TRANS*FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: What happens when we consider transformative experiences from the perspective of gender transitions? In this paper I suggest that at least two insights emerge. First, trans* persons’ experiences of gender transitions show some limitations to L. A. Paul’s (2015) decision theoretic account of transformative decisions. This will involve exploring some of the phenomenology of coming to know that one is trans, and in coming to decide to transition. Second, what epistemological effects are there to undergoing a transformative experience? By connecting some experiences of gender transitions to feminist standpoint epistemology, I argue that radical changes in one’s identity and social location also radically affects one’s access to knowledge in ways not widely appreciated in contemporary epistemology.

Increasing attention is being paid to the various decisions we face that change our lives, recently arising in light of L. A. Paul’s (2015) groundbreaking work. These decisions have important implications in how we think about decisions (e.g., decision theory) and the phenomenology of these choices. However, there are also important contributions to epistemological questions to be made by focusing on transformative experiences. Moreover, much can be gained by focusing on some of the experiences of trans people deciding to undertake a gender transition. As I argue in this

1 I should make a few notes on my language choices in this paper. As I also note in McKinnon 2014, I will generally use the language of “trans women” to refer only to transsexual women, and “trans* women,” which is the emerging convention, to be the more inclusive term that refers to all forms of transgender women, including genderqueer, genderfuckers, bi-gender, and so on. The generic “trans*” denotes maximal inclusivity, including trans masculine people, agender people, and so on. The primary focus of this paper, though, is on trans women’s experiences. What I have to say will apply, in varying degrees to other trans* identities.

I also want to note that I do not ascribe to a gender binary where there are only men and women (even if these categories include trans men and trans women). Moreover, I don’t fully ascribe to the distinction between gender (as social and perhaps mental) and sex (as biological). Regarding language, I will use male, female, man, and woman to describe gender identities, whether cisgender or transgender. I’ll typically refer to transgender women as “trans women” when it serves my purposes, and cisgender women as “cis women.” When I use the general form “woman” or “female,” I mean to include both cisgender and transgender women. I know that this is controversial. Fully justifying this is well beyond the scope of this...
paper, when we consider trans people’s decisions to transition through the lens of transformative experiences and decisions, two insights emerge. The first concerns an important limitation to Paul’s account of the normative decision theory of transformative experiences. The second concerns the implications for epistemology when we consider the effects of radically changing one’s social identity and location, which is a feature of some (perhaps even many) transformative experiences. This paper is thus composed of two related projects, tied together by considering trans experiences of gender transition viz. transformative experiences.

I begin by first explaining Paul’s account of transformative experiences, with a focus on her view on the normative decision theory of undertaking such experiences. I then argue that gender transitions count as—perhaps paradigmatic—instances of transformative experiences. I then show that deciding to undertake a gender transition shows important limitations to Paul’s view of the decision theory of transformative experiences. In short, I argue that while one may not know what it will be like after one transitions, one may know what it will be like if one does not.

The remainder of the paper takes up the epistemic effects of radically changing one’s social identity and location, which is something that almost universally occurs when one undertakes a gender transition. I make this case by connecting transformative experiences to feminist standpoint epistemology. In rough outline, I argue that radical changes to one’s social identity and location give one important new access to knowledge that was unavailable or prohibitively difficult to obtain prior to the change. This has broader implications for epistemology: these changes will happen, to greater and lesser degrees, whenever one radically changes one’s social identity or location. Moreover, this has political implications, particularly for anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-oppression projects.

1 Gender Transitions as Transformative Experiences

In “What You Can’t Expect When You’re Expecting,” L. A. Paul endorses, for the sake of argument, a normative decision theory. In deciding whether or not to transition, for example, one must determine the possible actions, the possible outcomes of those actions, the probabilities of the possible outcomes, the values (in terms of utility) of each of the possible outcomes, and then one should choose the option that maximizes one’s expected utility.

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paper. However, one worry I have is that making a relatively clear distinction between, for example, “female” and “woman” is cissexist. Let’s say that we grant that trans women are women (gender term). Are they female (sex/biological term)? Let’s say that we grant that those on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and post-genital surgery are female. That’s problematic for a whole host of reasons, not least of which is the financial burden that such medical interventions cost (they’re often prohibitively expensive, which raises class issues, and other intersectional issues). Such a distinction, I think, often seems to make intersex people invisible and placed into “gray areas” of the applications of the concepts in problematic ways.
Paul argues that some experiences are “epistemically transformative.” She argues that some knowledge involves “what it’s like” experiences, and one cannot have the knowledge of, for example, what it’s like to see red unless one has had that experience. So for someone who has never seen red, such as Mary the neuroscientist in Jackson (1986), when she sees red for the first time, even if she knows that red has a particular wavelength, she’s epistemically transformed. As Paul writes, “[b]efore she leaves her room [to see red for the first time], she cannot project forward to get a sense of what it will be like for her to see red, since she cannot project from what she knows about her other experiences to know what it is like to see [red]” (2015, 7).

Paul continues:

> Before she leaves her room, because she doesn’t know what it’s like to see red, or indeed what it is like to see any sort of color at all, she doesn’t know what feelings and thoughts she’ll experience as the result of seeing red. And so she doesn’t know whether it will be her favorite color, or whether it’ll be fun to see red, or whether it’ll be joyous to see red, or frightening to see it, or whatever. (2015, 7)

Moreover, she won’t know what it’ll be like to have whatever emotions she might have from the experience (and subsequently). Essentially, Mary can’t know what it’ll be like to be herself after her transformative experience. So Paul is arguing that one cannot be rational in deciding what to do when faced with deciding about undertaking a transformative experiences because one cannot know “what it’s like,” or what it will be like, after one has made the choice. More precisely, though, Paul is arguing that one cannot know what one will be like—what one’s preferences will be—after a transformative experience. For example, in deciding whether to have children or not at age 32, I can’t know what it will be like for me to be childless at 50, just as I can’t know what it will be like for me to have an 18 year old child when I’m 50. Moreover, I can’t know what I will be like at 50 with a child, or even what I’ll be like at 50 without a child. I can’t know whether my preferences will change and, if they do, what they would be.

