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Queer University: An Ethnographic Case Study of the Trans Student Experience of College Campus Space

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An Honors College Project Presented to
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by Madeline Johnson

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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College Campus Space**
Madeline Johnson

ABSTRACT

Operating from the premise that physical space becomes a gendered reality through social interaction, this study examines the social formation of self for gender nonconforming college students. Through ethnographic observations of an LGBTQ+ student organization and interviews with self-identified trans¹ students, this research highlights the negotiation of campus space from a queer participant perspective. First, I present the trans student description of cisnormative space, the process of queering space through forming a queer community, and the experience of perceived safe space. This study finds that students experience all on-campus space as pervasively and fundamentally cisnormative, but upon the erasure of their gender identity in interaction, engage in acts of small acts of resistance to 'queer' the situation. Second, I find that the interlocking pressures of college life provide specific contingencies that exhaust trans students, such that many turn to an explicitly queer space. Thus, many trans students hold that 'queer space' is synonymous to 'safe space', defining and creating a "queer community" through shared language and ideals of queer identity. This equivalence leads to a split narrative of safe space as some define 'queer space' as 'safe space', while others hold 'queer space' to be a reification of the cisnormative public space, and argue that the normative goal should not be safe space, but rather inclusive public space.

INTRODUCTION

Think about the built environments involved in your daily routine. When you move around these spaces, do you feel welcome, safe, and comfortable? The sociological study of gender and space seeks to understand how the physical spaces of social interaction become gendered, especially in ways that enforce gender difference, oppression, and inequality (Spain 2014, Spain 2015). The experience of transgender individuals is particularly central to this discussion in that trans people often do not perform the 'correct' gender identity expected by cisnormative² society, but instead embody gender in a way that breaks the binary male or female norms. Some scholars have called this 'queering space' such that a gender nonconforming identity exacts an interruption on social space and particular interactions become gendered. A trans individual's spatial interruption, or 'queering' of space, suggests that their navigation of social space is inherently different and unique (Doan 2010). This study will examine, if and how that happens on college campuses in order to understand how trans college students negotiate on-campus space in terms of what is described as "safe" space, "claimed" space, and "gendered" or "queered" space. It is my hope as a researcher to expose the "world-taken-for-granted" of cisgender individuals navigating the heteronormative and cisnormative spaces of these campuses, by exposing injustice unknowingly imposed on the

¹ Trans is the latin prefix meaning "across" or "beyond". The term transgender (or trans) refers to any individual who self-identifies with a gender that differs from their biological sex assigned at birth. Cis is the latin prefix meaning "on the same side" and cisgender individuals experience only the gender identity consistent with the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

²Cisnormative refers to the assumption that all human beings identify only with the gender that corresponds to the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

peripheral transgender community through the creation and embodiment of space (Schutz 1973). This ethnographic research is oriented toward a 'queer community' of trans college students navigating college campus space. There is frequent talk at this fieldsite about the creation of safe space, community, and communication--goals seemingly realized in the experience of many individuals involved in the club. But particularly for students who identify as transgender, their gender identity is not a 'given' within the majority of on-campus space. Instead, they must constantly negotiate their identity in interaction with others. This study highlights individual gender identities within the trans constellation: a term encompassing the myriad *gender nonconforming* identities, which includes all who do not conform to a culturally prescribed gender expectation of either man or woman. The idea of a trans constellation (as opposed to an 'umbrella') enables nonconforming identities to be grouped together without establishing one as dominant. *Genderqueer or Genderfluid* individuals generally do not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions and may "queer" gender presentations regardless of their gender identity, and/or may identify outside of the conventional binary gender divide of man/woman. This means they could experience continuous gender fluctuation along the spectrum or could simply refuse to 'fit' within the socially prescribed constructions of what it means to be 'man' or 'woman'. Genderqueer individuals may or may not identify as transgender. Note that this distinction is nuanced and theoretically ambiguous, and although a large body of literature discusses gender and space, there is very little theoretically situated around nonconforming gender identities (for some exceptions see McKinney 2005, Doan 2010, and Nagoshi 2010). Therefore, this study addresses that gap by focusing on the lived experience of those trans individuals at my fieldsite as they articulate it: their meanings, their experience, and their definitions of situations will emerge in the ways I analyze the data.

Crucial to this lived experience is the idea of "passing". For trans students, gender is a process that has to be repeatedly defined and negotiated within interaction. To pass as woman, for example, an individual may dress, speak, and carry themselves a certain way in order to 'successfully' be taken as a woman. This is not cut and dry: it happens along a spectrum of negotiation where, upon any interaction, a trans person's gender identity may be validated, misunderstood, or completely denied. As I show, transgender college students negotiate their identity through mundane interactions common to any transperson through small acts of resistance to a cisnormative public, but also particularly within the college sphere by negotiating an organized communal identity through an LGBTQ club.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wealth of literature discussing issues of gender and space. This research defines social space as the 'place' where social interaction happens. Place, traditionally, is a physical space imbued with meaning (Gieryn 2000, Spain 2015). The study of gender and space began in the United States with the peak of the feminist movement in the 1970's, as women began to enter physical spaces not previously open to them in the workplace and other social institutions. Central to the Anglo-American feminist theory at this time was the idea that oppression manifests in the physical space of urban centers according to gendered norms. Social science literature contested the idea that "public" spaces are really public at all, explaining rather that space becomes gendered in a way that pushes women to the exterior. The 'separate spheres' framework began to describe social space as inherently gendered where the division between the new urban center of a city and the suburbs was the physical result of ideological division between masculine and feminine (Bondi and Rose 2003, Spain 2014). The gendered structure of urban space into separate spheres of what some scholars

