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Trans* in the Neoliberal University: Students' Relationship with Georgia State University and its LGBTQ+ Support Structures

by

Elizabeth Townsend

Under the Direction of Faidra Papavasiliou, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2024

ABSTRACT

This ethnography shows how trans* Georgia State University (GSU) undergraduate students navigate the university, interact with university-created LGBTQ+ support structures, and how university-created LGBTQ+ support structures engaged with them. Trans* students find it difficult to navigate GSU because so much of the university's bureaucratic structures involve classifying people into gender categories. Through interviews, autoethnography, and participant observation, trans* students' negotiation of that pressure is illuminated and interrogated in this work. Ultimately, queer students find GSU-created and sponsored organizations lacking in genuine support but take the pieces they need and build the rest on their own.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Neoliberalism, Trans*, Higher Education

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2024

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August 2024

DEDICATION

For my Mom and Dad, who have always encouraged me and supported me. I love y'all and I wouldn't be half the person I am without you both. For my brother, sister-in-law, and nephews Wyatt and Gage. I'm not sure you'll ever get to see this or what you'd think if you did, but I love you and thank you for everything you've done for me. For my best friend Andie, without whom I'd be lost forever, and nothing would be the same. For my baby dog, Cricket, my heart and soul. Finally, I have to extend thanks to my cohort-mates Tami, Caroline, and Mac: I *could not* have done this without you.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The summer before I started the anthropology master's program at Georgia State University, I was in a mad scramble to acquire a graduate assistant job. Graduate assistants at GSU are compensated by having their tuition waived, which would be invaluable to me as an out-of-state student. The anthropology department tries to provide its graduate students with an in-department assistantship. However, I was a late acceptance, and all the positions had been filled, leaving me to search the university's job boards and fill out applications. During that desperate search, I saw the posting for a graduate administrative assistant (GAA) position in a GSU office called the Multicultural Center. Even without room to be particularly discerning, I was excited by the posting and submitted my resume quickly. It sounded like the perfect position for me.

Aside from the fact that, with my anthropology focus, any posting that involved the word "culture" caught my eye, I also had previous experience working for university offices focused on minority populations. While getting my bachelor's degree at the University of Alabama, I spent my free time volunteering at the Women and Gender Resource Center (WGRC), a division of student life that focused on gender equality and supporting those affected by gender-related violence. It offered me a place to help others at a macro and micro level, with a focus on both campus-wide political activity and offering workshops on interpersonal and intimate partner violence. I felt fully connected to others on campus and enjoyed providing a meaningful service. With the Multicultural Center, I assumed it would be more of the same—another opportunity to make a change and help people—simply with a different, broader focus.

The Multicultural Center is also the LGBTQ+ Center for GSU. Learning that the office included LGBTQ+ students under its umbrella of culture made me even more enthusiastic to

apply. I came out as bisexual when I was in middle school, but by 2022, I had only just begun interrogating my gender identity. When working for the WGRC, I identified as a woman, my sex assigned at birth. However, the summer before joining GSU, I came out as agender and began identifying as trans*. Working at the Multicultural Center would not just allow me to work with various cultures, which appealed to me as an anthropologist, but also allow me to work with LGBTQ+ students—those who were a part of my own culture.

I applied with a reasonable resume and lots of enthusiasm. The staff member in charge of hiring reached out to me through email, and we spent around a week talking, answering questions, and establishing expectations. Eventually, we set up a video interview, where I officially met the hirer I had been corresponding with and her boss: the head of the Multicultural Center. Some of the discussion was about the Center, but mostly they wanted to know about me. After the video call, I waited for an email informing me of their decision. However, the email that arrived informed me that they were stuck deciding between candidates and asked me to create a theoretical event for Latinx Heritage Month and present a plan for its implementation to them in another video call. I spent a week creating the event and a PowerPoint for the presentation. Ultimately, they liked my idea, and I received an email informing me that I would be hired a week or so later. They told me they loved my idea and implied I would get to organize something similar—though that never came to fruition. The Multicultural Center is not responsible for GSU's Latinx Heritage Month programming; that falls to the Latin American Student Success Organization (LASSO).

