Discomforting Power: Bodies in Public

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Abstract

In this work, I draw from oral history interviews with queer and trans disability justice activists in Seattle, WA. I posit a theory of comfort that interrogates how “being comfortable” in certain spaces gets allocated on the basis of social privilege. I argue that comfort is only bestowed on and felt by some bodies, often at the expense of others. Who gets to be comfortable? And how is the feeling of comfort or the feeling of discomfort differently experienced based upon one’s social status and embodied identity? When does comfort get noticed and when does it go unnoticed? When does comfort become coded? I posit that terms like “safety,” “privacy,” and “cleanliness” become code words for comfort in some contexts, especially concerning public bathrooms. I move from broad accounts of discourses around public bathrooms to particular fears, events, and lenses. My interlocutors discuss their experiences of avoiding drinking water, facing possible violence, peeing on themselves and taking extra clothes everywhere as a result of lack of accessible bathrooms, facing illness from chemicals in the bathrooms, and staying out of public because of the problems with public bathrooms. I interrogate the implications of the construction of comfort for activism, organizing, and identity, arguing that comfort becomes an oppressive and defining force that is used as a weapon against marginalized people.

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Introduction
Comfort: A Powerful Social Construction

Power is uncomfortable and discomforting to those who do not have it. Power discomforts. Comfort and discomfort are operating in the background of the power that gets exerted over marginalized people. Experiences such as racism, classism, sexism, and ableism are often expressed through a repressive discomfort. Comfort becomes coded as other feelings and under differing valences – safety, privacy, and cleanliness. For example, a white person might not say "I feel uncomfortable around people of color," but rather this sentiment is more likely to be expressed as feeling "unsafe." Anti-trans bathroom advocates do not often say, "I am uncomfortable with trans people" but couch this feeling in terms of bodily "privacy." Comfort is implicated in power structures that marginalize people and in how access is experienced, whether it is expressed that way or not. However, activism is largely about discomforting power, about unsettling how bodies are treated in public – socially, culturally, and individually. Unsettling comfort is an activist tool, and this tool can help us parse out the muddled and varied ways that comfort settles into, and lurks underneath, social relations.

Comfort pervades our contemporary moment, it saturates how we navigate space, and it pops up in many of the debates raging both in and out of the academy. When I first began this project, comfort was most visible to me in association with trigger warnings. Trigger warnings have a long and important history in relationship to anti-violence movements. In 2014, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) released a statement on trigger warnings saying that they are often invoked to protect students from discomfort, which inhibits learning.[1] The debate the AAUP's report contributes to pivots on issues of comfort, trauma, learning, and

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[1] American Association of University Professors, "On Trigger Warnings," (Washington, DC: American Association of University Professors, 2014).

the connections between them. Feminist disability studies scholars, such as Angela M. Carter, dismiss the AAUP statement and the debates surrounding it as reductionist, pulling attention away from the very conversations we should be having in classrooms about power and oppression: “the mainstream rendering of this ‘debate’ has accomplished very little outside of perpetuating the conflation of trauma with that of discomfort and the ableist logics of oppression that tell the marginalized to ‘get over it.’”[2] Alison Kafer argues in “Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma” that missing from the trigger warning debate are crip viewpoints, which might offer a nuanced perspective on access, disability, and trauma.[3] This debate surrounding trigger warnings cuts to the heart of problems with comfort that I identify and grapple with in this dissertation – it is messy, complicated, and indelibly implicated in privilege.

The “comfort” that statements about trigger warnings concern themselves with is that of the student who is unfamiliar with the trauma of some oppressions (or at least discussions of this oppression) and who will inevitably have some reaction to the material that is uneasy – full of anger or sadness, and definitely uncomfortable. On the one hand, comfort is something that privilege can shore up and hide behind, while discomfort is a sign of learning something new and unsettling. On the other hand, trauma is a real and embodied experience and eschewing trigger warnings under a sign of comfort fails to capture the nuance we must attend to as educators.[4] This partially shows us how access and comfort are interconnected – when does comfort define access? How does access influence the distribution of comfort? My work is not about this debate,

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[2] Angela M. Carter, "Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2015).

[3] Alison Kafer, "Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016).

[4] For more on these issues see Alison Kafer’s Un/Safe Disclosures and this list: Signs, "Digital Archive: Pedagogy, Triggers, and Safe Spaces," http://signsjournal.org/currents-trigger-warnings/pedagogy/.

but rather debates over trigger warnings offer a salient example of the complexity of "comfort."[5] Comfort colludes with anti-intellectualism; it exhibits an unwillingness to learn and an unwillingness to change, especially in relation to ableism, heterosexism, and whiteness.

Dis/comfort has a specific timbre in an American context, where comfort can mean the attainment of the American dream and middle-class values. As a middle-class value, comfort is named by some activists as something to push against, something to question. Indeed, in what was one of the most divisive presidential elections in recent history, activists and scholars alike called upon the general public to be okay with getting awkward to talk to people who share different viewpoints, to call out or call in discriminatory language, and to do something about the rise of emboldened discrimination. On the site Resist Media, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency created the need to make a toolkit for white people to talk to their families during Thanksgiving 2016. In a blog post in service of this goal entitled, "Dear White People: Your Comfort Makes You Bad Allies," Donyae Coles spells out comfort's connection with whiteness:

> The comfort of whiteness is what protects toxic whiteness. In order to dismantle that culture, white people who are not ok with it *need* to be uncomfortable. They need to have tough conversations and place themselves in awkward positions.[6]

This post describes *dis*comfort as a dismantling and disruptive force, thereby positioning discomfort as productive and something to work for. Toxic whiteness is not the mainstream discussion and understanding of race, but rather the undercurrent of middle-class, abled, white,

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[5] Any prolonged engagement of "comfort" must have some reference to comfort women. Comfort women were women and girls who were trafficked into sexual slavery during World War II. While I cannot do justice to the horrific experiences and nuanced trauma these women experienced, it is particularly important to recognize how comfort operated within these women's lives and how it is defined. Their bodies, most often against their will, were taken as "comfort" for soldiers. "Comfort" in this instance being the repeated violation and rape perpetrated by militaries. While comfort women are outside of the purview of this work, the legacy of comfort women is, nevertheless, crucial to understanding the long and storied history of how comfort is mobilized in oppressive and violent ways.

[6] Donyae Coles, "Dear White People: Your Comfort Makes You Bad Allies," *RESIST* 2016.

cis-heterosexual values. Coles argues that an important act of solidarity is to engage with loved ones about how racism is built-in, institutional, and insidious. Comfort in this context is choosing to avoid a possibly awkward interaction, and is collusion with white supremacy and racist systems.

These kinds of calls to disrupt the workings of whiteness are a cornerstone of feminism as visionary, and have not lost their importance or strength. Scholars and activists naming comfort's complicity with whiteness is not a new phenomenon, of course – women of color feminists such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, the Combahee River Collective, and bell hooks, to name just a few, have all theorized on this before.[7] For example, in "The Uses of Anger," Audre Lorde discusses how dealing with racism is dealing with anger. She cautions that while anger is uncomfortable, hatred is what kills – "anger between women cannot kill us if we can articulate them with precision."[8] Dealing with discomfort, through articulating the multifaceted experiences of privilege and marginalization we all have, is the only way to get through this work. Similarly, in her groundbreaking work "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," Cathy Cohen argues that movement building should be grounded "in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges."[9] This is hard work, that involves recognizing and dealing with privilege where "it is difficult to feel safe and secure in those spaces where both your relative privilege and your experiences with

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[7] Some of these citations include: bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York, NY: Ten Speed Press, 2012).; Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press 1981).

[8] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981).

[9] C. J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens - the Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997). 458.

marginalization are understood to shape your commitment to radical politics."[10] Cohen acknowledges how "uncomfortable" and "daunting" this is, but stresses how important this work is to social change.[11]

In this dissertation, I seek to add to these calls for and musings on discomfort, and hope to contribute more nuance to important critique of whiteness' collusion with comfort. My aim is to parse out the insidiousness of comfort as an organizing logic for many of the actions we take as individuals and the institutional context in which we find ourselves. I put forth here a theoretical orientation, a lens through which to view and critique comfort. I posit a theory of comfort that interrogates how "being comfortable" in certain spaces gets allocated on the basis of socially-defined privilege that is bestowed on some bodies, often at the expense of others. Who gets to be comfortable? And how is the feeling of comfort or the feeling of discomfort differently experienced based upon one's social status and embodied identity? When does comfort get noticed and when does it go unnoticed? When does comfort become coded?

In her seminal feminist disability studies work, Alison Kafer argues that "recognizing bathroom access as a site for coalition building can potentially move us beyond the physical space of bathrooms, turning our critical attention to the acts of elimination that occur *beyond* the socially sanctioned space of the toilet, public or private."[12] Kafer's statement is a provocation: she posits that while bathrooms are designed to be a space of "elimination" – namely the efficient disposal and invisibilization of our bodily fluids – other "acts of elimination" such as discrimination, legislative management, and social shaming based on bodily and behavioral

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[10] Ibid. 480.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013). 157.

differences become readily apparent.[13] Her point has broad applicability: we have been conditioned to "flush away" our bodily waste, but what other kinds of "flushing away" actions are happening in the bathroom? How does "flushing away" become applied to people?

Public bathrooms have intimate historical and contemporary ties to cultural capital and legislative actions. Bathrooms are tied to most of the pervasive social issues of our contemporary moment. I echo Judith Plaskow's assertion that bathrooms are connected to most of the movements for social justice.[14] The justification of hierarchy and the manufacture of lines of difference are ways that elimination operates. As I discuss below, comfort is mobilized in 'acts of elimination:" lines are drawn and enforced between mattering bodies and non-mattering bodies; good citizens and unruly strangers in bathroom spaces.

Getting Closer to Comfort

"Comfort" is a malleable term, it is not universally positive or negative.[15] It gets taken up and used in different ways depending upon the context. If you say, "I am comfortable," it means, "I am able to feel comfort, I am relishing in this comfort, I do not want to move because it feels okay here." Being comfortable might connote the need for a challenge; it might signify the need to learn something new. However, comfortability is not permanent, it is a state that people strive

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[13] For support, she cites Carrie Sandahl's observation that Medicare and Medicaid will not cover adult diapers and other incontinence products unless you live in an institution, not if you live at home.

[14] Plaskow argues that access to bathrooms has throughout US history signalled who are "outsiders to the body politic" (61). In Judith Plaskow, "Embodiment, Elimination, and the Role of Toilets in Struggles for Social Justice," *CrossCurrents* 58, no. 1 (2008).

[15] Comfort can, for example, also collude with weakness in fitness contexts – getting out of one's "comfort zone" is encouraged when exercising and training. Comfort can mean mediocrity, or settling and not choosing greatness. Being "too comfortable" when talking about weight and fitness can signal laziness. However, in regard to money, being comfortable is good, it means you have "done well" for yourself financially, and does not signal laziness in the same way it does with regard to fitness. It can, however, signal that one has plateaued in regard to earnings. (Thank you to Elizabeth Stigler for pointing this out to me.)

for – to be “comfortable with money” or to find a “comfortable place to live.” Comfortable is about what one is able to do, what one can access, and simultaneously describes what it will feel like when you get there. Some people are already comfortable, some people are striving for it, and some people do not feel comfortable for various economic, spatial, identity, and other reasons. This, of course, changes; it is not static, but fluid and contingent. Importantly, the notion of ability is frequently attached to comfort. I read the “able” in comfort*able* as a reference to who is “able” to access comfort, to who is afforded the privilege of being comfort-able. Disability studies scholars have long argued that any reference to ability is a construction that must be expanded upon because *dis*ability is premised on the naturalization of ability.[16] Therefore, I am lead to say that dis-comfort is premised on comfort, or comfortability. Any mention of comfort then is also about discomfort, who feels it and who does not - and this reveals a particular distribution of power. In my analysis here, comfort is directly related to safety, privacy, cleanliness, and access. I argue in this dissertation that terms like “safety,” “privacy,” and “cleanliness” become code words for comfort in some contexts. All of these terms are politically charged and embodied, and as such are concepts that must be interrogated. Comfort is often upheld as a goal for which to strive, a not-yet future state. This is precisely why we must be suspicious of this term – it is prescriptive, affective, and slippery.

Thinking through some of the definitions of the word “comfort”, we are reminded that comfort describes a place (“this is comfortable”) and is a place (“I am comfortable”), it is also an action one can undertake (“I plan to get comfortable”). As a noun, comfort as a noun evokes

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[16] Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Cultural Front (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998).

notions of support, refreshment, sustenance, and consolation.[17] As a verb, to comfort can mean corroborating someone's story, trauma, or feelings.[18] If comfort is corroboration, or a confirmation of the materiality of one's feeling, then comfort in the context of bathrooms has potential to be used as a corroboration of normativity.[19] Corroboration is a way that comfort colludes with whiteness and gets coded as polite speech – "This person makes me uncomfortable."[20] What does it mean to corroborate a story? In popular crime narratives, this means that you must have support from others to make your story believable. Which stories are always already corroborated? Corroborating normative ideals of bodies means having gendered signs on the door that say men wear pants and women wear dresses, marking which gendered presentations are acceptable in the room.[21] It means putting a wheelchair sign on the door to perform accessibility when ADA standards do just that, standardize disability, while not leaving room for the ways in which the wheelchair symbol does not encompass how disability cannot always or easily be contained within a few grab bars and a slightly larger stall.[22] These signifiers

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[17] Oxford English Dictionary, "Comfort (N.)." in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, available at: www.oed.com/view/Entry/252092 (accessed 23 April 2013), 2013).
[18] "Comfort (V.)." in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, available at: www.oed.com/view/Entry/252092 (accessed 23 April 2013), 2013).
[19] "Corroborate," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, available at: www.oed.com/view/Entry/252092 (accessed 23 April 2013), 2013).
[20] Critical race theorist C.W. Mills argues in his article "White Ignorance" that, "if one group, or a specific group, of potential witnesses is discredited in advance as being epistemically suspect, then testimony from the group will tend to be dismissed or never solicited to begin with" (31). In Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. S. Sullivan and N. Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
[21] The signs obviously ignore the fact that women do not only wear dresses and men do not only wear pants, but the larger point is not that this encompasses all the gendered possibilities of bathrooms, but rather that the signs on bathroom doors are meant to pull from normative binary gendered expectations. The most notable bathroom sign I saw in relation to this was in a Houston, TX bar, where the men's bathroom was represented by a key and the women's by a lock – which reproduces the imagined genitalia and reinforces heterosexist ideas about sexuality.
[22] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, Corporealities (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

define which bodies can enter, establishing the normative parameters of the bathroom space. I am interested in uncovering how comfort can construct entitlement, how it is written into laws and policy, and how today the language of "comfort" is an acceptable, polite vehicle for nevertheless exclusionary practices.

I dare say we all want to experience some level of "comfortable" – with money, in a house or home with enough food to eat, in the fit of our clothes, in our identities, with close friends, family, and lovers. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong about the desire to be comfortable or to desire comfort during difficult experiences. These are individual feelings and the words we use to describe them are social and cultural. The nuances of comfort are easy to pull from, but not easy to name because of the sociality of our understandings of comfort – how comfort can operate on a societal level through race, gender, sexuality, ablebodymindedness, and class. I believe much of the social theory in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Ethnic Studies, Disability Studies, and Cultural Studies operates through calling into question why some people can pull from popular narratives of comfort (heterosexuality, whiteness, maleness, ablebodymindedness, etc.) and how this becomes an oppressive technology.[23] Theories question who gets left out of popular conceptions of "normality" and might even argue that those

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[23] Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, is a good example of this because she discusses how the language of diversity is a controlled and controlling phenomenon in higher education. Comfort plays a part in her analysis, with comfort being a part of the ways that diversity and diversity workers become coded (40-41). Another example is in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, where Robert McRuer makes the argument that the neoliberal state seeks to comfort us through demonstrating efficiency and inevitability (182). Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* takes on comfort as an academic's phenomenon when she argues that theorists often desire to inoculate ourselves against painful political complicity by taking "comfort" in a "belief that any critical practice that eventuates harming those it was once used to protect was politically complicit all along" (68). In Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).; Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).; Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Cultural Front (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

marginalized people are deserving of comfort. You do not even have to use the word "comfort" to critique these notions: comfort is so entrenched in how bodies move through spaces.

Spaces are cleaned, maintained, and built without much notice from those not performing the labor involved in such actions. In this way, comfort becomes a form of privileged ambiance, a background feeling that is carefully and covertly built in to various places and spaces. I use ambiance in a similar sense as rhetorician Thomas Rickert does, referring to "the active role that the material and informational environment takes in human development, dwelling, and culture."[24] Ambiance, then, is what goes largely unnoticed in the background. However, what is ambient is also contributing to how we are constructed and what we are constructing – this therefore influences what is imaginable without us fully realizing it. My work here, joining scholars including Sara Ahmed, Alison Kafer, and Thomas Rickert, is to unsettle this ambient comfort, to find the cracks in the veneer.

How is comfort operating in our background assumptions about space, place, and identity? Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, describes how "some bodies can 'have' comfort, only as an effect of the work of others, where the work itself is concealed from view."[25] Comfort here is labor. In one of my oral history interviews with white trans disability activist Emerson, he talked to me about his own labor of comfort in bathrooms:

> It is entirely the way I was raised to uphold social mores and social norms. Is that, you don't want to make other people uncomfortable. So I don't think it's ever happened. Well, I take that back. I have made other people uncomfortable in the bathroom, but not since I've been trans. I used to make people uncomfortable in the bathroom when I was a masculine of center lesbian identified person. I think people are totally cool in the bathroom with me now in ways that they weren't before. Even though that would have been, under this new law they're trying to pass, that would have been the bathroom

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[24] Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

[25] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004). 149.

> genital-wise available to me.[26] No, nothing too weird has happened to me. And you know, I can't say for 100% certain because you block out some things that are deeply hurtful to you.[27]

Comfort partially operates in this invisibilized labor. What stands out in Emerson's quote is that labor is painful and because of that pain, it becomes invisible to him. He describes blocking out what is "deeply hurtful" because the labor of comfort is constant and quotidian. Comfort in the dominant sense in which it is used to describe our experiences in bathrooms, which I use as a case study, becomes an oppressive and defining force, used as a weapon against marginalized people. As I discuss throughout the chapters that follow, comfort is an underlying assumption in many of the discriminatory logics mobilized by anti-trans bathroom advocates. The pull of capitalist policies, cultural norms of embodiment, and biopolitical mechanisms of governing prop up the emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and economic labor of comfort.

The invisibilized labor of comfort was particularly salient to me on a recent road trip, when I stayed at a well-known motel chain. The cleaning staff left a note that said, "Our cleaning standards are the highest in the industry. We work extra hard for your comfort." The cleaning staff at this motel was mostly invisible, which is most likely an integral part of their job. You see the cleaning cart in the hallway, but the cleaning staff are supposed to stay out of the way of the customers. Seeing this note came at a particularly important time for me in my understanding of comfort: my comfort at this motel was premised on the hidden labor and hustle of others, only strategically brought to my attention so I know that I am being taken care of, can relish in that knowing, and can tip and recommend based on that knowledge. What do we make of this sign in a context wherein hotel green initiatives are critiqued as limiting employee wages and benefits

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[26] Emerson is referring here to Initiative-1515 in Washington State that proponents worked to get on the ballot in 2016. This initiative would have required all people to use the bathroom that matches the sex on their birth certificate, instead of their gender identity and presentation.

[27] Emerson, interview by Ashley Mog, January 31, 2016.

while increasing their labor?[28] This mundane example of a hotel sign, which is connected to larger political struggles, shows us how comfort is never just about a mental and bodily feeling of ease. Ahmed describes how this comfort labor becomes invisible:

> To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view … [into] a space where you can't see the 'stitches' between bodies.[29]

As a norm, then, comfort works to obscure its own construction. Much like privilege, comfort is expressed through an ease that is not clearly distinguished for those who experience it. The phrase "too close for comfort" is particularly instructive in this instance because not letting difference be "too close" is part of managing difference, managing uncomfortable diversity, and dealing with challenges to the status quo that might threaten an ambient comfort.[30]

Access And Comfort

Another way in which comfort is both mobilized and disrupted is through understandings of access. I am interested in how "access issues" in terms of bathrooms become a fertile ground in which to interrogate comfort; indeed, this is the crux of the chapters that follow. Access, like comfort, is complex. Just as many of the people I spoke with mentioned planning to be uncomfortable in a space, this planning extends to inaccessibility. Planning as labor in both comfort and access is undertheorized. Even when a space is marked as "accessible" through a sentence on advertising about wheelchair access to elevators, sign language interpreter availability, or a scent-free policy, these accessibility statements are often not entirely enacted and enforced. Comfort is sometimes an issue of distribution, specifically, how can more people

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[28] David Brody, "Go Green: Hotels, Design, and the Sustainability Paradox," *Design Issues* 30, no. 3 (2014).

[29] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 148.

[30] For more discussion on this, see Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Transformations (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

be comfortable? The missing question there in relationship to access is who takes on that labor and how is comfort playing into enactment of accessibility?

In relation to creating a radically accessible space, Stacy, a disabled queer cisgender Chicana activist and healer, mentioned to me in our oral history interview that setting a standard of what comfort might look like is an integral part of planning an activist event:

> I think that for me creating space that is informed [by access] means saying upfront that people might be made uncomfortable and that if things come up please approach, like, me or a different facilitator or people there that are advocates.[31]

Stacy plans for the discomfort of others and sets up a protocol for attendees to an event to help deal with that feeling. She informs the space with access in order to recognize how comfort, trauma, and privilege are intertwined. Access is sometimes discomfort – accessibility means confronting uncomfortable feelings, dealing with privilege, and disrupting ablebodyminded norms. An understanding of access that includes, but does not stop at, disability, involves reconfiguring how comfort is allocated.

One of the ways comfort operates is through pushing marginalized people, who feel might feel discomfort, to hide that feeling. Sara Ahmed says of comfort that, "the availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labour of others, and the burden of concealment."[32] The "burden of concealment" is evident in the struggles over accessible activist spaces. Access is not always unquestioningly positive, it is fraught with labor, struggle, and discomfort. Stacy's narration of the process of activist event planning is an example of this concealment burden:

> Talking about accessibility still feels like a checklist of "special needs" that need to happen on top of the *real* organizing that's happening in the room. And so it really…and not to… I feel like all of the different people that are doing movement work have a lot on their plate and are overextended to a point where they're like, 'I can't take care of the needs of one more special—you know, extra thing besides like the pushing forward, the

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[31] Stacy, interview by Ashley Mog, January 17, 2016.
[32] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 149.

> pushing back on the institutions that I'm trying to impact change in.' And I just don't think that that allows any of us, um, the authentic ability to show up in our organizing work and have our full humanity, and come from our fullest, most, like the places within us that have the most integrity.[33]

Accessibility as a checklist is often experienced as annoying by organizers. What if access is the real work of organizing? This is the question Stacy pushes us toward. Access involves invisibilized labor – much like comfort. Understanding access in this way enables us to accept that sometimes access work is uncomfortable work, not just a utopian vision where everyone is invited. If access is just a checklist, it becomes non-performative because the statements of inclusion do not do what they say they will.[34] Access as non-performative is comfortable for some because it does not require work on ableism. It centers ablebodymindedness, privilege, and dominant conceptions of comfort. Stacy goes on to say that when we cannot be embodied and present when access is not taken into account, and cannot move beyond the set up very easily:

> I mean it creates an environment where a need is like objectified, right. It is the lowest common denominator of what a person possibly could need to be in this space and engage and just like at base show up. And I mean I think that that's important and it's a good starting place. And as long as what we're trying to do is be right and just show up and do the bare minimum, we're never actually engaging in the larger conversation that we all actually have needs to show up in a space. … And so yeah, I think that it is symptomatic of like, of a reductionist mindset when it becomes a checklist and where we are in like movement is that that's the best we've got. That's the skillset that we're working with. And we're not getting at the broader picture of it and we're not thinking about accessibility in a way that does open up the dialogue that like, we all actually need to be fed to be in spaces, we have to have rest and the ability for like literally the conditions that we're operating in to shift to give us the space to do the work that we need to be doing.[35]

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[33] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."

[34] Sara Ahmed talks about this sort of "unhappy performative" act in her piece "Declarations of Whiteness." She argues that "admitting" one's racism is not actually anti-racist work and often results in a re-centering of whiteness. See:
Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *Borderlands E-Journal* 3, no. 2 (2004).

[35] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."

As Stacy mentions here, access is an integral part of organizing that can actually be part of a bigger movement or a broader understanding of justice. However, as Marisa, a white queer disabled femme, highlights, sometimes in organizing comfort, privilege, and access can become entangled in ways that are challenging:

> I also can see white folks with disabilities not distinguishing between what is white privilege and what is ableism. I think that is a hard thing to pull apart as a white person with disabilities in that we are—as a white person I'm used to being prioritized in comfort, and having comfort. And also it's important to have spaces be accessible. It's a really hard thing to pull apart and distinguish what is going on when and what is a discomfort based on challenging my white privilege versus what is a discomfort that is an unacceptable part of ableism.[36]

Marisa's point here is integral to understanding how comfort interacts with access. Comfort's nuances are not easy to identify because of how privilege drives the ways in which people interact with different situations. This does not mean that access is not important or that comfort is something to completely eschew, but rather that when privilege gets personally coded as comfort, access is a challenge to pick apart and enact in a significant way.

Comfort is performance – it is actively constructed without consistently direct thoughts of how that affects and effects others.[37] Ahmed's argument that "discomfort is not simply a choice or decision – 'I feel uncomfortable about this or that' – but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or 'extend' their shape" is particularly instructive here.[38] Ahmed says that, "to be uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives."[39] Is the discomfort that Marisa points out part of a reshaping of space at an intersection of race and disability? Because individually felt discomfort is not exactly a choice, but rather the result of a shaped space, asking for access in an inaccessible space is reshaping that space.