called “production” for men and “reproduction” for women, became the cornerstone of a body of literature that minimized women as urban actors, treating the city structure as deterministic of female oppression (Bondi and Rose 2003). Studies specifically emphasized disparity in property ownership and access to transportation systems as limiting women’s access to cultural resources or employment, typically located downtown (Best and Lanzendorf 2005). As women began to enter the workplace, this “separate spheres” perspective was officially deemed outdated and unhelpful by Krenichyn in 2004, initiating the next strand of research which recognized that the increasing diversity of urban spaces was potentially liberating for women in their access to and negotiation of city space.

At this point, scholars began to emphasize the need for more inclusive narratives concerning gender identity and the non-uniformity of the experience of suburban women. In 2010, Petra Doan used autoethnographic methods to describe how binary forms of gendered ideology exclude trans individuals from any range of public to private spaces. Public restrooms provide a particularly tricky dichotomous legal space where transgender individuals cannot fully claim either male or female space without being branded as deviant. This issue has dominated recent public discourse in the United States since North Carolina passed the HB2 (Transgender Bathroom Law) in March 2016, instigating a legislative frenzy surrounding public gendered space (Wang, T., Geffen, S., & Cahill, S. 2016). Doan ultimately argues that transgenderism does not (as some feminist scholars claim) reinforce dichotomous ideals of gender but rather that trans individuals are often forced into dichotomous gender performance as a result of the spatial pressures. Addressing the “diversity of gender”, Lane (2009) points out that public spaces are, thus, contested political spaces. A space’s meaning is not fixed, but the result of ongoing, negotiated interaction. Queering space through nonconforming or disruptive gendered performance emerges as an act of resistance to cisnormative inequality. This diversity is supported by the idea that gendered performances of individuals create the very space they embody, making gendered space a reciprocal process involving human agency (Doan 2010).

The contested political realities of space are evident within social theories of symbolic interactionism in that “worldmaking” itself tends to happen according to the labeling of binaries (Bourdieu 1989). Space is created through a labeling process that renders some spaces masculine and others feminine unless an alternate path or label can create and embody space, leaving no room for individuals that do not fit a stereotypically male or female category. According to Bourdieu, the social world consists of “social space” that is stratified and divided up similarly to “geographic space”. Bourdieu theorizes that the way in which certain social groups or social space gets “made” is based on the manipulation of “symbolic power” provided others recognize the plausibility of the “worldmaking”. The plausibility structure of the gendered binary perpetuates male and female ideology such that it feels grounded in the real world and validated by previously constructed common sense.

This research is theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionist perspectives assuming that worldmaking happens according to an individual's access to symbolic capital. Therefore if transgender individuals are excluded from the binary forms of dominant cultural capital, their participation in worldmaking is going to look very different from someone who identifies with heteronormative structures. Many studies recognize that distance in space is an indicator of access to resources and inequality (Logan 2012, Spain 2015, Bourdieu 1989). In this study, queer theory critically augments symbolic interactionist perspectives and will be included here among analysis for its ability to “rebel against a heteronormative structure of gender” and establish “queerness” outside of this structure (Nagoshi and Bruzy 2010). The deconstructivist approach within critical theory addresses the fact that queer space can only

be defined by what it is *not*, and forming a group identity of 'others' does not fully account for the lived experience of the transgender individuals. Deconstructivist approaches to social theory seek to break the double bind of binary logic (Namaste 1994, Nagoshi and Bruzy 2010). In studies of gender and space, the double bind is perpetuated by a branch of essentialist theory holding to standards of gender identity (or all forms of identity) as being innately fixed to the individual (e.g. man or woman) rather than fluid and diverse (Nagoshi and Bruzy 2010; Epstein 1987).

In light of this theoretical climate and because cisnormative social space can be rigid in the face of a diverse gender identity, social scientists began to examine how individuals actually employ their agency to change and interact with space. Studies began to analyze space especially according to ideas of "safe space" and "claimed space" (Kern 2005; Krenichyn 2004). One such study used Interlocking Systems Framework to look at how various aspects of a woman's identity came together her experience of urban space. They found that a woman's perception of space as "safe" directly correlates to her privilege and sense of ownership of that urban space (Kern 2005). Research on women's feelings of safety in public space shows that fear tends to accompany social vulnerability in many forms. One study found that men tended to perceive women as fearful in public spaces, defining safety in a public space as a 'big problem' for women. In this case however, the ideological construction by men of women as fearful and endangered was central to men's own construction of their masculine gender identity (Day 2001). This suggests that safe space may vary according to the gendered perspective of the one describing it. Queer individuals, according to the autoethnographic study described above, are continually at risk in public space for their violation of gender norms and may therefore rarely experience safe space (Doan 2010). Regardless, their meanings and description of safe space are central to and invaluable for an informed perspective of campus space.