Ultimately, my time at the Multicultural Center was not what I expected, but it was a necessary experience. It opened my eyes to the role higher education can play in queer and trans* life. I was able to meet people who identified as different genders and sexualities, who

were from different cultures, and who had different goals for their education. I met some of my best friends in that office. However, it also exposed me to considerable issues in the ways higher education treats trans* students, which led me to focus my work on ways trans* students at GSU navigated such a fraught system.

1.1 Using the Term Queer

My work orbits around the potentially controversial term queer. The word has various meanings depending on who is saying it and who hears it. In one definition, it is an umbrella term for all non-normative sexual and gender identities. In another, it is a theoretical framework that "…deconstructs hierarchies, norms, and identities by understanding sexual and gender identities to be multiple, contingent, and ordered within power relations." (Browne and McCartan 2020, 185). Still, it is a painful reality that the term can also be used as a slur to deride those who deviate from the heterosexual norm. The choice to use it is bound up in these two realities.

Ultimately, despite the term's messy, sometimes cruel genealogy—or perhaps because of it—I embrace it in my work. Nothing about normalizing discourses, sexuality, or identity is clear-cut and straightforward. Because of that, the term queer fits my work as a term that subsumes and ignores boundaries in a way so crucial to understanding the messiness of the theory and ethnography I focus on. However, I also chose to embrace its use as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities because of its painful history. To me, queer highlights the way that academia will study LGBTQ+ life and community but does not accept and include them in the same measure.

There is no one way to be LGBTQ+. Variety is evident in the community's discourses around terms and definitions. Belonging under the LGBTQ+ umbrella hinges on anything from

skin color to relationships. That is why I use queer as a framework for deconstructing binaries, a stand against delineated notions of life and sexuality, and as a reclaimed name for a community that embraces its non-normative identities in word and deed. Queer embodies what my work is: a marriage between academic rigor and theory and collaborative community work with a marginalized group. Ultimately, I want this piece to oppose easy categories, hierarchies, and norms.

1.1.1 An Aside: the Term Trans (Trans-asterisk)*

I add an asterisk to the end of the term "trans" for much the same reason I use the word queer in this work. Trans* has been used in the community but was officially recognized by the mainstream when it was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018 (Steinmetz 2018). When said aloud, the asterisk is left silent or vocalized as "trans asterisk" or "trans star." It comes from the asterisk's use as a "wildcard" in search terms—a tool used to search for words that begin the same way. For example, when "trans*" is searched in an advanced search field, the results include every word that begins with those five letters, from transfix to transform (Steinmetz 2018). In this way, all forms of trans*ness are visibly included.

Officially, trans* is an umbrella term used to refer to any identity that does not conform to heteronormative gender expectations. It is a more fine-grained way to disrupt normative assumptions in the same way as queer. In the case of trans*, however, it explicitly refers to individuals who do not adhere to the gender binary rather than a broad spectrum of both genders, sexualities, and presentations. It is also a more direct way of saying "non-cisgender," defining a category by what it is—trans—rather than what it is not—cisgender (Steinmetz 2018). Some within the community see it as an unnecessary trend when they feel the term trans could serve the same purpose. However, much like queer, trans* has a messy, imperfect genealogy that lends

itself well to discussing anti-normative genders and sexualities, which is why I use it in this work.

1.2 A Trans* Epistemology

J. Nicolazzo's concept of trans* epistemology inspires my work. Nicolazzo proposes that trans* people must build an epistemology from which we can know ourselves and our community. Trans* epistemology also gives us the power to address how the most common narratives of trans* existence have been written about us rather than with us (Nicolazzo 2021, 514). Much of the way the world understands trans* people is from the perspective of "the gazing cisgender eye" (513). By centering trans* knowledge, frameworks such as heteronormativity and cissexism that undergird society are challenged and called into question. Instead, trans* epistemology allows us to understand how gendered perspectives impact how we know ourselves and our worlds (517). The idea of a trans* epistemology, through which trans* people can theorize and learn with a focus on our struggles and successes, is tantalizing. It is a location from which the most marginalized aspect of my selfhood can speak to academia and society. I position this work as an effort to contribute to building this trans* epistemology.