Just as Paul argues that having one’s first child is both epistemically and personally transformative, so is a gender transition. An experience is personally transformative when “it may change your personal phenomenology in deep and far-reaching ways. A personally transformative experience radically changes what it is like to be you, perhaps by replacing your core

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2 I think this isn’t quite right, though. I think that I can have a much better idea of what it will be like for me to be childless at 50 than of what it might be like for me to have an 18 year old child when I’m 50: the former is an easier projection of my life at present, whereas the latter involves a transformative experience (having and raising a child). However, there is certainly room for disagreement here. For a useful discussion, see Arvan Forthcoming. I return to this point in section 2.
preferences with very different ones” (Paul 2015, 8). ³ Gender permeates our lives, often in ways that those who’ve never wrestled with their gender identity don’t realize. From our gendered names, to pronouns, to what we wear, and to how people relate to us, gender inflects all facets of our lives. Changing one’s gender—say, from one binaristic identity to another—will radically change one’s life.⁴

For someone who transitions from, for example, a relatively stereotypical masculine male identity to a relatively stereotypical feminine female identity, nearly everything about her experiences will change.⁵ Moving through the world where people attribute a male gender is very different from moving through the world where people attribute a female gender, particularly in sexist, patriarchal societies such as ours. Men are typically afforded more space than women; women are more likely to be ignored in conversation; people are more comfortable being touched (casually on the arm during conversation, for example) by women; and so on.⁶ The way one relates with social and legal institutions is changed, particularly if the person has to navigate the often complicated systems of changing their sex/gender marker on identification such as a driver’s license, birth certificate, or social security number. It may change one’s tastes in clothing, or at least one’s ability to express and participate in various clothing and gender presentation preferences. And in almost all cases, one’s post-transition preferences will have shifted over time: it’s impossible to predict what gender presentation preferences one will have post transition, and how those choices will feel like, and how they will affect others’ interactions with oneself. For example, how do people react to someone claiming a femme lesbian identity compared to a femme hetero identity? How will one’s athleticism be treated post-transition? How will one’s newfound hobbies of, say, sewing and baking be viewed?

There may also be biological or physiological changes, particularly if one receives hormone replacement therapy or transition-related surgeries.⁷ The latter will certainly change how one has sex with partners and how one experiences sex (including masturbation). It changes the experiences of even more basic bodily functions such as going to the bathroom. A gender transition, then, is a paradigmatic instance of what Paul refers to

³ For a useful discussion on ways that this changes what one knows, particularly viz. sensual knowledge, see Shotwell 2011.
⁴ I can’t stress enough, though, that not all people are binary-identified, and that not all trans people transition from one binary identity to another. People’s experiences will differ, but insofar as one changes one’s socially recognized gender—e.g., in claiming a trans identity—one will radically change one’s experiences.
⁵ This is not at all to say that all these things must change, or that they should, nor is it to say that they will for everyone who transitions.
⁶ A useful, accessible discussion of this can be found in Vincent 2006.
⁷ It’s crucial to note that not everyone has access to safe and adequate transition-related medical care. It’s also crucial to note that not all trans people want any transition-related medical interventions such as HRT or surgeries.
as a transformative experience. The decision to transition, then, is also a paradigmatic transformative decision. However, as I argue in the next section, when we consider the rationality of choosing to transition, we’ll see that Paul’s account of the normative decision theory of transformative decisions gets the gender transition cases wrong.

2 Implications for Decision Theory

Insofar as one must be able to at least attach approximate utilities to each of the possible outcomes of a transformative experience, Paul is correct that one can’t make a normatively rational choice in transformative experience decisions. However, this doesn’t mean that one can’t know (or reasonably believe) what the expected utility of choosing not to have the transformative experience will be. And that’s where I’d like to place some of my focus: for many, but certainly not all, trans people contemplating a gender transition, they know (roughly, though some may know exactly) the expected utility of not transitioning. The upshot is that this shows an important limitation of Paul’s decision theoretic account of transformative experiences.

To simplify things, let’s assume that in deciding to transition, one has the decision between two mutually exclusive options: transition and not transition. Each decision option will have many possible outcomes, but let’s simplify further and assume that one will either be happy or not happy for each decision option. So we have two decision options, each with two possible outcomes, for four possible outcomes: transition-happy, transition-unhappy, not transition-happy, and not transition-unhappy.

The suicide and depression statistics for trans* people are distressing. In a number of studies, the percentage of trans* people surveyed who’ve attempted suicide at least once is around 41%. For many but not all trans people, the available options are either transition or commit suicide. This means that the “not transition-happy” outcome is so unlikely as to be effectively impossible. In cases structured such as these, the outcomes

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8 This then connects to my brief discussion in section 1, and footnote 2, of being better epistemically positioned to know what it will be like not to have a child than what it will be like to have a child.

9 It’s higher for those without family support, for those with more oppressed intersectional identities, and lower for those with family support and with less oppressed intersectional identities. See: http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf, last accessed September 12, 2014. The reader may note that I switch from discussing “trans*” people to “trans” people. The reason is that not all trans* people decide what we would understand as a “gender transition”; however, it’s a common feature of what it means to be trans.