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[36] Marisa, interview by Ashley Mog, July 13, 2015.
[37] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).
[38] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 152.
[39] Ibid. 155.

Shaped space is social and cultural.[40] We are able to feel individual comfort because of the social construction of language for this feeling. Comfort is social, and feeling discomfort because of a need to address one's own racist, ableist, hetero or cissexist collusions is another sort of push to make or remake space.

Bathrooms and Public Space

Public space is an assemblage of entities that have already been both physically and discursively shaped to fit certain norms; in this way, comfort for some is already built in to public space. Spaces are often set up so you already know what to do through the social and cultural teachings you receive: sidewalks are for moving along; bathrooms have enclosed toilet stalls, sinks, and soap. In the US, we are mostly taught to sit on the toilet (or stand up when you urinate, if you have a penis). Eliminating in a different way requires thought or education – using a catheter or visiting a place that uses bidets or squatting toilets, for example. It is marked when you use a space for something it is not meant for, revealing the assumptions regarding what is "proper" and what belongs in a certain space. When streets are marched in instead of driven on or when people have sex in a public bathroom, to take some examples, the ambient comfort that normatively governs those spaces is disrupted.[41]

Bathrooms are my locus in this work because of the ways in which bathrooms are so intimately tied up with comfort and discomfort. Bathrooms are unavoidable – they are a space in which politics, gender, accessibility, cleanliness, safety, health, intimacy, and bodily functions coalesce, intersect, and battle. Therefore, bathrooms are an important and I contend ideal place to

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[40] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

[41] Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

discuss issues of access, activism, and comfort.[42] As I will discuss in the next chapter, an historical name for bathrooms is "comfort station." I came to this knowledge after having written on how "I am uncomfortable" is used as an exclusionary feeling to keep transgender people marginalized in public bathroom access where bathrooms literally become contested zones of "comfort."[43] Bathrooms are also a place where clashes over meanings of hygiene, safety, and privacy come to the forefront. These words and concepts are often coded in terms of comfort. Stacy mentioned the exclusionary logics inherent in these sorts of conflicts over bathrooms when she said:

> If we're not able to be uncomfortable then we're constantly making ourselves smaller and less impactful and less relatable and able to engage in broader community, more expansive work, and like actually you know, like engaging in the world in a reasonable way.[44]

Comfort and discomfort work in a symbiotic tandem in this way: discomfort as a mobilizing logic to keep some people out of public bathrooms negatively impacts any broader attempt at community building.

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[42] Sheila L Cavanagh, *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2010).
Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner, "Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences," in *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, ed. Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).
Harvey Molotch and Laura Norén, eds., *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2010).

[43] In 2015, trans activist Michael Hughes from Minnesota began a Twitter-based campaign to draw attention to these proposed laws. These Twitter #wejustneedtopee and #occupotty campaigns involve trans-identified individuals, people who can pass for the gender identity they are presenting and identify with. For the campaign, people take selfies in bathrooms of the gender that matches their biological sex, not gender identity, to show the disconnection between assumptions about sex versus lived experiences of gender. Many of the pictures are accompanied by statements such as, "do I really belong in here" or "no one should be afraid to go to the bathroom." See, Alex Abad-Santos, "#Wejustneedtopee: Why Lawmakers Shouldn't Choose Which Restrooms Transgender People Use," Vox Media Inc., http://www.vox.com/2015/3/13/8208425/wejustneedtopee-transgender-bathroom.

[44] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."

Storied Methodology

One of my primary methods in this dissertation is oral history, which I selected due to my focus on community building, coalition, and accounts of how comfort functions. I chose to interview activists because the experiences of activists provide perspectives that create a rich collection and account of theory on the ground. I am interested in how activists generate and utilize theories of social change, space, and embodiment politics, especially in relation to comfort. Interviews are used by a wide variety of disciplines and I use them in an interdisciplinary way by using feminist interview analysis and oral history methodologies. I have chosen oral history specifically because it provides a way to engage with the interaction between interviewer and narrator and to situate this practice as an embodied one, one that occurs over time, in addition to analyzing the thoughts and recollections of my narrators.[45] Oral histories are not just about a transcript or a recording. This process helps researchers gain a greater understanding of an issue or a history through a staged interaction between the words of the narrator and the positionality of the interviewer: both construct the information in the interviews.[46] The text, then, is not two-dimensional, but rather it becomes an animated experiential interaction with more than one person.

All of my interviewees are based in and around Seattle, WA. Seattle, the largest city in the US Pacific Northwest, is a city full of contradictions. Widely considered a liberal bubble, Seattle is not without discriminatory and violent policies. One way this is manifesting, for

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[45] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

[46] Oral historian Maylei Blackwell talks about herself as a DJ who “synchs knowledge from multiple sources” (39) and “layers tracks” (40) of oral histories and historiography, which has greatly influenced my view of oral history. See, Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, 1st ed., Chicana Matters Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

example, is through the growth of Amazon. Amazon's affluent workers are increasingly gentrifying Capitol Hill, the queer neighborhood, and driving people out who have lived and worked there for years. With the building of a downtown campus of Amazon, the Capitol Hill neighborhood (which is very close to downtown) has also seen an increase in violence against LGBTQ people in the place that used to be the haven for sexual and gender minorities, alongside an increasingly white population flooding the city. While some argue that the Amazon boom is good for the city and good for diversity, others are fighting against these claims and arguing that an increase in racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic attacks has arisen. Some of the resistance in this case has included a graffiti campaign called Capitol Hill PSA (Public Service Art).[47] My oral histories talk about and are involved in this fraught relationship of capital, marginalization, and liberal ideologies. My interviewees are involved in local organizations and groups that work on social change in Seattle such as the Northwest Access Fund, Beacon East Asian Medicine, Seattle Disability Justice Coalition, and Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites.

I have conducted fifteen interviews with people who identify as activists. Everyone I spoke with identifies as queer and/or trans and is disabled. Some of my interviewees I knew prior to the interviews, but most I met through the process. I found people entirely through my connections and word of mouth, receiving recommendations and contact information from people at the end of each interview. The archive I currently have is rich and full of more than I could attempt to encompass within one dissertation.[48] Each interview was between one and four hours and was often broken into a few meetings. My commitment to accessibility in this endeavor meant that I made the decision early on to be flexible with this practice, anticipating

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[47] Kelton Sears to Seattle Weekly News, January 26, 2015, http://www.seattleweekly.com/home/956461-129/the-public-safety-art-of-caphillpsa.

[48] There is so much from my oral histories that did not make it into this work, but I have done my best to do justice to some of the stories that I was entrusted with.

and expecting the need to break up interviews. It was important that I do this because I worked with disabled activists who could not sustain several hours of interviewing. As a disabled person myself, I find it challenging to sustain this as well (non-disabled academics also find this practice challenging, but do not frame this in terms of stamina and accessibility). This practice is a kind of cripping of oral history; after all, working with and speaking to people with disabilities, as a disabled academic, necessarily involves creative imaginings and reworkings. It is not easy or fast to do oral history the crip way but it is vital if we are to speak with and do justice to the experiences of disabled people.

I also approach oral history from a feminist disability studies perspective.[49] I adapt this method from Horacio Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd's conception of "queer oral history" as a practice to make explicit the links between, and false binarism of, theory/praxis.[50] Through my research, I hold the complexity of individual stories and experiences in an understanding of how intersectional, not single issue, politics informs how people move through public space and how that space is constructed. Drawing from feminist understandings of reflexivity, feminist disability oral history recognizes the researcher's role in creating narratives and works with theory as an interpretive, collective act.[51] Oral history is not about where one person's narrative merges with another, but rather it is about the discontinuities in experience and how those

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[49] As Kim Q. Hall and various other scholars have argued, a feminist disability studies perspective brings together the gender and sexuality analysis from feminist studies into productive conversation with the medicalization, embodiment, and normalization analysis from disability studies in order to radically transform both fields in a way that understands the inextricable relationship between gender, sexuality, and disability. For a collection on this emerging field, see: Kim Q Hall, ed. *Feminist Disability Studies* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

[50] Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Introduction: Close Encounters," in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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

discontinuities can be rich and productive sites of understanding. Specifically, it offers a route to understanding what social change can look like from a messy, justice-based perspective. Being flexible in my approach meant that I was prepared for messiness, for long pauses between thoughts, and for breaking up one oral history over several months. This is not on the surface so different from the standard practice of oral history, but making clear that I utilize feminist disability studies as a basis for my approach to oral history allows making my commitments to access and activism explicit.[52]

My interviews began with the question, "how did you become an activist?" This question could have been the whole interview in most cases because this question solicited life history narratives, which included weaving together past, present, and future events. I set out to gain a wide breadth of knowledge about how each narrator views their own activism in conjunction with coalition, comfort, and space. I listened for comfort and other concepts I am interested in, while staying receptive to how their analyses go outside of the preconceived notions I brought to them. Because I treat my narrators as theorists with on-the-ground experience, I stayed open to what they might teach me beyond my currently constructed project as I conducted my interviews and listened back to them. These narratives are important to my project, not simply to capture them, but as sources of embodied knowledge that may contribute to understandings of how activism is conducted, ways that coalition and intersectional activism is conceived of, and what works and does not work in different contexts.

My own understanding of activism largely resides in a central need to combat what Alison Kafer calls the "grim imagined futures" of marginalized people, especially disabled

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[52] In the collection, *Women's Words*, authors discuss the necessity of adapting your oral history process to the communities of people you are working with and understanding this as an inherently political act. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York, NY: Routledge 1991).

people. Asking coalitional activists about their process and their experiences helps us to get closer to strategies for imagining more open and accessible futures.[53] I did not define activism for the people I interviewed or when soliciting interviewees, but asked for people who identify with activism in some way. Oral histories enable us to access embodied knowledge, the knowledge we have in our bodies and the ways our bodies interact with other material bodies/objects/laws/things. A useful way to conceptualize embodied knowledge is through Jeff Friedman's formulation of "cultural phenomenology" as a method of studying "the way individuals use embodied experiences to ground and articulate their consciousness of the world around them."[54] Embodiment in this definition, then, is understood through engaging with how interviewees think and feel about how they move through the world with privilege, otherness, or a nuanced combination of the two. It is important to know what my narrators think and feel about their own trajectories that led them to activism because these stories are rich sources through which to conceptualize the embodied nature of activism.

The activists I spoke with are individuals whose bodies are noticed, called into question, and/or policed on a regular basis because their bodies/identities/political orientations fall outside of normative. I will introduce them as they appear in this work, echoing the identities they shared with me in order to partially locate the position from which they speak. I use pronouns to describe each person based on what they asked me to use, including ze/hir, the singular form of they, she/her, and he/him.

For my rhetorical analyses, I follow disability studies scholar Margaret Price in using critical discourse analysis (CDA), which she calls "explicitly activist" because of an "investment

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[53] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 2.

[54] Jeff Friedman, "Spiraling Desire: Recovering the Lesbian Embodied Self in Oral History Narrative," in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 79.

in recognizing social relations in terms of power and difference as manifested through language."[55] This means I analyze news stories, legislative texts, documentaries, cultural artifacts, and the affective accounts from my oral histories through an understanding that language has political meaning and that this meaning is mediated through power and difference. CDA is complimentary to oral history in that both are concerned with the political, invested in undermining power through making discourse evident, through bringing it out of the ambient background in which comfort often operates.[56]

Chapter Summaries

Throughout the following chapters, I work to move from broad accounts of discourses and actions around bathrooms to particular fears, events, and lenses. Comfort is a lens through which I interrogate what happens in the bathroom in regard to gender, disability, and race and it also leads me to other salient and related topics such as safety, privacy, and hygiene.

In chapter one, "Hygiene and the State: Legislating Bodies in Public," I present social and legal moves from the Progressive Era of US history. I analyze the Social Hygiene Movement, Cross-dressing Laws, and the Ugly Laws, examining policies concerned with public space and connected to public bathrooms. I demonstrate how the legal solidification of bodily norms informs how we take on identities and navigate space today. While this chapter establishes some of the historical constructions of comfort, I also consider the relevance of this history contemporarily. I argue that the bathroom functions as a place of overlapping activism and concerns because bathrooms are not neutral, but have been saturated with politics since their very inception in public in the US.

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[55] Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011). 29.
[56] Boyd and Ramírez, "Introduction: Close Encounters." 1.

Chapter two, “Going to the Bathroom in Different Bodies,” is concerned with bathroom space – school bathrooms, public bathrooms, the racial segregation of bathrooms, the classed history of bathrooms, and how bodies are policed in both implicit and explicit ways. One of the questions I asked in my oral history interviews concerned bathroom space and any experiences my narrators have about it. This chapter is focused on narratives of bathrooms, from my oral histories as well as other debates concerning gender-neutral bathrooms. In 2016, Time Magazine declared the “Battle of the Bathroom” was in full swing, with seventeen states proposing laws to restrict trans people’s bathroom access in just the first two months of the year.[57] In this chapter, then, I explore some of these proposed laws alongside bathroom experiences from my interlocutors. I consider how and when “privacy” is operating as a code for comfort, especially in the proposed laws. I do this through the theory from my oral histories and through a critical discourse analysis of the news coverage of the proposed laws.

Chapter three, “Toxic Safety: MCS and Comfort-able Space,” concerns the relationship between comfort, “safety,” and public bathrooms through an exploration of the experiences of people with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS). I highlight how the phenomenon of “not knowing” what will happen when you go into a public bathroom, an experience from one of my oral history interviews, can act as a coalitional feeling. The phenomenological experiences of people with MCS are understudied and undertheorized, especially in the bathroom. I consider some of the ways that comfort and safety become conflated in public bathrooms through an exploration of the experiences of my interviewees with MCS and their thoughts on access.

I conclude, in “Coalitional Feeling, Discomforting Power, and Imagining Worlds” with a collection of accounts from my oral histories of strategies for activism and the imagined futures

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[57] Michael Scherer, "Battle of the Bathroom: Why the Fight for Transgender Rights Has Moved into the Most Intimate of Public Spaces," *Time Magazine*, May 19 2016.

they are working within and striving towards. I grapple with some of the themes that emerged regarding what works with activism and what activism could look like. Many of my interlocutors mentioned the ways in which coalitional organizing is not comfortable, but all of my oral histories mention the necessity of building relationships with others and working through the dynamics inherent in organizing, including comfort and discomfort. Through the use of long-form quotes from my oral histories, I present ways of thinking and conceptualizing what justice might look like, how coalitional feelings move us, and how power can be discomforted.

Chapter 1
Hygiene and the State: Legislating Bodies in Public

In this chapter, I discuss the Progressive Era as a period when there was an ever-increasing categorization and defining of bodies: Progressive Era policies have been vital in shaping how bodies are normatively imagined to belong in public space. The progressives were not the originators of legislative categorization and elimination, but we can see the active technology of production around mattering, non-mattering, and the justification for those lines of hierarchy. In order to more fully explore some historical context for comfort, this chapter also surveys the history of the public bathroom and the legal and social milieu that accompanied their Progressive Era emergence.

I focus this chapter on the Progressive Era, roughly spanning 1880-1930, as a period that is crucial to understanding the ways in which norms of comfort, privacy, and safety are entangled.[1] I examine the "ugly laws," cross-dressing laws, and the Social Hygiene movement specifically given their direct connections with current norms around public bathrooms in the US, as I argue at the end of each section. These movements and laws are intertwined and part of the same genealogy, but holding them in focus separately enables us to gain nuanced depth. These valences are important to analyze alongside each another because they have all left a legacy that remains with us today in the ways we talk about and experience public bathrooms. As Nielsen argues,

> In the Progressive Era, perhaps more than in any other, [controlling and defining the construction of the United States] meant surveillance and containment of bodies considered deviant or degenerative. Policies were put into place to carefully monitor the

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[1] Historians figure the bounded years of the Progressive Era differently. I use Kim Nielsen's configuration from *A Disability History of the United States* here as it accounts for the complicated dynamics on both sides of this period of time. I am not so concerned with the boundaries of the Progressive Era as I am with documenting moments during this period of time that are significant to the legacy of public bathrooms.

> bodies of those entering the United States and sterilize the deviant bodies of those already within the nation's gates. Sexuality, class, race, gender, and ethnicity forcibly intersected with notions of disability and quality citizenship.[2]

Quality citizenship is a fraught category that helped produce and maintain white, cisgender, ablebodyminded, middle- to upper-class men and women as the norm around which to organize the hierarchical strata necessary to capitalism, to reproduce hierarchy under continually shifting conditions.

These norms were both dominant and dominating: subsequent reforms were targeted at those who did not fit the established norms, and identifying, measuring, and quantifying deviant bodies became an important activity of reformers. Progressivists were invested in educating people who were considered deviant, rehabilitating them to bring them into line or, if necessary, identifying and restricting people who could not or would not be reformed. Historian Thomas Leonard posits that Progressive Era scholars, politicians, and social engineers had an extensive "catalogue of inferiority" that was intimately tied up with economic policy goals and the desire for social change.[3] The people who fell into this catalogue were heavily policed through spatial tactics and denied full participation in public life.

These Progressive Era cataloguing impulses, that I expand upon below, worked together to police public space through the educational disciplining of morality; in the process, they determined which embodiments and behaviors could be acceptably normalized, and which could not. By focusing on Progressive Era phenomena to analyze the bathroom, I argue that the spatial solutions conceived during this time – of gendered, classed, abled, sexed, and racialized panic about separate spaces – are instrumental in understanding how such concerns still circulate in

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[2] Kim E Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, Revisioning American History (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012). 129, Disability History)

[3] Thomas C Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton University Press, 2016). 129.

current debates about trans-inclusive bathrooms, in how people with disabilities are frequently unable to use public bathrooms, and in the ways in which bathrooms are inescapably saturated with politics. Of course, there have been significant changes since the Progressive Era: racialized, gendered (when talking strictly of cisgender women and men), disability discrimination is no longer legal (in theory at least), and public health policy has been reformed beyond concerns of "social hygiene;" Nevertheless, there are important lessons from the Progressive Era that still affect American culture and society.

Ugly Laws

Looming large in histories of disability are localized laws that were passed at the turn of the century called the "ugly laws." Susan Schweik found "ugly laws" in different cities dating from 1867 to as late as 1913.[4] The "ugly laws" were city-level acts or passed legislation originally created as part of initiatives to rid the urban streets of beggars. These laws were also applied to those who were visibly disabled, although not often enforced.[5] The definition of disability in this instance related to class and physical disfigurement, both of which were pathologized and brought under the purview of medical and scientific inquiry and political importance. In his essay, "The Birth of Social Medicine," Michel Foucault states that, "medicine's first objective consisted in analyzing the zones of congestion, disorder, and danger within the urban precinct."[6] He argues that in constructing US cities, the medical sphere interacted with norms of middle-class respectability and the bourgeoning ideals of which bodies should be considered abject or to be shied away from. Schweik argues that the imagined subject

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[4] Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, The History of Disability (New York: New York University, 2009). 3.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Michel Foucault, "The Birth of Social Medicine," in *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 147; ibid.

affected by ugly laws were those of "sanitary nuisance."[7] An early "ugly law" was passed in San Francisco in 1867 and used language to describe those who were "inherently diseased, maimed, deformed, defective, and infective."[8] Such language was used to describe not just impoverished people on the streets or people with physical disabilities, but also people of color and immigrants who were moving to the city in large numbers during this time. The direct aftermath of the Civil War and white people's racial apprehension at the time, exacerbated the political climate that led to the passage of laws relating to the physical appearance of people inhabiting public spaces.[9]

Ugly laws were highly interested in regulating public space. Schweik argues along this line that there were largely three reasons for the emergence and proliferation of ugly laws. Firstly, the institutionalization of biopower, which "assesses and ranks, rather than showing itself in spectacular punishment," meant that solutions like almshouses, prisons, and asylums were created to deal with the problem bodies.[10] Secondly, Progressive Era reformers were highly interested in planning managing city spaces, in order to make them more aesthetically pleasing and hygienic.[11] This functioned through mapping what an "ideal city" might look like – "legible, beautiful, and orderly," – which demanded politically segregating undesirable groups into specific places in a city.[12] Lastly, the emergence of the legal category of "injury," was meant to manage and organize workers and laborers who displayed forms of "disease, maiming, and deformity" under a regulatory system.[13]

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[7] Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. 95.
[8] Ibid., 28; ibid.
[9] Ibid., 30; ibid.
[10] Ibid. 64.
[11] Ibid. 69.
[12] Ibid. 71.
[13] Ibid. 75.

In the rapid development of industry and capitalism, people who had been injured working in a factory or in war sparked a national conversation about how injury should be handled and how to tell if someone was making a false claim of injury. These anxieties required legal and political apparatuses to define who did or did not have an injury that justified compensation.[14] Ellen Samuels argues that bodily ideals at the turn of the century were predicated on a "fantasy of identification" which assumes that "embodied social identities such as race, gender, and disability are fixed, legible, and categorizable."[15] Framing ugly laws as a fantasy of identification and of control helps us understand how, even though these laws were not often enforced, they were still passed and loomed in public imaginaries. The "fantasy" is that there are commonsense markers of difference, and that for those that cannot be easily seen on the body, there are experts who can diagnose this difference, the legacy of this is still with us.

The ugly laws pivoted on an intersection of class, disability, and race. Adrienne Phelps Coco argues that the ugly laws were not made to bar all people with physical disabilities from the public sphere but instead were enacted to specifically codify deviance based on class. To support this, she points to the fact that disabled veterans and other people with disabilities who were upper class or could work to support themselves independently were exempt from the law.[16] This suggests that the embodiment of those that were impacted by this law was based on certain tropes of Americanism, being able to work and having wealth. Kim Nielson argues that "through the creation of anti-begging ordinances, city officials perhaps unwittingly drew distinctions between deserving people with disabilities (those with money) and the undeserving,

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[14] Ibid. 83.

[15] Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2014). 11.

[16] Adrienne Phelps Coco, "Diseased, Maimed, Mutilated: Categorizations of Disability and an Ugly Law in Late Nineteenth-Century Chicago," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 27; ibid.

ugly, unsightly, and disgusting people with disabilities (those without)."[17] This distinction Nielson points to is still salient today in the pathologization of poverty and disability, especially in relation to race, gender, and sexuality. For example, people who are homeless often have trouble or are kicked out of public bathrooms because of their appearance, inability to pay for goods, or because of imagined deviance.[18] People with disabilities and people living in poverty or who are homeless are not able to easily access public bathrooms because their appearance falls outside of the "bandwidth of the acceptable" that Foucault describes.[19] Many cities with a significant tourist population often have businesses that lock their bathrooms and only customers who purchase items may ask for the keys or the code to access bathrooms, giving workers the role to judge acceptability. This process of key or code bestowal often involves the person working to judge the gender of the person as well.

There are legislative strides being made today that work towards breaking up the legacy of ugly laws, especially in relationship to bathrooms. Many of these laws were not repealed until the 1970s with the passage of laws relating to disability participation in society.[20] One such law is relates explicitly to the bathroom. The 2005 Restroom Access Act codifies the requirement of someone with irritable bowel disease to have access to all bathrooms in public. People who qualify can get a card to ask any and all businesses to let them use their bathroom, public or

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[17] Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*. 89.

[18] Renee Lewis, "Homeless America: 'Everyone Should Be Able to Pee for Free with Dignity'," Aljazeera America, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/8/29/homeless-un-toilets.html.

[19] It is interesting to note here that longitudinal national studies show that 65% of people living in long-term poverty are disabled. In Peiyun She and Gina A. Livermore, "Long-Term Poverty and Disability among Working-Age Adults," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 19, no. 4 (2009).

[20] For example: Civil Rights Division U.S. Department of Justice, "A Guide to Disability Rights Laws," U.S. Department of Justice, http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm.

not.[21] While many people find ways to use public bathrooms, no matter their experience of social oppression, the ideas of deviance that ugly laws first promoted remain with us today in various guises. The ugly laws were ultimately “part of the story of segregation and of profiling in the United States, part of the body of laws that specified who could be where, who would be isolated and excluded, who had to be watched, *whose comfort mattered*.”[22] The Restroom Access Act pushes against the isolation and exclusion felt by many people with disabilities by forcing bathroom access in public by forcing some consideration of comfort for people with IBS. This is not a perfect solution, but it represents an instance of thinking about who might matter when it comes to bathroom access.

Ugly laws emerged from a turn-of-the-century desire to control public space, codifying what was “disgusting” in order to be able to remove the perceived aberrance from the public sphere. This visceral word “links the unsightly beggar implicitly to other core triggers of disgust: excrement, corpses, incontinence, everything that evokes organic matter falling.”[23] The “unslightly beggar” was at the core of ugly laws. Schweik argues that the ugly laws connected people who were considered unsightly – people with visible disabilities and people living in poverty, and specifically people of color who fell into either of those categories – to physical excrement we expel from our bodies. Public bathrooms, and bathrooms in general, arose out of a want and need to control where that excrement goes. It should be hidden from public view, it should not be seen or heard, because it upsets social order and public health. While I am, of course, not arguing that people are the same as excrement, it is important to note the ways that

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[21] Rachel Nail, "The Restroom Access Act: A Major Victory for People with Crohn’s," Healthline Media, http://www.healthline.com/health/crohns-disease/restroom-legislation#Support4.
[22] Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. 184. My emphasis.
[23] Ibid. 94.

both people and shit have been classified into the same category through architecture, legislation, and societal feelings – acts of elimination are connected.[24] Going to the bathroom is "gross" and something we cannot tolerate having on display, much in the way that both disability and poverty evoke feelings of disgust and unseemliness. At the intersection of this law were a convergence of ideas about class respectability, compulsory ablebodymindedness, and the intelligibility of who could access comfort in public, which was also reflected in cross-dressing laws.