Building a trans* epistemology as a group project invites change and challenges, which means centering the varied nature of trans* communities in our work (Nicolazzo 2021, 515). Through this, academic study takes new forms, focusing on emancipation and participation. It is with each other that justice and recognition are possible, that the dream of creating a world in which gendered possibilities are infinitely possible (522). The push for a unique trans* epistemology in academia is fitting. Because higher education is complicit in maintaining and reinforcing trans* oppression, then it can also be the location where trans* epistemology aims to confront and redress it (529).

There are no simple solutions to trans* oppression because the factors that cause it are so complexly embedded in the fabric of society (Nicolazzo 2021, 529). However, one step to redressing how trans* voices were previously silenced is recognizing that trans* people provide a unique knowledge base and have a necessary perspective on academic topics. By grounding this work in trans* epistemology, I add my voice to a unique and significant body of work vital for trans* liberation. Coming to know the trans* community as a fellow trans* person rather than simply a researcher means I do this work in collaboration with the trans* community, not as an outside observer.

1.3 Orienting My Work

A significant factor in ethnography is determining and managing the difference between speaking "with" and speaking "for." This dichotomy is especially relevant when dealing with a minority subject population. Anthropology has accepted that certain positionalities are privileged. However, there is a growing recognition that some positionalities can be discursively dangerous, mainly when privileged people speak out of turn on behalf of less privileged persons. This situation can often, intentionally or not, result in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the less fortunate group (Alcoff 1992, 7). Ethnographers should aim to create conditions for dialogue and speak with or to people rather than for them (15).

As a member of my subject community, it would be easy to assign myself the position of speaking "for." I am one of them, after all, so why shouldn't I be able to translate between my community and the academy? This belief is a simple trap to fall into, one that requires conscious effort to avoid. While I might be a native anthropologist in the sense that I, too, am LGBTQ+, my participants cover a wide range of demographics, from race to gender to nationality. I must acknowledge that, though we share one community, we do not share all of them. In many ways,

as a white academic, I am heavily privileged when compared with the average member of my community. Instead, I worked to create a dialogue between myself and my participants. My work is not just my own but a collaboration between myself and my participants.

Through this, I hope to document a broader view of trans* existence in higher education and the role of university-run LGBTQ+ centers in the lives of trans* undergraduates. I focus on the messy reality of existence in a system not built to recognize you, as well as the benefits and consequences of representation within such a system. I note how institutional support structures can be valuable but remain limited. Finally, I look at student activism and the need for a broad, coalitional, grassroots movement that includes trans* liberation in its goals.

There is no apolitical way to write about the trans* community because trans* existence is, by definition, a political statement. Being trans* upsets the schema and categories of US state bureaucracy. Efforts for trans* inclusion fall short because trans* people represent a disruption of heteronormative gender categories. When systems built on these categories attempt to change this basis to recognize trans* identities, they always falter. Ultimately, true trans* liberation would include reworking these systems from the ground up. In the meantime, this work attempts to add data to the creation of a trans* epistemology form in which this liberation can be theorized and work towards its goals undertaken.

Seeing how my trans* interlocutors and I navigated the higher education bureaucracy became the focus of my research. My time with the Multicultural Center gave me about a thousand questions I wanted to explore. This thesis is only a piece of them. It connects theories with lived experience, calls out what GSU gets wrong, acknowledges what it does well, and ultimately highlights the frustrated neutrality with which queer students regard GSU's efforts. Dealing directly with the Multicultural Center and GSU's LGBTQ+ student group Alliance, I

highlight my experience working with them and how the university's bureaucracy prevents them from being all they can be and stops those involved from making essential changes. Finally, I found that GSU was a *good* place to be trans*—but not a great one. Also, the university's support structures did not have much of an impact on the queer community at GSU.