In recent years, there has been a prolific increase in campus climate surveys for diversity and inclusion efforts on college campuses. Early studies examining LGBT perceptions of campus life found marginalization central to this population's experience (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Evans and Broido, 2002; Garber, 2002; Melaney, Williams and Geller, 1997; Waldo, 1998). This research was limited in scope, however, and not until the cross-university studies of Rankin (1998 and 2003) that a comprehensive survey of LGBTQ+ college student experience was collected. In a survey of all undergraduate students, 25% (n=1,800) reported that they had personally experienced harassment. Of this sector, 75% were women. Of the 25% of men that reported harassment, 62% were members of two underrepresented groups, men of color, or members of sexual/gender identity minorities (Rankin 2006). In sampling only GLBT students, Rankin found that one third of LGBTQ college students experienced harassment in one year, 89% of which took the form of derogatory remarks. Furthermore, 79% of the harassment experienced was at the hands of other students.

With the examination of safe space from several angles, literature began to push for re-urbanization to create inclusive space (Bondi 2003). Some queer theorists hold a rather deterministic expectation of spatial contingencies, surmising that creating a range of gendered spaces would encourage a range of gendered performance (Doan 2010; Namaste 1994). In other words, if normative public space is not dichotomously gendered but consists of gender variant spaces, they suggest it would encourage gender variant identities. Although I find this research helpful to conceptualize the potential for public spaces to be 'degendered' (given that space *becomes* gendered through interaction but does not *have* to be), it describes built environments as if they define human identities, rather than simply constrain

or influence them. Instead, the strength of qualitative inquiry into queer conceptions of gender and space lies in the meaning making of individuals: their negotiations of gendered social interactions. Rankins work addresses LGBTQ college student's experience, but takes a bird's eye approach to a nuanced experience, while this research intends to highlight the microinteractional, lived experience of gender non-conforming college students.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. Do gender non-conforming folk describe public campus space as cisnormative?
2. Do they experience safe space? And is the emergent narrative of safe space within gender nonconforming meaning making consistent with perceived policy goals?

METHODS

This study emerges from ethnographic fieldnotes collected over twelve months of participant-observation of an LGBTQ+ Club at an east-coast public university. Data was collected in physical space during weekly club meetings and events, consisting of an educational presentation, thirty minutes of 'activity' or discussion time, to a more informal setting at the on-campus Starbucks. Fieldnotes were collected from twenty of these meetings, in addition to club events including a week-long gay pride event, a formal dance (also referred to as 'gay prom'), and two off-campus Drag Show events at a local bar, publicized by the LGBTQ Club. Further, I spent about 15 hours participating in everyday college life with these individuals: studying and dining in public spaces on-campus. Fieldnote data was supplemented by digital ethnography of GroupMe and Facebook groups--the social media platforms that organize the group. Additionally, six self-identified trans or gender nonconforming individuals participated in semi-structured interviews of their experience of on-campus space and online space. Four participants were active members of the LGBTQ club, one had never attended, and one attended rarely. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were coded according to how these students experience and define on-campus space as *safe* space, indicated by perception of safety, *claimed* space, indicated by perception of belonging, ownership, and comfort, and *gendered* or *queered* space, defined in terms of perceived expectations of cisgender norms within the space. Their observations of space are reported according to a continuum of queer, cisnormative/heteronormative, to anti-queer space.

The research design for this study emerges from grounded theory and symbolic interactionist perspectives of social life, assuming that humans act towards things based on the meaning they have for them such that meaning is rooted in social interaction. Things are 'real' to the extent that they are real in an individual's lived experience (Blumer 1980). I engaged in participant observation, being an active member of the club in order to ascertain the members' experience and own meanings. After each experience, I would type regular fieldnotes of situations that participants indicated were central to their life. I did not record fieldnotes on-site, except for occasional direct quotes on a "Note" on my Iphone. Although several members know that I am interested in researching issues of gender, I did not disclose that they were the subject of extensive writing at this time. I felt that to be 'out' while such a new member of the club might call into question my motives and damage rapport. While my end goal of producing a paper focused much of my time with them, the roughly nine months of ethnography have been spent in steady building of rapport with these students for its own

sake, not meticulous recording of every detail, moment, and interaction of interest for research. Ultimately I have over 50 pages of fieldnotes and over 50 hours of time spent with these students, inhabiting their space and listening to/participating in their experiences. As a cisgender female, I am an ally³ of the queer community but do not inhabit, experience, or present a gender nonconforming identity. As such, I experienced some curiosity from participants concerning my motive towards or position in the group. This influenced my rapport more significantly in my fieldsite than with participant interviews. Participants articulated their experience as if to an ‘outsider’, enabling me to “play dumb” by asking seemingly basic questions to targeted root meanings and assumptions in their experience. They detailed experience, illuminating much of the mundane because they recognized their audience as someone who didn’t already “know” what it was like to be trans. In this case, I believe not identifying as trans as a researcher brought greater depth to the data collection. On the other hand, a defining factor of the “queer community” within my fieldsite (described in the analysis below) is that members identify as queer. As a cisgender heterosexual female in a committed heterosexual relationship, when participants asked, “Are you some kind of queer?”, responding as an ally felt and often became synonymous to ‘outsider’. Although welcomed, befriended, and integrated, I never became one of them in the queer community. I have tried to correct for this gap in firsthand experience in my analysis by considering and portraying first and foremost my participants own words and their meanings, such that any reader can observe the situation in context and follow or critique my conclusions. All participants are referred to below with preferred pronouns and definitions of identity. Nevertheless, as a fellow undergraduate student, it was not difficult to build interpersonal rapport. I shared these same campus scenarios, unique campus context, and student life with my participants and can speak firsthand to the particular campus culture at Middle University (Mid U). The analysis and data collection that follows is the product of a cisgender outsider’s perspective of the trans student college experience of space: a context that I hope renders these experiences accessible to any member of cisgender society.