10 I want to make it as clear as possible that not all trans people have the pre-transition experience of considering suicide as the only available option to attempting to transition. I make no claim whether such experiences constitute “most” of trans people’s experiences. I do want to note, though, that the decision theory situation I’m setting up will also work if the outcome options for the agent aren’t simply <suicide or transition>, but also include <deeply unhappy life or transition>. I thank an anonymous referee for the latter point.
of deciding not to transition are known: the probability of “not transition-unhappy” is essentially 1 for many trans people, and the probability of “not transition-happy” is essentially 0.\textsuperscript{11} And the disutility of the “not transition-unhappy” outcome is large. What this means is that the decision situation is between known suffering (or suicide, depending on how we characterize it), and a gamble at an unknown probability of happiness (of an unknown magnitude).

Many of the experiences for trans people who identify with a gender significantly different than their birth-assigned gender (say, someone assigned male at birth but who identifies as female) are that once one comes to understand oneself as trans (and to identify with their gender identity), there’s a feeling of an existential need to transition, and to do it as soon as possible. It becomes all-consuming, often in surprising ways. We can tragically see this in the experiences of those who we’ve lost to suicide: they often report that when they realized (or strongly believed) that they couldn’t transition, often due to a lack of family and social support and acceptance, they saw no other future than one of misery living as their birth-assigned gender.

In light of these features of the decision to transition for many trans people, consider an analogy. Suppose I have to place a bet with my life. I know I’ll lose if I bet on red. But I have an unknown non-zero chance of winning some unknown amount by betting on black. If I care about winning, the only rational choice is to bet on black. So I should do that, according to normative decision theory. The same is true for many trans people contemplating transition.

This has important implications for Paul’s decision theoretic account of transformative decisions and experiences.\textsuperscript{12} Paul’s description of the (normative) decision theory of transformative experiences is importantly incomplete. She’s quite right that in most transformative experiences, one can’t know—or even reasonably guess—whether one will likely be happy (or unhappy) after the experience. Moreover, one is epistemically blocked from knowing one’s post-transformative experience preferences required to complete the utility calculus and perform a rational decision. However, some trans people’s experiences of transition as the only option other than suicide (or of a life of extreme unhappiness) shows us that in contexts such as these, choosing to undertake a transformative experience becomes rational.\textsuperscript{13} Just as it’s rational to bet on red in the aforementioned case, it’s

\textsuperscript{11} Of course, this won’t be true of all trans people contemplating transition.

\textsuperscript{12} Now, one might think that gender transitions aren’t best characterized in terms of Paul’s analysis of transformative experiences. The decision to transition shares all of the key features of Paul’s analysis of transformative experiences, as I discussed at length in section 1, and I can’t think of a good argument for excluding gender transitions as, properly speaking, transformative in Paul’s terms. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

\textsuperscript{13} In a sense, this sort of bet is what poker players (and gamblers, more generally) call a “freeroll.” These bets involve structures where one will be no worse off for “losing” the bet than one is before one takes the best, and since one has a non-zero chance of winning, the
rational for trans people to transition if their only other option (that they judge worth pursuing) is suicide. Paul’s account of the decision theory, and thus the rationality, of transformative experiences needs to account for cases structured such as gender transitions, where one can effectively know the probability and cost associated with not deciding to undertake the transformative option. However, I make no comment on how that ought to be done.

3 Trans*formative Knowledge

But what of the coming to know about one’s trans* identity, and the potential attendant decision to transition? And what does the phenomenology of that coming to know look like? Phenomenologically, an experience common to many trans people at the beginning of their transition is an identifiable instant where one goes from not considering oneself trans (that is, anything other than the binaristic gender one was assigned at birth), to opening oneself up to the possibility of being trans, to knowing that one is trans.

Why would there be so many stories sharing this experience, though? One might think that coming to realize that one is trans (and that one ought to transition) would be much like what has sometimes been called a “feminist awakening?” As Clara Fischer (2014) describes it, a feminist awakening is a “transformative experience from nonfeminist (un)consciouness to...
feminist consciousness” (122). That is, it’s when one comes to self-identify as a feminist. Fischer argues that “coming to feminist consciousness is not an abrupt, sudden event, but rather a protracted experience, being rooted in the contradictions of oppressive systems, manifested in feelings of uncertainty and unease” (140). As I’m arguing, though, many people’s “trans awakening,” as it were, are unlike Fischer’s description of a slow, gradual feminist awakening. Understanding why will be important, as I’ll argue that many trans women’s “trans awakening” was shortly followed by their feminist awakening. And how these experiences differ will tell us something important about epistemology.

In understanding how coming to know that one is trans may be abrupt, though perhaps at the end of a long struggle with one’s unease with one’s birth-assigned gender, William James’s (2014 [1897]) discussion of a genuine hypothesis, and particularly his distinction between live and dead options, is helpful. For James a live hypothesis or option, for an agent, is one that is a legitimate candidate for belief by the agent. Not all possibly (or even necessarily) true propositions are live options for all agents. James’s example was belief in God: for some atheists, it’s simply not the case that they’ll possibly believe in God.17

Until I came to know myself as trans, one might say that I considered myself cis (well, I didn’t know about the concept of cisgender, so I merely didn’t consider myself trans). The truth is that I was long aware that trans people existed (though only through terrible, stereotyped media portrayals in movies like Ace Ventura: Pet Detective or daytime television like The Maury Povich Show). And while I experienced a distinct and persistent discomfort with my gendered self starting around age 12, I didn’t once consider being trans as even a possible explanation. That is, it simply wasn’t a live hypothesis for me. However, I can distinctly remember the moment (even the exact date) where I first opened up being trans as a live option (after much research and reflection on trans narratives).18 And in the very same instant, I went from opening myself up to the possibility to knowing that it was the case: I was trans. The rest, they say, is history.