Cross-dressing Laws

Cross-dressing laws reached their apex in the years 1848-1900, although laws continued to be passed and enforced after 1900.[25] According to Sexuality Studies scholar Clare Sears, these laws were "a central component of urban life from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century," encompassing a variety of behaviors including women and men wearing clothes that did not "belong" to their gender, dressing indecently, and wearing disguises.[26] One such law in San Francisco stated:

> If any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress, or shall make any indecent exposure of his or her person, or be guilty of any lewd or indecent act or behavior, or shall exhibit or perform any indecent, immoral or lewd play, or other representation, he should be guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction, shall pay a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars.[27]

Similar laws were enacted at the local and city level elsewhere, including New York**,** Bloomington, and Chicago.[28] Clare Sears argues that cross-dressing laws were bound up with

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[24] See my discussion of this in the introduction from: Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

[25] Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). 3.

[26] Ibid.

[27] San Francisco, *Revised Orders of the City and County of San Francisco: Comprised in Order No. 553, Approved October 6, 1863* (Order of the Board of Supervisors, 1863); ibid.

[28] OutHistory, "Cross-Dressing and the Law," OutHistory.org, http://www.outhistory.org/wiki/Cross-Dressing_and_the_Law; ibid.

other legislation – such as the Chinese Exclusion law of 1882 – that sought to control immigration, race, and gender politics in a struggle to reify white masculine dominance within the changing landscape of post Civil War America.[29] She notes that non-normative bodies were policed as part of managing the population writ large:

> These local orders constituted a body of law that targeted the atypical human body as a potential public nuisance, and they appeared in the municipal codebook alongside laws that regulated sewage, slaughterhouses, and the keeping of hogs. However, while these nineteenth-century laws differed significantly from each other in their object of concern, their mechanisms of control were very similar, seeking to manage public nuisances—animal, object, or human body—through regulating city space.[30]

Increasing urbanization required laws to manage the population that would keep order in densely inhabited areas and establish state power, which is a hallmark of the Progressive Era. Cross-dressing, or acting as a different gender more generally, was categorized as a medical condition that involved strange behavior, which needed to be addressed. As such, cross-dressing became a pathology, requiring management through policy that was yet another mechanism in the web of power over bodies. It was codified in order to be a foothold for disciplinary power to police individual bodies. While it is no longer against the law to wear clothes that are not assigned to your sex assigned at birth, it is still widely considered a problem that is contended with on local levels and becomes a significant issue when talking about bathroom access.

Cross-dressing laws elicited similar kinds of rhetoric at work in anti-trans bathroom bills that appeared at the city and state levels in the mid-2010s. These bills demonize trans women specifically, as was evident in the repeal of the equal rights ordinance in Houston, which was

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[29] Clare Sears, "All That Glitters: Trans-Ing California's Gold Rush Migrations," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008). 383.
[30] "Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 8 (2008): 174; ibid.

pushed through in 2016 with cries of “no men in women’s bathrooms.”[31] This sentiment was followed up with the assertion that “if men can dress as women, they can enter women’s bathrooms,” stoking fears of assault on privacy and bodily safety. This tactic is a distraction from recognizing the existence, agency, and humanity of trans people and is the result of anxieties about changing cultural norms around gender, with more and more LGBT people represented in popular media and more widespread protections of both sexual orientation and gender identity. Proponents of anti-trans bathroom legislation in Texas, for example, argue that safeguards against discrimination for LGBT people create sexual orientation and gender identity as “two new protected classes.”[32] Clare Sears makes a similar case in her book *Arresting Dress*, arguing that cross-dressing laws were born of cultural tension about the changing social landscape in the Progressive Era. She notes that “reaching beyond its surface concern with the types of clothing that ‘belonged’ to a particular sex, cross-dressing laws primarily dictated the types of bodies that ‘belonged’ in public city space and the types of bodies that ‘belonged in the categories of man and woman.”[33] In a startling repetition of history, it is evident that bathrooms are a place we can locate social anxieties about changing social norms around gender and sex.

Much like the ugly laws, cross-dressing laws worked on the axis of comfort as a norm in public spaces. Certain bodies were acceptable to look at and to be seen, while others were considered unsightly and unfit for public space. Although our current norms related to bodies that may be considered grotesque are more flexible and changeable, ideals that led to the emergence of these two laws around the same period of time are evidence of the discursive

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[31] Patrick Svitek, "Bathroom Battle Begins Taking Hold in Texas," *The Texas Tribune*, April 27 2016.
[32] "About Us - Campaign for Houston," https://www.campaignforhouston.com/about.
[33] Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. 139.

underpinnings of comfort and respectability that are still at work with the treatment of transgender children in schools, the current battles over gender-neutral and trans-inclusive bathrooms, the accessibility (or not) of bathrooms for people with various disabilities, and the daily conflicts businesses have with homeless individuals using public bathrooms.

The Social Hygiene Movement and Health Discourses

The Social Hygiene Movement (SHM) spanned the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and was a product of Progressive Era reformers' desire to understand and control sexuality, gender, race, and disability. Historian Christina Simmons argues that the SHM marked the professionalization of the earlier social purity movement, which was concerned with controlling sexuality by confining it to specific, reproductive purposes.[34] The SHM was heavily influenced by eugenics, which was popular science during the Progressive Era, making whiteness, white men specifically, the "pure" standard by which to judge people of color and white women.[35] I am highlighting the SHM because studying this movement allows us to zoom in on a period of time and illuminate the historical influences of the norms we inhabit related to public bathrooms, gender, race, and disability. The SHM is significant for this study because it was a movement concerned with, among other things, bathrooms. Looking at what the SHM had to say about bathrooms helps us understand why issues of comfort, hygiene, and safety are still evoked in current popular discourses regarding who is allowed in which bathroom.

In the early 1900s, when the SHM was in full swing, bathrooms emerged as a space to pay attention to. In "Sex, Social Hygiene, and the State," Kristine Luker traces the discourse around prostitution, the rise of the SHM, and the resultant criminalization of women's

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[34] Christina Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (1993). 53.

[35] Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*.

sexuality.[36] This criminalization of sexuality resulted from the overlapping interests of and loose alliance between the purity movement, who were trying to eradicate prostitution, and the developing field of public health, who were trying to get rid of venereal disease.[37] The SHM became important because it helped create "a vast new array of social instututions ('state-building' as it came to be known) to regulate sexuality."[38] The movement achieved this through empowering the state and its institutions to "define appropriate and inappropriate forms of sexuality rather than procreation, and to enforce such boundaries through the power of law."[39] Social hygienists set up special courts to try women with prostition, but also put considerable efforts into the prevention of what they termed "promiscuous sexual intercourse."[40] This prevention was seen as important because of a perceived need to protect women from potential future social ruin. The prevention strategy also later included concern for teaching men, especially men in the miltary, about preventing venereal disease.[41]

In fact, the Social Hygiene Association, one of the more influential SHM organizations, stated that one of their most important goals was to "devise and advocate effective police procedure and effective legislation with regard to vice."[42] Influencing policy and moral standing through controlling space was an important tenet of the movement. In light of this goal, bathrooms were a space to investigate, educate about, and control. There are many references to bathrooms in the literature of the SHM. In the "Notes from the War Department Commission on

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[36] Kristin Luker, "Sex, Social Hygiene, and the State: The Double-Edged Sword of Social Reform," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 5 (1998). 625.
[37] Ibid. 613.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid. 625.
[40] Ibid. 615.
[41] Ibid.
[42] "Social Hygiene," in *Journal of Social Hygiene*, ed. Inc. The American Social Hygiene Association (New York, NY: The Waverly Press, 1914). 3.

Training Camp Activities" from a January 1919 bulletin of the Social Hygiene Movement, the need to guard against men bringing sex workers into bathrooms is emphasized. The bulletin urges readers to place signs in bathroom stalls to warn people of the dangers of prostitution, listing this as an important step in curbing venereal disease and promoting general cleanliness.[43] In February 1919, a SHM newsletter advocated ensuring women's toilets in urban areas had the right accoutrements in order that they exhibited a "definite refining influence."[44] "Refining influence" here relates to a major goal of the SHM: education regarding proper public comportment. Much of the concern with white women's sexuality was related to the desire to keep "unchaste" women from using public bathrooms for sex work. Reformers wanted to ensure women of "questionable morals" – meaning any white women who were involved in sex work and any women of color, especially black women – were kept spatially separate from "respectable" women.

In order to protect children, SHM proponents took an interest in education and in keeping children out of spaces that could be "diseased." Protecting children was an important goal of the SHM, children were to be shielded from improper morality and taught how to act correctly. A September 1920 newsletter contained a discussion of the widely held belief that toilet seats could transmit syphillis and gonnorhea. While the newsletter argued that there was not a correlation in most cases, they suggested installing "santitary toilets"[45] in case it could aid in "the protection of

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[43] American Social Health Association, *Social Hygiene Bulletin*, vol. 6-9 (1919). ix.

[44] Ibid. xvi.

[45] While the newsletter itself is not clear on what a "sanitary toilet" is, my research indicates that this refers to the actual commode itself. Barbara Penner suggests that both designers and corporations had a vested interest in making the toilet *seem* suitable, even if it did not particularly make excretion better for the user. In Barbara Penner, "Designed-in Safety," *Places Journal* (2013), https://placesjournal.org/article/designed-in-safety/

our school children."[46] The protection and purity of white children was also a concern in the social purity movement, the predecessor of the SHM.[47] R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes argue that interest in white children was part of the larger white social ambivalence about changing urban landscapes. As a result, the SHM held an emphasis on educating children about proper social behavior in order to control the spread of both morality and bodily cleanliness. For example, in a 1914 Social Hygiene Manual, there are chapters detailing the role that parents should play in social hygiene, making it clear that parents need to be active educators for their children in order to help shape a more hygienic society. One expert said that parents should "keep [children] from talking about their genitals or telling stories about them" in order to act with good manners; this would save them from great embarassment as these "unclean stories" that should be kept to oneself.[48] Terry Kogan argues that "this [Victorian] interest in privacy was heightened with respect to issues surrounding bodily functions, and concerns over such functions became deeply intertwined with social morality," tying together modesty and cleanliness with being a "good and moral" person.[49]

Feminist historian Eileen Boris details how workplace bathrooms became a site of struggle in the first half of the twentieth century because white women, especially, refused to share bathrooms with black women out of a fear of uncleanliness or lack of hygiene. Boris points to widespread beliefs that black populations were more prone to syphilis (historical records show equal rates of syphilis among white and black populations) and that a subsequent fear of

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[46] Association, *Social Hygiene Bulletin*, 6-9. 215.
[47] R Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, "Producing the Prurient through the Pedagogy of Purity: Childhood Sexuality and the Social Purity Movement," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20, no. 4 (2007).
[48] "Social Hygiene." 437.
[49] Terry S Kogan, "Sex-Separation in Public Restrooms: Law, Architecture, and Gender," *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 14 (2007). 47.

contamination led to white resistance such as labor walkouts.[50] At the heart of this refusal, Boris posits, were

> racialized understandings of manhood and womanhood—of the black male rapist, the pure white female, and the uncleanly black woman—[and these cultural understandings] provided an arena for the wartime debate over fair employment, one connected to larger structures of power and authority.[51]

Fear of disease from sharing bathrooms with "unclean" people was an important cornerstone of the SHM, and we can see some of the legacies of social hygiene in these battles over bathroom space. Any shared toilet facilities, Boris argues, "starkly symbolized social equality," which is what made them so powerful.[52] Historian Tanya Hart argues that while scientific beliefs about germ theory challenged racialized understandings of disease, cultural beliefs still existed that strongly linked non-whiteness with syphilis: "though germ theory explained the randomness of disease, older prejudices and beliefs in the immutable racially gendered and classed foundations of health and disease remained and frequently resurfaced."[53] Although Hart notes that Progressive Era reformers were working with both environmental understandings of disease alongside racialized ones. Holding both of these beliefs in the cultural milieu of the Progressive Era helps explain how the SHM, racialized labor walkouts over toilets, and what some might call "progressive" social change were happening at the same time.

These newsletters demonstrate that health was a dual concern in the public toilet: requiring proper bathrooms to be both hygienic and morally pure. As cultural studies scholar

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[50] Eileen Boris, ""You Wouldn't Want One Of'em Dancing with Your Wife": Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War Ii," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998). 94.
[51] Ibid. 79.
[52] Ibid. 92.
[53] Tanya Hart, "Constructing Syphilis and Black Motherhood: Maternal Health Care for Women of African Descent in New York's Columbus Hill, 1915-30," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 1, no. 1 (2013). 35.

Gay Hawkins argues, "sanitation culturally organized the limits and meanings of the 'natural.'"[54] Sanitation, both morally and materially, helps to solidify what is constructed as 'normal' and what possible futures there may be. These cultural circulations of what "sanitary" signifies are relevant when considering how and for whom public bathrooms are constructed. The insights from the SHM newsletters help us understand how public bathrooms are not merely for "natural" processes, but rather are steeped in a desire to identify which bodies belong in what spaces, to control those bodies, and to dictate how those bodies interact with the toilet space.

The Specificity of Bathrooms

It is impossible to understand how comfort operates in a contemporary American context without going to the bathroom. Bathrooms are where we can locate central sites of struggle. "Comfort stations," having first appeared in the Progressive Era, are intertwined with constructions of comfort and citizenship across class, disability, race, gender, and sexuality. Class stratification and divisions are legible through public anxieties about cross-class mixing within the bathroom space and homeless people accessing public bathrooms as their main toilet spaces. Disability and physical accessibility are a part of the unequal allocation of bathrooms, comfort, and citizenship, due to both the intentional barring of people with disabilities in public life and the continual lack of attention to accessibility even when mandated by law. Gendered concerns over violence, privacy, and morality are part of the origin of sex-segregated bathrooms and the current anti-trans rallying call of "no men in women's bathrooms." And finally, the production of cultural anxiety about immoral sexuality, especially with relation to sex work, racial mixing, and deviant sexuality, helped inform pushes for cross-dressing laws. Racial segregation, powerful technologies of white supremacy, and fears of racial mixing saw

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[54] Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). 54.

expression in the bathroom – bathroom allocation was one of many spatial solutions to these intertwined issues.

The implementation of public bathrooms in the United States emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century when sewer systems, water distribution through pipes, and the construction of drains were technologically possible and became more widespread.[55] As I discussed in the previous chapter, one of the common names for public bathrooms during the late 1800s and early 1900s was "comfort station," signaling and designating the intent and design of these spaces. "Comfort stations" were places to take respite from the hustle and bustle of public life (much like bathrooms are now). This comfort, of course, was not an egalitarian vision. These bathrooms were most often only for men, at least in urban areas, and specifically for white men who could afford a small fee to enter. There is a dearth of published information about this gendered formation of public bathrooms on an American national level because toilet facilities varied from state to state – timings of when bathrooms emerged, architectural decisions, and location of facilities.[56] What is common across states, however, is that women were not allowed to use these facilities and most public bathrooms were racially segregated.

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[55] The US Department of Labor issued national guidance in 1910 about sex-segregated bathrooms saying that sex-segregated toilet facilities must be provided in all places of employment as a "sanitation standard." In John B. Miles, "Interpretation of 29 Cfr 1910.141(C)(1)(I): Toilet Facilities," United States Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, https://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=interpretations&p_id=22932.

[56] Much of the information that exists about the history of public toilets covers the United Kingdom and Australia. However this is still useful because, as these authors like Clara Greed, Barbara Penner, Olga Gershenson, and Andrew Brown-May argue, Victorian values heavily influenced the ways public bathrooms were constructed in the US. See: Clara Greed, *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets* (Oxford: Architectural Press, Elsevier Publications, 2003).; Gershenson and Penner, "Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences."; Andrew Brown-May and Peg Fraser, "Gender, Respectability, and Public Convenience in Melbourne, Australia, 1859-1902," ibid., ed. Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner.

White Bathroom Design

In terms of bathroom design, whiteness and it synonymous meaning of cleanliness pervade the construction of the bathroom space – in the tiles, the sinks, and the toilets themselves. Feminist Sociologist Shelia Cavanaugh argues that "whiteness – as a colour and a racialized aesthetic denoting purity, hygiene, and public sanitation – enables the glass in the hanging mirror to refract. White backdrops function to stage gender."[57] As such, the whiteness of the bathroom, in both its racialized history and its material construction, make toilets a place where racialized understandings of gender is quite literally built into the walls. Anne McClintock traces the synonymization of whiteness and cleanliness back to European empire building and imperialism. She argues that "commodity racism" was clear in the nineteenth century, as soap became synonymous with power, whiteness, and imperialism: soap had the power to civilize and we can see the whiteness of bathrooms in this same vein.[58] White sinks, countertops, toilets, and floors, then, are part of centuries-old norms that construct whiteness as purity. Making bathrooms white enables a continuation of a "civilizing" and "sanitizing" mission. Barbara Penner also posits that the color of bathroom fixtures was meaningful and purposeful. She argues that during the late 1800s bathrooms were designed as ornate rooms, but as a cultural interest in hygiene developed bathroom design also shifted, leading to "bright white and almost clinical" bathrooms that were in service of "better exposing and eradicating dirt – and expressing a cultural commitment to doing so."[59] The legacy remains with us today: most toilets one sees

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[57] Cavanagh, *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination*. 86.

[58] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995). 207-208.

[59] Barbara Penner, "We Shall Deal Here with Humble Things," *Places Journal* (2012), https://placesjournal.org/article/we-shall-deal-here-with-humble-things/.

today are white and many bathrooms in public spaces are made up of at least some white tile in this vein.

Sex-segregated Bathroom Issues

By and large, women-only bathrooms were not created until shared toilet facilities became an issue in workplaces in the 1880s: “the first laws mandating sex-separation of workplace toilet facilities at the end of the nineteenth century were rooted in the ‘separate spheres’ ideology of the early century, an ideology that considered a woman’s proper place to be in the home.”[60] Starting in the early 1900s, there were rest rooms in rural towns, which mimicked home environments for women and often contained toilets.[61] These rest rooms were places for respectable women to have a sanctuary as they moved around public space.

The passage of laws related to women-only public bathrooms was important because it led to the construction of facilities that women could use when out of the home.[62] The US was dealing with the aftermath and rapid change brought on by the industrial revolution of the mid-1800s and 1880 began a period of time when more white women both had access to higher education and were joining the workforce.[63] To put this in context, historians Dorothy and Carl Schneider report that by 1900 one in five women over the age of ten were counted as workers by the census, by 1920 that figure grew to one in four women.[64] The racial disparity is important to

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[60] The first law was in Massachusetts in 1887. See: Kogan, "Sex-Separation in Public Restrooms: Law, Architecture, and Gender." 5; 15.

[61] Katherine Merzbacher O'Bryan, "Gender, Politics, and Power: The Development of the Ladies Rest Room and Lounge in Rural America, 1900-1945," ed. Middle Tennessee State University (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing2013).

[62] Ibid.

[63] Margaret W. Rossiter, ""Women's Work" in Science, 1880-1910," *Isis* 71, no. 3 (1980).

[64] What is important to note is that not everything women did for labor counted as such – for example, farm work if your husband was a farmer, did not count as employment. Dorothy Schneider and Carl J Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994). 49.

note as this figure for women was comprised of sixteen percent white women (both "native born white" and "native born white with foreign born parents") and forty percent black women.[65] Legal scholar Terry Kogan argues that, "the legal requirement that public restrooms be sex-separated owes its origins to the early nineteenth century that advocated a cult of true womanhood, a vision of the pure, virtuous woman protected within the walls of her domestic haven."[66] Kogan's unmarked rendering of woman in his article is white, but this makes an important point – white women were the women whose comfort *could* be imagined in public space (when they left the comfort of home) and the ones who needed to be protected from the vices of men's bathrooms. Feminist historians have worked to challenge the "separate spheres" ideology as it discounts working-class white women and all women of color.[67] Public bathroom restriction at the turn of the century was not just about the "protection" of white women when they were outside of the home, but generally helped to define who was welcome to access public space.

Feminists have argued that bathroom gendered segregation was a tool to keep women from easily moving around a city.[68] Judith Plaskow noted that the lack of women's bathrooms in public space had everything to do with restricting women's movements around space and establishing which bodies were privileged and accounted for in that space:

> Sometimes the absence of women's lavatories so clearly reflects the exclusion of women from public power and public space […] there was no restroom for women senators near

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[65] The other 44% were immigrant women and women not counted as "native born white." Ibid. 118.

[66] Kogan, "Sex-Separation in Public Restrooms: Law, Architecture, and Gender." 5.

[67] For example, Linda K Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988).

[68] Brown-May and Fraser, "Gender, Respectability, and Public Convenience in Melbourne, Australia, 1859-1902," 82-83; ibid.
Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner, "Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences," ibid., ed. Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner, 6; ibid.

> the Senate floor, for example, until 1992, when the number of women in the Senate went from two to seven.[69]

It is also important to note that women in the House of Representatives did not get bathrooms near the chamber until 2011. Limiting the access to bathrooms of certain groups is an extension of social control.

Class and Privacy

Privacy, and the interwoven with public bathrooms, is a crucial issue in understanding how comfort and bathrooms come together. Barbara Penner argues that "it was the modern invention of privacy that caused a decisive break with earlier attitudes toward the body that had marked much of human history."[70] Victorian cultural interest in promulgating privacy was intertwined with ideals about decency – what it meant to be "decent" or socially appropriate was under scrutiny and construction during the Progressive Era. Cultural ideas of decency help to shape the move from communal privies to public bathrooms. The cultural push for decency while using the toilet helped led to individual stalls and rooms that we have today. Being "decent" today can mean several things: being clothed, being a nice or kind person, as well as connoting respectability.[71] "Decency" is a loaded word, but one inextricably connected to class (respectability), privacy, and in turn comfort. Privacy, a word linked to comfort, was according to Penner inextricably tied up with decency. This puts the term "comfort station" into a whole new light: if comfort is related to decency in the popular imagination in the Progressive Era, it is easy to see how comfort stations became synonymous with class. The respectability politics inherent in the push to keep one's bodily functions private assume access in public – for

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[69] Plaskow, "Embodiment, Elimination, and the Role of Toilets in Struggles for Social Justice." 52-53.
[70] Penner, "We Shall Deal Here with Humble Things".
[71] Oxford English Dictionary, *"Decent, Adj."* (Oxford University Press).

example, being able to afford the cost associated with "customer bathrooms" or being able to find a wheelchair accessible toilet stall.

Class was an important factor in who was and was not allowed in a pubic bathroom. Many of the first public restrooms had a charge associated with using them in order to keep homeless and working-class people from using the same public bathrooms as middle-class people.[72] Cost was also a morally driven proposition: Gershenson and Penner argue that early public bathrooms in 1905 London charged a penny for public bathroom use in order to keep "promiscuous" women from using the same bathroom and negatively influencing those ladies shopping at the market (and able to afford the fee).[73] In fact, journalist Therese Oneill argues that women's bathrooms became a bigger issue in the early twentieth century because of the growing popularity of shopping: "to attract the female money-spender, private businesses and even whole cities began building comfortable, secure areas where a woman could 'retire.'"[74] In her book, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, Susan Porter Benson argues that the development of the modern department store brought more middle- and upper-middle-class white women into public and also provided jobs for lower- to middle-class white women on shop floors, interacting directly with the public.[75]

The widespread creation of public bathrooms was a result of the confluence of various processes: "private, sex-segregated lavatories were a modern and Western European invention, bound up with urbanization, the rise of sanitary reform, the privatization of the bodily functions,

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[72] Gershenson and Penner, "Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences," 10; ibid.
[73] Ibid. 6.
[74] Therese Oneill, "A Brief History of the Ladies' Bathroom," *The Week*2016.
[75] Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, vol. 253 (University of Illinois Press, 1987). 20-23.

and the gendered ideology of separate spheres."[76] As Gershenson and Penner argue in "The Private Life of Public Conveniences," the idea of public bathrooms was part of larger processes related to establishing what public respectability meant in terms of which bodies were welcomed in public space. The Progressive Era was full of social change: more women in the work force and women working for the right to vote, union movements, the continuing movement of black populations from southern states to northern ones, increasing and widespread urbanization and industrialization, and the proliferation of legislation and social movements to control this rapid change. Strides towards rights for some (voting rights for women, for example) were accompanied by voracious attempts to control changing cultural norms around different bodies and public access. However, it is not always the body at stake; political struggle was also mapped onto the body in strategic ways. Historian Daniel Eli Burnstein argues that "Progressive Era reformers emphasized the positive attitudes of cleanliness and the belief that filthy environments undermined individual and social order."[77] Social reformers were interested in social change that was not always about the individual body, but about the shape of society and the social body.

Comfort Stations in Public

The shifting, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of comfort in public during the Progressive Era created opportunities for reformers to use both legislation and social movements to work as a battleground for cultural concerns. By focusing on Progressive Era phenomenon to analyze the bathroom, I argue that understanding the spatial solutions during this time – of gendered, sexed, classed, abled and racialized panic and action – enables us to trace how such

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[76] Gershenson and Penner, "Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences," 5; ibid.

[77] Daniel Eli Burnstein, *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York City* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006). 147.

issues still circulate in current debates. Bathroom politics are still of consequence today and access has always been a theme since the very conception and implementation of public toilets.

We can trace arguments and contestations about trans-inclusive bathrooms and the access (or lack thereof) for people with a variety of visible and invisible disabilities through the history of public bathrooms. What I tried to show in this chapter is how inequality was built into the walls of public bathrooms. People have been barred access to public bathrooms for various reasons and through various mechanisms – ugly laws or cross-dressing laws, or cultural movements that are tied to public health such as the Social Hygiene Movement. Today, this obstruction continues through such as bathroom bills directed at trans people. Overall, I have sought to show that the mechanisms of nationalism, cissexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and racism work in concert, with some issues more easily identifiable at different times.