SETTING

The following case study occurs at Middle University (Mid U) in mid-atlantic US. of 21,227 undergraduate students. In its statistical report, the university records that 77.78% of its students are white, 40% male and 60% female. The university itself does not recognize transgender or genderqueer students within this headcount; there is no category for an ‘other’ gender and students are assigned accommodation based on binary biological sex, not gender identity. The queer community at this university is swept under the rug of a binary statistical report. The university has faced some student pressure via formal petition with administrators, however. The university implemented a program called the SafePlace program which provides inclusivity and communication training to professors and administrators about LGBT+ identities and concerns. Of 2,694 staff and faculty employed by this university there are 325 Safe Place trained staff and faculty, about 12.06%.

Additionally, this University does not yet include “gender identity” in anti-discrimination regulation for its hiring practices. In other words, the equal opportunity policy at this university has not yet been amended to include language from a statewide policy change in January 2015 including “gender identity” in a host of anti-discrimination clauses. In March of 2015, a Trans Inclusion Task Force petitioned the administration to include this wording, collecting

³ Defined by Ayvazian as “a member of a dominant group in society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which [they] receive the benefit” (2).

upwards of 200 signatures in a month. As of April 2016 “gender identity” is still absent from some of the wording. This is significant to my fieldsite in that it suggests that transgender voices have little sway within the broader university context, despite the creation of clubs and programs in an effort to provide inclusive space.

ANALYSIS

Experience of the Cisnormative

Trans student participants described their experience of on campus space as pervasively and fundamentally cisnormative, but engage in small acts of resistance to effectively ‘queer’ this space. Each situation begins with the absence of their gender identity, which becomes a gendered interaction as they claim or assert their gender identity. There was unanimous consensus among participants and upon coding fieldnotes that cisnormative space is “everywhere”, just “what it is”, and an assumption until proven otherwise. One transwoman student commented, “There’s not a lot of awareness of any LGBTQ+ situations, or just people in general.” This absence of their gender identity from bathroom options, classroom content, etc. was often described as an ‘erasure’. However, I will describe this occurrence as absence because erasure, although emergent from interviews and some queer theory literature, the cisnormative expectations of college campus space never allows a non-binary gender identity to exist long enough for it to be ‘erased’ but simply assumes and enforces its absence.

The experience of cisnormative space is highlighted by several common experiences of erasure where the confrontation of the trans student with some sort of public sphere results in ignoring, erasing, or ‘othering’ their experience of social life. Public restrooms, for example, are common to daily life and usually binary gendered spaces. Jordan shares their⁴ experience attempting to use an on-campus restroom as a transwoman of androgynous presentation, about midway through full transition, still using male pronouns in most circles.

The bathroom issue is a big thing for me. Because I have gotten yelled at by custodians, going to the boys bathroom. (Here?) In the Student Success Center actually, recently. She was like, "What do you think you're doing?" And I was like "I'm trying to pee, sorry." Because I don't want to go to the girls either... I don't know where I lay. Or stand in that.

Because Jordan is transitioning slowly into their gender identity, presenting androgynously in this interaction, they do not present clear physical distinguishers of gender presentation. The context of the binary bathroom space makes her nonconforming gender identity more pronounced, requiring her to negotiate her gender identity upon confrontation. The custodian assumes they are female because of their ambiguous presentation and reprimands their choice to use the restroom consistent with their biological sex, in what the participant perceives as ‘yelling’. Not all participants described such direct confrontation, but all reported uncertainty or anxiety when finding a public restroom because of the absence of a ‘good fit’ with either binary option. In that sense, the space acts upon the situation, creating a gendered interaction. In response, trans students tend to find the best fit possible if no gender neutral bathroom is available, and stand up for their decision when confronted.

Another college-specific experience of erasure, happens when cisnormative classrooms leave out an LGBTQ perspective or experience in class content. For Ray, a

⁴Jordan uses the pronouns ‘they/them/there’ instead of ‘she/her/hers’. Here, ‘they’ serves as a singular pronoun used to refer to one person to describe their non-binary identity

genderfluid⁵ individual, a cisnormative experience is learning about everyone else's experience in class but your own. They describe a Human Development class during a module on health and sexuality, which most students take as a part of general education requirements.

There's so much nuance in these conversations that a lot of professors are missing because either they don't know (which is fine if they don't know) or they don't care to learn, because they're so stuck in this teaching pattern. Because they feel that the majority of their students are cisgender. And whether they're right or not is beside the point, you know. But yeah, most classes are definitely like that and it's incredibly frustrating. *It has a very special way of making you feel othered even though no one is actually saying anything to you. Because you're learning about everyone's experience except your own.* It's rough. [...] But I'm definitely that kid. I've e-mailed teachers before to talk about that sort of thing, not in an attacking way, but like "maybe if you reconsider this perspective". So yeah I'm very vocal about these things.