What’s important is that this is a very common experience among those who undergo a gender transition: years of doubt, avoidance, of not viewing

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17 He raised this as an objection, and I think a convincing one, to Pascal’s Wager argument directed at atheists. Pascal effectively argued that atheists convinced by the wager argument, but who didn’t yet believe in God, should go through the motions as if they believed in God, and eventually they would come to believe. James was raising a problem for this argument.

18 I think it’s important to flag that I don’t share the “traditional” trans narrative: knowing from approximately age 3, not engaging in behaviors expected for one’s birth-assigned gender, having a post-transition heterosexual orientation, the feeling of being “trapped in the wrong body,” and so on. This made coming to know difficult, since most widely circulated trans narratives portray exclusively the “traditional” narrative, and so it was hard to find stories and experiences that matched mine. Thankfully, though, that is slowly changing, as more voices are speaking, and a more accurate representation of the vast variety of experiences is being shared and read. For a discussion of some reasons we should reject this as a standard trans narrative, see Bettcher 2014.
being trans as a live option. But the moment it’s opened up as an option, the phenomenology of the transition to knowing is abrupt and almost instantaneous. Moreover, were being trans a live hypothesis to me at 12, I’m confident that I would have come to know much earlier than I did. The epistemic roadblock was, in a real sense, merely that being trans wasn’t a live option for quite a long time.

In what follows, I will turn my lens to what trans experiences can teach us about epistemology. In particular, I will consider how viewing gender transitions through feminist standpoint epistemology can teach us something important about how radically changing one’s social identity and location can create new, and very different, opportunities for knowledge.

4 Radical Changes in Epistemic Standpoint

Relatively much has been written in feminist standpoint epistemology of the importance of one’s social identity, location, or situatedness for access to various instances or forms of knowledge. A typical view, for example, is that members of oppressed groups are often in a better epistemic position to see the oppressive nature of social institutions. However, relatively little has been written on what effects changes in one’s situatedness, whether minor or radical, have on knowers. My purpose in this section is to explore these effects, focusing on gender transitions as a case study.

Feminist standpoint epistemologies (FSEs) focus on three central theses: situated knowledge, epistemic privilege, and achievement (Harding 1991, 1993; Wylie 2001, 2003, 2004; Pohlhaus Jr. 2002; Rolin 2006; Intemann 2010; Crasnow 2013). All of these theses are related, but they have some distinct attributes. It’s important to note that there are many different feminist standpoint epistemologies, hence the plural. Currently endorsed epistemologies shift and change over time, particularly as new knowers enter the conversations to question assumptions of extant theories. Each of these theses can be brought to bear on insights gained from radical shifts in one’s situatedness.

For much of epistemology’s history, it was thought that politics or one’s identity, such as biases and prejudices, could only contribute to block objectivity in science, and to knowledge acquisition in general. FSEs—and feminist standpoint empiricism—turn that assumption on its head by acknowledging how one’s identity can be a critical resource in creating knowledge. In fact, feminist epistemologists and feminist philosophers of science started to see gaps in our scientific knowledge (and knowledge

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19 As I’ll discuss, two notable exceptions are Kukla and Ruetsche 2002 and Shotwell 2011.
20 Importantly, much of what FSEs have to contribute is consistent with much of “mainstream,” mostly atomistic epistemology, particularly when we focus on definitions of knowledge. However, FSEs tend to categorically reject the concept of an atomistic knower; that is, one who can adopt the view from nowhere, to use Nagel’s (1986) phrasing, and know some proposition without any reference to their situatedness.
more broadly) due to traditional atomistic epistemologies that considered, for example, the gender of the researcher irrelevant. So, far from being merely a liability, in some contexts one’s situatedness is an asset for creating knowledge. But what do we mean by situatedness, and what is FSEs’ situatedness thesis?

Each person has a complicated intersectional identity, composed of various socially and biologically constructed factors. These factors include race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, religious affiliation, nationality, and so on. These also include perceived versions of these statuses. For example, someone who is black might appear, and thus be racialized, as white. These are sometimes called “invisible” identities.

What matters for the situated knowledge thesis is that one’s social location as, say, a cisgender black heterosexual woman, as a member of an oppressed class, may allow her to “recognize that many of the concepts and procedures adopted by [a] discipline are problematic when her colleagues do not, precisely because she is able to see the objects of study both with the eyes of a researcher trained in the discipline and through her own experience from a marginalized social location” (Crasnow 2013, 417, discussing Collins 1986).

The situated knowledge thesis goes hand in hand, I think, with the epistemic privilege thesis. The latter is the idea that those with a particular situatedness—particularly those with oppressed intersectional identities—have, as a consequence of having their identity within a social structure, an epistemic advantage in accessing certain kinds of knowledge, especially of the structures of oppression themselves. For example, if we want to

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21 However, I am of the view that any biological feature, such as race, sex/gender, and so on is also inherently socially constructed. What it means for someone to be black, mixed race, a man, or a woman (or neither!) inherently depends on social decisions, almost always implicit and undisclosed. For some useful discussions of Intersectionality, see Crenshaw 1991 and Garry 2008, 2012.

22 See Alcoff 2005. This is sometimes also discussed in the stereotype threat literature. See McKinnon 2014.

23 I think it’s critical to note that this insight was long ago discussed in terms of “double consciousness.” Collins and Crasnow both use the phrase “double vision,” which I worry is ableist.