1.4 A Roadmap to this Work

This work begins with a review of the relevant literature on performativity, norms, the history of modern sex and gender categories, hetero/homonormativity, neoliberalism, bureaucracy, and trans* existence in higher education. These pieces of literature form the building blocks for my methods and findings. Their definitions and foundational research shaped, negotiated, and made my work. Specific credit goes to the plethora of trans* scholars whose literature was crucial for my ethnography.

I follow the literature review with a description of my methods and positionality. This chapter includes an in-depth consideration of the purpose of ethnography and a description of ethnographic techniques. It also details how I recruited my interlocutors, the interview process, and the participant observation. I interrogate my positionality and reflexivity. I articulate how I navigate working with my interlocutors to create a co-theorized work that accurately represents them. I also interrogate the validity of using autoethnographic techniques.

Next, I ground my work in its spatial location. GSU is in Atlanta, Georgia, which combines the diversity and liberal politics of a large metro area with the complicated conservative politics of a Southern state. Consequently, it has faced a rash of anti-LGBTQ+, particularly anti-trans* legislation, but none have been passed into law. GSU is a large, diverse university with a large Student Engagement division meant to provide services for all GSU

students. One of these services is the Multicultural Center, which includes a section for serving LGBTQ+ students. The student club Alliance also works to serve LGBTQ+ students.

Finally, I conclude with two chapters on the findings. The first describes how trans* students navigate the nuances of trans* existence at GSU. The second is about how the Center and Alliance do and do not successfully address trans* students on campus. Ultimately, my interlocutors found that it is challenging to navigate higher education while trans*. However, they perceived GSU as superior at handling their gender identity compared to other universities. As for the Center and Alliance, they have important roles on campus, but both have issues they need to overcome to become genuinely impactful in the lives of trans* students.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This ethnography draws together a body of theoretical and empirical work on sex and gender through the lenses of performativity and normativity. It also has a focus on neoliberalism as a current sociopolitical status quo that influences gender politics even as it shapes the bureaucratic structures within which struggles with sex and gender take place. These form the background for contemporary trans* politics, whose particular manifestation at GSU I examine ethnographically in this work.

2.1 Sex, Gender, and Performativity

In Keywords for Disability Studies, Kim Hall defines *sex* as the body's chromosomal, anatomical, and physiological characteristics. Specific combinations of these characteristics mark a body as male, female, or intersex. Sex is distinct from *gender*, which refers to the norms of appearance, behavior, and desire that index someone as masculine or feminine. Particular expressions of masculinity or femininity are considered the "correct" way to indicate one's sex, with masculinity thought to indicate male biology and femininity thought to indicate female biology (Hall 2015, 89). When studying the evolution of LGBTQ+ identity categories in higher education, T.J. Jourian found that the concepts of gender identity and expression have been added to conceptions of sexual identity to further challenge earlier theorizing on sex and gender (Jourian 2015, 13). By complicating the picture, however, sexuality and gender identity and expression allow for a more thorough analysis of contemporary gender and sexual politics and a more accurate description of lived experience.

Sexual orientation, also known as *sexuality*, is a person's attraction and behavior. It is how a person's relationships or sexual preferences are understood by themselves and others (Browne and McCartan 2020, 185). In the US, sexuality categories have a complex interrelation

with gender. In some ways, sexuality categories are based on the perceived sexes of potential partners. However, these conceptions of sex are deeply influenced by cultural categories of gender, meaning that in a single sexuality category, acceptance of trans*ness can differ from person to person. For example, a lesbian can be attracted to anyone who identifies as a woman or only to people who were assigned female at birth. This can create much controversy in the community and complex emotions for trans* people since they never know how their trans* identity will connect with someone's sexuality.