College students spend a significant amount of time in the classroom, and here Ray points to the frustration that occurs when an educator ignores minority narratives of gender or sexuality because the professor teaches to the majority. What is illuminating about this passage is not so much their desire to include nuance in the conversation, but the feeling of being 'othered' by being ignored. Much discourse around trans individuals focuses on experiences of harassment or violence. Here, however, Ray explains their frustration as stemming, not from overt statements of discrimination in the classroom, but rather the erasure of their experience from what is defined as general education. Thus, they negotiate accordingly by becoming 'vocal' in an attempt to re-introduce their experience into class discussion.

Trans students also face consistent erasure on university forms, where their identity is 'unlisted'. Another genderfluid participant, Lou, defines cisnormative as the absence of one's identity on a standard required form, and describes an interaction with a professor to resist this erasure.

Especially those stupid forms to fill out at the beginning of the year, like surveys that they always make you do. And it's like, "Are you male or female?" like, "What's your gender?". And I'm like, that's not gender. That's sex. [...] When we did have the form, I went up to [my professor] like, "Hey can I ask you a question outside real fast?" And I showed her the form because we were all filling it out. And I was like "I don't know how to answer this question because I'm...neither...both...all of them at once... and so it's not the right language so, I don't feel comfortable."

For trans college students, the inability to correctly self-identify on university forms is a common experience and another manifestation of cisnormative expectations. In this example, a positive classroom experience with someone Lou describes as a "liberal" professor, turns into a negotiation of identity on the administration's terms. The form imposes the expectation that Lou will correctly self-identify, but their experience of gender is complicated when faced

⁵ A genderfluid individual experiences their gender on a continuum throughout any given time frame. They could experience varying levels of traditional femininity or masculinity, or any combination thereof, within a day, within a month, or over the course of their life. Individual descriptions vary.

with “not the right language”. Gender identity is confined to certain options, reinforcing binary norms by defining what exists, what is an ‘other’, or simply ‘unlisted’. Lou’s small act of resistance enables them to explain the erasure to a professor, claim their own gender identity, and respond accurately to the form.

These instances of erasure and othering are situationally bound together in gendered interactions; the way trans students describe negotiating a public sphere, or “common sphere” (such as a classroom for any college student) reveals that, to understand cisnormative space, we must look at interaction. The following fieldnote illuminates the way a trans person’s gender identity suddenly becomes central to an otherwise standard interaction, as her gender identity is erased, reinstated, and then negotiated on her terms by the claiming of a gendered name. Katie, described below, is ordering a drink at the on-campus Starbucks from a barista who knew her as Nate, her former male identity.

Katie stepped towards the Starbucks register, standing with legs crossed and face raised towards the menu. She spoke her drink order and the man behind the counter seemed unfazed by her appearance: a tall figure with broad shoulders and a stubble-lined chin wearing a floral headband and skirt. He made eye contact, smiled, and asked for her order without hesitating. Like he had done for each customer before her, the Starbucks employee asked, “And your name?” She raised her chin, smiling, and said “Katie” and he wrote it in black Sharpie on the cup. As we walked away from the counter, she said, “well that was funny,” pitching her voice higher than normal. “I actually know the guy working the cash register. And I actually came out to him a couple of weeks ago and I was like ‘Hey so I’m trans, I actually go by Katie now.’ And he was like really supportive and whatever, and was like ‘Okay cool that’s cool’. But then last time I was here he was just like ‘oh HEY Nate!’ and in my head I was just like ‘Oh? Oh. Oh okay, I guess we’ll just go with that for now.’ But I was really disappointed because, like, that’s not my name anymore and he must have forgotten. But this time he just treated me like anybody else, and was like ‘and your name?’ So hey, I guess that’s a step in the right direction.”

In this passage, Katie claims a gendered name. Gender emerges as a result of this situation and Katie negotiates accordingly, self-identifying as a transwoman. But the nuanced spectrum in identity negotiation also emerges in the misunderstanding between the barista and Katie, when he mistakenly uses her male name. The “step in the right direction” however, happens as she uses “Katie” as a way to remind Starbucks guy of her gender identity (a change since last time they spoke) claiming agency over the definition of the situation. The name is a powerful tool that can be used to either validate a transperson’s identity or discredit their sense of self, which is also why my fieldsite community introduces themselves with names and pronouns, a normative ritual that asks individuals to self-define.

Names and appearances go hand in hand: they are often the first impressions any given ‘public’ forms of a trans individual. A student’s physical appearance consistently informed their experience of space, and when their preferred performance of self was not perceived as welcome in the cisnormative public, many trans students de-transition to conform to the space. This negotiation leads not to an act of resistance, but rather alignment with the norm. A young transwoman, Jules, lives at home and commutes to campus everyday via public buses. She describes her experience:

I occupy the public buses a lot because I live on the other side of town. I go to all my classes in the SMAD and Art buildings and then I go to LGBT+ and Ally Collective in the Student Center. The Collective is probably the only

enjoyable part of the day: it's just like a *small hangout where everybody can bond and vent and exist*. When I go to the public buses I can't... *I have to de-transition or whatever. I have to put several layers back on to cover up*.

For Jules, physically covering up by adding layers, parallels her sense of a limited existence in the public space. In the Collective space on-campus, she feels able to engage in multi-dimensional interaction with like-minded people (bond, vent, and exist). In the public sphere, however, she “de-transitions” in the face of cisnormative expectations which alters her performance of self. “It’s not. [a good situation],” she says. “I’m not Jules there.” The progression from the bus to class, to the Collective, to the bus, highlights the way trans students negotiate spaces differently according to perceptions of when it is acceptable to break binary expectations of gender performance. Ray, a genderfluid person of color, for example, expects their gender nonconforming appearance to warrant unwanted or unsolicited interaction.