24 Talia Mae Bettcher (2009) argues that, setting aside the epistemic privilege question aside, there’s a moral duty to give trans people (and, by extension, those with marginalized identities) first person testimonial authority. It’s also important to note that one view in feminist standpoint epistemology is that we should aim to understand social structures and identities from the perspective of those with the relevant identities and situatedness. See, for example, Harding 1991, 2006. Gaile Pohlhaus (2012) makes a similar point. She argues that “if a person’s social position makes her vulnerable to particular others, she must know what will be expected, noticed by, and of concern to those in relation to whom she is vulnerable, whereas the reverse is not true. Finally, when one is marginally positioned, the epistemic resources used by most knowers in one’s society for knowing the world will be less suited to those situations in which marginally situated knowers find themselves on account of being marginal” (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012, 717).
know about problems with how women’s testimony (not strictly only in legal contexts) is often treated with insufficient epistemic authority (that is, we’re interested in understanding what Fricker (2007) calls testimonial injustice) then we should ask women, not men. Since women inhabit the relevant social locations for the knowledge we seek to gain, they’re the better sources due to their inhabiting that identity within that structure of oppression. Moreover, if we want to understand how black people suffer epistemic injustice, we should ask black people about their experiences, not white people.

Here’s an illustrative example of both the situated knowledge and epistemic privilege theses working together. I’m fairly active on social media platforms such as Facebook. An acquaintance had posted a story about a recent study of hormone therapy treatment for trans women, specifically focusing on the importance of antiandrogens (testosterone blockers) in concert with estrogen therapy. A cisgender male physician, who works with trans patients, made a comment about how antiandrogens are critical in treating “bio-males.” I asked him to define this term, which he took to refer to “someone who has functional testes with average production levels of testosterone in their system.” This is deeply problematic language to use in describing trans women, but he couldn’t understand what might be objectionable about this term and its use.

This is oppressive terminology, particularly in describing trans women. There is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a body to count as male or female.25 The categories are socially constructed in that science alone can’t tell us how to classify all people into the binary categories of “male” and “female.” There will necessarily be borderline and unclear cases. For example, like the physician, most people take someone with functioning testes to count as clearly male. However, there are a number of intersex conditions where someone appears otherwise female, but have functioning testes that produce testosterone. Are we to count these people as male or female? Biology alone can’t answer that for us. Moreover, what of a trans woman who has had genital surgery (which includes removing the testes)? Is she suddenly no longer a “bio-male”? If so, then this privileges those who desire (as not all trans women do) and can afford (as even fewer can) genital surgery. Rather, the physician should use more descriptive terms such as “trans women who have functioning testes” rather than “bio-male.” The latter is oppressive in ways that the former is not.26

The key point is that the cisgender male physician couldn’t understand how “bio-male” might be oppressive, let alone offensive. However, as a trans woman myself, I’ve had to deal with the ways that being socially

25 A useful recent discussion can be found in Karkazis et al. 2012.
26 For two recent blog posts/online articles on this topic, see http://www.autostraddle.com/let-it-go-for-the-last-time-trans-women-were-not-born-boys-255055/ and http://www.metamorphosis.com/blog/2013/04/40-hey-youd-know-right-how-do-guys-think.html, both last accessed September 30, 2014.
labeled “male,” particularly in reference to my biology (chromosomes, hormones, presence or absence of testes, etc.) operates within social and medical systems to create oppression. For example, in many jurisdictions, one must have genital surgery in order to change the sex/gender marker on one’s identification such as a driver’s license, health care card, passport, social security number, and so on. Conceiving of gender in terms of someone’s genitals, then, affects whether their gender—as female, in this case—can be legally and socially recognized. And this produces oppression. Someone without the double consciousness of both a trans woman who has struggled with the relevant systems of oppression, and one well trained as a researcher (who also engages in trans advocacy and activism) is less well epistemically positioned to understand “bio-male” as oppressive. And unsurprisingly, this is what happened. Even upon explaining it, the physician struggled to grasp the seriousness of the problem. Importantly, this person considers himself an advocate for trans health care (and he is). But he remains epistemically impoverished due to his situatedness.

Finally, the achievement thesis is that knowledge isn’t something passively gained from the world. Rather, knowledge is gained through struggling with the world, with particular attention to one’s situatedness and social structures. This connects nicely to my comments earlier about the phenomenology of a gender transition. It effectively forces one (in transitioning from one instantiation of masculinity to an instantiation of femininity, in particular I think) to struggle with the world in ways one hadn’t before.

It’s a contingent fact of our world that navigating the world in differently gendered bodies and personalities presents people with different experiences. Men typically have some version of male privilege, which may entail a likelihood of being paid more than a woman of equal qualifications, on one hand, or having his utterances given a higher baseline level of respect, on another hand. Of course, this is not to say that all men will benefit from male privilege, or that they will do so equally. Intersectionality matters, as always. However, to take but one of many examples from my own experiences, pre-transition, I noticed that my questions at philosophical conferences were taken up by speakers and afforded a level of respect appropriate to taking a question seriously. However, on one vivid occasion, as the only women in the audience of a session on decision theory (an area in which I have some expertise), I asked a fairly simple question about the basis of the speaker’s argument. He didn’t understand what I was asking. I re-phrased. He still didn’t understand. I re-phrased one more time.

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27 Bettcher (2007; 2009) writes about how gender presentation in our North American society is often about genitals. It’s important to remind the reader that I don’t subscribe to the sex/gender distinction at all.

28 Here I’m thinking of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois (2007 [1903]).

29 I take up the relationship between gender, language, and norms of language in the final chapter of McKinnon 2015.
Still nothing. A man (and soon to become friend, particularly due to our bonding over this experience) reiterated my question, almost verbatim of the form of my first asking, and suddenly the speaker understood and gave an answer.