Anthropology sees gender as a principle of social organization and has demonstrated that gender norms vary depending on social, cultural, and historical contexts. The leading Western presumption is that gender is a binary structure. In a binary gender system, masculinity and femininity are the only two options. However, more recently, the concept of a gender spectrum has become more common. It is a theoretical structure of current gender concepts emerging at the intersection of academia and activism. In a spectrum, male and female are on either end of a line, and various options fall between the two. *Gender identity* is a person's conception of their gender, while *gender expression* is how they outwardly express their identity. Gender identity is not always congruent with gender expression, and a person's gender expression is not always interpreted by others the way they desire (Hall 2015, 89). Some trans* identities, such as nonbinary, reject binary or spectrum gender models in search of language that describes their identity more accurately (Jourian 2015, 19). However, there are also trans* people who, other than identifying as trans*, do not use any related descriptors, aligning themselves with one of the two binary genders at all times. To them, the only difference is that their gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth. For these trans* people, both their gender identity and expression are aligned with the gender binary system (20).

The terms transgender and cisgender have their basis in the gender binary. *Transgender* comes from the Latin word trans, which means "on the other side of," while *cisgender* is based on the Latin word cis, meaning "on the same side as." Putting cis in front of "man" or "woman" rejects the idea that trans* people are not included in these base categories (Jourian 2015, 20). It also helps specify when referring only to those whose gender identity and assigned sex at birth match. Differentiating between cis and trans* can also help expose gender privilege, a form of privilege that cis people receive because their bodies are legible to society. They do not have to expend energy to have their gender understood or combat hatred and judgment for their gender identity.

It is important to note that gender privilege should not be assumed to impact all cis people identically. It interacts with other factors like conventional aesthetics, class, age, dis/ability, race, and gender expression. Therefore, it can be experienced differently from person to person (Taylor 2010, 268-269). One result of gender privilege is *cissexism*: how non-cis people are discriminated against for their gender identity. Cissexism is especially rampant in higher education. The entire system categorizes people into "male" or "female" categories, from housing to Title IX compliance. The university system pressures those who do not adhere to the gender binary to conform and punishes them if they do not—aka, cissexism (Jourian 2015, 16).

A large part of queer life is making sexual orientation and gender expression legible. One significant way people do this is through performativity. Performativity was first used concerning sexuality and gender by queer theorists Eve Sedgewick and Judith Butler, who borrowed the term from the linguistic concept of performative speech acts, or performatives. A *performative* is a word or phrase that is not a description or statement, but an action taken through speaking it (Sedgewick 1993, 2). Performatives gain the power of an act because they

refer to the past, combining discourse and power into a particular reference (Butler 2011, 225). *Performativity* is using a performative to index a way of meaning, being, and doing in everyday life (Sedgewick 1993, 2). This indexing legitimizes the presentation because it references a shared past, creating a legible self.

Queer performativity occurs when a queer person's repeated daily actions are viewed by others as "in place" with queerness (Browne and McCartan 2020, 185). However, because performativity relies on a known past, queer performativity has to cite a queer past. Because heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality structure in modern society, heterosexuals have a valid history that they can cite to create a performative. For queer communities, especially trans* communities, it is not long ago when queer people were considered crazy and queer existence was shameful. Therefore, queer performativity is often intertwined with oppression and shame (Butler 2011, 226). While queer performativity does not have to involve shame to be legible, Sedgewick argues, it is almost always produced in relationship to shame, meaning marking oneself as queer also involves recognizing shame (1993, 11). The necessity of citing a painful past to create a working present creates tension around performativity in the queer community.

All gender expression involves performativity. Adults expect children to perform the gender that aligns with their assigned sex at birth. Adherence to an assigned gender is a performative act that references the prevalence of the gender binary in the past. Correctly performing gender allows a person to claim and maintain their place in the cisgender mainstream (Butler 2011, 232). However, heterosexual and cis-gender norms are the ultimate ideal, and successful performativity of masculinity and femininity requires adhering to extremes. Cis-gender, heterosexual society is continually worried about the ineffectiveness of these extreme norms and relies on rigid expectations of performativity to maintain them (237). Modern society

also holds trans* people who desire acceptance in the gender binary to these performative standards. When people choose not to adhere to these norms but rather push the boundaries of gender presentation, they are engaging in queer performativity.

