Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life

by Andre Cavalcante. New York University Press. 2018. $89.00 hardcover; $27.00 paper; also available in e-book. 224 pages.

reviewed by ELIZA STEINBOCK

Beginning in the 1930s magazines and newspapers, in stories of “sex reversals,” “sex changes,” and “sexual metamorphoses,” captured the attention of mainstream America: so Joanne Meyerowitz shows in How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States.1 What differentiated these stories from previous tales of lone individuals discovered living as a gender other than the one they had been assigned, was that quoted medical doctors affirmed the possibility of bodily change—for anyone.2 In this new iteration of transformation narratives, the media recast ordinary trans lives into extraordinary examples of a transformed life potentially achieved by all. These media texts provided a potential spark of recognition; others could now envision sex change as a real possibility. Together, Meyerowitz’s

2 Meyerowitz, 15.

Andre Cavalcante’s book Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life approaches these questions about media’s role in the lives of trans individuals through ethnographic studies of participants in the midwestern United States and the San Francisco Bay Area during the deepest years of the recession, between 2008 and 2011. Through the prism of his subjects’ everyday interactions with media texts and communication technologies, Cavalcante shows “how media made a sense of ordinary life more or less within reach” for these participants even though they were from different racial communities, generations, regions, and economic backgrounds. A decade after Cavalcante began his research, the media landscape and political atmosphere in the United States has shifted again to daily coverage of transgender erasure by the Trump administration. The book’s historical focus on a time, not so long ago, when trans people faced a dearth of representation and what little representation there was evoked negative tropes, has much to teach us now about what Cavalcante identifies as the “tactics” of the weak (from Michel de Certeau) and strategies for developing resilience in the face of significant adversity.

The book studies today’s crossover generations of trans people who have lived through a sea change in media technologies and are digital natives. In the book, then, “pre” and “post” no longer primarily refer to surgical status but correlate to eras before and after the availability of the internet as a research tool, community center, and space of exploration. In this regard, Struggling for Ordinary is a welcome addition to other books in the growing field of transgender internet studies, such as Tobias Raun’s Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube.

3 C. Riley Snorton, Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 139-176.
5 Cavalcante, 17.
However, as a communications scholar and self-identified white gay cisgender man, Cavalcante is not participating in these digital communities; rather, through in-person observation and interviews, he focuses on whatever media the participants report having a special affinity for, that brings them closer to a sense of felt ordinariness. (The author’s accessible writing style and palpably keen attention to the language, feelings, and activities of his study participants make for engaging reading.) The book follows Nick Couldry’s practice theory of media, which does not select the kinds of media genres or narratives to study beforehand or differentiate between “old” and “new” media, but instead conceptualizes media and technology in the context of their everyday use. The startling insight gained by Cavalcante from this approach is to detect in the voices of participants the desire for being and feeling ordinary and for transgender to appear as ordinary in media. Notably, the term “ordinary” does different conceptual work than “normal,” as the latter is embedded in clinical and moralistic connotations. “Ordinary” returns us to mundane, everyday life and even is inherently “good” in that it reflects an order, rhythm, and feeling of harmony in which a person is stitched into communal life. The humdrum is not achievable by all in equal measure. It requires other people to move through the world without thought or trouble. Cavalcante’s swerve to attend to the ordinary is bolstered by trans sociologist Viviane Namaste’s critique that transgender people and experiences are more than just illustrative examples of how gender works and should be studied for how they forge identity in the details of an unglamorous, everyday life. The political stakes of being seen as “just ordinary people,” to quote participant Margie, is to affirm the right to be both someone (i.e., recognized) and no one (i.e., left un molested). Media of all kinds become technologies of self-making that realize this desire for the comforts of becoming an ordinary trans person, as well as an affective chamber in which to negotiate the problems of becoming extraordinary when it becomes life-threatening and dehumanizing.

The chapters articulate how transgender people rely on media to expand the scope of their lives and to craft ordinary existence. The first chapter would be most useful to assign in undergraduate courses, or for any introductory audience, as it outlines a brief history of trans media representation from the 1950s onward, with special attention to the gay 1990s and the rapid developments of the 2000s, when it became especially clear that visibility will never be equal to understanding and can even engender backlash. Chapters 2 and 3 present the opposing forces within media texts that shape various experiences of being transgender as examples of impossi bility and possibility. These two chapters are particularly attentive to how recurring characterizations cancel out ways of being and how trans subjects have also been able to fashion aspirational self-templates from improbable materials, such as superhero comics, children’s cartoons, and amateur photography. Taking stock of the affective impact of media in chapters 4 and 5, Cavalcante’s focus shifts to analyzing the ways participants practice resilient reception in harsh media environments and tactically use media, such as software applications for locating safe single-stall toilets, to get along in everyday life. Collectively, the book’s overarching media narratives that offer avenues of agency and self-affirmation from myriad media forms that this way is responsive to the reality pervasive cross-platform and conveniences of care affordances enables Cavalcante to argue that the main takeaway of one that speaks to the project of contributing to trans media studies in TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly. These collections demonstrate 1 tracking the lived practices of “identities and expression, practice including image and communication,” with his expertise, might developed since the 1990s, precisely. Could we take from trans media stories the project of the study of less politically to this project.

After finishing Cavalcante’s book, one is more easily articulated.