We should look more closely at the "comfort station" as it operates both blatantly and in the ambient background of bodily and spatial politics. Elimination is a goal of bathrooms in a strictly individual sense, whether to get rid of bodily excrement or to relieve oneself of social pressures and take refuge for a moment alone or a moment of privacy. However, having any access to that space is a collective and political affair with implications extending far beyond the individual and, indeed, the bathroom. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the intersecting matters of gender, disability, race, class, and sexuality that became so salient in the Progressive Era have been a significant part of the bathroom battlegrounds of the 2010s. These battles over who can access public bathrooms tell us a great deal about which bodies have the cultural capital and status to feel and access comfortable in public.

Chapter 2
Going to the Bathroom in Different Bodies

"bathrooms for me are part of a disability justice issue […] the point is to have universal access" – billie[1]

"codes of cultural intelligibility authorize the biopolitical practice of gender policing, thereby allowing anxious individuals to punish those who trouble the stability of sexual and gender categories" – Issac West[2]

In 2016, I interviewed RaeRae, a disabled trans activist in Seattle, WA. We met in a West Seattle coffee shop to do our oral history interview. RaeRae expressed to me several of the complex layers to public bathroom access in this interview:

> So being trans and disabled makes using bathrooms very difficult. Obviously I prefer gender neutral, accessible bathrooms, that's not always the case. At this point in time I'm read as female, so I don't feel physically unsafe using the women's bathroom, although emotionally I don't feel that's where I should be. But you know if it's a queer club or event, I'm fine using any bathroom. But I hate having to like go and stand outside the doors and figure out which one to go in. And obviously being disabled there's—I used the disability stall even before I was a cane user and occasionally use a chair because I had really bad anxiety and claustrophobia. And I have really bad IBS, so I just need like my own space. And now that I have multiple chemical sensitivities, I—a lot of the bathrooms have air fresheners, people put perfume on in there, they use scented soap, so there's like that extra layer of complication.[3]

Accessible bathrooms for RaeRae means more than one larger stall in a sex-segregated bathroom – accessibility needs to take into account cane users and wheelchair users, people with IBS desiring a separate space, a more secluded space for anxiety, and the added time it takes to assess the options and weigh the risks in order to "figure out which one to go in." It also means scent-free soap and a general understanding of chemical exposure. They explained to me that there are bathrooms that do not feel "emotionally" right, which signals that using public bathrooms is not just a physical experience, but an affective one. They went on to outline the intense negotiation they face any time they need a bathroom in public.

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[1] billie, interview by Ashley Mog, July 6, 2015, Seattle, WA.

[2] Isaac West, *Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). 72.

[3] RaeRae, interview by Ashley Mog, February 3, 2016, Seattle, WA.

> I know there are people that have it worse off than me. So where their lives can literally be endangered by using the wrong bathroom, and that's something that my partner goes through. So yeah, it's really difficult to process and deal with. But you know, I just have to, I don't know. It's hard to go through such an emotional process just because you have to empty your bladder. You go through this long painful process in your head for something that's going to take ten seconds. And you have to do this every time you need to use the bathroom when you're in public.[4]

They describe a "long, painful process" – something that many people do not think about at all. Although RaeRae does not see their own bathroom experiences as treacherous as their partner's, finding public bathrooms is nevertheless revealed as an emotional process should not be readily ignored.

In this chapter I first discuss the history of bathrooms and how scholars from across the disciplines have conceived of and analyzed the racial and gendered politics surrounding bathrooms. I demonstrate the links between the bathroom, privacy, and comfort, and go on to discuss how bathroom surveillance functions to regulate gender, sexuality, and citizenship. I focus particularly on the rhetoric of "protecting children" as a way that has been used to justify policing bathrooms. I conclude with introducing personal insights regarding how these forces affect the people I interviewed. This chapter uses oral histories and media analysis to analyze how public bathrooms, privacy, and comfort are constructed through a complex web of social relations. Specifically, I find the entanglement of comfort and privacy to be a fertile ground from which to interrogate access. Overall, I seek to bring together scholarship on race, gender, sexuality, and disability to construct a more nuanced documentation of bathroom space.

An interdisciplinary engagement with this space is both a critically and materially productive way to analyze the bathroom – after all, as José Muñoz famously argued in *Cruising*

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[4] Ibid.

Utopia, “an escape via singularity is a ticket whose price most cannot afford.”[5] Humanities, social science, and public health scholars have weighed in on this issue from disciplinary positions. My own analysis of the bathroom in this chapter, as well as the analyses found in the oral histories I curate, do not conceptualize the bathroom as a singular space, but rather a place with overlapping and intersecting concerns. Ignoring the multiplicity of issues that are related to bathroom access would fail to capture the significance of the bathroom in quotidian life. As such, I contend that approaching the bathroom through highlighting the ways in which disability, gender, and race intersect and inform each other is the only way to approach the distinctiveness of this space.

Marginalization Politics

Bathrooms provide an important place to critically analyze social conditions, especially the social place of marginalized people. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, who can and cannot access public bathrooms in the US has been and still is contingent on various cultural norms and legislated policies. Many groups of people, both contemporarily and historically in the United States, find bathrooms to be inaccessible spaces: people of color, and in particular Black and Latinx people before desegregation in the 1960s; people with disabilities (both before and after ADA); people with MCS; transgender and gender non-conforming people; and parents or care-givers with babies that need to be changed. Bathrooms have an inescapable racially segregated history that informs the ways in which gender and disability segregation occurs today. People with physical disabilities are not always able to access the “accessible stall” even if it meets ADA standards because it is not big enough, the grab bars are not functional, or the space itself has physical barriers in the way. Thinking beyond the legislative and architectural barriers,

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[5] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). 96.

people with MCS often find bathrooms to be inaccessible spaces because of the chemicals and scents used to mask the smells that humans produce. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people face verbal, physical, and legal policing for just using the bathroom at all, as evidenced by the plethora of "bathroom bills" introduced in the 2010s in state legislatures. 2016 was an unprecedented year for these proposed laws after the first month and a half of the year saw double the number of proposals than occurred in the whole of 2015. Each of these intersections – race, gender, and disability – are not mutually exclusive, but intimately connected. This chapter demonstrates how conceptions of access can be expanded through an understanding body politics, and constructions of privacy, safety, and comfort.

In their article, "Calling All Restroom Revolutionaries!," Simone Chess, Alison Kafer, Jessi Quizar, and Mattie Udora Richardson argue that "everyone needs to use the bathroom, but only some of us have to enter into complicated political and architectural negotiations in order to use them […] the people who never think about where and how they can pee have a lot of control over how using restrooms feels for the rest of us."[6] As the title of their article makes clear, it is a call to action and, though written in 2004, it remains immediately relevant today. The "complicated negotiations" of a public bathroom space represent an intermingling of privacy, safety, and comfort concerns.

What can we learn about body politics and comfort from analyzing the bathroom? In this chapter, I argue that privacy is toted out in popular conversations about bathroom access and becomes a political code for comfort in many instances. Who gets to be private? How is privacy a part of comfort in public? Which bodies get comfortable privacy in public on a regular basis?

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[6] Simone Chess et al., "Calling All Restroom Revolutionaries!," in *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, ed. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2008). 216.

How is privacy built into public spaces? How is that privacy felt as comfort for some? Genitals, the obsession of many proposed bathroom laws, are often called "private parts" – whose parts get to be and remain "private," rather than a matter of public concern? Public bathrooms are not public in every sense, because many people do go there to have a private moment when out in the world. Some people are not allowed to or able to have a private moment in a public world. However, public bathrooms exist as respite and as resources for all of us when we are accessing public space that are not equally available or welcoming to everyone.

Public privacy

Intimate events like urination, defection, dealing with menstruation management, putting on makeup, fixing your hair, sex, taking a moment away from outside bustle, and many other things that may or may not be legally and socially authorized in most public space, occur in public bathroom space. Harvey Molotch notes in his chapter "Learning from the Loo" that talking about public bathrooms creates an uneasiness: "focusing on the public restroom […] opens up a tense domain" because it is a place where things we hold close to our own bodies happen, things that might be thought of as private.[7] Much of how we operate in the bathroom is about privacy – it is a place one goes for a private moment, to deal with private bodily functions, and to have private parts in states of undress.

In polite company, mentioning the bathroom is not supposed to be explicit. Sometimes just talking about the bathroom in unfamiliar company is uncomfortable. What makes a bathroom uncomfortable in general varies for different people, but part of the problem might be that "the toilet involves doing the private in public and under conditions only loosely under the

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[7] Molotch and Norén, *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing*. 1.

control of the actors involved."[8] Controlling urine, feces, vomit, and other bodily fluids is often one of the most important social rules and not just for public health. These events are deeply intimate, and in American culture, these are events to manage individually.

Going to the bathroom is often seen as a private act, even when in public. Private is the opposite of public, it is individual, restricted, and exclusive, yet privacy is a part of our publics. Public/private is an organizing dichotomy, yet is also not so easy to pin down. We have private property, private parts, private citizenship, private investigators, private practice. Private can also mean secret or concealed. It can refer to the business sector, which is not accountable to the same governmental regulation as the public sector. We speak about the privatization of social services, of prisons, of the university. When we hold all of these definitions together, it is easy to understand the how privacy discourse becomes integral to bathroom rhetoric. Karla Holloway reminds us that "privacy is a privilege that legal and medical interest in identity obscures"[9] and if privacy is a "privilege" rather than a right, who gets to be private in the bathroom? Which groups are brought under a conception of protected privacy? How does privacy intermingle and become conflated with comfort and safety? For whom does privacy equal safety?

Historical Origins

Gender, race, and disability effects are often compared and identified as parallel lines of construction, especially when talking about the bathroom. Using simple parallels only serves to reinforce cultural logics of race being separate from disability and gender when they are in fact a complicated and inseparable set of identities and concepts. For example, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who famously argued that bathrooms are one of the fundamental ways we know gender,

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Karla FC Holloway, *Private Bodies, Public Texts: Race, Gender, and a Cultural Bioethics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). 20.

pulls from racialized notions of difference in explaining his concept of "urinary segregation."[10] Elizabeth Abel draws this distinction out and draws attention to the fact that the separation of two gendered bathroom doors have labels that go far beyond mere gender markers. In the English translation, Lacan's words for the two bathroom doors are "ladies" and "gentlemen," two terms that signal both a specific class status and whiteness.[11] As such, it is clear that even the words we use to label the doors are value-laden, with gender, class, and race inextricably linked.

While many activists and academics have documented some of the overlapping concerns of bathrooms in terms of gender and disability, a more thorough racial analysis is required in order to more fully document the power bathrooms have in shaping bodies. This work involves tracing some of the histories of public bathrooms: their emergence, the policies governing them, and the cultural imaginary surrounding them. For example, Lee Edelman's article in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, the Epistemology of the Water Closet," examines how bathrooms became a place of gay scaremongering during the 1950s and 60s for men. Edelman shows how the nationalist concerns of Cold War discourse, alongside an increasing demand for domestic privacy, operated through reference to race by making the white middle-class family the imagined "all American family" that could attain the American dream. This Cold War rhetoric also helped solidify the bathroom as a site of fear of homosexuality alongside issues of nation and race.[12] The racial segregation of spaces, such as bathrooms, were

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[10] Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud " in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

[11] Elizabeth Abel, "Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow's Racial Symbolic," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (1999). 438.

[12] Lee Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, the Epistemology of the Water Closet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993). 560.

undeniably a part of a larger system of gender differentiation and cultural order.[13] Sherrie Tucker details some of the "commode-on-the-road" stories her narrators shared in *Swing Shift: "All Girl" Bands of the 1940s*. She found that both the black and white women she talked with described the social and political consequences for using differently raced bathrooms. Tucker argues that while the "criminalization of women varied according to race," any transgression of the raced boundary of the toilet was a violation of a larger system that encapsulated more than bathrooms – a hierarchical racial order mixed with gendered expectation.[14] The racial logics may now operate in different ways, with overt racial segregation no longer legally allowed, but racial logics continue to function in our present moment.

Thinking beyond the historical context of the toilet's racist architectural order, racism weaves in and out of what kind of discourses are contained within bathrooms through what is written there and who is actively maintaining the space. There are two ways this manifests: firstly, through racist graffiti on the walls of bathrooms, and two, through the racial division of labor in terms of who cleans public bathrooms and, when present, who is an attendant in public bathrooms. Writing on the stalls of a toilet is not unfamiliar to most of us – I wager that a lot of people are familiar with seeing racist epithets scribbled in the bathroom. Many of us can recall a time we saw such things written in public bathrooms. A cursory search on news stories about race in the bathroom shows that this kind of issue is still being reported on in news

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[13] Robert R Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past," *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (2005).; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[14] Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). 140.

outlets, especially when it occurs in a school.[15] Charles Lawrence's study "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus" relates to this same issue, with many of his interlocutors expecting to see racist language on bathroom walls.[16] Shelia Cavanagh found a similar phenomenon in her interviews with LGBTI people about bathrooms – much of the graffiti found in bathrooms was sexual in nature, and it was almost always racist.[17] Even if in a casual manner through graffiti on the wall, race is present in bathrooms.

"Show Me Your Papers": Policing Bathrooms

Most of what we hear in the popular media about the toilet in the 2010s pertains to transgender people's access to the bathroom. In the beginning of 2017, several US states are considering or have been considering laws to determine who can and cannot enter which bathroom. Access to the bathroom for trans people is a major political issue in which many groups have a stake. Religious lobbying groups, Democrats and Republicans, LGBTQ rights organizations, racial justice organizations, and domestic and sexual violence advocacy agencies are all influencing these debates. Some of these bills have passed, and some have not. However, regardless of the outcome, the proposal of these bills sends an important message about who can be included, welcomed, and brought into a privileged domain to use public bathrooms in the first place.

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[15] "Racist Graffiti Found Scrawled in Connecticut College Bathrooms," NBC Connecticut, http://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/Racist-Grafitti-Found-Scrawled-in-Connecticut-College-Bathrooms-297939841.html.

[16] Charles R Lawrence, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus," *Duke Law Journal* 1990, no. 3 (1990).

[17] Cavanagh, *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination*. 189.

The American Civil Liberties Union describes proposed bathroom bills as, “show your papers to pee” laws.[18] Any mention of “papers” one has to show in order to access a space can be correlated with national level legal issues such as immigration and in gaining a disability designation in order to receive accommodations. All of these are instances in which one must show “papers” to get in or out of a space, or to receive equal and accessible treatment within a certain space. Any law requiring “papers” as legitimizing documents alludes to borders and to both racialized and disability-laden systems of classification. Here we might turn to scholars of the Jim Crow era, who argue that gender and race were co-constructed in these racialized laws, which themselves focused on ensuring white comfort and power. Historian Elizabeth Abel, for example, points to the intertwined nature of both race and gender in spatial classification:

> Jim Crow signs on bathroom doors and drinking fountains constitute a racial symbolic that stabilized itself by appropriating, and thereby inadvertently destabilizing, the structure of sexual difference.[19]

She argues that this was determined through a hierarchy that was designed to protect the purity of white women, especially those of the upper class who were considered the pinnacle of femininity. They “needed” to be protected from non-white people, who were coded as hyper-masculine. There are similarities to “showing papers” at work here – being forced to show some sort of pedigree, a racial belonging, was a requirement of spatial access in a segregated society, which is not something that is entirely in the past. Along these same lines, Disability Studies scholar Ellen Samuels discusses how there is a “fantasy of identification” at play in the desire to classify and fix meanings of gender, race, and disability. As I discussed in chapter 1, she argues that this fantasy is “predicated on an epistemology of visibility” wherein anyone whose

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[18] Sam Brodey and Julia Lurie, "Get Ready for the Conservative Assault on Where Transgender Americans Pee," Mother Jones, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/03/transgender-bathroom-discrimination-bills.
[19] Abel, "Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow's Racial Symbolic." 442.

difference is not readily apparent comes under a system of identification wherein an "authoritative gaze" becomes the only legitimate way to judge a person's body.[20] She calls this practice "biocertificative legibility," referring to the ways that a body is identified in race, gender, and/or disability through the means of some sort of biological imperative.[21] Samuels' discussion raises an important point for us: in a system that polices the ways bodies move in and out of space (anything from national borders to bathrooms), papers that identify your belonging in any imagined community are an essential tool of that policing.

In 2016, the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, more commonly referred to as HB2, was passed in North Carolina and is peppered with demands to "show papers." This law requires that in publicly funded places – such as government buildings, state universities, and public schools, which are singled out in the bill as explicitly required to follow the mandate – people must use the bathroom or locker room that matches their sex assigned at birth, specifically the sex on their birth certificate.[22] The use of "biological sex" in the bill warrants further attention. Biological sex is defined in HB2 as "the physical condition of being male or female, which is stated on a person's birth certificate."[23] An instance of Samuel's biocertificative legibility, "the physical condition" very blatantly refers to genitals – specifically, genitals that have been identified and classified by a doctor. Genitals are central to the fear mongering of this law.

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[20] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*. 17.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Michael Gordon, Mark S Price, and Katie Peralta, "Understanding Hb2: North Carolina's Newest Law Solidifies State's Role in Defining Discrimination," *Charlotte Observer* 2016.; "Session Law 2016-3 House Bill 2," ed. General Assembly of North Carolina (2016).
[23] "Session Law 2016-3 House Bill 2." 2.

Police in the state have said they do not understand how to enforce HB2 and, indeed, there are no specific guidelines in the law for enforcement.[24] Instead, this law creates borders, and reifies comfort zones, about who can go into which bathroom. The governor of North Carolina and his supporters framed the law as pivotal in ensuring the safety and privacy of women and children.[25] However, beyond politicizing public bathrooms the main purpose of the law seems to be to keep people from suing the state based on any kind of discrimination – race, gender, disability or otherwise. So while HB2 is broadly about cis-discomfort, with trans bodies and trans people, cis-discomfort is also a tool to mobilize voters on the right to broadly restrict civil litigation and civil rights in NC. UNC law professor Erika Wilson called LGBT issues a "Trojan horse:" HB2 does not allow ordinances, like local minimum wage laws, and invalidated standing non-discrimination ordinances in cities that had already passed them.[26] To me, the act of "showing papers" is so evident in this law because "showing papers" is about signifying belonging, keeping certain people out, and this defines who can access civil rights.

"Showing papers" also comes to the forefront in Sabo et. al's, article "Everyday violence, structural racism and mistreatment at the US-Mexico border." The authors conducted extensive interviews with Chicano/a US citizens and permanent residents at the Arizona border with Mexico, and found that bathrooms became a place of racial profiling and discretionary stops. They reported that more than half of their 299 interviewees had experienced or witnessed this kind of policing in public spaces like bathrooms. They reported participants describing

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[24] Samantha Michaels, "We Asked Cops How They Plan to Enforce North Carolina's Bathroom Law," Mother Jones, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/04/north-carolina-lgbt-bathrooms-hb2-enforcement.
[25] Chad Silber, "Mccrory Defends Controversial New Law," WFMY News 2, http://www.wfmynews2.com/news/politics/mccrory-defends-controversial-new-law/100658239.
[26] Nina Martin, "Why North Carolina's New Anti-Lgbt Law Is a Trojan Horse," ProPublica, https://www.propublica.org/article/why-north-carolinas-new-anti-lgbt-law-is-a-trojan-horse.

immigration officials waiting outside of public bathrooms for people they had profiled inside, only to search, question, and harass those people once they came out of the toilet.[27] The authors do not delve into why the bathroom is one of the public spaces of surveillance, however it is clear that bathrooms were important enough to mention for their interlocutors. This illustrates once again the extent to which bathrooms are not exempt from racial politics today, even though many would argue that the racist past of the bathroom remains in the past. Current politics are perpetuated and informed by the racist history of the public bathroom and what is evident in this story is that public bathrooms are a center of surveillance of bodies.

The Desire for Privacy

As I have emphasized in this dissertation, bathrooms are political, and are a place where privacy, safety, and comfort collide. These collisions become evident when we compare arguments made about prison bathrooms with popular arguments for bathroom bills. In her study of the Michigan Department of Correction's (MDOC) case about whether or not male prison guards should be allowed to work in the women's housing units in Michigan prisons, Jami Anderson argues for a more nuanced understanding of the societal anxiety that surrounds toilets. Anderson found that the MDOC argued that women have a "special sense of privacy in their genitals."[28] This "special sense" was not just about the women inmates, but was framed in terms of the "discomfort" felt by male guards who had to surveil women inmates showering, using the toilet, and dressing, and who are asked for menstrual pads by inmates. This law was supposed to

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[27] Samantha Sabo et al., "Everyday Violence, Structural Racism and Mistreatment at the U.S.–Mexico Border," *Social Science & Medicine* 109 (2014). 70.

[28] Jami Anderson, "Bodily Privacy, Toilets, and Sex Dsicrimination: The Problem of "Manhood" in a Women's Prison," in *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, ed. Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009). 90.

be primarily about the rampant sexual assault in prisons; however, the debate in the court became framed around comfort and where the lines of comfort lie.

By focusing on a masculinized discomfort with feminized bodies and bodily concerns, the MDOC was able to pass a law stating that only women guards could work in the housing unit in Michigan women's prisons – men were barred due to concerns of safety and comfort. Anderson argues that this only serves to undermine the real concerns of rampant sexual assault in prisons and frames privacy, comfort, and safety in terms of gendered stereotypes: "the court's reasoning […] rests on unjustifiable assumptions about sex and sexuality, in particular the notion of the untamable potency of maleness and necessary modesty of femaleness, and it prioritizes the validation of these assumptions."[29] Anderson raises an important point: something that was at first about the widespread problem of sexual assault, and about physical safety, became reformulated to satisfy normative masculine comfort. In a similar vein, Stacy argues that comfort and safety become conflated concepts:

> I think very often people say safety when they mean comfort. I feel like really really often when people are feeling uncomfortable, they'll say that they are unsafe or something feels unsafe to them. And that is so often used to shut down conversation and to not… to put a barrier up that can't, um, be engaged with any further and I think it's problematic. And there are truths about physical safety, right?[30]

Stacy works to parse out how comfort and safety are different, but this is challenging because of the ways concepts like safety and privacy are individual feelings and have social meaning. Comfort is part of a complex milieu that while about personal preference and feeling, infuses community and governmental understandings of how spaces can be used and which people are welcome.

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[29] Ibid. 97.
[30] Stacy, interview by Ashley Mog, July 15, 2015.

In early 2016, a group calling itself "Just Want Privacy" launched a campaign in Washington State to forward a ballot initiative, I-1515, that would repeal the WA Human Rights Commission's ruling that allowed transgender people to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity. I-1515 is just one example of the myriad "bathroom bills" being put before legislatures in the United States. Part of a conservative backlash against same-sex marriage increased visibility of trans people in the media, these bathroom bills are part of what Time magazine called the "transgender tipping point."[31] While there is much more awareness about trans people and the discrimination trans people face, there is also a battleground over trans people's access to public spaces. Bathrooms and locker rooms are the most contentious with nineteen states considering bathroom legislation 2016.[32] The increased visibility of trans people has led to higher rates of violence and deaths of trans people, especially trans people of color, which are inextricably connected to these bathroom bills.[33]

In the Just Want Privacy (JWP) talking points, much of the rhetoric conflates privacy, safety, and comfort in invoking an imagined predator that is a danger to vulnerable people – namely women and children, but *particular* women and children: those who are white, cisgender, and heterosexual. Just Want Privacy pulls on familiar lines of thinking – that sexual assault is a problem because of stranger predators – to deftly infuse contemporary fear over transgender people using the bathroom with historically situated racialized, gendered fears of a predator

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[31] Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time Magazine*, May 29 2014.
[32] Joellen Kralik, ""Bathroom Bill" Legislative Tracking," National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/-bathroom-bill-legislative-tracking635951130.aspx.
[33] National Center for Transgender Equality, "Harassment of Transgender People in Bathrooms and Effects of Avoiding Bathrooms: Preliminary Findings from the 2015 Us Transgender Survey July 2016," (2016).

(read: a black or brown man) harming the innocent (read: white women and children).[34] This is why it is so powerful: it is not just about gender, but also about race. This proposed bill plays upon the subtly ubiquitous stereotypes of the black or brown predator praying upon white women and children.[35]

"Protecting" the Children

In addition to discourses of privacy for women, children's bodies are a focus of many of the proponents of bathroom bills. JWP discusses children in this way:

> the Just Want Privacy Initiative does not require anyone to use the "wrong" bathroom. It simply gives businesses the freedom to decide for themselves what options best serve their customers, and *it protects children from premature exposure to opposite sex anatomy*. … Children are now prematurely exposed to opposite sex genitalia without the consent of their parents.[36]

This is a complex statement because we are not told which children are to be protected, but it is clear that not all children are going to be protected as this group's proposed law has strict regulations for schools (much like the North Carolina law) wherein trans children do not have the opportunity or right to use the bathroom they choose. In the above statement, privacy functions in various ways: as freedom, as protection of a presumed innocence, as a presumption of what children's genitals look like, as a conflation of gender feelings/identity/presentation with a binary understanding of sex as biology, as an implicit statement about keeping penises out of a

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[34] In *Safe Spaces: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Christina Hanhardt discusses how LGBT struggles for public safety have pivoted on shifting definitions of violence since the 1970s in an attempt to decouple deviance from gayness. The resulting political landscape, argues Hanhardt, is to leave intact race, class, and geography as markers of deviance (31). In Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[35] On the Just Want Privacy's website, you see pictures of little girls and young women juxtaposed against a dark, unknown male figure peering into bathroom stalls. I-1515 did not make the ballot, but JWP is trying again in 2017 with I-1552, seeking to repeal the Washington Human Rights Commission's ruling that people can choose bathroom and locker rooms based on gender expression and identity.

[36] "Just Want Privacy: Safety and Privacy for All," https://justwantprivacy.org/. Emphasis mine.

room for vaginas, and as a statement of parents as de facto owners of their children's bodies, sexuality, gender, and curiosity.

