) as a cognitive exercise, but as bodily gestures of seizing and giving. Glissant's departure from the grasping hands of "comprendre" in favor of the mobility of giving-on and giving-with conceives of a way of knowing and understanding, in relation, that is unmoored from the tenets of mastery and ownership that structure knowledge production. Understanding is not the process of seizing for one's own, but a process of passing on and moved by, perceiving and receiving, recognizing the impossibility of isolated identities. "Understanding" as a form giving-on and giving-with offers a flexible way of relation, in motion and becoming, and the option to acknowledge the unknowability of the other, with who we move through relation.

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[114] Ibid.,191-192, emphasis in original
[115] Wing, "Translator's Introduction," xiv, emphases in original

Glissant's ideas of opacity and relation, which he himself contrasted with autism, speak for me to a neuroqueer understanding of relation that very much resonates with Glissant's writings. In my analysis of Baggs, "the analysis as such being in turn an element of Relation"[116], relation comes to the fore through a sensory engagement with the world. As Manning and Massumi write: "from the autistic, we hear neither a rejection of the human, nor a turning away from relation."[117] In their haptic and kinesthetic "giving-on-and-with" their environment, Baggs directs us rather to a form of "making sense" which shifts from its vernacular meaning of elucidation onto the literal sense-making of relation. What emerges in reading Baggs and Glissant together is an a/relational poetics of opacity, one that takes the positioning of autistic as "arelational" as a different form of relationality in itself.

In a blog post, Baggs writes quite beautifully about how their positioning as "outside" of sociality, and not understanding normative communication, allows for a becoming attuned to a different relational engagement that I suggest here:

"My most natural way of looking at the world is through patterns of sensation and movement through space and spatial stuff in general, not through the clunky world of words or word-like symbols that most people seem to use. If I stick to those things, there is a lot I can perceive that most people have trouble perceiving. Including socially. By "including socially", I mean that when I am around a group of people, their voices may turn into the sound of water, their movements may all sort of blend together, but in their movements I see patterns not only of individuals but of the people interacting within a group, and the individual's place within the group, and their effect on the group and the group's effect on them, and on each other. I see this particularly well when not trying to understand what they're saying to each other."[118]

Rather than prohibiting an engagement with the world, their trouble with understanding normative language and speaking in fact *enables* a different engagement with the world. Without understanding what a group of individuals are saying to each other, Baggs's way of interaction perceives sociality in a different register, rather than being excluded form sociality. Baggs's video work and writings allow its viewers and readers to tap into an a/relational attachment, one without an illusion of, or need for, a "grasping" understanding. Their demand

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[116] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 174
[117] Manning & Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 4
[118] Baggs, "Doing Things Differently", np

for a different kind of solidarity, one that can embrace the "many shapes of personhood", is a call for affirming the "otherness" of the other, rather than reducing it in the process of understanding. Disability justice activist Lydia X. Z. Brown echoes this sentiment in reflecting on Baggs's work after their passing: "Sie fought unceasingly for the principles that all people count, regardless of type or degree of disability, and that all people deserve to exercise their own agency and to receive necessary care and support, even and *especially if others do not understand why*."[119]

This chapter has argued for the centrality of opacity in transgender and disability aesthetics. Opacity has functioned here as both a visual strategy that refuses transparent access as well as an epistemological intervention that unsettles the process of "knowing" and "understanding" difference in order to be in relation. Mel Baggs's *In My Language* is a prime example of how aesthetic works can redirect the ways in which we see and know embodiment, calling on multi-sensory registers of haptic and kinesthetic visuality to expand our modalities of seeing and sensing. I have argued against interpretations of their work as offering access to a world otherwise "unknowable." Rather, I emphasized how Baggs's video work challenges the ableist frames of legibility through which their embodied experiences can become legible. With this chapter, I underline the importance of how aesthetic practices, rather than making minoritarian positions available for knowledge production, can change the ways in which we are in relation.

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[119] Brown quoted in "Mel Baggs, influential blogger on disability and autism, dies at 39," Washington Post. Emphasis mine.