2.2 History and Norms

The relationship between gender and higher education is central to this work. Life at a university comes with gender baked in. Higher education is set up for cisgender people to flow through effortlessly, so they are generally blind to the prevalence of gender in its systems. However, every day at GSU, my interlocutors face questions about their gender and how they should be categorized. There is a struggle with category because the sex and gender categories used by governments, universities, and society are not static. According to historical John D'Emilio, while same-sex attraction and varying gender expression have been present throughout history, the categorization of people as "homosexuals" or "transgender," etcetera, emerged alongside sexuality discourses around the advent of capitalism (D'Emilio 1993, 467). Ultimately, the expansion of wage labor transformed society and caused the proliferation of discourse that enabled LGBTQ+ people, as a category, to emerge (469).

Philosopher Michel Foucault agrees that sex-specific discourses exploded in number and significance from the advent of capitalism in the mid-18th century onward, becoming a central tool for agencies of modern disciplinary power (Foucault 1984, 302). The discourse around sexual identity became a political, economic, and technical necessity in order to create organized structures through analysis and classification (306). As the state began administrating population based on birth rate, marriage, and fertility, sex became a necessary organizing force (308). In order to ensure a citizen is operating according to state desires of reproduction, logic, and industriousness, the state must know their sexuality and ensure that they are controlling and

using it to those ends (309). It was not until the state began categorizing these different types of sexuality that it became possible for homosexuality to shift from a behavior to an identity. Sex became a public issue, with a web of discourses, academic knowledge, and analyses necessary for its control (309). The categorization of sex remains an organizing force to this day, becoming so ubiquitous that it feels as though society would stop functioning without it.

Categorizing people involves holding them to a standard and judging how they adhere to or eschew it. In the Foucauldian school, these standards are called norms. *Norms* are characteristics used to regulate and correct people, not through physical control but by qualifying, measuring, appraising, and hierarchizing them (Foucault 1984, 266). They distribute people throughout a continuous field, splitting them into categories. Norms become ubiquitous, and everyone, from state structures to fellow citizens, notices deviations (192). Deviations from the norm are subject to consequences ranging from minor deprivation to humiliation to, at times, physical harm (194). *Normalization* is when norms are embedded in the workings of society so that deviations are easily recognized. It is a powerful tool that creates distinct standards for people to adhere to in order to gain membership in society. Normalization also creates a system where people can be classified and hierarchized not only by organizations like the state or bureaucracy but by everyday citizens, allowing peers to distribute rank based on these views (196). The norm serves as an imperative that people must do to maintain good standing in society and a system of measurement where sticking closer or straying farther can determine how a person is categorized (197).

A norm is not a single expression a person must adhere to but is instead the center of a bullseye—people rarely hit the bullseye, but everyone tries to get close. The closer to the bullseye they hit, the more successful they are. Additionally, society can accept new norms and

discard old ones. When a new action or presentation becomes common and is integrated into the perception of what people "should" do, it is considered normalized. Likewise, something once considered a norm can be abandoned and become subject to societal judgment, such as marriages with significant age gaps. Norms vary from culture, society, and location. For example, some ethnic groups have norms that differ from the society they reside in, so adhering to them results in group acceptance but judgment and possible discrimination from society. All groups have norms, but not all norms match or are enforced as strongly as others.

2.2.1 Hetero/Homonormativity

The maintained norm of sexuality is heteronormativity. Heterosexuality and heteronormativity are not the same thing: heterosexuality refers solely to sexual orientation, and *heteronormativity* is the dominance of heterosexual forms and practices as the only acceptable orientation in society. It includes the belief that there are only two genders, man and woman, where the two are opposites and must be attracted to and in relationships with each other (Browne and McCartan 2020, 185). The institutions, structures, and pressures that privilege heterosexuality over other sexual orientations are considered agents of heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548 footnote 2). Ultimately, heteronormativity is an organizing project for heterosexual culture, maintaining heterosexuality's power in everyday life (522). Heteronormativity's dominance contributes to structures that disenfranchise queer and trans* people.