JWP poses the safety and privacy of children as necessarily opposed to "ideological debates about transgenderism."[37] What is implied here? Trans children and children with bodies that are deemed unacceptable are dangerous, corrupting forces that threaten the innocence of children. The project of making ideal citizens is also at stake in this conservative rhetoric. Judith Butler argues that "the figure of the child is one eroticized site in the reproduction of culture" through which heterosexuality is installed as the prerogative of culture that must be carried on.[38] Building on this, Alison Kafer argues that as the projection of normality starts in childhood, children are used to "buttress able-bodied/able-minded heteronormativity."[39] Because the child is both a figure to be protected and a figure that needs active producing, children play an important role in all of this bathroom discourse. In the American imagination, children are precious and in need of protection. Children, as an "eroticized site" of cultural reproduction, are a fertile ground from which to illicit passionate concern for any issue. If children are in danger, we care. It is, of course, not all children that are cared about – black and brown children, queer, trans, and intersex children, and disabled children are not part of this eroticized reproductive fantasy as it exists on a macro level.

The good and pure imagined children envisioned to be going to bathrooms and locker rooms are on their way to fulfilling a utopian dream to become upstanding citizens. More than this, the imagined child fits into a normative and unmarked category that must be defended and protected: "the always already white child is also always already healthy and nondisabled;

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Butler, *Undoing Gender*. 124.

[39] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 29.

disabled children are not part of this privileged imaginary except as the abject other."[40] JWP makes assumptions about an abstract predator, which pulls upon the gendered fear of trans bodies, racialized fear of non-white bodies, and the ablebodyminded fear of an "unstable and violent person."[41] The imagery of lack of privacy as an injury is an important one because it suggests a violent force against our very bodily integrity. JWP raises this same rhetoric from the Michigan Department of Corrections – that there is something fundamental about genitals. Genitals are dangerous, mysterious, and the very core of our privacy and comfort. The JWP group forces this point, as do many of the campaigns. In Houston, for example, the "no men in women's bathrooms" was so potent that it was widely thought of as being instrumental in getting the non-discrimination ordinance repealed.[42] Similar dynamics appeared in North Carolina's HB2, the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, which invoked the same discourses of "safety for women and children" from an imagined male predator.[43]

Fighting the "Bathroom Landscape"

Even before I knew how centrally the bathroom would figure in my overall dissertation, I always asked my interviewees about the bathroom: what were their personal experiences with public bathrooms, and how did these affect their activism? It may have begun as a hunch from my previous research on coalitional activism, but the importance of the bathroom soon became clear in the answers.

Themes regarding the politics of privacy, comfort, and safety were salient in my interlocutor's narrations of their own stories about public bathrooms. In retrospect, it is no

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[40] Ibid. 33.

[41] "Just Want Privacy: Safety and Privacy for All".

[42] Svitek, "Bathroom Battle Begins Taking Hold in Texas."

[43] Gordon, Price, and Peralta, "Understanding Hb2: North Carolina's Newest Law Solidifies State's Role in Defining Discrimination."

surprise that most of the people I interviewed had some connection to me in relationship to bathroom activism. In my undergraduate activism in the mid-2000s, I worked on issues related to bathroom access from an intersectional perspective, striving to include conceptions of access that related to both disability communities and LGBTQ communities. I gained some of the information I have because of my past commitment to bathroom issues.

I worked with a few of the people I quote below on bathroom activism. Emerson, a white, queer, transmasculine person, was someone I conspired with extensively during our undergraduate years. He continued when I left Seattle, advocating for more accessible bathrooms. Much of his narration of the bathroom activism he spoke about in our interview was deeply familiar to me. Marisa, a white cisgender queer femme, and Charity, a white disabled cisgender straight ally to queer and trans communities were also involved in this activism at UW. Charity, Marisa, and Emerson were my contemporaries and I am as much a part of their story as they are part of mine in this instance. Others, like RaeRae, a non-binary, genderqueer, white Jewish person and Monica, a white disabled cisgender queer femme were doing some of this activism after I left UW and continued the genealogy of work. Stacy, a disabled Chicana cisgender queer femme, and Dorian, a black, disabled, non-binary person, were not involved in these UW activist circles, but also have resonant stories of life experience and activism that illuminates these same themes of privacy, comfort, and safety that so saturates any discussion of the bathroom. The activists I work with in this chapter grapple with the constructions of comfort and discomfort in their everyday interactions with bathrooms.

Predatory fears

The feeling of being seen and targeted as the imagined predator, abundant in the analysis of JWP, greatly affects the trans and gender non-conforming people I interviewed. Emerson, a white transmasculine queer person, describes his bathroom experiences through his own socialization and feelings about social norms. He describes the ways in which he personally engages with bathrooms:

> And I was not very fearful of my safety, I was really making—I didn't want to make others uncomfortable in the bathroom with my presence. That is totally me on an interpersonal level. Politically, that's not who I am. Fuck you, use the bathroom that works for you, your safety is important, everyone's safety is important, but you using the bathroom is not a harm on somebody else. But for myself and a lot of other trans folks, you try your hardest to not let anyone know you're a trans person in the bathroom. And you'll—I know, still to this day because I have to use the stall for my bathroom instead of the urinal. I'm not one of those brave trans guys that will be willing to use a STP, or a stand to pee device. Because I always worry about, what if it's the one day you don't line everything up accurately, you can you know, make a mess for all involved. It's not fun.[44]

When he says "I'm not one of those brave trans guys," he is speaking about that push and pull feeling of in one instance feeling like it is important to push through the fear and be yourself, but at the same time feeling the danger that can accompany going to the bathroom which makes you think twice before acting. "You try to not let anyone know you're a trans person in the bathroom" because of the possibility of verbal, physical, or emotional violence. Emerson is not necessarily arguing for continual passing of trans people, but rather is speaking about passing as a survival tactic in the bathroom because of what could happen "one day." He expresses not wanting to make anyone else in the bathroom uncomfortable with his presence, revealing the invisible labor involved in this passing. He makes himself uncomfortable in order to shield others (presumably normative cisgendered people) from the difference of his body. Sara Ahmed says "discomfort is not simply a choice or decision […] but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or 'extend' their shape,"[45] which is evident in Emerson's account. His

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[44] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."

[45] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 152.

discomfort and his concern about the discomfort of others is not a choice per se, but rather an effect of the construction of space, gender norms, and the interaction between the two.

Dorian is a wheelchair user, and much of their experiences are inflected by the intersection of disability, gender, and race. Dorian describes how they know people perceive them:

> People do see a black male walking into a women's restroom, and yeah, that's going to be a fucking issue. And it is. People literally have grabbed my wheelchair and pulled me backwards, you know. But usually when you do that, and I go off on them, then they let me go...[46]

The reason Dorian says "it's going to be a fucking issue" if a black man is perceived to be going into the women's bathroom is because of the white supremacist history that inflects black men as predators, especially when white women are concerned. Underpinning much of the bathroom privacy, safety, and discomfort discourse is the historical legacy of the protection of white women. The violent encounters that many people describe of getting looks, comments, and physical threats to their presence in the bathroom happens to Dorian, but Dorian is also sometimes intercepted from going into a bathroom at all because of their embodiment. Karla Holloway reminds us that privacy is differentially distributed based on race, and Dorian's account reminds us that some people have never had private bodies or been afforded the private dignity that is valorized by opponents of trans bathroom access.[47] Dorian, as someone who told me they are "used to white people thinking they can just touch me" has the experience of being forcefully barred from the bathroom by people pulling their wheelchair back. This instance shows how race, gender, sexuality, and disability conjoin to make a messy bathroom experience for people who do not easily fit into bodily norms.

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[46] Dorian, interview by Ashley Mog, July 19, 2016, Tukwila, WA.
[47] Holloway, *Private Bodies, Public Texts: Race, Gender, and a Cultural Bioethics*.

Bladder leashes

When Emerson said "you can you know, make a mess for everyone involved" he was suggesting that the mess was more than just urine, but also a mess involving reactions of and interactions with other people. He refers to a bathroom code, which dictates that in the men's restroom one only uses the stalls if defecating, and otherwise you use the urinals. Stalls provide some privacy, some shield from the gender codes for the moment. However, stalls are not so easy to navigate because of this expected activity in the men's bathroom:

> But I use a stall and to this day I try not to be a loud pee-er, or how can I make myself sound like I'm peeing and standing to pee, but in the stall. Or just make it so I'm going number two all the time. Which is an uncomfortable thing, the amount that you—then you're, I don't want to drink as much water because I don't want to have to go to the bathroom as much. You know. And then there's in public male bathrooms, you know you always have to wait in line for the stall and those lines are always longer because [of] longer business typically being done in that area.[48]

The most striking comment to me is that Emerson sometimes does not drink as much water as he wants to because he wants to limit his exposure to dangerous and uncomfortable situations that often accompany public bathroom encounters. Even if most of the time nothing happens, this is not an unusual story, and this very real worry about a possible problem weighs heavily on bodies.

This inability to access public bathrooms because of not fitting into bathroom norms while moving through public space creates discomfort for people who must hold their bladders all day. Trans studies scholar Isaac West discusses this in terms of how some people are restrained by their "bladder leashes" – one can only go so far and so long in public without needing a bathroom.[49] This "bladder leash" prevents people from fully participating in public spaces. Our bladder leashes are often saturated with shame or stigma because there is a code for

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[48] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."

[49] West, *Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law*; ibid. 67.

the bathroom – when you can mention it, what you do in it, and how you interact with being in a stall versus being in the main part of the bathroom.

Dorian told me they have to “carry around a change of pants just because I don’t have much access to the bathroom.”[50] Because of Dorian’s disability, they need to use the bathroom more often than other people. As a result, Dorian must consistently ask questions about what the bathroom will be like anywhere they go before leaving the house, and based on the information then decides about whether to participate. This means that Dorian often will not be able to participate in some social situations.

> And because I can’t—I can’t hold my bladder like so, what my bladder can hold and my cath schedule is more often than most folks because of how sensitive my bladder is and because I developed autonomic dysreflexia, like I can’t go out unless I can use the bathroom. So I’m actually really limited by where I can go because of the bathroom. And by law you really don’t have to have an accessible bathroom and you don’t have to list that. You can say you’re accessible and not have an accessible bathroom. We’re this like, genderless, peeless, wasteless entity that like rolls around on wheels and never pisses and never shits and you know, has no function whatsoever. You know. The world’s just not set up for us. So you know, so I feel like I’m constantly like, ‘So what’s the bathroom like, what’s the bathroom like?’ When I visit somewhere or travel I pretty much expect not to have access the way I need in a bathroom. I mean people are lucky to have access the way they need in the bathroom in their own house.[51]

When Dorian needs to go somewhere, for example traveling to Berlin from Seattle for the world championships of para-athletics, they bring a change of clothes if a wheelchair accessible bathroom is not available and navigate emotionally exhausting situations, saying “I’m already fighting just to pee.”[52] Constantly fighting to pee in public spaces can mean it is not worth the emotional labor to be in those spaces. However, it is challenging to avoid public spaces at all costs, which puts people like Dorian in a horribly uncomfortable, tiring, and untenable situation. Dorian has to make difficult choices about peeing on themself or not going somewhere. With this

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[50] Dorian, "2nd Interview with the Author."
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

in mind, any semblance of the way the bathroom functions as "private" clearly breaks down if someone is barred from access in the first place.

Spatial barriers

One of the most salient issues for Dorian is just accessing a bathroom even when there is one labeled "accessible:"

> Being non-binary and stuff, at a time when people are really focused on that, I have so much issue with just using the bathroom as a wheelchair user. Even accessible stalls, my chair doesn't always fit all the way, or its kind of hard to transfer, or sometimes I just have to cath myself into the toilet, I can't really transfer off the toilet and close the door, or whatever it is…. […] I've seen huge bathrooms where you could fit like thirty people where you wash your hands and you can't get a wheelchair in the actual accessible stall? That's not an issue of space, it was an afterthought, that's what that is.[53]

Disability as an afterthought, even in the accessible stall is central here. The purported message of "we are accessible – look, we have an accessible bathroom!" works to shut down the concerns of people with disabilities who are the supposed users of those spaces. Many of my interviewees spoke about this issue of access as an afterthought. Charity, for example, spoke to me about the lack of availability of the accessible stall:

> One time I was at the Folklife Festival with Sarah and so we head toward the bathroom in the center house, and there's a line coming out and the line is like really long, like fifty odd people long. Super long. And so I of course, the way my body works I don't get a lot of heads up on having to use the restroom. My bladder is kind of like, 'hey come on Char let's go now.' And I'm like okay okay. So one time we went in and I was like I saw the line and I said to Sarah I don't know what to do, I really have to go. And she's like, 'I bet not everybody's using the disability stall.' So we go in there and somebody in a wheelchair was using it, some were waiting, and when that lady came out we went in. And as I was going in I heard this girl say, 'Wait in line like everybody else.' And I was like going into the stall, she said that. But Sarah said something striking back, I don't remember what it was. But I was like, Way to go Sarah. Because like, I was just like so, I can't believe someone said that, there were twenty stalls you know, only one of them is accessible and I did wait for the only other person who needed that stall. So it's kind of like what the fuck to the girl who said that, because you want me to wait my turn - I'll do if every stall is accessible. But it seems ridiculous that I should wait while everybody else

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[53] Ibid.

> uses whatever stall and then I have to wait extra time.[54]

Charity points to an important point here: in a bathroom with several stalls, having only one accessible stall sends a message. This is an overlapping concern for queer, trans, and disability communities: there is a widespread lack of space allocated for bodies that do not fit the supposed norm. Whether it's the lack of gender-neutral, family-style bathrooms, or only one accessible stall in a large bathroom, the cultural message of tagging on access rather than incorporating it into the design is read as an afterthought. Furthermore, it demonstrates who has a "welcomed body" and who is the "imagined body" in a given space. Dorian further illustrates this point. In addition to the lack of stalls, Dorian described that there will sometimes be obstacles that impede access to the accessible stall – it will often be the farthest stall from the door, requiring someone who needs it to go the length of the bathroom and navigate around people and objects to get there. This certainly shows the lack of consideration, but also a pernicious ignorance about how disabled bodies might use the space.

Dorian noted that things could easily be different, and of benefit to many people as a result. They suggested, for example, that there should be bars in every bathroom stall, so that people who have balance issues, or who might appreciate some extra physical support, could use any stall and not take the one wheelchair-accessible stall. This has the potential to take some of the pressure off the one stall supposedly designed to fit all disabled bodies. I say "all" hesitantly here because all disability is obviously not the same, and experiences like MCS cannot be easily affected by a stall option. This would likely need to be incorporated and considered during the bathroom's design and construction, not incorporated post-fact, but it is nevertheless worth considering. While you cannot physically build anti-racist, anti-ableist, or anti-transphobic

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[54] Charity, interview by Ashley Mog, 2016, Seattle, WA.

bathrooms in a moment, you can do small actions to make the spaces better.

Staring/Rules/Policing

In our interview, Monica talked about her role as an ally looking at the "bathroom landscape" – she acted as a surveyor of sorts, ready to report back to trans friends about the spatial realities of the bathroom in question. She would assess what kind of bathrooms (single stall, multiple stall gendered, family) existed in order to allow friends to make informed decisions before entering a particular space. In her own experience of using bathrooms as a person with disabilities, she finds a different sort of landscape that involves unwritten rules regarding who belongs in which stall:

> I pretty much pass as a non-disabled person, people do not notice my physical disability right away, and so sometimes, especially on good days (and the idea of good days versus bad days I think is a pretty common one among disabled folks). On good days, you know, I am totally fine using the standard sized stalls, it's not an issue. But there are some days where I am just feeling really gimpy or sick or slow or whatever and using the larger, um, stall and restrooms that are more or less designated for folks who use wheelchairs feel more comfortable for me because I just need something to grab onto or for whatever reason. It's just feeling better for me. But I will often feel a sense of guilt using those stalls because I don't "look like the right person" to be using that stall.[55]

Her sense of what it means to "look like the right person" to use the wheelchair-accessible stall is predicated on the responses of others. She identifies feeling a pressure to stay out of that stall due to the societal expectations of what the stall means and represents. Marisa also describes the feeling of being watched in the bathroom when it comes to the accessible stall:

> I've definitely also helped folks who use wheelchairs in bathrooms quite a bit and have experienced how other people are like uncomfortable in that situation or don't know what to do if they see someone who needs to use the disabled stall. Or um, people observing like a caretaker in a bathroom.
>
> *What do people do?*

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[55] Monica, interview by Ashley Mog, July 9, 2015, Seattle, WA.

> Mostly just stare and look uncomfortable. Which I think is similar to if they see a trans or gender non-conforming person in the bathroom, they're not going to be aggressive about it they'll just be awkward and stare. So I've experienced that with people before.
>
> *Do you think that's passive-aggression?*
>
> Yeah. Seattle style. Just a passive, "I'm not going to do anything overtly aggressive but sort of be intimidating by awkward staring." Using their eyes to be aggressive.[56]

Both Monica and Marisa, while expressing different ideas, mention that the social expectations attached to the accessible stall feel heightened when others are using the bathroom at the same time. Marisa points out that anyone who seems different in the bathroom is on the receiving end of this experience – she notes that trans or gender non-conforming people have a similar experience. Emerson's experience of not wanting to be seen as the trans person in the bathroom is also connected here – when you pass as non-disabled or cisgender there is a feeling that if you are "found out," it will involve some sort of backlash that people with more visible transness or disability already face. Intimidation, as Marisa describes it, is a feeling of uncomfortableness that one pushes onto the perceived root of the discomfort. However, what is discomfort for someone who fits into bathroom norms, can be experienced as violent by those who do not.

Conclusion

Spaces are saturated with a legacy of exclusionary norms that affect bodies at the intersection of race, gender, and disability.[57] We can see this through the conflation of privacy, comfort, and safety in bathroom discourse. West argues that, "the undoing of the privatizing logics of public bathrooms may be one of the most exciting and productive sites for queer coalitional politics as it opens up the potential to linking the everyday concerns of LGBT

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[56] Marisa, "2nd Interview with the Author."

[57] West, *Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law*. 86.

[people] and people with disabilities."[58] Here, he emphasizes a key point: where there are privatizing logics, there are likely to be multiple groups of people affected. All of the legislative decisions I presented in this chapter pull from privatizing logics: bathrooms are meant to be a private place, where private parts are exposed. However, the availability of privacy is differential based on hierarchies of gender, race, disability, sexuality, and class. Bathroom choices and experiences are political and highlighting overlapping concerns between race, gender, disability, and class can move us away from the exclusionary logics of the private.

The examples I provided in this chapter – experiences that arose in my oral histories, HB2 in North Carolina, Just Want Privacy in Washington State, and women's prison bathrooms in Michigan – have essential commonalities. Where these experiences overlap provides a place to build a coalitional politic of familiarity that can get us closer to more liberating body politics, in the bathroom but also in public spaces more broadly. All of these examples center on bathrooms but concern issues that stretch far beyond the bathroom itself – bathroom battles represent negotiations over identity, bodily form and function, hierarchization of experience, and governmental power.

At the time of writing, Donald Trump has reversed the Obama-era guidance that transgender children should use the bathroom they choose and the Supreme Court has ultimately decided not to put bathroom access rights on their docket because of this Trump administration decision. Actress and activist Laverne Cox, in an interview on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, characterized a possible Supreme Court battle in this way:

> Anti-trans bathroom bills are not really about bathrooms. They're about whether or not trans people have the right to exist in public space. Because if we can't use public bathrooms, we can't go to schools. We can't work. We can't go to health care facilities.

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[58] Ibid. 64.

> So it's really about us having a right to exist in public space, and I exist and I have a right to exist in public space.[59]

The veiled comfort discourses that are deployed in bathroom legislation are about negotiating what is and who is acceptable in public space, what is culturally acceptable, and which people fit in the shape of the space. Battlegrounds over the bathroom and the individual experiences my interlocutors shared in their oral histories are the affective experiences that push forward a public culture wherein bathrooms are both a site of inquiry and activism, and a representation of larger issues.

The public culture that forms the background against which gender, race, and disability intersect with the bathroom is a place for organizing that can undermine the norms that leave so many people out, with disastrous consequences. Looking at how race, gender, and disability affect bathroom access and experience gives us a lens through which we can think about public space more generally. Bathrooms are an integral space in public; most of us need access to bathrooms as we navigate a day out of the house. As Laverne Cox highlighted in her interview with Colbert, for many people not having access to bathrooms in public translates to choosing between either not having access to public space or having to hold your bladder all day, to potentially ill health effects.[60] As such, bathroom access is one of the indicators of who can access public space more generally, which signals its importance to social theorists and activists. Organizing around bathroom access can help get us closer to justice outside of the bathroom, as I argue in the following chapter.

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[59] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, *Laverne Cox Did Not Cry While Meeting Beyoncé* (YouTube).
[60] Ibid.

Chapter 3
Toxic Safety: MCS and Comfort-able Space

[MCS] is about toxins that make one sick, not smells one doesn't like. – Anna Mollow[1]

Marisa is a white disabled queer femme activist in Seattle, who also identifies as having Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), which is not something that everyone who is symptomatic identifies with. She wants to be physically present at activist events, but is unable to because many public spaces are inaccessible to her. Both chemical scent levels and the energy required to attend events keep her from being as involved as she would like to be. She describes her experiences navigating public space and activist events in this way: "The major thing that affects what I can engage in now is less about choice and more about access to space."[2] She is unable to attend events where organizers do not understand her disability and do not have a policy that limits or bans scents, an action that would make the space more accessible. Being in these places triggers chronic pain for Marisa, which makes attendance not just ill-advisable but uncomfortable and even impossible. Her description of the difficulties in attending activist events in Seattle is marked by the discomfort that many organizers feel enacting and enforcing accessibility guidelines. Many events she encounters do not have clearly marked access for events and do not respond to access requests, leading her to reflect, "I spend a lot more time being frustrated with lack of access than actually participating in events sometimes."[3] As with many others I interviewed, Marisa stresses the point that in order to mitigate the barriers to access, it is necessary to pre-plan for discomfort and lack of access. Marisa argues that choosing which marginalized people to prioritize is hard, and that many organizers find it "awkward and

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[1] Anna Mollow, "No Safe Place," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1&2 (2011). 191.
[2] Marisa, interview by Ashley Mog, June 26, 2015.
[3] "2nd Interview with the Author."

uncomfortable” because the choices inevitably reveal a prioritization.[4] This prioritization can be felt and experienced as negative by those who constantly find themselves low on the hierarchy of access. I contend that this is what Marisa felt most passionate about. We often have to make choices about what to prioritize, but as Marisa argues, MCS is seldom a priority. She spoke to me about the general lack of attention to access and even described instances where organizers blatantly ignored her requests. Marisa’s experience is not unusual and in this chapter I explore the ways in which MCS and its interaction with comfort affect people accessing public space and activism.

MCS is an umbrella term for people whose bodies and minds become ill when exposed to chemical scents and substances.[5] MCS ranges in severity, with some people becoming mildly ill with certain scents to others who find it challenging to be outside of their own homes because of the myriad scents in public and private spaces and the near impossibility of controlling them. Chemical scents are found in items like perfume and cologne, laundry detergent, cleaning

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[4] Marisa told me about the challenges regarding flexibility and understanding access requests she faced trying to work with the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites group: “Yeah I’ve really been wanting to participate in coalition of anti-racist whites, and they have a really strict participation system where to be a member organizer you have to attend all of their monthly meetings, and then you participate in allyship work with—they have 5 or 6 organizations run by folks of color that they do work with. And they have pretty longstanding relationships with those organizations. So they have a really great system as far as what it looks like to be a white person working on anti-racism and helping communities of color. And the strictness of their system makes it really difficult for me to participate. I went to their open meeting at the beginning of the year and it was a 3-hour long meeting where people were sitting in chairs the whole time and like, there was maybe a 10 or 15 minute break in the middle, and it was on a weeknight… And I don’t sit for one place for three hours usually, ever. That’s really hard. And it was really hard because I talked about that at the meeting, I talked about wanting bring like talking about racism and anti-racism and being consciousness of whiteness into disability communities more.” Lack of flexibility does reveal prioritization.

[5] MCS has many other names, but I use MCS in this work because it was the most common identity term used by the activists I interviewed and the most common term I came across during the course of this research. MCS is sometimes called chemical sensitivity, environmental illness, chemical injury, and chemical disability.

products, wall paints, pesticides, and more. Some of the effects of a chemical exposure are nausea, dizziness, vomiting, brain haziness, rashes, fatigue, convulsions, and physical pain. Having a chemical exposure can make one ill for days after the fact, depending on the situation and severity. People with MCS then, are individuals whose physical environment is not just an ambient backdrop or neutral space. A person with MCS cannot just decide to go out in public without an active mediation of what possible chemicals may reside there. Stacy Alaimo describes this in *Bodily Natures* when she says,

> people with MCS must themselves continually negotiate the material agencies of every place, every stream of air, every food and personal care product that they encounter. Phenomena that most people experience as inert and benign make themselves known to people with MCS in vivid and undeniable ways.[6]

People who do not experience MCS, or who do not know someone with MCS, are unlikely to think about how their scented products affect others and some are even skeptical that this is a legitimate disability. However, to a person with MCS, these scented products make public spaces precarious, dangerous, and uncomfortable. It is important to take MCS into account because it is a real, challenging, and salient experience that many people have and it is likely that more and more people may find themselves experiencing MCS because of the continual industrialization and development that requires chemicals.

Activism, as an exercise in imagining different spatial configurations and access possibilities, is an important place to ask questions about access for people with MCS and other chronic illnesses. Indeed, activists are already asking, fighting, and living the material consequences of the lack of understanding and access surrounding MCS. In this chapter, I discuss MCS and the debates surrounding it. I explore the narrations from my oral histories about

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[6] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). 13.

MCS, especially those about the bathroom, alongside my own autoethnographic writing. My overall concern in this chapter is to question what access looks like when MCS is taken seriously. MCS is often left out of dominant understandings of disability access. It is important to take MCS seriously as people with MCS and other chronic illnesses, as individuals who might increasingly find themselves isolated from the public, challenge dominant paradigms of understanding disability. MCS challenges heteronormative understandings of capitalist time and space because making accommodations that limit chemicals disrupts many of the dominant, money-making, corporate interests that structure US society.