Conclusion

I think writing
is desire
not a form
of it

- Eileen Myles, "For Jordana"

This dissertation explored contemporary aesthetic practices at the nexus of transgender and disability politics that bring forth critical modalities for seeing, sensing, and knowing transness and disability. With this dissertation, I offer a triangular investigation into the entanglements between transness, disability, and the realm of visual culture, taking aesthetic practices as a privileged site for exploring connections between transness and disability that are often foreclosed in popular representations or academic disciplines. My research examined aesthetic practices, from the last two decades and from Euro-American contexts, that provide a visual vocabulary for grappling with the complex ways in which transness and disability implicate each other. While these sites of investigation are often not explicitly connected, what has motivated this project is an interest in how transgender and disability politics, as well as the knowledge production coming forth from these fields, have powerful affinities. Trans and disability politics and epistemologies emphasize bodily vulnerability and interdependency as a starting point for social and political relations. Both trans and disability politics and epistemologies are invested in reshaping the meanings attached to bodily difference and formulating a critique of the biopolitical regulation and medicalization of bodily difference. In doing so, they demand new epistemological and visual frameworks of embodiment that are capacious for gender and functional diversity. My theoretical framework in this dissertation, thus, consisted of what I refer to as "trans-crip critique." Here, I draw out important sites of connection and conversation between transgender studies and disability studies, building on the various ways in which these areas of investigation use tools in queer theory and critical race theory to arrive at a critical interrogation of transness and disability.

In addition, this dissertation has inquired into how contemporary aesthetic practices productively disrupt the visual protocols through which trans and crip bodies become visually legible and epistemologically intelligible. Central to my methodological approach was not to

presume the givenness of "transgender" and "disability" as identity formations or bodily experiences that could be visually represented. Rather, I turn to the aesthetic to find tools to unsettle what we think these categories mean, include, and exclude. In addition, the aesthetic practices discussed in this dissertation expand our visual vocabularies for transness and disability, offering a multiplicity of what bodies can look like, how refusal of forces of normalization and correction can be articulated, and how transness and disability demand new social relations.

As such, the research questions that guided this dissertation inquired into the role of aesthetic practices in, firstly, how they disrupt the visual and epistemological economy through which transgender and disabled bodies become objects of knowledge; secondly, in how they reorient how we see and sense transness and disability; and, thirdly, in how they materialize how trans-crip critique and aesthetics reshape social relations. This dissertation responds to these questions by way of four conceptual interventions: 1) I suggest that *appearing*, rather than visibility, offers an appropriate conceptual framework for analyzing trans and disabled embodiment in visual culture, 2) I propose to approach the entanglement of transness and disability through the optic of trans-crip *adjacencies*, 3) I critically examine the inclusion of transgender and disabled subjects as a form of *rehabilitation* that is refused in aesthetic practice, and 4) I explore the importance of *opacity* for trans-crip aesthetics and for new understandings of minoritarian relationality. Rather than organized around a central theoretical framework, each dissertation chapter thus deployed trans-crip critique with a different theoretical constellation. I flesh out below the particular strategies each chapter offers for understanding critical navigations of visual culture, as well as the contributions made by each chapter.

In chapter 1, "Bodies as Evidence: 'Appearing' and Aesthetics", my analysis offered a critical exploration of the concept of "appearing" and its importance for research into transgender and disability aesthetics. This chapter also frames the following dissertation chapters. In my reading of the notion of appearing in Judith Butler's (2015) work on political assemblies, I illustrate Butler's productive emphasis on the performative force of the body, where the body demands infrastructures of livability that correspondingly support bodily vulnerability. While the formulation of appearing bears crucial resonances to trans and disability politics, in this chapter I show how Butler's deployment of appearing remains limited when put into conversation with transgender and disability aesthetics, particularly if we are interested in mobilizing the concept of appearing outside of its reliance on both the form of the public assembly as well as the visibility of the body. Specifically, through an analysis of Leslie Feinberg's photo-series *Screened-In* (2009-2011)*, I argue that we need to rethink what kind of

visual frameworks determine the "space of appearance" where subjects become intelligible as political actors. In addition, through a reading of Cassils's performance series *Becoming an Image* (2012-ongoing), I underline the importance of refusing visibility as a premise for political subjectivity. These two case studies have offered a qualification of how the concept of appearing is useful in the study of transgender and disability aesthetics.