I appear very alternative so that kind of, you know... Walking around campus in the back of my head, it's always like, is someone going to say something? I've been very lucky. I haven't heard too many slurs or I haven't been harassed as much as some of my other queer friends.

For Ray, walking around ‘appearing’ a certain way, is enough to bring gender into the back of their mind. The vigilance of Ray’s self-awareness suggests that for some trans individuals, there is no mundane experience in which gender is *not* pronounced. Their very existence in public space creates the potential for an interaction (is someone going to say something?) that calls upon them to negotiate their identity. Because of interlocking pressures and expectations of being a college student, this constant identity negotiation can become exhausting.

A College-Specific Experience

For many trans participants, the social pressure of negotiating self-performance of gender identity added to the daily pressure of academics, proves to exceed a balanced lifestyle. Jules, a transwoman, illustrates her experience of managing interlocking pressures.

Imagine a dumpster fire. That's what it's like. There's the pressure to do well in your major classes. There's passing pressure which is, if you're a trans girl, you want to look like a trans girl. And if you're a man you want to look like a man. And then there's all of the interlocking mental issues that come with being Trans and not having the resources to change anything about yourself through medical means like hormones. So then you've got depression, anxiety on top of the other two things. And then, you have yourself. If I take a break to get better, then the grades will fall and then the grades will fall and I'll get more anxious, and then if I get more anxious I'll notice more things about myself that I don't like. And if I realize that, then I get depressed, and if I get depressed the grades go down.

In a vibrant metaphor, Jules describes daily survival as a trans student as a successive disaster, out of control, and yet contained. Life specific to trans college students looks bleak from this experience, particularly the struggle to balance self-care, with self-validation in the form of passing, with the expectation of being a ‘good’ student. Because the constant negotiation becomes exhausting, many gender nonconforming students describe an explicitly queer space that they inhabit for refuge.

Queer Space & The Queer Community

The idea of 'queer space' emerges as trans college students begin to describe alternative 'havens' in their life to the daily grind of cisnormative interactions. In these spaces, you enjoy the privilege of your identity being the norm, as everyone within a 'queer' space shares your experience in some facet. Amanda, a transwoman, makes a very clear connection between queer space and safe space.

I spend most of my time in *an explicitly queer space*. Um, so I feel like outside of that space, I don't know, like, I intentionally keep myself in that space because I feel safer there.

(Interviewer: What makes that a queer space to you?)

It's just, I mean, everyone else in there is either in the community, or an ally. Um, so I just understand when I'm there that it's everyone there is someone who is accepting in some way and that many of them even just understand directly what it is. Because *they're also that thing*.

(Interviewer: Being queer, you mean?)

Yeah.

In this dialogue, Amanda defines safe space as a queer space, and once she finds queer space by feeling comfortable and accepted, identifying with the 'queer' experiences of people inhabiting the space. Keeping herself within the space, she claims it as 'the community' and defines it as safe. The shared acceptance, understanding, comfort, and perception of safety, all contribute to what Amanda describes as a "community". Through the creation of a "queer community", trans individuals begin to claim space as their own.

The on-campus LGBTQ and Ally Collective is a prime example of the formal organization and institutionalization of the social solidarity described by Amanda above. "The Collective", as it is referred to, serves as a daily hangout space for those within the "queer community". Lou describes how the community is formed according to shared values and shared language.

[The Collective] is a place where you can openly be yourself, discuss your identities, discuss other people's identities with respect of course. [...] We actually have a couple ground rules [...], ouch and oops. If someone says something that may not be inclusive [...] or good to talk about per se in the Collective. Someone can say "ouch" or "I'm uncomfortable", and they'd be like "oops" or "sorry we'll stop talking about this". the Collective is [...] a professional environment, it's through the school so we do have to follow some of the school rules. [...] As a volunteer myself, I have to be very mindful about how I'm speaking so I'm not excluding people.

Here, Lou highlights how the Collective, as a professional university-affiliated space, necessitates certain ground rules to hold the queer community together. Understanding that it is an explicitly queer space, volunteers and graduate assistants facilitate inclusive language, doing much of the negotiation against cisnormative space that is required of trans individuals in public space, on behalf of the group identity. In order to make 'queer space' the boundaries of respect and shared language are enforced through 'ouch' and 'oops'. The social club extension of the Collective, [the LGBTQ Club], is another queer space created by trans students. Jules describes below, the social processes that occur to create a 'queer community', focusing particularly on the acclimation of a trans student to the queer community.

I guess most of the people there [LGBTQ Club] are like *fledglings*, like I was, but I catch on quick. They still haven't moved past the initial phase of 'being in their identity' and being able to like things besides that. It's like when

you first come out, that's all you think about, that's all you are. [...] But then you start realizing that you need to *like what you like even with your identity*. I guess since I'm a video game nerd, I play a lot of video games so I never really lost those. [...] But then other people haven't quite discovered that yet, that thing that they can keep a constant without it being truly a part of this other identity they hold. Like, video games are not, like, gay. So some people are like, 'I'm gay I don't play those shooter games'. [...] Because *it almost feels like sometimes you have to follow the gay rulebook*. The statute of limitations for gayness. Because I've heard from people who are in band or in sports, how they don't feel welcomed in the Collective because Handbook number 384, page 384, says that uh, sports are for straights.