In this vein, I work toward a queer crip understanding of space and access through taking constructions of comfort seriously. Queering forms of disability accessibility understanding has long been the goal of crip theory. Alison Kafer describes the ways in which critiques of compulsory able-bodymindedness are already "queer and crip projects, and they can be potentially enacted without necessarily flattening out or stabilizing" the terms of queer crip lives and experiences.[7] Through utilizing queerness, trans, and disability insights to analyze MCS, I strive to find how a deeper understanding of how MCS relations to space are also about envisioning more liberatory spaces and futures that do not eschew or minimize trauma. MCS is one way to get at the complexity of access that disability justice activists and disability studies scholars actively work on: public spaces are often constructed with a dominant understanding of comfort and access in mind. My hope is that by focusing on the experience of MCS as it intersects with space might enable us to get closer to a more nuanced understanding of how to make access more accessible.

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[7] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 17.

Some of the experiences of people with MCS – not knowing what will happen, planning to be uncomfortable, and fearing the violence of both people and spaces – can act as a coalitional feeling Coalitional feelings are themselves not comfortable, but rather entail radical understanding of relationality. Bernice Johnson Reagon talks about the challenges of coalition:

> Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you should not look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they are looking for a home![8]

Coalitional feeling is not a comfortable home, which makes it an uneasy feeling but has the potential to bring us toward social change. Coalitional feeling requires moving out of one's comfort zone. People with MCS, as many other marginalized people, are used to not being comfortable, not having comfort prioritized in public. Paying closer attention to MCS, especially in the bathroom, as part of a coalitional feeling allows for a way of thinking that challenges the way we think through access more broadly.

As I noted in the previous chapter, in each of my interviews, I ask a question about the bathroom. Bathrooms serve as a space for thinking through access, which many activists work on; those concerned with MCS access have particular concerns about bathroom space and take MCS as an important issue in the assemblage of access, space, and embodiment. All of my interlocutors know I am interested in comfort because I take time to explain my project before the interview starts. Of the fifteen interviews I conducted, six people brought up the topic of MCS. Some of my interviewees knew beforehand that I have MCS. With others, I would only mention it if asked about my own experience of disability. However, in many ways and for many

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[8] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). 359.

reasons, MCS kept resurfacing as a topic of conversation when I would ask questions about the bathroom. Some of my interviewees brought it up independently from conversations about bathrooms, but the bathroom was the place where the topic of MCS arose most prominently. Not everyone claims a label of MCS who might experience it, but the people that speak about chemical sensitivity in my oral histories do. Marisa's interview was a turning point for me in my research process as her oral history highlighted and brought together for me how trans and gender non-conforming people's bathroom experiences have some critical overlaps with disability experiences that are not often spoken of, such as MCS. Interviewing people with MCS about their life experiences and activist work became a productive way to think about my own personal stake in my subject matter and how MCS is underlying much of the bathroom activism that exists, even if it is not explicitly talked about in these terms. In this chapter, I wrestle with the question of what bathroom access, or even access in general, would look like if MCS were a necessary component of understanding disability and public space?

Contested Access

MCS is a medically contested experience, with research scientists and medical practitioners arguing over whether it is physical or psychological.[9] What is interesting about this ideological split is the stark line drawn between brain and body: it pivots on the question of whether one is "really feeling" chemical exposure or if it is "all in their head." This, of course, assumes that something "in one's head" is less legitimate as it can just go away with proper thinking patterns, concentration, or behavioral therapy. What is confusing in some of the medical

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[9] Pamela Reed Gibson, "Life Indicators, Illness Characteristics, and Psychosocial Concomitants of Self-Reported Multiple Chemical Sensitivity: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice* 4, no. 3 (2014). 204.; Claudia S. Miller, "Possible Models for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity: Conceptual Issues and Role of the Limbic System," *Toxicology and Industrial Health* 8, no. 4 (1992). 181-202.

discourse around MCS is that it is a full bodily experience, including an emotional and psychological one, and so labeling it one way or another – physiological or psychological – does not actually get to the root of the issue or describe experiences of MCS in their entirety.

Here is it useful to draw from Margaret Price's term, bodyminds, to talk about MCS. Price uses "bodymind," which I have taken up throughout this dissertation, because "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also *give rise to each other* – that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two – it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term."[10] MCS involves a negotiation between one's bodymind and outside stimulus. Price also argues that bodymind is "a sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience."[11] Utilizing Price's insights enables a more nuanced understanding of how people with MCS negotiate space because MCS is both an individual feeling and an effect of structural barriers in the form of industrial chemicals, including the substances used to clean public and private space, and a widespread societal acceptance of scented places and people. While much of the medical science seeks to draw apart body and mind in an explanation of MCS, activists, environmental justice scholars, and Disability Studies scholars actively work on undermining this assumption. Therefore, my own narration of MCS in this chapter reflects Price's understanding of bodyminds and refuses an ontological separation.

Activists and writers with MCS also argue against this separation. For example, disability studies scholar Anna Mollow argues that

> The stigmatizing label "crazy," whether affixed to people with psychiatric illnesses or to those with unproven physical disorders like EI [environmental illness], may give the rest

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[10] Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015). 269.

[11] Ibid. 271.

> of society a feeling of safety; it keeps people with frightening symptoms comfortably "other." But such safety is illusory: when it comes to our society's environmental practices, phrases like "out of touch with reality" or "a danger to oneself or others" seem to fit with uncanny precision.[12]

Mollow suggests that there is an important political motive in confining MCS to a strictly psychological diagnosis: it tells us that people with MCS *are* out of touch with reality because reality tells us there is nothing wrong with chemicals. She says "comfortably 'other'" to signify the ways in which the comfort of the normative is dependent upon othering MCS. Experiential knowledge is often ignored if there is a lack of "hard" scientific evidence, which is another instance of the hierarchization. Disability Studies scholar Alyson Patsavas argues of this phenomenon that

> The dismissal of experience as a basis of knowledge is part of a politics that obstructs knowledge of/by/for disabled people, as systems of privilege facilitate biomedical knowledge about pain at the expense of experiential knowledge, not just by excluding but by devaluing that form of knowledge.[13]

If people with MCS *don't actually have MCS*, then the general population does not need to be aware of or worry about the chemicals – for themselves or for people who "claim" to have MCS. If a common societal understanding were in place, then surely action by political leaders and the general population would be required. However, widespread discomfort with serious thinking about future chemical injury is a salient topic, there is much resistance to recognizing MCS as a legitimate life experience. An interest in keeping the illusion of "safe" chemicals is ideologically important for the capital-driven companies that produce these products and those who have special interests in them. Medical dismissal plays a role in how capitalism continues to market comfort, and medical discourse around MCS is implicated in the rhetoric and strategies utilized by companies.

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[12] Mollow, "No Safe Place." 190-191.

[13] Ibid. 206.

A famous example of the entwinement of capitalism, medical discourse, and resistance to recognizing MCS is when the United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) work building was renovated in the 1980s. Several employees became sick with environmental illnesses, six of who sued the EPA. While they initially won money for damages, this was overturned in 1995, with the judge arguing that "the building's owner could not be held responsible for psychogenic illnesses."[14] This is not the only time that the US's largest governmental agency for environmental concerns has been at the center of political concerns around information about chemical exposure. In her book *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*, Michelle Murphy argues that the 1980s began a pattern of industry-defending, with corporate interests influencing the release of scientist findings on the safety of chemicals. Such findings flew in the face of efforts by environmental justice activists and chemically injured people who worked on creating awareness of dangerous chemicals.[15] As such, the medical discourse around MCS is arguably shaped by the rhetoric and strategies utilized by companies that want to deny these experiences for commercial gain.

There are also many individual accounts of corporations denying the realities of MCS. While there are legal cases that make national headlines, there are also several memoirs and personal accounts of the difficulties entailed in finding and creating access. Memoir writers with MCS often describe their own journey to get answers as marked by companies denying the negative effects of a given pesticide or chemical and placing the onus of responsibility solely on the sick individual. Mel Chen talks about this kind of onus shifting as "grammatical responsibility" in that individualizing language of having a problem being the sole problem "in

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[14] Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). 126.
[15] Ibid. 117-130.

your head" is all about making MCS the problem of people who do not fit in to what is "normal" and whose bodies cannot conform to ableist standards.[16] For example, in her chapter, "Listening to the Body: Women with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, and Multiple Chemical Sensitivities Talk about the Body," Debra Swoboda details how her interviewees repeatedly faced the question "how do I know you are not faking it?" from their medical practitioners at all levels and points in the diagnosis process.[17]

Displacing chemical injury onto the "other" makes MCS an individual responsibility rather than a collective one and serves to secure the extensive financial interests in widespread chemical dispersion.[18] This makes MCS appear to be an individual problem, while ignoring how individual issues are always social. Comfort is an important part of capitalism: it is sold to us, and we are supposed to embody it and work towards it. In the case of individuals with MCS, this capitalist comfort for others is actually dangerous. The dryer sheets and perfumes marketed to consumers contain toxic chemicals that *cause* sickness: capitalism is defining individual comfort in ways that are actually dangerous to all of us in the long run.

Suspicion of MCS creates a complicated social backdrop that makes navigating public spaces difficult for many people with MCS. Socially, culturally, and individually, people with MCS have to negotiate this experience every day. Social conventions of politeness and not making other people "uncomfortable" often get in the way of having group understandings of

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[16] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Perverse Modernities (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012). 274.

[17] Debra A. Swoboda, "Listening to the Body: Women with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, and Multiple Chemical Sensitivities Talk About the Body," in *Dissonant Disabilities: Women with Chronic Illnesses Explore Their Lives*, ed. Diane Driedger and Michelle K. Owen (Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc./Woman's Press, 2008). 90.

[18] One story in the documentary *Stink!* follows a teenager who is allergic to Axe body spray. His mother tries to obtain information from the company about the ingredients and is repeatedly turned down with claims of "the formula is proprietary." Jon J. Whelan, "Stink!," (Net Return Entertainment, 2015).

MCS, even in disability access-friendly situations. billie, a mixed race, nonbinary trans and multiply disabled person describes this sensation on hir blog:

> most folks with MCS are in a constant struggle to navigate our daily lives. if we are able to go out, we face a constant barrage of life-threatening chemical exposures. because MCS affects not only our bodies but our cognitive abilities and emotions, we often cannot express or identify that we are being made sick by one particular product someone is using.[19]

billie is gesturing here to the pervasiveness of chemicals. Chemicals are so embedded in our lives in ways that, unless one is forced to think about it, people rarely acknowledge that chemical exposure is all around us and in every public bathroom we encounter. Chemicals lurk in the ambient background of most public spaces.

MCS is not a clear-cut disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is the most effective way to gain legal and medical legitimation. A recognized diagnosis depends on the effects that chemical scents have on the individual, how disabled a person becomes, and if that disability counts as “an impairment which substantially limits one or more life activities.”[20] While there have been successful claims by people with MCS under the ADA,[21] there have also been court cases that ruled against people with MCS’s legitimate claim to accommodation.[22] Both the legal and medical suspicion of MCS creates a complicated social backdrop that makes navigating public spaces difficult for many people with MCS, both materially and discursively.

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[19] billie rain, "Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (Mcs) Accessibility Basics," Dual Power Productions, http://dualpowerproductions.com/2011/03/14/multiple-chemical-sensitivities-mcs-accessibility-basics/.

[20] U.S. Department of Justice, "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended," in *P.L. 110-325*, ed. U.S. Department of Justice (2008).

[21] Job Accommodation Network, "Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (Mcs) and Environmental Illness (Ei)," askJAN.org, https://askjan.org/media/MCS.html

[22] Ronald E. Gots, "Editorial Commentary: Multiple Chemical Sensitivities - Public Policy," *Journal of Toxicology: Clinical Toxicology* 33, no. 2 (1995).

Public Chemicals and Avoidance

The most commonly espoused treatment for MCS is avoidance, once again the responsibility of avoiding chemical injury on the individual – a challenging task in a chemically laden society. Avoidance is difficult when we think about the myriad ways that chemicals reach into many, if not most, of our spaces. If I go into a public bathroom, for example, I can reasonably expect that industrial strength chemicals were used to clean it, that the soap in the dispensers will be perfumed in some way, and that the others I encounter in there will likely have used scented laundry detergent or might be wearing perfume. This is not restricted to bathrooms, of course. I highlight the bathroom here because of the ways in which my oral histories illuminated how bathrooms can be uncomfortable, unhealthy, and dangerous for those with MCS.[23] Bathrooms are an integral part of our everyday lives, they are unavoidable places we all need to use. Telling someone to avoid the bathroom all day is not tenable. As I discussed in chapter two, while many people do avoid public bathrooms, this comes at great bodily and personal expense, entailing: holding your pee, avoiding water and other liquids, choosing to pee on yourself while out in public, or having to choose not to spend time outside of the house.

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[23] The people who clean bathrooms with these chemicals are also exposed to the potentially damaging effects these may have. The American Lung Association, for example, has released guidelines and funded studies on the ways in which cleaning products often contain volatile organic chemicals (commonly known as VOCs) that have long-term effects on the health of people exposed to them. American Lung Association, "Cleaning Supplies and Household Chemicals," American Lung Association, http://www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/indoor/indoor-air-pollutants/cleaning-supplies-household-chem.html.

Stacy Alaimo talks about this issue in her chapter on MCS: “as the term chemical injury suggests, many people become ill through toxic workplaces, and those closest to the chemicals, such as factory workers and agricultural workers, face the most risk, suggesting that MCS is a class issue” (117). But on the other hand, people from various class backgrounds face damaging chemicals, as Alaimo points out “affluence itself may multiply risks” because of the continued exposure to new products like carpet, paint, dry-cleaning – all things that off-gas. In Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*.

Avoidance restricts where you can go and restricts your movement – this restriction is not evenly distributed.

An additional factor to note within this framework is that the people who often do low-paid cleaning labor are immigrants, people of color, and poor people. This creates the racist and classist effect of poisoning bodies that are less normatively valued, which is something environmental justice movements have been concerned with for a long time. Exposure to chemicals through large-scale farming that uses pesticides, industrial pollution that invades neighborhoods, and other forms of industrial labor can all cause chemical sensitivity or injury in ways that we need to talk about alongside other forms of spatial politics. Thinking more broadly about access might, then, entail figuring out how race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class are all intertwined in ways that are not always readily talked about, understood, and culturally acted upon. Doing this sort of thinking is highly uncomfortable because it flies in the face of those mainstream US cultural values frequently taught to us, as Mollow explains:

> Everyone knows, of course, that dangerous chemicals are part of daily life. But it's better, the media tells us, to focus on individual solutions to disease (eat five to seven servings of vegetables a day and think positive thoughts) than to object too strenuously to the proliferation of toxins in our everyday lives.[24]

However, doing this sort of thinking and acting is important if any real change is to be made. As more and more people (possibly) acquire MCS and acknowledge MCS as a legitimate disability, avoidance will only take us so far.

Avoiding spaces on a consistent basis, as people with more severe MCS must do, creates conditions of isolation, stigma, and further disability. Alaimo states that "a truly effective treatment for MCS would not be an individual matter but instead would entail a staggeringly thorough overhaul of nearly all military, industrial, manufacturing, agricultural, domestic, and

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[24] Mollow, "No Safe Place." 191.

consumer practices."[25] However, MCS management and access largely still remains an individual matter. Shifting an access paradigm requires several levels of intervention and a coalitional understanding of disability, space, and relational practices. Oakland-based disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, in her blog post entitled "Fragrance Free Femme of Colour Realness Draft 1.5," argues that MCS access means something affective, involving actions that send the message to people with chemical disabilities that they matter as a group:

> When I think about access, I think about love. I think that crip (disabled and chronically ill) solidarity, and solidarity between disabled folks and non(yet) disabled folks is a powerful act of love and I-got-your-back. It's in big things, but it's also in the little things we do moment by moment to ensure that we all- in all our individual bodies- get to be present fiercely as we make change.[26]

However, Piepzna-Samarasinha's vision is not easy in a world where disabilities, especially ones that are seen as "hard to accommodate," are part of a paradigm that consistently devalues marginalized bodies. Part of the pushback individuals might have for not wanting to cut out scents is that they like to "smell good."[27] Sometimes the desire to "smell good" is about making others comfortable, as exhibiting a "body odor" is often not acceptable outside of somewhere like a gym. Body odor, as something we are taught to mask, is often associated with poverty – and specifically very public poverty on public transportation, in parks, and other public meeting places.

Class, Avoidance, and Access Planning

Scent is a complex phenomenon that takes on myriad cultural signifiers. "Smelling good" is a classed desire, as having regular access to showers requires a certain amount of consistent

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[25] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. 115.

[26] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Fragrance Free Femme of Colour Realness Draft 1.5," http://www.brownstargirl.org/blog/fragrance-free-femme-of-colour-realness-draft-15.

[27] Mollow, "No Safe Place." 194-198.; Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Fragrance Free Femme of Colour Realness Draft 1.5".

income.[28] Additionally, smelling good often means having perfume, a "fresh" laundry detergent, or a strongly scented deodorant to mask body odor. Wearing scent is cultural, and scented products have different meanings to different people. Many perfumes and colognes are expensive, and the ads we see in magazines, on television, and on social media project a certain kind of opulence with many scents. However, not all perfumes and colognes are upper class symbols, as there is a classed disdain for "cheap scents" and there are various levels and price points of perfume and cologne. Perfume and cologne can have dangerous and even deadly chemicals like arsenic in them, and companies can abstain from releasing this information on the grounds of "proprietary" formulas.[29]

Having a perfume or cologne on might act as a status symbol, a symbol of luxury or glamor, or it could be linked to other aspects of identity – subcultural identities, non-western identities, gender non-conforming identities, counter-cultural identities, and oppositional identities of marginalized peoples. The identity aspect of wearing these scents can make it difficult for individuals to disengage with chemical scents even when it hurts others (or the people wearing them). Piepzna-Samarasinha describes her own journey with disengaging from chemical scents:

> Many POC hair and products are scented like what. Why? Maybe we like pretty scents. Maybe we've got some damage from being told by racist ass white people when we were growing up that we smell funny/strong/like curry/like fish, etc. Maybe we've got some more baggage from parents who raised us to never, ever, smell or be dirty. And while some of us grow up with great bodycare products that work for us, some of us have some serious hair and skin trauma from going without, and don't find products that make us feel beautiful until adulthood. Many of us struggle to go fragrance free because it

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[28] Anthropologist Sherry Ortner posits that class is infused with meanings not just about one's income. She argues that, "gender and sexuality are carrying a secret burden of class meanings," which affects how people make decisions and is placed upon discourses of "lifestyle choices" Sherry B Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). 20, 27.

[29] Whelan, "Stink!."

> might've taken us a looooong time to find products that worked for our hair and skin, and we don't want to give them up… At first, I'm not gonna lie, I mourned being able to choose from 30 kinds of conditioners in the store to, like, three. I felt bored. I missed being able to use Nubian Heritage lotion, Carol's Daughter hair product and other POC brands of more-natural hair and skin care that I had a lot of cultural ties and sweet memories to. Brownness had smelled like Honey and Black Seed lotion to me, and it took a while for that to fade.[30]

Piepzna-Samarasinha describes the complicated ways in which smell can be a response to or resistance of oppressive systems, connected to generational affective ties, and long histories with products that do not work. There are various reasons chemical scents are a challenge to give up, and many of these register on a deeply personal level. Smell is deeply personal, but also undeniably social in the ways that the "deeply personal" is always social. Some of the justification for not enforcing or implementing a scent-free policy has to do with identity and culture, without connecting this to larger consumer systems and understanding the various layers of trauma.

Chemical scents are more complex than just class symbols; they are also part of most personal care products one uses at home, especially in the bathroom. When looking for an affordable shampoo, conditioner, or menstrual product, for example, it is challenging to find one that does not contain a scent. Frequently "scent free" and "fragrance free" go hand in hand with "organic," and organic products tend to be more expensive and available only at upscale stores. This makes access to some fragrance-free products difficult not only financially but also physically, given that many neighborhoods, towns, and cities do not have the infrastructure to house certain stores.

People without economic access to scent-free products are often also people who are more exposed to chemicals – living in neighborhoods in close proximity to factories and

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[30] Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Fragrance Free Femme of Colour Realness Draft 1.5".

freeways or working in custodial services or beauty industries – and furthermore they are less likely to have access to medical care if and when symptoms show up.[31] Even when people know that some chemical scents might be dangerous or making them sick, there may not be another commercial option.[32]

Chemical scents are often put into products to mask the smell of other chemicals, which enables consumers to be farther removed from having to think about which chemicals are actually in the products we use. There are lower-cost options available in some places; however, the options are not uniform or always available in every store. In addition to commercially available products, some people follow a DIY ethic and make their own products using baking soda and vinegar. Using baking soda and vinegar to clean your home or wash your hair is low cost but requires changing your patterns and relationship to cleaning rituals, as this is not a culturally normalized way to clean either your body or home in the US.

There is a cultural imperative to avoid smelling unsavory in order to assimilate. As Piepzna-Samarasinha mentioned above, racism functions to make it so that non-white people who smell like curry, or fish, or any other aromatic scent might feel a dominating social pressure to cover that up. Certain kinds of workers are also beholden to this imperative: Service industry workers who might smell like bleach or cleaning chemicals at the end of the day, cooks who smell like fried food, or anyone with a job that makes you smell at the end of the day. For others, the general feeling of smelling "bad" pushes us to rectify this and ignore many of the dangers of those chemicals we use in the process – smelling good is worth the risk. The knowledge of potentially dangerous chemicals in our

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[31] Engineer Anne Steinemann's study on best-selling laundry products, found harmful, illness causing chemicals in most affordable products on the market, and there is often no alternative. Anne C Steinemann et al., "Fragranced Consumer Products: Chemicals Emitted, Ingredients Unlisted," *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 31, no. 3 (2011).

[32] Ibid.

products does not stop their widespread use because of heavily ingrained norms that both US and global capitalism sell.

Tash, a white, d/Deaf, queer trans activist told me that working on scent-related access policies for events is often the most challenging, largely because people do not understand, or do not want to understand, what they mean. In one incident planning a university event, Tash told me:

> Scent-free access in general is one of the hardest ones to pull off. But, yeah, that was like the biggest pushback that we had [when planning events]. Most of the other times people either took our [scent-free] soap or—oh no one time our advisor—so we had a staff meeting, we were discussing access at the disability justice workshop we were putting on, and we were trying to figure out how we could make it actually scent-free, because it's really hard to control, it's people coming in and the public. So we were doing all that we could and we decided that um if someone came, showed up after the like multiple asks that we made and information and resources that we distributed about how to be scent free, if someone showed up and was really scenty and refused to comply with what we needed them to do, like stay at the back of the room or like wash off all these different ways, that we would ask them to leave. And our advisor, it was mostly for financial reasons but also he helped with understanding university policy, he was like, 'You can't do that. You cannot ask someone to leave because this is a public university.' Um and we were like, well if someone shows up and they are scented, someone else will be forced to leave.[33]

Tash's advisor was pushing for what might be seen as a more "democratic" version of public space, where everyone should be welcome. What is challenging with this view is that someone showing up wearing strong scents literally keeps people with MCS out of that space. It is not a matter of preference, but a matter of accessibility, and Tash's advisor saying that you cannot ask someone to leave reveals the hierarchy of priorities that Marisa mentions. To make access for "everyone," without taking MCS into account, means a portion of people cannot participate and whether implicitly or explicitly shows again how people with MCS fall to the bottom of the

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[33] Tash, interview by Ashley Mog, December 3, 2015, Seattle, WA.

hierarchy. This shows us that universal design of a given space demands asking people to change their behavior and their use of products, not just their willingness to think about access.

Queer Crip MCS

The activists I spoke with who identify as having MCS talked about their own experiences of finding themselves avoiding public spaces like bathrooms all day because of the possibility of a chemical exposure. This sense of avoiding a space is not an uncommon one, as I describe above, because there are many other groups of people who avoid bathrooms for reasons of safety and comfort. Access, spatial avoidance, and MCS were important topics in the lives of some of my interlocutors.

billie told me ze does not feel gender discrimination in the bathroom personally, although ze engages in trans bathroom activism to prevent that for others. However, the bathroom is not a safe and comfortable space. In articulating hir own bathroom experiences to me, MCS was a significant issue. billie narrated that, "bathrooms have like air freshener and like scented soap, and it's like a small space. And for me, bathrooms are really unsafe but it's because of my physical health not necessarily because of my gender."[34] billie's point here is important: gender is one of many salient issues in bathroom access and activism, and to get at a more nuanced and encompassing bathroom politic, we must make connections and go beyond single-issue activism.

Issues of who can feel safe in the bathroom are incomplete without a broader understanding of how MCS is part of that picture. Tash reiterated to me that doing any kind of disability activism or planning disability access is always already a coalitional act; if MCS is missing, it is an incomplete coalition. While this begs the question of what a "complete" coalition might look like, I think Tash is arguing that we should strive for a more rigorous

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[34] billie, "Interview with the Author."

approach to organizing and planning for access. Tash's activism focused on how to work through a wide definition of access. Specifically regarding bathrooms, Tash would make sure there was scent-free soap in the bathroom to make it a more accessible place. However, they found that doing this sort of access work in a public building often resulted in people stealing the soap or people working in the building protesting:

> whenever we had an event we would get scent-free soap and [gender neutral bathroom] signs and go to the nearest wheelchair accessible bathroom and put those up. They often got removed before the event was over, but we kept putting them up. One time there was someone who was really concerned about us putting scent-free soap in the bathroom and was like, 'This is a public building you can't do this, people are going to take the bottles and fill them with poison and put them back.'[35]

It is interesting that the person Tash spoke about was afraid of poison, when the soap bottles in most bathrooms are already *filled with poison* for those with MCS.[36] While a hopeful idea, the conception that public spaces are not poisonous is not the case for many people. People with MCS find poison in many public spaces and these poisons keep us from fully participating in public. While this was the most severe instance of pushback against an event's access policies that my interviewees shared with me, it was not uncommon to hear stories of misunderstanding or refusal to understand the effects of chemical scents in public bathrooms, and spaces in general. The fear of toxicity – "people will fill these bottles with poison" – is palpable and serves only to obscure talking about disability access as a wider issue. While we do not fully know why the individual in Tash's story had such a strong reaction to scent-free soap, we do know that popularized discourses and the conflation of comfort, safety, and toxicity uphold particular visions of normality while keeping certain people out of public spaces.