Through this chapter, my dissertation contributes to critical discussions around the politics of visibility in relation to minoritarian aesthetic practice (Tourmaline et al., 2018), suggesting to shift from a vocabulary of "visibility" to one of "appearing," which allows us to better understand the role of the active and corporeal qualities of embodiment in contending with the social and political constitution of the field of vision. The language of "visibility" is insufficient in grappling with the ways in which aesthetic practices disrupt visual codes and performatively assert the trans-crip body as a troubling figuration to visuality. Consequently, my deployment of trans-crip appearances thus disaggregates the visual codes through which bodily appearances become sensible.

In Chapter 2, "Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* and the Performance of Trans-Crip Adjacencies", I then turned to the work of Asian-American performance artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang and examined her visual strategies for navigating the fraught terrain of transgender representation. In particular, I analyze the video-performance *Shape of a Right Statement*, where Wu Tsang re-enacts a statement made by autism activist Mel Baggs, and argue that Tsang's deployment of techniques of re-enactment and appropriation prompt the viewer to sense trans-crip adjacencies that disrupt the contemporary consolidations of "transgender" as separate from disability. Building on trans-of-color critique's crucial questioning of the conditions under which "transgender" becomes intelligible, as well as the constitutive exclusions that take place in this process, I argue for the importance of considering transness and disability as adjacent to each other. As such, I build on Tina Campt's (2019) notion of "adjacency over identity," that she formulated in the context of Black visual aesthetics, and extend the notion of adjacency to refer to a mode of relationality that captures the implicatedness of transness and disability. Trans-crip adjacency functions as an optic through which transness and disability move through each other and can transform each other. Specifically, in my analysis I show how disability studies has usefully operationalized the incoherency of "disability" as a representational category, always failing to capture the ontological multiplicity it is supposed to refer to, which offers impetus to rethink transness as in excess of its capture on the consolidation of the identity category of "transgender."

This chapter builds on debates on trans-crip affinities, particularly Jasbir Puar's (2017) call to move from "epistemological correctives" to "ontological multiplicities," and brings these debates into the domain of aesthetic practices. In doing so, I connect debates concerning entangled relationships between the epistemological *intelligibility* of transness and disability to the problematic of the visual *legibility* of trans-crip subjects, thus emphasizing the powerful ways in which aesthetic practices can trouble intelligibility and legibility. The chapter also contributes to domains of art analysis and debates concerning issues of appropriation and re-enactment in contemporary art, and I highlight via my reading of *Shape of a Right Statement* how research that privileges an optic of power relations (either as subversion or as exploitation) ultimately misses out on how these formal techniques can be utilized as gestures of solidarity or affinity.

Building on considering transness and disability as "adjacent" to each other, Chapter 3, "Refusals of Rehabilitation in Transgender and Disability Aesthetics", revolves around how the theme of inclusion is critically explored in the exhibitions *Ramps* by Park McArthur (2016) and *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* by Jesse Darling (2018). In my engagement with McArthur's and Darling's sculpture and installation practice, I demonstrate how their two exhibitions offer a generative refusal of contemporary forms of inclusion and accommodation of the minoritarian subject, while also attuned to the complex oscillation between an anti-assimilationist trans-crip critique and the realities of trans and disabled subjects in need of care and support. By extending crip critiques of cultural logics of rehabilitation into the domain of transgender studies, I show in this chapter how notions of cure, repair, and bodily wholeness have a vexed status in relation to gender transformations.

The third chapter's final contribution emerges from my reading of Darling's aesthetic practice, where I consider transness and disability as tethered to the problem of communicating one's wound while desiring to refuse the imperative of repair or cure. Consequently, this chapter contributes to argumentative claims about woundedness as a political attachment (Brown, 1995) and the figuration of the wound in contemporary art as an affective demand (Jones, 2009). Rather than the wound functioning as an anchor for a self-sovereign subject who communicates their woundedness in a claim to protection and rights, I argue that Darling's figuration of the wound highlights how it cannot be considered outside of the web of power that requires its communication.