Jules' description of the gay rulebook suggests that safe space is not always experienced as a relaxing environment where you can 'be your true self'. Instead, these queer norms are enacted, taught, and enforced in interaction to arrive at some mutual understanding of what makes a queer space and a queer community. Ray, the genderfluid self-identified black student mentioned before, described the same Club space above with a different experience.

Those problems of, like, microaggressions of racism can still come up. Which I've experienced a lot recently. With the [LGBTQ Club]. And it's not necessarily like they are racist. But the space has gotten so large that it's very hard to make sure everyone understands to be *intersectional and conscious* of the things they're saying, or the way they're speaking to me, because I think other than me and one or two other people there's like no black people.

For Ray, keeping themselves in a queer space forces them to negotiate other aspects of their identity. Although Amanda, above, can count on people to be 'directly understanding' of their transness, Ray cannot feel the same level of 'safety' due to the combination of their 'blackness' and 'transness'. As individual students create queer space, then, it is contingent upon shared language that promotes mutual understanding which leads to perception of 'acceptance', 'comfort', and 'consciousness'. Unfortunately, this shared language can make queer community white-normative or normative of certain 'likes', despite efforts to be 'inclusive'. Jules, self-identified white transgirl, highlights this issue not from the perspective of racial identity, but simply out of concern for what is considered 'politically correct'.

It's important to be politically correct, but there's also a case of hyper political correctness. In the community. To the point where I personally have been shamed for the things I like. Like, I mentioned 'oh yeah I watch South Park'. And I was told to my face 'If you're not a middle school boy you need to stop watching that show'. And that was another Trans person telling me that. *It's like people's only personality traits are politically correct and gay.*

Jules ties the language to identity in a situation where the queer community becomes dominantly about shared likes. To her, hyper-political correctness fits everyone into the same 'likes', publicly shaming those that do not fit in. Interestingly enough, the attack on her choice of TV Show was not upon her choice to view that show, in light of its content of that, but an attack on her identity as a whole. This is reminiscent of the way Ray's queer identity is not accepted within the community as a result of their blackness, only here Jules' identity as a transwoman is invalidated and insulted by calling her a boy, as a result of her bringing something 'not queer' into their queer space. The dominant norms of queer space, although all participants agree that it constitutes a safe space for queer people, leads to split narratives of safe space among participants.

The Split Narrative of Safe Space

Safe space is a theoretically ambiguous concept that has made its way into much of the policy debate surrounding trans and gender nonconforming issues. Safe for whom? What does it mean to be safe? The following analysis seeks to exhume the ways trans participants in this study talk about safe space, noting that they do so with a split narrative, along two seemingly contradictory strands. The first emphasizes comfort for anyone present, like-mindedness among those present, and an explicitly queer space. This strand says that safe space *is* queer space. Remember how Amanda (above) describes explicitly queer space as feeling “safer”. Lou, genderfluid, seems to echo this.

I don't really hang out with people outside of [the LGBT Club] per se. [...]

So like I have friends outside of [the LGBT Club] but the majority of my friends, the majority of the people I feel *comfortable* with are in [the LGBT Club] or in the Collective. So that, just being in those spaces makes me very *comfortable*.

And maybe being outside those spaces aren't as *comfortable*.

Lou articulates a level of familiarity, acceptance, and above all ‘comfort’ in the explicitly queer spaces that dominate their life. Those spaces are safe because they are comfortable, and they are comfortable because they are queer, bound together by the shared ideals of the queer community outlined above. Jordan seems to agree, saying “What I would describe as a safe space, is a place where like-minded individuals are getting together to discuss things related to that topic so like, [the LGBT Club] is a really good, like, a safe space”. When trans students talked about safe space, the primary descriptors were “comfort” as an ideal for safe space, and being “uncomfortable” as the primary indicator for not feeling safe.

The narrative splits however, when trans students begin to suggest that “safe space” tied to a particular queer space is the ‘wrong’ goal. Instead, they say, you should be able to enact your gender identity wherever you want. This perspective emphasizes the injustice of constantly having to negotiate one’s comfort in the public sphere and sacrifices the comfort of queer space for small acts of resistance. Katie, the transwoman above who defined safe space as queer space, adds the following:

Okay this is just my kind of opinion, but I hate the idea of not being able to go somewhere. And for me, I would probably tell someone, ‘Just go wherever the f you want because if I want to go to this certain place in the library, I’m going to go there.’ If I want to go to this dining hall and be okay, I’m gonna go there. Just because, I think *you can put a certain confidence out there about yourself, and I think you’ll be safe*, and you’ll be okay, and as long as you’re not like throwing yourself out there like explaining to the world like “I am this! I identify as this, “ you know like shoving it down people’s throats, I think you’ll be okay.

As Katie thinks about giving advice to a younger trans student, she resists the idea of restricting safety and comfort to particular geographic areas. Instead, she suggests that safe space should come from within, through a resolute negotiation of identity regardless of the space. While this might appeal to individual agency, the dumpster fire effect of campus life for many trans students renders the ideal unrealistic. Nevertheless, other participants mentioned the same ideal. Take for example, Jordan, the transwoman who we heard from earlier discussing cisnormative space as ‘everywhere’. She discusses safe space and the LGBTQ club on campus as someone who is not an active member.