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[35] Tash, "1st Interview with the Author."

[36] Thank you to Alison Kafer for helping me think through this idea.

Marisa detailed to me her experience of navigating public bathrooms as a person with MCS:

> bathrooms can be dangerous because of the soap in them or a lot of times people will spray things in the bathroom. I never know when that is going to happen, like, it could be fine when I walk in the bathroom and someone could be in a stall next to me and spray things while I am using the bathroom. … It has made bathroom access different for me. I find myself avoiding public bathrooms, which has been true for a lot of my trans friends for a long time.[37]

The element of "not knowing" what will happen in the bathroom creates a precarious experience for someone who needs to use it. The chemical exposure roulette that Marisa narrates involves balancing one's own discomfort and need to use the bathroom against the real possibility of becoming ill for doing this. The "not knowing" is not restricted to people with MCS: it is a coalitional feeling, something that can inspire a larger conversation about comfort, identity, and access. Trans and gender non-conforming people, for example, often cite this feeling as one that occasions avoidance.

The element of fear and discomfort about what others will do in the bathroom has created an untenable construction of space. Not knowing whether one will face violence in the form of other people has a heavy effect on bodyminds. Trans and gender non-conforming people are often at risk of vitriolic epithets, police intervention, and physical violence. These issues are often at the center of queer and trans bathroom activism because of their pervasiveness, as I argued in chapter two. What might happen if we think about Marisa's experience of "not knowing" what might happen in the bathroom as being in the same realm of experience as gender-based violence in the bathroom? Marisa flags this multi-directional possibility of coalitional understanding of bathroom violence, and I find the connection an intriguing one. If

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[37] Marisa, "2nd Interview with the Author."

bathroom-based violence is conceived of broadly, what kind of possibilities for social change could that yield?

Accommodation Negotiation

I asked Marisa what kind of response she receives when asking for accommodations at public events or trying to figure out access information and she told me she encounters "complete and total ignoring" of her questions and requests.[38] Even in disability community spaces, accessibility can be an issue. Marisa spoke about a disability activist event where a potential attendee was asked to leave:

> they actually had to turn someone away who came from far away and was a wheelchair user because [this person] put sunscreen on, on a really hot, sunny day ... that person was pretty upset [about being turned away]… but [the organizers] stuck to it, which was good. Because you're, like, choosing to prioritize MCS in that situation, which doesn't ever happen, so. Generally though, at disability events, even at UW, there is not a lot of enforcement because people feel awkward and uncomfortable about it. And sometimes people's, like other folks' disabilities can get in the way of wanting to do that enforcement.[39]

One of the most challenging parts of Marisa's story is that someone was not allowed into an event but really wanted to be there. How are we framing this person using the wheelchair? This person had to be turned away after traveling a long distance which, as Marisa suggests, had a positive side effect in that MCS was finally taken seriously and prioritized. However, we would be remiss to simply celebrate this as a victory for MCS. This story gives an affective punch because all parties have disabilities. It is particularly significant that a wheelchair user was turned away on the grounds of accessibility because people who use wheelchairs are often imagined to be the sole proprietor of disability and access. This story does not give us a clear message about what access and inclusion looks like in a perfect world, but rather demonstrates

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

the fraught, painful, and complicated process of planning an event that not only takes MCS into account, but prioritizes it. The person turned away was understandably upset because they traveled so far to get there. However, Marisa's feeling of relief in this situation because people with MCS are seldom put first is also important to note. Creating access is not easy as access needs are neither evenly distributed nor necessarily compatible – there are no quick solutions when it comes to inclusion for all.

This story is complicated – an event centering on disability had to turn away someone with a disability because of what one of my interviewees, ET, calls a "clash of the impairments."[40] ET, a white, trans, disabled performer and activist talked to me about the complex experience of negotiating access while being part of Sins Invalid, a show founded by Pattie Berne and Leroy Moore.[41] People in Sins Invalid have a variety of disabilities and a variety of access needs, which were not always in sync with one another. ET explained that the thought process of the group went this way: "how can we stretch for each other and figure that out? And so we would. And I think that modeling was really powerful."[42] What works in the situation, according to ET, is interpersonal labor, understanding, and trust. Is this always possible at activist events where people do not know each other? How do you get people to respect each other's boundaries and also think critically about access? How do you push back against norms pushed by capitalism that people do not even realize they are following?

While Marisa expressed that some events enforce a scent-free policy, she explained this is not necessarily the norm. She acknowledged the difficulty of this at events where people come together who are not often able to participate in events and when other people's disabilities clash

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[40] ET, interview by Ashley Mog, December 1, 2015, Seattle, WA.

[41] Patty Berne, "Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility," (New Day Films, 2013).

[42] ET, "1st Interview with the Author."

with each other. She described her experience with another participant at an activist event about scent-free enforcement:

> Because people will be like ‘but I’m not wearing any scents’ and I’m like ‘but your laundry detergent, I can smell it.’ Um, yeah – so that’s hard. Like, I kind of got into an argument with someone at one of the UW events. Because like, unless you are actually are… like, it almost needs to be like, if you have MCS you can sit here [in the scent-free seating area of an event] and people with MCS can invite the people they know are safe to sit there.[43]

Marisa’s experience here is not unfamiliar to me as a person with MCS. When someone has not educated themselves on what MCS means, it is hard to expect a person to understand that almost every product commonly used has a scent that can stay on one’s body: laundry detergent, dish soap, even just hugging someone with cologne or perfume. Chemicals are insidious and therefore hard to fully escape or understand without experiential knowledge or intellectual labor. Marisa describes a situation here wherein the only solution she could see is to have separate spaces, led by people with MCS because of the huge undertaking that MCS education would take.

Spatial Negotiation

Having MCS myself, I found these experiences interesting during my interview process because I increasingly do the same things my interlocutors talk about. Before I walk into a public bathroom, I often wonder if I will get a chemical exposure. On a day where my chronic pain is not triggered or when I can think clearly, going into an intensely scented bathroom can derail that. When I am at a public lecture at my university or other public venue, I take note of air vents, trying to figure out which way the air will flow so I can avoid being downwind of someone wearing strongly scented products. Mel Chen describes a similar experience of dancing around public space to protect from an exposure: “when I used to walk maskless with unsuspecting acquaintances, they had no idea I was privately enacting my own bodily concert of

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[43] Marisa, "1st Interview with the Author."

breath-holding, speech, and movement; that while concentrating on the topic of conversation, I was also highly alert to our environment."[44] People with MCS, much like many people who experience marginalization or oppressive structures, are hypervigilant about their surroundings, mapping the contours of whatever current space they are in.

Thinking about, negotiating, and avoiding scents requires a complex negotiation of comfort, especially when capital-driven desires tell a general population that some fragrances exist for their own comfort. When I negotiate public space, this involves thinking about my own personal comfort for MCS reasons, the manners that have been socialized into me as a cisgender woman, and how I can physically move within a space. These factors all impact whether I can feel comfort, and whether this happens over and against the comfort of others. billie, who is also a prolific online writer of MCS guidelines, notes that people who have MCS will often not say they have sensitivities because they do not want to make others uncomfortable.[45] Additionally, because of the medical contestation around MCS, there is frequently a layer of suspicion regarding the experiences of people with MCS. Many people with MCS, including myself, have been told that our experiences are not real or valid. Because of ableism, which is a system that works to invalidate crip bodyminds on individual and collective levels, many people with MCS do not have easy or comfortable experiences in negotiating accommodations. If experience is treated as suspicious when one is asking for accommodations, the burden of comfort is again on the marginalized body who has to "just deal with it" or are forced to avoid spaces altogether. The constant feeling of needing to pass as nondisabled in public situations is both physically and emotionally uncomfortable and can even be dangerous. In this way the labor of comfort is again

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[44] Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. 199.
[45] rain, "Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (Mcs) Accessibility Basics".

displaced onto the bodies of those with MCS. This experience is exacerbated by a lack of wider understanding and enforcement of MCS safety guidelines in disability communities.

A recent example of how these issues intersect with one another happened to two of my narrators and myself at a Society for Disability Studies (SDS) conference. While there are clear guidelines in conference regulations about showing up without scents on, there is another problem with hotels not completely understanding what being 'scent-free' actually means. Charity, a cisgender, heterosexual woman and a wheelchair user, was at this conference with her caregiver, Emerson, who is transmasculine. There was only one gender-neutral bathroom at this particular conference, and it was not fully wheelchair accessible. Charity mentioned to me that while the women's bathroom was more accessible for her wheelchair, it was not necessarily more accessible in general because of Emerson acting as her caregiver:

> They had a gender-neutral bathroom, which is awesome but it was originally the men's bathroom and it reeked… and there was also that gross chemical smell like "I'm a man and I have to use a gallon and a half of cologne." But I think it was more comfortable for me in terms of the gender thing because I am worried when I have a male caregiver, or in this case a trans caregiver, because I am always worried about what people in the bathroom, what their reaction might be.[46]

When Charity and Emerson used the women's bathroom, I was asked to be around for support in case they ran into trouble, specifically trouble in the form of other people. However, that bathroom was also smelly. Because of Emerson's previous experiences in women's bathrooms as a gender-nonconforming person, he was understandably wary of being in there, even as a more masculine-presenting caregiver. Emerson wanted to avoid possible violence; both from individuals, and from possible police intervention under the specter of legal rules about which bodies can be in which bathrooms as the police are often a tool to force conformity in the bathroom space. Charity was very much aware of, and had experienced herself, the sometimes

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[46] Charity, "3rd Interview with the Author."

violent reactions people have when it comes to gender and bathrooms. The fear of what others will do, as I mentioned above with Marisa's experiences, makes going to the bathroom so much more difficult for some.

When Charity and Emerson used the gender-neutral bathroom, I stayed nearby to help with Charity's service dog, but had to leave because, as Charity said, it reeked in there. The hand soap was perfumed and there were air fresheners spritzing every few minutes. Being in this bathroom for longer than a few minutes made me feel ill. However, being part of this team of three, I helped as much as I could because there were so many access needs in our group to take into account. As Emerson mentioned several times in his oral history interview, the bathroom needs of everyone at this conference were not easy to wrap up in one space. Working with the hotel, SDS tried to lower the scent levels in the public bathrooms, but it was not entirely successful:

> That space, that bathroom space at SDS was very complex. And it was additionally complex because, like, you had people who understood the issues really well that were organizing the conference, and even in that case they were struggling to come up with the right combination to meet the needs of the complexity of the identities and bodily experiences of the people who were showing up for this conference. And so with the like gender neutral space that was created on one of the main floors of the conference sessions, Charity *could* get in the door but it was not like the fully accessible larger space that was on a different floor of the conference area. But it also—I remember you and I both went in there, and it was complete- I remember you had to leave because it was so scenty. Like, and I also almost had to leave because it was so scenty, because I'm multiple chemically sensitive as well…. But I don't know, it doesn't always work out the way you want it to. But it was just such a complex experience being a trans person and helping my cisgender friend who uses a wheelchair. A woman, you know, so she would be going into the women's restroom. And than having all of these different barriers, to that, to that access, um, within a space that was supposed to be or tried to be as accessible as possible.[47]

Emerson sums up here how complicated this issue was for all of us in our group to navigate. I share this story, and our three sides of it, because it illustrates how bathroom access is not a

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[47] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."

singular issue. When planning for access, there are so many issues to contend with that it should give us pause to work out who the imagined bathroom user will be. It was clear at SDS that they tried to create as accessible a space as possible. The problem was that the gender-neutral bathroom, the imagined democratic bathroom for all, was only on one of the conference levels, was not fully wheelchair accessible, and was incredibly smelly, which barred many people from using it.

Air Freshener and Billboard Liberation

In Kafer's book, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, she describes a moment of what she calls "billboard liberation" that included her and two other crips retooling the "inspirational" text on a bus shelter advertisement for a charity into a critical crip message. They changed the original caption, which read "Lost Leg, Not Heart: Overcoming" to "Lost Leg, Not Rights: Overcoming Pity."[48] For Kafer, this message, while removed a few days later, is not about the overall visibility of such action. Indeed, changing all pity/inspiration narratives to more critical messages on billboard and signs would not only be practically unfeasible but also would not necessarily change dominant conceptions of disability. Instead, she asserts, "I offer these cripped, queered billboards not as the real tools of a better life, not as the real future, but as a catalyst to get us thinking about what might equal a more liveable life, and for whom, under what conditions, and at what costs."[49] It is in this spirit that I interpret an anecdote from billie's interview. Ze told me about a form of activism around MCS and bathroom access that ze engages in:

> personally, if I go to the bathroom and there's an air freshener I will throw it away… for awhile I was doing that all the time and posting about it on Facebook and I think a bunch of people started doing it… I just take it and cover it with a bunch of paper towels so they don't see that I've thrown it away.[50]

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[48] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 101-102.
[49] Ibid. 102.
[50] billie, "Interview with the Author."

This part of the interview was filled with laughter by both of us because this is something I can see myself engaging in. This kind of activism is like billboard activism because changing one bathroom's scent level does not necessarily spread culture-wide change, but instead this action creates a space to think about what a different future or possibility might be. billie tells people that ze does this, ze spreads this information around social media, and invites others to take on this action as well. This act of resistance encompassed in the guerrilla activism billie describes is all about surviving trauma and pushing people to think about how comfort is not built into spaces for all. Throwing away air freshener is different than asking someone to leave who is wearing scents, which is arguably a more direct and harder way to approach MCS activism. I am not arguing that throwing away all air freshener will change ableism, but it shows how there are various ways to resist, to work on MCS access, and to find coalitional feeling in ways that are not always readily apparent.

billie has a hard time being in many, if not most, public spaces because of the constant chemical scents. In a situation where going into bathrooms can be dangerous and uncomfortable, this small act can create a larger impact on the experiences of people with MCS. Air fresheners – a chemical compound people buy to mask bathroom smells – are visible symbols of trying to control what happens in a bathroom. Less air freshener in the bathroom is something that can create more access for people with MCS and can positively impact all of us who are inhaling chemicals. Bathrooms become a site of trauma because they force people with access needs to confront the disconnect between crip time and capitalist time because being in a bathroom that is heavily scented will inevitably make someone with MCS fail to be gainfully productive capitalist subjects. billie's narration of others taking up the cause and engaging in throwing away air fresheners shows us that some acts of guerilla activism can have the impact to interrupt how people move around otherwise. These moments of crip activism can, temporarily at least, create space that defies confining capitalist logics.

billie’s activism helps us envision moments of access. Activism is about imagining different ways for us to exist in an oppressive culture. Moments of crip activism can, for however long, create space that defies the confining logics of comfort. Taking MCS seriously, including a politicized understanding of comfort, is a way to get closer to the complexity of access as both an experience in public space and an aspirational goal for the future.

Conclusion
Coalitional Feeling, Discomforting Power, and Imagining Worlds

I survive because there's no other choice. - Dorian[1]

So coalition activism has always—it feels right and it always feels hard. - Emerson[2]

I would say that as our struggles mature, they produce new ideas, new issues, and new terrains on which we engage in the quest for freedom. – Angela Davis[3]

Visionary politics is an important part of activism. In my introduction, I conceptualized questioning and recognizing dis/comfort as something akin to the visionary, a looking forward or a striving. I have argued that bathrooms are a space wherein groups with different experiences can find common ground. Much of the marginalization involving bathrooms involves comfort as a sticking point, argument, or place to hide. Comfort is an act of the elimination of discomfort and in this way is a dominant and normalized version of striving.[4] This striving is sometimes at the expense or labor of others and it is part of a larger milieu of social relations. What I put forth in this conclusion is a looking forward that is not solely about one's own comfort but about worldmaking in a larger social justice sense, which is not easy but is important. Being able to imagine a world otherwise is a survival tactic, a rallying call, and a framework from which to build a movement. José Muñoz captured this visionary mode in the opening sentences of *Cruising Utopia*:

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality… We must strive in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then* and *there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we

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[1] Dorian, interview by Ashley Mog, January 28, 2016, Tukwila, WA.
[2] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."
[3] Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016). 11.
[4] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 157.

> must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.[5]

The activists I interviewed had various perspectives on what a different world might look like, including questioning comfort as an overall concept, widening comfort marginalized people, framing activism in order to forefront sustainability, and focusing on what healing and resilience might look like in the face of marginalization. Worldmaking is a way to unsettle and challenge dominant and dominating conceptions of comfort by upsetting the status quo, getting people out of their 'comfort zones,' making people face the comfort they might take for granted, and addressing long ignored access needs.

The four major themes that emerged in my oral histories were: 1) relationship building as integral to coalition, 2) moving in and beyond comfort in organizing, 3) setting frameworks in order to build sustainable movements, and 4) healing one's own trauma as a form of activism. In every interview I asked, "how did you become an activist" and "what difference do you think coalition makes in activism." I received a variety of experiences that gave me pause and pushed me to think about how I conceptualize activism. I offer below a collection of these oral histories based around the themes that emerged, not all of which agree, but these differing perspectives are what create a rich collection and account of theory on the ground. While I have utilized the insights from my interlocutors throughout this work, I feel it is important to listen closely to their words through the extended use of direct quotations in the conclusion. What I heard in the interviews, as much as anything I read for this dissertation research, constitutes some of the important theory-driven, visionary work that I believe will move us forward.

What kinds of coalitional feeling can be mobilized to create change? Kafer, in conversation with Bernice Johnson Reagon, posits that a "robust combination of future dreams

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[5] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 1.

and present critique is essential to politics, and it requires leaving open the parameters of our political visions."[6] I argue that coalitional feeling can bring us closer to the open parameters that leave room for worldmaking. Coalitional feeling is not quite solidarity but rather an operational recognition of moments of familiarity.[7] Coalitional feeling means recognizing how we may not always agree, and making connections might be uncomfortable, but that our struggles are intertwined. The oral history segments below, gesture towards the kind of possibilities opened up by coalitional feeling and activism.

Relationship Building

When I spoke with my interlocutors, they all mentioned some form of relationship-building as an integral piece of activism. They talked about relationship building in broad ways – whether it mean the lack of building as a problem or the work of building as the uncelebrated hard labor of being in the struggle. Reflecting on hir experience in Riot Grrl, billie spoke to me about the divisions created in movements when some in a community are classed as disposable:

> You know I feel like in the left, I think maybe this is one of the ways white feminism has failed, there's this whole—you know looking for what's fucked up about people and pushing them away. And it kind of creates this disposability in communities I think. And I think it tends to negatively impact the most marginalized and the most oppressed the most. So I'm kind of trying to do the opposite of that, like looking for the most fucked up thing and then finding something good, you know. Like looking for someone who's completely losing everything and like, finding—helping them find something good in life. [Laughs] Like I—just on a personal level, centering the margins.[8]

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[6] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 153.

[7] I am influenced here by Eli Clare's "disability politics of transness." In his piece "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement" he for a disability politics of transness that, "could frame bodily difference as neither good nor bad, but as profoundly *familiar*" (265). In Eli Clare, "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[8] billie, "Interview with the Author."

What billie stressed to me throughout hir interview was the importance of centering those that are most marginalized in order to strengthen the entire movement. When billie talks about pushing people away in white feminist movements, ze is talking about feeling discomfort and guilt because of someone else's life experience is part of always looking for what is wrong with individuals. billie names this as a separation tactic. What sets apart disability justice as a movement is that relationships with the most marginalized are not eschewed because of discomfort:

> You know it's just—it's not like someone's going to be, "You're an abuse survivor therefore I think you're a piece of shit." It's going to be like, "I don't like that person because they're really intense, they always talk about blah blah blah. Like I don't like that person—I know they're homeless but I wish they would like just chill out." I just wanna… You know what I mean, the stigma—people attach stigma to low status people in their community who make them uncomfortable and then what that does is leave a victim pool at the bottom of the hierarchy for people to take their shit out on, right. So like for me, part of what I think disability justice is, is to eliminate the victim pool of queer, disabled people of color, trans folks, who are like struggling because of the oppression that we're living and then stigmatized by the communities who say they care about people like us.[9]

billie specifically points to the ways in which "low status people" are the ones that make others uncomfortable. Ze posits that the people who are not low status, who confer the uncomfortable label, create a loop of stigma that a movement like disability justice helps to intervene in. Disability Justice, as an explicitly intersectional movement, is what billie suggests as a way to push against the stigmatization coming from all sides.

While billie had a blanket statement about stigma and status, Tash specifically mentioned whiteness in their discussion of division and working to move past that in order to build a movement. Tash told me about organizing a disability justice workshop connecting disability and incarceration, inviting several different community groups. They mentioned that organizing in

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[9] Ibid.

white spaces that they had not learned about what how integral relationship building is to accessible events:

> One of the most important parts of [movement building] is everyone at the table from the beginning… It has been a huge learning experience for me in terms of how to reach out to groups I don't necessarily have a relationship with yet. That's another thing I've learned is that like, I think a lot of like—a lot of like the white activist spaces that I've been in don't talk about building a movement through building relationships. Not just like networking and getting people to the rally, but really getting to know people and investing in each other's lives, and I think that is a huge part of building coalitions across difference, and even just within your community is really putting the time and energy into building relationships with each other that's in a way that's, whatever, not valued by capitalism and all of that but um, that's, in my view that's where change is going to happen.[10]

Tash explained that the disability and incarceration event was a challenge because it was planned last minute and key people were unable to be a part of it. Tash described how whiteness has kept groups from forming relationships. Whiteness in Tash's description is also intertwined with capitalism and capitalism impedes meaningful relationships. This is in line with billie's argument about white feminism – aligning with dominant modes of power (white supremacy or class hierarchy, for example) is a mode that keeps the most marginalized at the bottom. Kimberle Crenshaw famously argued in "Mapping the Margins" that the only way to build an intersectional movement is to center and start with those most affected by oppression.[11] The question becomes then, what does that actually look like in practice? billie, in a Crenshaw-ian manner, told me that ze focuses social justice action on centering and connecting resources with the most marginalized people in hir communities. Tash posits pushing against capitalism where possible as a way to build relationships in order to make change.

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[10] Tash, "1st Interview with the Author."

[11] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).

In a similar vein to Tash, Stacy offers up actively seeking out people who have differing points of view. Stacy described the importance of this practice but also talked about needing to connect with others who want to work towards a different imagined future as well:

> Like if I'm trying, if my goal in life is to shift the conditions in the world, I can't just do that in bubbles of people who understand the theoretical framework from which I'm coming.[12]

Stacy stresses here the need to come out of comfort zones, to not solely surround yourself with likeminded people, if you want to make change.

Monica mentioned to me how relationship building is challenging to do but is one of the goals of activism:

> For me, I think forming… if folks across identity groups are coming together to talk about issues of access and how access is defined by them, so, issues, issues of race access or equity, are, are different than maybe a person with white privilege who has a disability. Like, their issues of access are going to be different. But this idea of access, and gaining greater access, and greater social equity and capital is sort of the same. So although the needs are different, um, when, I think when we, when we sort of, I mean this sounds really corny, I just think we are going to have better results when we work together. If we can continue to find ways to work together without hurting each other. Which is hard, too.[13]

She stressed to me that working together will help us reap collective rewards of equity, but that it is a challenge to work together and not hurt each other. Monica, like billie, mentioned "white feminists making everything about them" as one of the barriers to coalition building. Her assessment that privilege gets in the way of organizing was a common theme in my oral histories.

In conversation with Stacy and Monica's ideas, Dorian spoke to me about how relationship building is important, but comes with a fraught history for marginalized people who

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[12] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."
[13] Monica, "2nd Interview with the Author."

are frequently the educators on their own oppression. Dorian talks about finding connection with people who might not ideologically line up as part and parcel of their sports career:

> You know, it gives me faith because I see a lot of different people that don't necessarily align in the ways that I do that have a lot of hope and if we just like sit down and talk about it we can see this hope together. You know, and to me that's really powerful. And being stuck on everybody having this same ideology I don't think you really have the chance to really experience some beauty like that.[14]

Dorian told me that they find "beauty" in connecting with people through sports. They are a para-canoe athlete, who competes in both national and international competitions. In participating in sports, they have been able to connect with and build relationships with unexpected people, even though that is a tiring continual prospect, which can be fraught and emotionally draining at times:

> Because I feel like people don't understand how serious this shit is until they can relate on a personal level, and it wasn't until I started playing sports that people really started believing what I said. And I started noticing that even when I started becoming an elite athlete even before my diagnosis, people started believing what I said. And I thought, Damn, that's fucked up. But that's the way the world works and sometimes. I like it, you know, I like doing it. Sometimes you've got to roll with it. And as an adaptive athlete, the focus shouldn't be on my disability but it always is. And you can't go anywhere without someone asking you what your disability is. So therefore I always end up in a conversation about police brutality and ableism. And medical discrimination and how a lot of medical discrimination is based in ableism towards folks with mental illness. And you know, our medical industry just like everything else in this country is based on capitalism and was built on a system of white supremacy. … It's a miracle that I'm here, really. So yeah, that's adaptive sports and that's—it's nice to have a goal for the first time in four years that isn't like figuring out what the fuck is wrong with me and getting medical care. So it is really nice to have this huge goal that's kind of like, you know, if I don't I don't. But it feels the same to me as getting a degree. I want it as much as somebody wants a degree. You know. And because I feel like I don't have a choice anymore, I have to do this. Social justice, disability justice, I have to do this, I don't have a choice. And if I can share my story with a wider audience and use it as a vessel to talk about things we need to talk about, why not. You know.[15] … Sometimes there'll be some shit [on facebook] and I'll be, 'Damn that is fucked up. And how do I know that person?' And I realize, 'Oh they're just some para who added me.' And then two days later they'll be like, 'Oh that's what's happened to you? That's fucked up.' And then we'll get into a

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[14] Dorian, "2nd Interview with the Author."