The problematic of communicability returns in the last chapter, "Mel Baggs's Opaque Aesthetics." Here I conduct a close reading of the video *In My Language* (2007) by autism activist Mel Baggs. In the chapter, I demonstrate how Baggs's video statement, in which they

"translate" their own non-verbal language into a computerized voice text, exposes the ableist frameworks of recognition through which minoritarian differences becomes intelligible. In my reading of *In My Language*, I make a detailed effort to show how bodily expressions of autism such as multi-sensory attachments, irregular eye contact, and repetitive motions are cast as, in Baggs's words, a "constant conversation," so that a reframing of Autism Spectrum Disorder "symptoms" into aesthetic interventions can be offered through registers of haptic and kinesthetic visuality.

The key contribution of this chapter lies in foregrounding the centrality of opacity in trans and disability aesthetics as a technique for refusing intelligibility and legibility as conditions for recognition. By bringing Baggs's work into conversation with Édouard Glissant's theorization of opacity, in my discussion of both I demonstrated the importance of figuring a form of seeing and sense-making that can let go of the demand of epistemological elucidation. Finally, this chapter also contributes to debates about intersections of neurodiversity and gender diversity by scrutinizing how autistic identifications with transness challenge the order of gender as a structuring principle for normative subjectivity and sociality.

In this last chapter, I suggest to think of Mel Baggs's video work as a form of minor aesthetics, echoing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature, where *In My Language* shows the "major" logics through which minoritarian subjects are positioned and understood. While this argument was specifically appropriate for Baggs's practice, since the interventions made by their video pertain to questions of language and communicability, I would like to think of all the aesthetic practices analyzed in this dissertation as such "minor interventions," i.e. works whose aim is not to represent or delineate a minority, but rather disrupt the operations of how minoritarian subjects are constructed and perceived. Through the aesthetic practices of Leslie Feinberg, Cassils, Wu Tsang, Park McArthur, Jesse Darling, and Mel Baggs, my research has shown that we do not see transgender and disabled bodies as "represented" in these artistic practices, but we learn to see how transness and disability *transform* the visual and epistemological operations of frameworks of recognition.

As such, my development of trans-crip critique has thus been primarily guided by aesthetic practices, in order to build connections between transgender studies, disability studies, and the study of visual culture. By bringing together these diverse cultural practices, this research contributes to scholarship on formations and figurations of transgender and disability in art and cultural productions. This dissertation considered aesthetics at the forefront of envisioning a different relationality that transgresses notions of representability, visibility, rights, and recognition that rely on a limited understanding of identity as anchoring political

subjectivity. The potential pitfalls of disciplinary formations as well as political organizing in the realms of transness and disability pertains to the reification of transgender and disability as subject categories that can be transparently represented in the quest for rights, recognition, and repair. Consequently, this research emphasized the importance of - alongside of mobilizing frameworks of rights and recognition as tools for resistance - articulating trans-crip adjacencies that undo naturalized premises of visibility and sovereign subjectivity. As such, I demonstrate how aesthetic practices offer an alternative imaginary that circumvents the role of bodily appearances in logics of liberalism, capitalist notions of productivity, and forms of sociality contingent on ableism and heteronormativity. All of these are logics that contain how transness and disability become legible and intelligible: in liberal frameworks of redressing injury through optics of legal recognition, locked in cycles of demanding rights and a contestation of their transgression; in capitalist logics of bodily productivity that enmesh bodily transformations into a curative logic, pivoting care and treatment around a logic of cure and repair; and finally, in normative forms of sociality that hinge on the denigration of non-normative embodiment and the forms of relationality and affective attachments associated with them, locking subjects into dynamics of assimilation or resistance through differentiation. As this research has proposed, art and aesthetics are at the forefront of reimagining these terms on which recognition takes place; they create space for reckoning with how non-normative bodies disrupt these dynamics and allowing us to think outside of these frameworks and parameters. As such, this dissertation's strand of trans-crip critique emerges from aesthetic practices' capacity to imagine alternative modes of being and knowing.