I don't really need it. I don't feel a need to seek out queer spaces and safe spaces. I've never been that person. Like I said, I don't really care. I like the people I like, and I have the friends I have, and I don't really need to diverge into communities that I identify with. Because for me, I'm just living my life and going day to day and it's not so much by community. Like, I don't really feel like I'm a part of the community, I just do my own thing. [...] What's important is recognizing that gender specifically is such a complicated thing to understand. Especially because you're talking about gender nonconforming people, there's not really a way to facilitate everyone. Because everyone has such different diverse expectations, characteristics, needs. It's more...be inclusive. It's not [...] creating places for X type of person to go, it's more accepting everyone for who they are. And letting everyone be a part of everything.

To Jordan, to seek out a queer space would be to diverge from daily life and insert herself into a community that she doesn't actually want to belong to. What's illuminating about this passage is the conflation of terms. In fact, Jordan does have community; she has her 'people' and 'friends' and therefore doesn't diverge into what is deemed officially as a "safe space" in the form of the LGBTQ campus organization. Because her experience of campus does not coincide with the other narrative that defines safe space' as queer space', she describes her experience as outside the norm, saying she lives her life 'not by community' or 'not by identity'. For Jordan, safe space is wherever she happens to find community in daily life, and to focus on creating queer space removes the focus from inclusivity of all spaces. I do not mean to describe the split narrative of safe space an excuse to abandon safe space efforts to futility: this would be unhelpful to the question at hand of the trans student experience. Rather, I hold that this tension illuminates competing meanings of inclusive ideals and safety. Trans individuals may need 'safe space' because the dominant culture is not safe: to construct safe space so that it is inclusive of everyone is no different from any other public space on campus. Exclusivity is then central to creating a space safe from bigotry, homophobia, and public cisnormative pressures, as any members of oppressed group may convene to discuss lived realities. But to the extent that public space is constructed according to the labeling of binaries, trans students press for inclusivity of nonconforming presentations within the public sphere. Holding these competing meanings in tension, then, takes safe space debate out of the spotlight and brings cisnormative space into scrutiny, pointing to official safe spaces as 'not enough'.

CONCLUSION

The pervasive experience of cisnormative space on college campuses, coupled with the heightened risk of violence faced by transgender people in the wider culture, lends an urgency to the question of safe space for trans students (Waters et al 2016). We have seen that cisnormative experiences emerge for gender nonconforming students through mundane interactions in which gender becomes more pronounced, resulting in the absence of their identity from the norm, requiring it to be earned and enacted through small acts of resistance. The college-specific attributes of a trans student's experience intensify it, adding different pressures to a trans daily life. A university also affords the institutional means to form an LGBTQ club, described by many as a "queer community" and "safe space" of like-minded individuals with similar experiences. Nevertheless, some gender nonconforming individuals do not choose to inhabit the 'queer community', positing rigid norms of 'queerness' or issues of intersectionality to justify their absence. Finally, a split narrative of safe space merges in the way that trans students talk about their experience.

I find that (a) many trans individuals negotiate on-campus space by establishing an explicitly queer space, forming a 'queer community' through shared language and ideals of 'queerness'. This queer space is unanimously defined as "safe". Second, I find that (b) a split narrative of safe space emerges in trans students perspectives: across the board I saw participants articulate safe space as the place where like minded queer individuals all get together and share experiences, language, and queer norm, heralding Safe Place programs, LGBT Clubs, and the "queer community" as a place of comfort away from the cisnormative public.. But they also articulated a frustration with the fact that safe space doesn't bring that queerness to the outside world: it reifies cisgender norms.

In light of these findings, I conclude that the 'reification problem' of safe space is central to any discussion of trans experience on campus and off. To designate safe space reifies the existence of cisnormative public space. These findings support existing symbolic interactionist perspectives that expect humans to act towards things based on the meaning they have for them, even if paradoxically. The trans description of safe space is not confused but rather indicative of competing meaning for what an experience of public space ought to look like. This paradox and reification of norms by the very effort to establish a space outside those norms is typical of any struggle for social equality.

Although a gender nonconforming identities are highly diverse, several policy implications emerge from any gender-nonconforming student's experience of campus space. Given the split narrative of safe space, it seems pertinent for campus administrators to examine the ways in which safe spaces may serve to 'check off a box' of inclusivity, while still excluding queer students from major areas of college life. The second narrative of safe space urges universities (including administrators, faculty, and student bodies) to be conscious of supporting the small acts of resistance that queer students engage in everyday, in an attempt to negotiate their identity on-campus. It is through a tandem effort to create safe space havens as well to provide support in the public sphere that trans students stand a chance of overcoming the dumpster fire effect of their current experience.

These findings also lend a queer perspective to gender and space literature. Anglo-american feminist literature was concerned about the spatial exclusion of a female gender identity, thus women began to claim space in urban centers. These data suggest cisgender social space persistently excludes trans individuals from what is constructed as 'public space' in ways similarly expected of patriarchal space for women. However, this study augments current critical theory by providing a qualitative nuanced picture of how trans college students actually experience campus climate. For women, critical feminist theory explored exclusion from a patriarchal public. For queer students, however, they are not in separate spheres but rather constantly encountering cisnormative situations. Safe space policies then, may not be enough.

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