This is an experience that many women have experienced. One need only look at the many posts on blogs such as the “What it’s like to be a woman in philosophy” blog www.beingawomaninphilosophy.com. And we may grant that many (cis) men are well aware that sexism exists, and may know, propositionally, that women face this sort of discrimination and epistemic injustice. However, I’ve personally experienced a particularly transformative kind of change in my perceptions of events like this. Sexism stands out in a way it didn’t before: being forced to struggle against implicit bias, sterotype threat, attributional ambiguity, harassment, and all the social ills disproportionately visited upon women has changed my epistemic access to how things are in the world. And while such knowledge is, I think, strictly speaking available to (cis) men, their not having to struggle with it in the same way as many women leads to the men being epistemically disadvantaged on these issues. And while, pre-transition, I was ostensibly aware of sexism and many of its manifestations, I didn’t fully understand what it felt like to experience sexism, and what it felt like to inhabit a world of structural oppression. So part of the shift in my understanding of sexism has come from experiencing the “what it’s like” of sexism in addition to having the propositional knowledge that these forms of sexism exist.

Critically, though, this coming-to-know and understand the presence and operation of sexism and misogyny on women isn’t limited to raising one’s personal awareness, or the awareness of only those who share the same intersectional identity. The insights that, in this case, trans women gain into sexism and misogyny can aid in cis women’s understanding too. For example, some of my experiences of the same conversational spaces before-and-after transition give insights into how deeply gendered expectations of speech permeate our worlds. And sharing these observations with cis women can (and indeed has) led to them coming to understand these features of their spaces in ways they may not have previously appreciated.

This is something that I think has been given insufficient attention in the various, mostly feminist, literatures touching on standpoint epistemology. Relatively little has been said about the epistemic and political implications

30 For further discussions of these issues, see Hutchison and Jenkins 2013.
31 But while I think that there are parallels with, for example, a person of color experiencing structural racism, I don’t take my experiences understanding sexism and misogyny (and, indeed, transmisogyny) to give me critical insight into what it’s like to be not white in our (Western, North American) world. For example, as I argue below, while I may understand the ways in which certain spaces are “white spaces,” I lack the “what-it’s-like” understanding of what it means to inhabit such spaces as a non-white person. I will fail to notice subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which white spaces fail to make way for non-white bodies and participation. I will likely also fail to notice subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which white spaces facilitate my presence and participation.
of what happens when someone is able to shift their social situatedness. Rebecca Kukla and Laura Ruetsche (2002) discuss how people can struggle to change their “contingent second natures.” However, their work focuses on changing how one interacts with knowledge, often through much personal struggle, but doesn’t focus on how changing who one is—that is, one’s identity and social situatedness—may affect one’s position as a knower. So in an important sense, their work focuses on less radical changes than what I’m interested in discussing.

Alexis Shotwell (2011), to some extent, discusses changes in identity and how this may affect one as an epistemic agent. She focuses, though, more heavily on the implicit understandings, such as one’s knowledge of oneself, one’s embodiment, emotions, and so on, than she does of how one may change one’s ability to come to know things about the world apart from oneself. Instead, I want to focus on what Avery Gordon (1997) has called “transformative recognition.” She writes, “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (8). And this is what a gender transition is like: one is forced to struggle with radically different experiences. One becomes changed as a knower, almost magically, often whether one wants to or not. So while changes in one’s contingent second natures typically involves much conscious effort, the epistemic changes one faces when one radically changes one’s situatedness, such as through a gender transition, is different in both degree and kind.

I think we can learn something important about what it means to come to know things—about oneself, others, and the world—by considering what happens when people radically change their situatedness. I grant, of course, that such changes are hard to undertake, and there aren’t many instances where people can undergo such changes. It’s not as if one can change one’s race, for example, in the same way one can change one’s gender identity.

One might question this, though. In *Black Like Me* (1961), John Howard Griffin does for attempting to go undercover viz. race what Norah Vincent does viz. gender. Griffin, a white man, takes on the appearance and persona of a black man. Essentially, Griffin undertakes a project of passing as a black man. In the preface, Griffin writes that, “This may not

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32 I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

33 Issues of passing come up in a number of fraught ways, and a black person can “pass” as a white person, for instance; similarly, a cis man can “pass” as a woman under the right conditions. Issues here, though, are that “passing as” connotes that one is not authentically the identity that one passes as. This can be fraught, for example, given that there is a large focus in some trans communities (and certainly in many media obsessions of trans identities and lives) on “passing” but not in the “passing as” sense. Trans women, for example, simply are women, after all. Passing in this sense is much more closely connected to what Kessler and McKenna (1978) refer to as gender attribution. A trans person’s efforts to “pass” as their authentic gender, then, involves attempts to alter the gender attributed to them by others.
be all of it. It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down. Some Whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man’s experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro’s. But this is picayunish, and we no longer have time for that” (1961, i).

Griffin’s project involved only changing the pigmentation on his visible skin. He didn’t change his name or any other details. Certainly, this would be easier to get away with in the pre-internet era. A journalist like Griffin would be easily searchable, and images of him as a white man would be easily discoverable. He travelled to New Orleans, arranged to have his skin pigmentation changed, and began his experiment.

This undoubtedly was an edifying experience for him (and thus for his readers). In a sense, I have been arguing for the position that Griffin takes: “How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?” (1961, 1), noting “that the best way to find out if we had second-class citizens and what there plight was, would be to become one of them” (1961, 3). In a sense, it’s an avowal of standpoint epistemology. He took himself to be an expert on race issues, but realized that his knowledge barely scratched the surface of the reality of being black in the US south.\(^{34}\) Insights were gained into what it means to lack white privilege, and to suffer anti-black racism. During his experiment, Griffin gained access to information that as a person racialized as white he did not have previously. For example, black people would mention or discuss features of their experiences of white people that they would only tend to say to other racialized-as-black people. One consequence of my gender transition—and along with it passing privilege—was access to similar information that women tend only to share with other women.