Locating in the aesthetic a site from which to formulate and further develop what I have called trans-crip critique, the dissertation carves out a space through which critical engagement with trans and disability aesthetics can be forged outside of strictly bounded disciplinary formations and epistemological parameters of either transgender or disability studies. As detailed in the introduction to this dissertation, both transgender studies and critical disability studies have recalibrated the place of the "subject" in the study of trans and disabled processes of being. Both disciplines, albeit in different registers, have ushered "subject-less critique" as a modality of breaking down, or opening up, the epistemologies and ontologies of trans and crip existence. Having said that, scholars within both disciplines have also warned against approaching both sites as untethered to the regulatory processes that reproduce in different ways trans and disabled bodies and subjectivities through existing frameworks of gender and able-bodiedness. Whilst one can argue that the differences in material conditions that regulate and affect trans and disabled existence necessitate epistemological distinctions between both

fields, I have shown how aesthetic practices expose their entanglements in multiple registers. In doing so, this dissertation has implications for further research in both fields and it allows for points of connection, contestation, and openings that explore how trans-crip subjectivities emerge through regulatory processes in normative societies (legal, medical, and social) but are not bound to them.

Trans-crip critique carves out a space through which to think the paradoxes of dependency on infrastructures of support whilst refusing the normative terms and conditions of that support. As my research has shown, trans-crip refusals are not founded on the nihilism of thought and being and consequently the outright rejection of the social order we live in. Rather, trans-crip critique is a generative thought-practice that disassembles and re-assembles the social order by foregrounding relationalities through adjacencies and opacity. This work builds on important theoretical precedents for trans-crip critique, in particular Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory*, which brought queer theory to bear on disability studies in order to highlight the entanglement of disability and heteronormativity; Alison Kafer's *Feminist Queer Crip*, which offers invaluable feminist perspectives for imagining just queer-crip futures; and, finally, Jasbir Puar's *Right to Maim*, which explored the complex ways in which transness and disability implicate each other within the context of legal and disciplinary apparatuses. My dissertation contributes to these emerging threads between transness and disability, and also brings these concerns into the realm of aesthetic practices so that aesthetic and cultural practices are considered crucial interlocutors for these debates.

I have also aimed to highlight the urgency of developing new tools for making sense of non-normative bodily differences without reproducing able-bodiedness and gender normativity as the benchmarks for intelligibility. Specifically, I have argued for the importance of a critical interrogation of the means by which, and the terms on which, inclusion of trans and disabled subjects takes place. While my emphasis on the aesthetic might occlude attention to trans-crip adjacencies in specific scenes of political organizing as well as social and legal contexts, it is my hope that the connections drawn out in this dissertation provide fertile ground for further research in that direction. Moreover, my aim is that this research's mapping of trans-crip connections provides a relevant optic for research in domains outside of humanities research.

Throughout this dissertation runs a desire, both on behalf of these artists and activists as well as my own, to imagine something into being that does not yet exist. My writing in these chapters has thus, perhaps, failed to be mimetic or representative of the "realities" of transgender and disabled experiences. That research is done elsewhere. Instead, my desire with this project has been to inquire into aesthetic practices that offered something else: forms,

shapes, feelings, words, concepts, and gestures that are essential for navigating the violent demands for transparency and legibility. To "appear differently" is to demand and open up new visual and epistemological frameworks for reckoning with non-normative embodiments, which, in turn, also requires the transformation of social relations. In her introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains how her book will never be able to accurately "reflect" how power operates in the world. But, she continues, "The failure of the mimetic function, however, has its own political uses, for the production of texts can be one way of reconfiguring what will count as the world."[1] Butler's words inflect my own hopes for what this research might enable. Instead of reflecting the world, my writing has traced how aesthetic practices expand the visual forms and vocabularies available for multiplicities of functional and gender diversity, reconfiguring how non-normative embodiment impinges on the social and becomes meaningful. As such, this research carves out space for grappling with the complexities of trans and disabled becomings, and the re-imagining of our frameworks of recognition they require.

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[1] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xxvi

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