[15] "1st Interview with the Author."

> conversation and their whole opinion might change just because they are listening with empathy.[16]

Dorian narrates here the ongoing challenges of doing something that feels fulfilling (competitive sports) alongside the constant education about their disability. What they mention about having the opportunity to influence the views of others, they presented to me as activism, specifically an instance of mundane, everyday activism. However, this comes with the legacy of marginalized people having the sole onus to educate on issues of oppression. This is an uneasy and complex connection to relationship building.

Tash argues that relationship building should not just be about planning actions and events, but about a sustained vision of affective ties:

> And I think some of the most powerful work that people don't get acknowledged for is the relationship building, um like spending time to get to know each other, cook and eat together and not necessarily like you know, plan the next event. And I think, uh, yeah. I think that's most often, like, the marginalized folks within that group doing the work.[17]

The vision Tash presents here is one of hard work, but sustaining work. They talk about how investment in people, and not just investment in causes, is how to make lasting change happen. Tash argues that this work is not acknowledged and that this non-acknowledgement replicates relations of power. So Tash's vision is to acknowledge this as labor and movement building. In somewhat of an answer to what billie's points at the beginning of this section about the most marginalized people being counted out, sometimes violently, Tash argues for valuing relationships between people. Tash says that valuing and creating relationships with others is not just for planning events or actions, but involves real digging in and leaning into the communities people want to be a part of and make change in.

Dis/comfort and Organizing

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Tash, "1st Interview with the Author."

Comfort has a complex relationship to activist organizing, to showing up at activist events, and to choosing what to participate in. As I have discussed throughout this work, comfort is slippery, it becomes conflated with privilege and expressed through domination. However, striving for comfort as a marginalized person, through making others uncomfortable or through arguing for inclusion, is not a singular narrative that we can pin down. On whose comfort is challenged, Marisa sees a complex relationship between bodily states of dis/comfort and the dis/comfort of being challenged:

> I guess in general I think my more comfortable connections are when I develop personal relationships with people. And I also want to say that I think the word comfort can be complicated because sometimes discomfort means you're connecting in a really important way and challenging privileges. So I don't always try and avoid discomfort but I think the more important part for me now is when I can have access to a space or to a community and experience bodily comfort in that way. But maybe my emotional comfort is challenged a little bit, that's important.[18]

She makes a distinction between "emotional comfort," which she defines as related to privilege, and defines "bodily comfort" differently:

> So the idea of like challenging that emotional comfort space where we can talk about white privilege and other privileges but at the same time recognize that our bodies can be comfortable even if we're challenging that emotional comfort space, which is I think a place where activists don't understand that distinction.[19] … I think comfortability can be a complicated thing because we want our bodies to be comfortable as much as possible and as much as we can, or feel comfortable to move around and adjust things the way we need them. And also emotional discomfort is going to happen if we're doing coalitional work in a good way, where we're challenging privileges and oppression and noticing where like resistance feelings come up in our own bodies. … And sometimes emotional discomfort can cause trauma for people, so it's complicated.[20]

She sets the stakes that in order to get any sort of coalitional work done, one must be okay with having emotional discomfort. However, she brings up an important and contradictory point that "sometimes emotional discomfort can cause trauma." This begs the question – what constitutes

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[18] Marisa, "2nd Interview with the Author."

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

emotional discomfort? How do we juggle something that can cause trauma but might also help us grow and make connections? These are some of the pressing concerns of the activists I interviewed and continued grappling with these concepts is integral to movement building.

Marisa describes how comfort, specifically the desire for comfort, can become entangled with discussions and negotiations of access. Marisa described about how sometimes the longing for comfort is expressed through privilege rather than a need for access:

> I think comfort and access can be really complicated and that's one of the ways where I've seen it play out, where I try and tease that out [whether comfort or access is a play] before I approach someone about access.[21]

Stacy describes this sort of phenomenon slightly differently. In our larger conversation about the conflation of safety and comfort in some activist communities, Stacy argues that comfort can be felt as a "tension." Depending on one's experiences with trauma, or the unwillingness to accept one's privilege, this tension can make it a challenge to move beyond discussion:

> I think that very often in social justice community, that the next indicated step there is then you organize with people who have similar lived experiences to you. And you create this safe political bubble for yourself to then go fight all the structural oppressions of the world. And I just don't agree that that is a good strategic plan. And that in that, I really think that there's so much that can be learned from, I mean and like, I think that I—I'll temper all this by saying that I also think this is a totally normal piece of early mid 20s identity development that that happens. But I think the cultural dependency in social justice community to stay stuck in caucus work and not know how to um extend towards or move towards other things that um are actually the like making impact on the structures that are creating the conditions of your oppression is a ridiculous, you know not being able to tolerate that tension literally means that we're never going to be able to get out of caucus work.[22]

What I find particularly instructive is her use of "tolerate" alongside "tension," this suggests to me not a condoning of tension, but rather understanding that it exists and an imperative to learn

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Stacy, "1st Interview with the Author."

how to work with it. She argues that working with tension is a skill set, to be developed by activists and those wanting to take action against marginalization:

> You know and building the intentional, understanding that that is a skill set, that involved in [tolerating tension] is doing your own trauma work. Healing from the impacts that oppression has had on you enough so that you're not consciously wanting your external environment to be safe enough to go and organize, but to cultivate internal safety so that you are coming to organizing projects from a place that is like whole and like not, not impacted by trauma, but that trauma has been metabolized enough so that every microaggression doesn't feel like violence.[23]

Stacy is talking about complex and enduring work here. I have quoted her elsewhere in this work saying that people often conflate safety and comfort because they wish to have a strong word for the discomfort they feel around being asked to stretch beliefs and conceptions of themselves. However, there are realities around the violence we face every day that do impact the ways in which individuals can show up for activist causes. Stacy argues here that in order to be in a movement that could be sustainable, you should work on building the skill set of metabolizing the trauma and marginalization in order to work towards an internal sense of self that can show up. This is, of course, not easy work, but something for which to strive.

Marisa takes a hardline approach to organizing through a discussion of access intimacy. Access intimacy was coined and popularized by Oakland-based transformative justice activist, Mia Mingus.[24] Mingus calls access intimacy a kind of "eerie comfort" characterized by someone understanding your access needs, a connection with someone or a group of someones that is not patronizing but "freeing." The comfort is access intimacy is "eerie" because it is not expected and because access is often a great challenge to achieve. Marisa mobilizes access intimacy to

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[23] Marisa, "1st Interview with the Author."

[24] Mia Mingus to Leaving Evidence, May 5, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/.

argue that a movement that is radically inclusive of disabled people, for example, should include a tireless strive for inclusion:

> To actually have access intimacy and make sure everyone's body is respected in a space you have to change what you're doing in a really intense way, you just don't have events in inaccessible locations, you just don't let someone in who's wearing a scented product, you just don't have an event if you can't get an ASL interpreter or two, because you need two usually to be there. You just don't show a movie if there's not captioning. And I think that disrupts the pace that people are moving at right now. People move at a really intense, numbing pace where they're not able to slow down and see all of what's happening.[25]

Access intimacy is slow work in Marisa's rendering, slow work that is not valued by dominant views of labor, work, and organizing. She argues that access is aspirational, hard work that happens in some disability communities she has been a part of:

> Disability space where everyone's bodies are really respected and honored for being what they are, I think. So when people are sitting on the floor and stretching or leaving the room if they need to. Or you know, there's a lot of people who can't make eye contact for different reasons. When all of those things are really respected I think my needs around scent and space are really respected in a different way, and I feel more comfortable saying what I need.[26]

Access is a relational phenomenon, access intimacy speaks of a close connection to someone or a group of people who understand, or are willing to understand, the complexities of disability.

Access can happen in a variety of ways and in circumstances that are challenging. When speaking to me about bathrooms, Stacy mentions that getting around bureaucratic expectations to enact access can happen through informal channels:

> I think when we were doing some of that work at like Seattle Central Community College was the first time that I was like, Oh I need to figure out a way to make a gender-neutral bathroom happen. And I think like I'm a very working poor, working class person and I was like, 'Oh I know the janitor!' [Laughs] So I'm just going to ask for the key for this specific bathroom that like you needed like just it was a single stall bathroom that was meant for families, and just to use that as opposed to like approaching the administration and getting the institutional change started. And I know there are people that have done a

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[25] Marisa, "2nd Interview with the Author."

[26] ibid.

> lot of good policy work around that here, and sometimes I think that it also is just like, Who's the janitor, are you treating them well enough to like be able to like open up that space when you're in a college after hours to like make it happen. And I think that that is like, I don't know it just seems so practical.[27]

What seems "practical" to Stacy here is something not so evident; it is the result of her class experiences and of a pushing against institutional hierarchy in a creative way. Because of her class background and her own political orientation, she did not see the efficacy of making a large cause out of bathroom access for her event. She acknowledges the importance of this work, but also needed a faster solution. She links economic justice causes of "is the janitor of this college being treated well" with needing an accessible bathroom to make sure events are more open. She was able to make a connection with the janitor in order to open up access possibilities for her event. As with Tash in the previous chapter, who worked through informal channels to create MCS access at university events, Stacy spoke with me about working with all the resources you have to make an event accessible.

Framework/Movement Building

Another salient theme and lesson about cultivating the world otherwise from my oral histories is the importance of framing a movement, namely framing activism as not just fighting oppression, but as surviving for liberation. Stacy frames it in this way:

> how are we from that place going to pave a better world, fight for a better world, liberate ourselves in a way that actually has impacts on people's lives that aren't just ours, if we can't pick ourselves out of the conditions that we're in right now. And I don't mean that in a bootstrap way, I mean, we're already surviving you know.[28]

Stacy pushes for everyone to cultivate skills of self-care and self-protection in order to advocate for others. She is careful to push against the "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" trope and rather

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[27] Ibid.

[28] "1st Interview with the Author."

advocate for a community approach and a focus on how our individual lives and experiences intersect with others.

In both a practice and a questioning of what Stacy encourages, Marisa told me that she is more likely to engage in her own MCS advocacy when she knows access is a value of the event she attends or the group she is a part of:

> I think for me I'm more likely to advocate for myself about scent-free space or about needing something different in a space if I'm either in disability community space where I know access is prioritized. And not just access but everyone's body doing what it needs to do and being as comfortable as possible. Or if I'm with someone else with MCS is when I'm most likely to advocate for myself about it. So there's been situations where I've been with someone else and we've both been like, "do you smell that?" Yeah. And then we can confirm and know we're not making it up. Because I think with MCS there's other people think it's a made up thing or that it's not real and so you can like talk yourself out of advocating. So like usually it's easier if I have community around that to advocate.[29]

Knowing the values and priorities of a group affects Marisa's action plan. She also speaks here of corroboration. As I mentioned in the introduction, corroboration works to value or devalue, comfort or discomfort. Continually facing disbelief, pushback, or dismissal of access needs is a way that one can be "talked out of advocating," in Marisa's words, and a way to push the problem of discomfort onto the already marginalized person. One way to combat this sort of feeling, Stacy argues, is through centering access as an organizing framework:

> Well I mean I think that generally speaking when I am doing like organizing in a space, access is a huge piece. So like making sure that there's, like the bathrooms aren't too scenty or like steps, just that we're doing our best frontloading to be as accessible as possible and giving people an opportunity for people to say what their access needs are that isn't patronizing or objectifying is definitely a part of how I create space when I'm like facilitating for a group or doing you know like anything in community. And I think that that, like physical access needs is one piece of it, also just being like a trauma informed facilitator and like understanding that different people will be activated by different conversations, so trying to be like, like not preventative about that as much as being able to take good care if something is to happen is really important and central to

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[29] "2nd Interview with the Author."

> how I facilitate, what I think is really important when you're trying to do transformational work in community.[30]

Framework labor means setting spatial access and an understanding of trauma as central to the goals of pushing a movement forward. Stacy argues that this is especially important in light of the myriad responsibilities many people face:

> There's more being asked of us than we could ever possibly attend to or like push up against. And so really allowing people to like plug into like a generational goal and vision of activism and like, We are part of a seed that like alleviates the pressure of the capitalist mindset that right now we need to change the conditions that we're in and allows people to be like, Okay what do I care deeply about? Let me be really choiceful about this strategic imprint that I'm trying to leave with and for my community and the next generation and the next, like you know seven generations. And really add some more resource as opposed to make more demands.[31]

One of the most salient points Stacy makes about framework setting is to draw out what it looks like to add resource to a movement, rather than a piling up of demands on activists or aspiring activists.

In a different vein of movement building, Dorian argues that while there is a demand for a larger movement, they think that "little fires" are the way forward. "Little fires" refers to the different goals and issues that various groups are working on. Having an understanding of how causes are connected, but not the same, helps this bigger goal:

> Because right now I think we've got to build a movement. You know. I think certain things that are breaking off from the ideas of like Black Lives Matter and like, I think people are, just worldwide wanting to see changes in the world and right now, people are still toying with the idea of a larger movement. And so until there's a larger movement that's gaining momentum, I think right now it's sort of building little fires in a bunch of different places is the best way to go about it.[32]

"Building little fires" enables groups to work in tandem, especially if those actions feed into other actions and become a larger movement.

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[30] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."
[31] Ibid.
[32] Dorian, "2nd Interview with the Author."

ET spoke to me about a specific group setting up a framework through a disability justice lens. Sins Invalid, a Bay Area-based performance art group, is the example ET presented to me as having created a strong framework for activism.[33] ET was a part of this group, having performed two pieces with this group.

> In terms of activism, Sins Invalid, just the framework. They've started hosting these international video conferences where people who are involved in disability justice and framing that have been meeting to frame like, what is disability justice? What does it mean to us? Sins Invalid is facilitating that but they're creating a space where it can be a broad community that's doing the framing work. And I love that. I love they're not just saying, This is what we say disability justice is, cos that's not disability justice. My feeling, I think that the way they're organizing it is truly in that lens of disability justice, which is you know, uh, multi-ability organizing and um really working to understand each other's different abilities, really centering queer and trans and folks of color in the organizing, all those things.[34]

Among the most important points that ET highlights are the work of "multi-ability organizing," which I take to mean differences in disability through an understanding of differences in talent, experience, and capacity. Framing, then, is about understanding the different ways that activism can look:

> Then the idea is, Well what's wrong with doing some of the "support" work, childcare, cooking, because in some ways that's considered less glamorous work and um and yet it's so important. Like I can't go to parades anymore because I can't push myself in my wheelchair anymore because it hurts my arms and I can't walk either. And that's about me aging because there were years where I did lots of parades in my wheelchair but I cannot do it anymore because I am aging. So there's that. And so it's just a question of, so the topic of where disability justice has helped me understand that activism isn't just you were there at the parade in the streets because most disabled people are not in the parade. When you go to the parade that's not where you see us. You see us doing less glamorous or less public work. Like a lot of online activism, a lot of seated activism where you can do sitting down, that's what you see a lot of us doing more of and there's a lot of value there.[35]

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[33] Sins Invalid is a performance project that centers disabled artists and performers, specifically queer, gender non-conforming, and performers of color. See Berne, "Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility."

[34] ET, "1st Interview with the Author."

[35] Ibid.

ET argues that activism through a disability justice lens is more than just being in the street, care work, office work, and other "less glamorous work" is integral to making a movement happen. This behind the scenes work is essential activism that many people with disabilities are also already participating in. For the 2017 Women's March, a group of disabled people organized an online march, where people who are unable to march could join in. They could not process the number of people who wanted to be involved – thousands more than anticipated by organizers. This shows that there is an obvious need for more creative ideas about what activism can look like.[36]

Tony, a disabled, white, queer social worker also stressed to me a need to think more creatively about activism in our oral history interview. Tony argues for a more expansive understanding of what activism can look like, putting forward a multiplicity of activisms:

> So you start, you know in psychology we talk about how usually when people are challenged at their core of who they are, they have two choices. That they can either conform to the outside and lose their inner identity. Or they can keep their inner identity and not conform to the outside and usually have some repercussions with your social circles. You know. I think I was the latter, I kept myself and really had some hang-ups about what was going on in my social circles. You know I didn't have a choice, I was underage and just had to be there. So yeah I acted out. You know and just uh, I think it was definitely forming in the way that made me question what was out there, made me question how people think of things, made me question these assertions that people take as true and come to my own conclusions. And I think activism is really about that too. You know let's challenge the way things are, let's challenge the way you think about how the world works. And it doesn't have to work that way or is there another way of going about it. You know there are so many different kinds of activism and activism can just be being kind to everyone during your day, because that's going to spread that kindness, that's reactionary. And that's an activism.[37]

The overarching work of framing involves opening up definitions of activism. Having an expansive vision of activism means accounting for access, understanding that people have

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[36] The organizers say that they would like the virtual march to be a model for other activist events. In to Disability March, 2017, https://disabilitymarch.com/2016/11/15/first-blog-post/.
[37] Tony, interview by Ashley Mog, May 23, 2013, Seattle, WA.

different experiences and are at different stages of an activism journey. This requires framing from the beginning of organizing, which is hard work, but the important work to create sustainability.

Emerson describes his goal in framing and movement building as to not only care about the issues directly affecting him, but being involved with wider goals:

> The type of activism that I strive to do is not the stuff that would benefit me the most, it would benefit folks in communities that don't have the same access to opportunities that I have had, or don't have access to the same privilege, whether that be sociocultural, the same white privilege, or the same class privilege that I have had—that I do have access to.[38]

Something implicit in Emerson's point here is that access spans across different experiences of class, race, disability, sexuality, and gender. Access is specific, and changes depending on context. Access needs to be a part of the framing of activist events and the movement building needed to build strong and lasting change – access gets people to events, meetings, and allows people to get involved in resistance movements. As Stacy mentioned at the beginning of this section, building a sustainable movement also requires moving with and beyond one's own experiences to do the work. Having access enables people to get to the activist event and investment in other people's experiences might be what keeps us there. While individual experiences of marginalization might be what initially leads people into activism, there needs to be an interest in how struggles are connected and collective.

Healing Trauma As Activism

The last activist theme that came from my oral histories was one I did not expect. Some of the people I spoke with underscored healing practices as intimately tied to activism. An emphasis on healing as a mode of engaging with activism and as a means of accessing activism

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[38] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."

was something that animated many/all of my interlocutors. Part of Stacy's narrative around healing and activism pertains to the difference between safety and comfort:

> And I think that perceived safety and using the word safety is just like hard because I want people to be able to feel safe and again I want people to be able to feel safe in themselves so they can move through the discomfort and dis-ease of growing and being more impactful rather than being like, 'Oh I feel unsafe here and so I'm going to disengage and pull back and we're just not going to do this right now,' you know. And I feel that is one of the cultural norms that happens here so much.[39]

She argues that feeling discomfort or unease often keeps people from finding a way to engage in activist practices. She argues that this is a cultural norm in Seattle, and getting caught up in discomfort, and transferring this into a feeling of being "unsafe" stops any possible action. It is hard work to move past those feelings of discomfort because of how culturally insidious it is. ET described to me that the breakup of their group, the Disability Justice Coalition (DJC), was partially the result of the interplay between comfort, trauma, and safety:

> And so the amount of personal healing—there was a lot of political work that was happening in the group. There was also a lot of personal healing with trauma happening in the group… And that's asking a lot because everyone in the group had trauma and was very embodied in their trauma. It wasn't people had trauma and weren't aware of it. It was people in the group had trauma and had finally gotten to a place where they had support and community around acknowledging the trauma and saying, 'It's okay for you to ask for what you need access wise.' But then we realized that sometimes it was hard to create equal access for everyone every time. [40]

ET's reflections here are raw and open, they capture the complexity of doing deep access work. Cultivating individual trauma healing is deeply personal but happens in the social environment of activism. Grappling with this personal pain is part of a lasting journey of access. Emerson found that his own activist journey was painful at times and found that when he was more separate from his personal experience, he was able to focus differently on activism:

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[39] Stacy, "2nd Interview with the Author."
[40] ET, interview by Ashley Mog, January 29, 2016, Seattle, WA.

> I think I did some of my strongest—rather I identified strongly, more strongly as an activist around trans issues and around disability issues when I didn't hold those identities very strongly.[41]

He posited his own story as a cautionary one. He was denied insurance coverage for gender affirmative surgery while also fighting for the care of others. This was a challenging time for him and he took a big step back to heal after going through years of struggle. When reflecting with me about this journey, he found that sustainability, pain, and healing were inextricably intertwined:

> Part of my story is hopefully going to highlight that a lot of this work is not sustainable. It's emotionally intense, it hurts on a lot of different levels. I think I lost my thought a little bit but you know, you just have a lot of people telling you to wait for the right time. Which is actually—some of the activism going on right now, specifically with [BLM] movement and some of the police brutality activisms and response to police brutality, people are tired and done with that. And I am noticing a lot more that there's an increase in direct action, there's an increase in making people uncomfortable and the status quo and the time for telling folks that they should just wait until it's their time for whenever they can get on the rights calendar or whatever.[42]

Emerson holds simultaneously that he had to back off of his activism in order to heal but also acknowledged that the fed-up-ness he feels is a catalyst for others to act. ET has a complimentary reflection on activism, wherein trying to do too much makes activism impossible to sustain:

> Because I think in activism there's this whole martyr complex thing or there's this urgency to save the world. And sometimes that makes it so that it's not sustainable work. And disability justice I think one of the inherent values is examining your capacity and working within that and that's okay. You know acknowledging that we have limitations is part of the disability experience and that's okay. And the same goes for activism.[43]

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[41] Emerson, "Interview with the Author."
[42] Ibid.
[43] ET, "2nd Interview with the Author."

What makes activism sustainable for both ET and Emerson is recognizing capacity, confronting the notion that we cannot keep going without a break when something is painful or inaccessible. Stopping to heal and take account of ourselves is an integral part of sustaining activism.

On healing and recognizing trauma as an integral piece of activism, Stacy's idea is to take a big picture look at what it feels like to do activism, what might drive people to activism in the first place, and noting where and how activism becomes unsustainable:

> A deep piece of the healing work that I do is really understanding sort of the um the social conditions that make that entire transaction happen, so the physiobiological ways to ramp down the stress hormones and like, give people the tools to practice something different. But in order for that to happen, a healing process has to happen, you know. And it means that we have to like, yeah, again like be able to have places where we get to engage in those conversations and have that be our lived experience for a while, but in order for us to make impacts in the bigger picture, we have to be able to put down our political identities and really plug back into what's bigger than the everyday oppression that we're experiencing. And what are we plugging into that actually more based on our resilience, more based on our survival and leaves us at the end of the day feeling really good about the work that we're doing in the world and really solid about the impacts that we're making rather than really depleted and really beat up all the time.[44]

She acknowledges that while the conditions of our everyday oppression are important to know and think about, she wants to push activists to something bigger: a collective resistance and resilience. This is highly aspirational, in the way many writers of academic social theory posit aspirational means and goals. She pays attention to individuals, through her healing practice, but has greater ideals in mind of collectivity that leads individual people to avoid the everyday feeling of depletion.

Conclusion to the Conclusion, or Where Comfort Lurks

What can we take away from these activists about comfort and coalition, about social oppression and resistance? In this dissertation, in conversation with activists and other theorists, I have excavated some of the places where comfort lurks, where comfort is the result of

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[44] Stacy, "1st Interview with the Author."

invisibilized labor by marginalized people, where comfort manifests through "acts of elimination" both in and outside of the bathroom.[45] I have also showcased some of the embodied theory from my oral histories with queer and trans disability justice activists about how "bodies in public" may be mobilized to "discomfort power." José Muñoz urged us to "strive in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then* and *there.*" What I hope to convey in my work is that the hard work of access, to bathrooms or any other space, happens through a complex negotiation with comfort in both a here and now *and* a then and there. Imagining what our then and theres look like, taste like, smell like, feel like is work that involves coalition and grappling with comfort in its many guises.

Insidious comfort props up privilege through calls of "I am uncomfortable" in the case of trans and gender non-conforming people using public bathrooms or through calls of "no men in women's bathrooms" as a rallying point. My interlocutors discussed how they make hard choices to avoid drinking water, to face possible violence, to pee on themselves and take extra clothes everywhere as a result, to face illness, and to stay out of public because of the problems with public bathrooms. These struggles happened across many different concerning to do with race, gender, and myriad disability experiences.

The challenging point of insidious comfort is that while there are many shared experiences between marginalized people, such as both MCS and anti-trans violence keeping people from using public bathrooms, our experiences cannot be conflated because losing specificity can enact its own kind of violence. We must heed Ahmed's warning that comfort is a result of invisible labor and notice that labor.[46] Coalitional feeling, recognizing points of familiarity between experiences offer one way into nuanced social justice work. Coalitional

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[45] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 167.
[46] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

feeling is not about always agreeing, but rather finding points to connect on, which was a resounding theme in most of my oral histories. Coalitional feeling is nuanced access work – creating intentional space, where a wide range of people can participate in imagining a different sort of future.

Public bathrooms are saturated with a complex history wherein comfort was built into the walls. The comfort built into walls is what we must grapple with – in and outside of the bathroom – because comfort affects the actions and movements of people outside of the bathroom. I imagine a world otherwise will have fully accessible bathrooms, will not accept comfort as a given, but will interrogate what that means. Power will be discomforted. A world otherwise will be built on the hard work of relationships, frameworks, organizing, and healing that activists are already working on. While there is not necessarily a unified vision for what alternative futures might be, it is crucial to remember that activists are likely to be the ones facilitating these futures through discomforting dominant and dominating power.

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