And yet, it’s hard not to think that Griffin took himself to be gaining new insights a little too easily, too quickly, and without enough struggle. He claims to be coming to perceive things he never did before partly because “I had seen [the ghetto] before from the high altitude of one who could look down and pity. Now I belonged here and the view was different” (1961, 19). But how different and why? He hasn’t yet suffered any anti-black racism. There’s nothing epistemically blocking him from seeing things as he does at this point were he still racialized-as-white: he just wasn’t looking before.

One problem with his experiment is that Griffin failed to properly inhabit a body racialized-as black. He lacked the appropriate situatedness of being black. He had the option of reversing the blackness of his skin and immediately transforming back into a white man were it to serve his (insofar as this is even under their control), and so is fundamentally different from Griffin’s project, since Griffin continued to be a white man even when he was attempting to pass as a black man. I raise this largely to set it aside.

\(^{34}\) A consequence of the view I’m offering in this paper is that his “expertise” viz. race issues in the United States at the time, since he was a white man, was relatively impoverished.
purposes. When he recounts the first time a slur was directed at him, he writes, “I learned a strange thing—that in a jumble of unintelligible talk, the word ‘nigger’ leaps out with electric clarity. You always hear it and it always stings” (1961, 22). This is questionable: does the sting that he feels share the what-it’s-like that it would for someone who is actually black? I sincerely doubt this. The slur was certainly directed at his body (which was racialized-as-black) but not him as a person since he was fully aware that he was just playing the part of a black man for his experiment.

All the while, Griffin knew that his long-term economic and social prospects weren’t affected by anti-black prejudice and implicit biases. He could code-switch when appropriate: he could break character and reveal his whiteness, and talk in a racialized-as-white way, or produce proof of his whiteness (such as a photograph). It was merely an experiment for Griffin. Being a trans woman, though, is no experiment. Trans women are women. While there is to some extent the possibility to “de-transition,” these cases are extremely rare and always traumatic. Much more importantly, though, Griffin’s experiences lack the historical situatedness of experiencing, struggling against, and indeed suffering anti-black racism. Racism wasn’t directed at him, but only at the façade that he created as part of his experiment.

Philosophers have made related attempts to show an analogy between a gender transition and at least the possibility of race transitions (or being so-called “transracial” or receiving “transracial surgery” or other medical interventions in parallel to the various available gender analogues, such as what Griffin underwent for his experiment). The idea here is that race and gender are analogues. So we have, for example, the claim by Christine Overall (2004) that “if transsexual surgery is morally acceptable . . . then transracial surgery should be morally acceptable” (184). But I think it’s wrong to consider gender and race analogues in this sense.

Cressida Heyes (2005, 2009) notes that “to the extent that the creation of particular subjectivities is a necessarily historical process, in which certain possibilities become sedimented by years of social practice, sex [or gender] and race have emerged looking rather different” (2009, 141). In brief, her view is that “an individual’s racial identity derives from her biological ancestors undermines the possibility of changing race, in ways that contrast with sex-gender” (142). That is, “race is taken to be inherited in a way that sex [or gender] is not” (144). Moreover, “[w]ith race inhering both in the body and in ancestry, and transracialism lacking a diagnostic mechanism, the marketing of race-altering body modifications cannot play to individual essence to the extent that sex change can” (144).

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35 One might note that Griffin and his supporters were concerned that he would suffer anti-black racist effects were his experiment to become known to, for example, hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. However, these effects would attach to Griffin as perhaps a “black sympathizer” rather than as a black man.
There are thus a number of important disanalogies between radical shifts in one’s social (and thus epistemic) location viz. race and gender, and this largely explains my focus on gender transitions rather than on race transitions. This presents an unfortunate barrier, I think, to anti-racist epistemologies, for example. George Yancy (2012; 2014; 2015; Unpublished) has argued that one critical aspect of white anti-racist development must involve white people developing the sort of double-consciousness that DuBois (2007 [1903]) articulated that black people develop. On this view, white people need both to come to see themselves through their own eyes as white people and to see themselves through the eyes of black people and other people of color. Even the first part, seeing themselves through their own eyes as white people is a significant step in societies where whiteness is normalized and treated as the default. However, if I’m right that one must experience the “what-it’s-like” of an oppressed group identity, then white people’s double-consciousness will fail to achieve the depth of understanding capable in black double-consciousness.

In short, I suspect that it’s easier for one to come to see what it’s like to be oppressed by obtaining the identity and situatedness of the oppressed. It’s harder, although I think and hope not impossible, to come to know these same things without such a radical transformation. But fortunately, I also think, we should attend to the experiences of those who do—or are able to—undertake such radical shifts in their situatedness, and what their experiences can teach us about, for example, epistemology.

I noted in the previous section that a common experience for trans women who undertake a gender transition is that their transition is often (though certainly not always) closely followed by some form of a “feminist awakening.” The lens of feminist standpoint epistemology can help explain this. When one used to inhabit the world with a male gender attribution, one lacks the what-it’s-like quality of misogyny and sexism. One might be relatively well aware of the concept of misogyny and its effects on women. However, actually inhabiting the world as a woman and having patriarchal forces operate on oneself is a different matter. In short, it’s the difference between knowing the rules of a sport and actually playing. Some things just have to be experienced. An anecdote will help clarify what I mean.