However, not all queer people experience heteronormativity in the same way: there are ways that heteronormativity, as an organizing structure, affects the LGBTQ+ community's norms. This situation is called *homonormativity*: when LGB people adhere to the concepts of heteronormativity in all ways except their sexuality (Browne and McCartan 2020, 185). LGB is a

shorthand for the portion of the LGBTQ+ identity whose gender allows them to be homonormative, regardless of whether they take the opportunity. Homonormative LGB people see their sexuality as the only separation from heterosexuality and otherwise adhere to the model of the heteronormative mainstream, which includes the gender binary, the necessity of procreation, and marriage. The ultimate goal of homonormativity is inclusion into the heteronormative mainstream without challenging any of the established beliefs—except for those surrounding sexual orientation. Homonormativity thus isolates and excludes LGBTQ+ people who challenge these heteronormative ideals.

In this work, I draw from two complementary perspectives on homonormativity, both of which were articulated in the early 2000s. One, by trans* historian Susan Stryker, is rooted in trans* theory, while the other, by social and cultural analyst Lisa Duggan, is rooted in neoliberal and queer theory.

Stryker brought to light how San Francisco trans* activists in the 1980s and 90s began using homonormativity as a term for how homosexuality, as a sexual orientation category based on the gender binary, sometimes had more in common with heterosexuals than the trans* community (Stryker 2008, 146). When they accused LGB people of homonormativity, trans* activists were referring to how they were participating in homosexual community norms that marginalized other kinds of sex, gender, or sexuality differences (147). Because homonormative LGB people focused on securing access to privilege for gender-normative LGB people, trans* activists viewed homonormativity as diminishing the potential scope of resistance to oppression in a way that intentionally excluded trans* people (Stryker 2008, 147-148). Stryker formulated a definition of homonormativity based on this history, where homonormativity is a state that occurs when trans* people are considered a community with a distinct orientation, separate from

gays, lesbians, heterosexuals, or bisexuals when, in reality, trans* people are in every category. Homonormativity considers each identity of the LGB acronym as attracted to their own, completely separate from all others (148). Essentially, homonormativity is when LGB people follow heteronormative gender norms.

Lisa Duggan's definition of homonormativity is broader, addressing the queer community and its relationship to neoliberalism as a whole rather than the sexuality versus gender split. As defined by Duggan, homonormativity is a form of politics that promises a demobilized LGBTQ+ citizen whose sexuality is kept entirely private. Through homonormativity, LGBTQ+ life is a domestic, consumption-based endeavor and upholds and sustains heteronormative institutions instead of challenging them (Duggan 2002, 179). Instead of addressing broader political concerns, homonormativity promotes a world where LGBTQ+ people "…get marriage and the military and then… go home and cook dinner, forever." (189). Essentially it offers the LGBTQ+ community inclusion into the heteronormative life path in exchange for abandoning queer politics aimed at creating a more just and inclusive world. Homonormativity relies on the belief that heteronormativity is the unquestionably superior basis for society and culture, and equality means judging homosexuality on those norms (184).

It is also worth considering the ways intersectionality can affect how LGBTQ+ people's ability to be read as homonormative. For example, structural racism prevents people of color from full access to homonormativity, and if an otherwise homonormative white gay man is HIV positive, his illness may prevent him from fully engaging in heteronormative structures. Additionally, homonormativity is time-space specific, only able to occur in places that have provisional social acceptance of and legal protections for same-sex orientations. Differences between governments, social standards, ethnic communities, and more can alter norms.

Therefore, in these situations, otherwise homonormative LGB people still face prejudice, exclusion, or other marginalization for their sexuality (Browne and McCartan 2020, 188).

This work marries both Stryker's and Duggan's perspectives of homonormativity for a multi-purpose use of the term. Putting the two together allows the term to address both neoliberalism and cissexism, which are essential in a work focused on trans* identities in a neoliberal organization. Because both definitions have heteronormativity at their core, it is easy to connect and combine them. Ultimately, for this work, *homonormativity* refers to a system of norms for LGB people that allows them to gain the protections and assets of heteronormativity provisionally. These norms include an emphasis on marriage and family, adherence to the heteronormative gender binary, a disconnection from politics, and eager participation in capitalism.