7 Cavalcante, Struggling for Grac南ey, 8.
8 Cavalcante, 20.

9 Cavalcante, 177–181.
10 Cavalcante, 177.
11 See C. Jacob Hale, “Suggested Rules to use them, or Trans _____.” Sandy Shull’s Trans Rights, Rules.html; and Susan Stryker, “(De) Fix Transgender Studies Reader, ed. Susan T.”
ied white gay cisgender man, ities; rather, through in-person media the participants report a sense of felt ordinariness, attention to the language, engaging reading.) The book does not select the kinds of differential between "old" and technology in the context of Cavalcante from this approach being and feeling ordinary and ably, the term "ordinary" does is embedded in clinical and mundane, everyday life and even m, and feeling of harmony in drum is not achievable by all in the world without thought or is bolstered by trans sociologists nd experiences are more than should be studied for how they yday life. The political stakes icipant Margie, is to affirm the (i.e., left unadorned). Media of lize this desire for the comforts affective chamber in which to hen it becomes life threatening rely on media to expand the first chapter would be most ny introductory audience, as it from the 1950s onward, with loments of the 2000s, when it qual to understanding and can opposing forces within media der as examples of impossibility attentive to how recurring ans subjects have also been able materials, such as superhero narrative. Taking stock of the affective acus shifts to analyzing the ways environments and tactically use single-stall toilets, to get along in everyday life. Collectively, the book's five chapters are built around drawing out overarching media narratives that structure the norms that limit life possibilities and offer avenues of agency and self-authorship. Struggling for Ordinary offers a satisfying analysis of myriad media forms that refuses the silos of object-based theories and in this way is responsive to the reality that media today are harder to differentiate in the pervasive cross-platform and convergence media environment. Instead, the concept of care affordances enables Cavalcante to evaluate the extent to which different types of care are fostered through the design of different media.

In his (overly theoretical) conclusion, Cavalcante presents a critique of academic preoccupations with figures of gender transgression and subversion, a critique he heard advanced by the study's participants, who deeply desire access to the pleasures of the ordinary. Contra the queer ideal of transgression and subversion, the "queerly ordinary" aspires to embody a kind of queerness that is lived beyond the classic queer-normal binary. The queerly ordinary "positions them as unique—defined by a difference that warrants recognition and affirmation, and fully average—defined by everyday concerns and mundane experiences," explains the author. Because the field of transgender studies is founded on the tenet that scholarly knowledge production is informed by the embodied perspective of trans people, it seems perplexing to this reader that the main takeaway of this book on media and transgender belonging is one that speaks to the project of queer studies. That is, I see the book's efforts as contributing to trans media studies, such as inventoried by T.J. Billard or showcased in TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly and in special issues of Spectator and Somatechnics.

These collections demonstrate how transgender studies has powerful tools for tracking the lived practices of "transing" across cultural expectations for gender identities and expression, practices that involve hard and soft forms of technologies, including image and communicative media. I would have enjoyed learning how the author, with his expertise, might explain how the transgender studies framework developed since the 1990s, precisely when a complexification of media was under way. Could we take from transgender studies powerful tools for studying complex processes of assemblage that would apply to this cross-platform and converged media environment? The grounded concepts and problems that arise in this ethnographic study of the use of less politically conspicuous media forms could be easily harnessed to this project.

After finishing Cavalcante's book, I was also left wondering if the desire for the ordinary is more easily articulated by midwesterners because of regional vocabularies.

9 Cavalcante, 177-181.
10 Cavalcante, 177.

and habits. In combining analysis of participants’ media use from the Bay Area and midwestern towns, which could have been compared and contrasted more sharply, the book might have leaned on Lucas Crawford’s insight that rural environments afford transitioning in different ways.13 This would have bolstered Struggling for Ordinary’s argument that insists on a different starting point attentive to actual practices for theorizing embodied media use, use that powerfully challenges universalizing assumptions about internet accessibility or interest in media texts.


Contributors

Susan Fellemman is a professor of art history and film and media studies at the University of South Carolina. She is the author of four books, most recently Real Objects in Unreal Situations: Modern Art in Fiction Films (Intellect, 2014) and the coauthored Screening Statues: Sculpture and Cinema (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), with Steven Jacobs, Vito Adriaensen, and Lisa Colpaert.

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Cáel M. Keegan is an assistant professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies and liberal studies at Grand Valley State University and secretary of the Queer Caucus of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. He is the author of Lana and Lilly Wachowsk: Sensing Transgender (University of Illinois Press, 2018) and coeditor of Somatechnics 8.1, “Cinematic Bodies.” His work has also appeared in Transgender Studies Quarterly, Mediekultur, and Journal of Homosexuality.

Eliza Steinbock is an assistant professor of cultural analysis at Leiden University’s Centre for the Arts in Society, where they research trans* visual culture. They are the author of Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment and the Aesthetics of Change (Duke University Press, 2019) and coeditor of the special issue “Cinematic Bodies,” Somatechnics 8.1. Their work has also appeared in Feminist Media Studies and the Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender.

Joshua Yumibe is an associate professor at State University. He is the author of Freer and Modernity (Rutgers University Press, 2012) and editor with Sarah St Rosen, and of Chromatic Modernity (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).
dia use from the Bay Area and contrasted more sharply, the rural environments afford bolstered Struggling for Ordinary's tentative to actual practices for fully challenges universalizing media texts.

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