Prior to my transition, I was somewhat aware of stories where women would say that they were often talked over, ignored, or variously excluded from conversations. However, I had yet to perceive any instances of this. This is not at all to say that I was never present for such instances: were I present, and one of these instances happened, I simply didn’t perceive it as such. However, within a few months of transition (“thanks” largely to passing privilege, where people routinely perceive me as a cisgender woman even, paradoxically, many who know about my trans status), I was part of

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36 Nussbaum (1997) discusses how literature may serve this sort of function.
37 For an insightful discussion of issues of gender attribution, see Kessler and McKenna 1978.
38 I recount a number of these as well as others on my blog, www.metamorpho-sis.com.
a three person conversation in a lunch room. I was asked a question about pedagogy by one of my male interlocutors, and in the middle of my answer, when I paused to take a breath, he physically turned his body to begin a new conversation only with the other male interlocutor. Since we were arranged in a triangle, this effectively excluded me from the conversation. Neither of them turned to me while speaking to indicate my inclusion in “their” conversation. “My” conversation was clearly over, as the topic was dropped, and my story cut off. So the exclusion was two-fold: the topic I was participating in was dropped and a new one taken up that was focused on the third person’s interests, and both male interlocutors physically shifted to face each other, turning the triangle into a pair, with me to the side.

This is, of course, a very minor observation. But it was one of the first of many, of increasing severity. It was surreal: I was aware that women are often excluded from conversations in exactly the way I just was, but I hadn’t perceived it before it happened to me. Changing my social identity and location to being a woman changed my situatedness and it changed how I struggle against subtle forms of misogyny and sexism. This changed, and began to sharpen, my ability to even perceive such instances as instances of sexism. The social change led to epistemic changes. I don’t claim that these changes were inevitable, though: the transition didn’t guarantee that I would have these epistemic changes. However, it certainly facilitated the changes.

Does this mean that having the “what-it’s-like” of experiencing misogyny is necessary to have a feminist awakening? Certainly not. Anyone can be a feminist. However, what I’m claiming is that one’s access to various forms of knowledge does depend on one’s social identity and location. In order to more deeply grasp what it means to be a woman in our Western societies, one does need to be a woman. Feminist standpoint epistemology helps explain this.

Returning to Clara Fischer’s discussion of personal change and feminist awakenings, she writes that “[f]eminist understandings permeate almost every aspect of one’s existence now [after one’s feminist awakening], as previously unproblematic norms become problematized and reassessed in feminist terms. Issues surrounding the body, sexuality, work, family life, and so on, all come to be seen in a different light, or through what feminists call ‘gendered lenses’” (2014, 124). As I’ve been arguing, the same almost universally happens for those who undertake a gender transition: the same events in the world take place, but one perceives them from a different epistemic standpoint.

Consider one more analogy. Suppose that one has experienced most of one’s life as a predator animal. One is an expert hunter and is adept at perceiving features of one’s environment (such as the direction of wind, lay of the land, and so on) such that one can be fairly good at predicting where one’s prey will move. But suppose that this person is suddenly transformed
into what was very recently their prey animal. On my view, they will begin to perceive the same world in importantly different ways. They may come to understand why the prey attempts to evade the predator as they do. They may begin to perceive areas as good hiding places, ones that the predators don’t tend to notice. And they’ll start to notice these because their situatedness has changed.

Turning to a real-world example, many men are at least somewhat aware that women often feel unsafe walking home alone at night, particularly after dark. They may even have some understanding why women experience this fear. But they tend to lack the “what-it’s-like” experience that women tend to have. And lacking that “what-it’s-like” has epistemic effects. For example, many men aren’t aware that many women choose to wear footwear on walks home at night in which they can more easily run if they need to.

Now consider a trans woman who transitions in her 20s. I’ve spoken to many trans women who transitioned in their 20s or 30s who’ve had the experience where pre-transition they had no real concern about walking home on a particular route at night. But post-transition, they were acutely afraid of that same route, and they changed their behaviors accordingly. What was taken to be known—that women experience fear and concern about walking home alone in the dark—took on a new depth of understanding when the same agent occupied the social identity and position of a woman being confronted with walking home alone in the dark.

So by way of conclusion, I think we can learn something important about what it means to come to know things—about oneself, others, and the world—by considering what happens when people radically change their situatedness. While one may have access to some kinds of knowledge given one’s situatedness, one is epistemically disadvantaged—or even blocked—from other kinds of knowledge grounded in other social identities and locations. And I’ve applied feminist standpoint epistemology in order to make sense of this.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I’ve raised the question about what we can learn viz. transformative experiences through the lens of gender transitions. Gender transitions are a paradigmatic case of transformative experiences, in Paul’s sense. I first argued that considering the rationality of gender transitions for some trans* people shows an important limitation to Paul’s account of the decision theory for transformative experiences. On the one hand, one might have some understanding of what it would be like were one not to undertake a transformative experience. On the other hand, and more importantly, in some situations such as some gender transitions, one may rationally choose the transformative experience since the cost of not so choosing is so high.
I second considered some of the ways in which gender transitions are transformative. Specifically, I argued that radical changes in one’s social identity and location can lead to radical shifts in one’s access to various forms of knowledge. Prior to the transformative experience, one was epistemically disadvantaged—or even blocked—from knowledge that becomes facilitated (though not guaranteed) after the experience. One of the upshots of this is that philosophers will have to re-consider the consequences of including first-person accounts in work related to various intersectional identities. Another is that it raises a worry about various anti-oppression and anti-racist projects that partly depend on those with more powerful social identities and locations developing a sort of epistemic double-consciousness we normally associate with those with the less powerful identities and locations. Both of these, I suspect, will result in a foregrounding of epistemic trust in first-person reports of people with the relevant intersectional identities.

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