2.3 Neoliberalism: Neoliberal Sexuality and the Neoliberal University

Neoliberalism is a term that describes the broader organization of capitalism at the present moment, which shapes every structure involved in this work, from the government to the university. In the *Handbook of Neoliberalism*, scholars define *neoliberalism* as the extension of unregulated, competitive markets into all areas of life, beginning as an economic policy and expanding into politics and society (Springer et al. 2016, 2). Proponents of neoliberalism believe the market is the ideal institution to organize people and should replace all other institutions, such as family or religion, as the primary way to produce and maintain social order (3).

In his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, the anthropologist David Harvey evaluates neoliberalism, the most prominent and influential economic theory in the West (Harvey 2005, 2). In his view, neoliberalism's central tenet is that societal well-being should be ensured through a robust, unregulated economic market, and the state should not interfere unless it needs to protect

the markets from outside forces (2). Proponents of neoliberalism posit it as an economic system that eschews the government, even though the free markets of neoliberalism often rely on the management of the state to maintain themselves (7). Where neoliberalism is the main economic force, there are usually substantial private property rights, free markets, and trade. Military and legal structures are often robust to ensure the security of private property and the free functioning of the market (2). A neoliberal state is formed when a state apparatus, such as the military or legal system, is used to protect capital accumulation through free markets and trade (7). The neoliberal state creates the markets it wants to see, protects them, and remains ready to reshape them. Therefore, the government influences the purportedly independent neoliberal system (Bruff 2016, 115). Despite this, the myth of neoliberalism as an apolitical economic system separate from the government persists.

Because of neoliberalism's focus on free markets and individuality, it is often presented as a kind of "non-politics" rather than the robust economic policy it is (Duggan 2002, 117). However, neoliberalism has a ripple effect, expanding beyond economic policy into domestic and international politics. Therefore, neoliberalism directly affects the current global political landscape (Spade 2015, 21). Neoliberalism also expands into cultural politics, shaping various policies from public spending to welfare reform to marriage (Duggan 2002, 117). When interrogating how neoliberalism affects individuals, queer scholars Stephanie D. Clare and Diane Richardson both focus on how neoliberalism defines a "normal" citizen. "Good citizenship" under neoliberalism is the voluntary governance of the self. Neoliberals perceive the state's role as enabling people to self-govern themselves into normal citizens who voluntarily engage in the market (Richardson 2005, 516). Neoliberalism sees people as naturally focused on maximizing

their interests and doing so openly. The ultimate neoliberal subject is someone who knows what they want and goes after it without any internal conflict (Clare 2017, 19; 31).

There are major issues with the neoliberal emphasis on individuality and self-governance. Trans* scholar David Spade points out that the focus on individuality and the market in neoliberalism causes people to see the world as a place where everyone has the opportunity to make the same choices. However, this view can obscure the systematic inequalities constraining access to these choices (Spade 2015, 22). Equality is considered equal access to resources and recognition, which neoliberalism views as a function of the market (Richardson 2005, 519). Neoliberal thought denies that conditions can be unequal for reasons out of someone's control, such as race or gender. Instead, it portrays unequal conditions as neutral, not unequal. Therefore, an individual is responsible for their oppression because, if they tried, they could escape inequality (Spade 2015, 28). When social movements are embedded in neoliberal systems and absorb this viewpoint, their goal becomes inclusion in the "freedom" of neoliberal systems rather than confronting structural inequalities (22).

2.3.1 The Neoliberal LGB

There are major issues with the neoliberal emphasis on individuality and self-governance. Trans* scholar David Spade points out that the focus on individuality and the market in neoliberalism causes people to see the world as a place where everyone has the opportunity to make the same choices. However, this view can obscure the systematic inequalities constraining access to these choices (Spade 2015, 22). Equality is considered equal access to resources and recognition, which neoliberalism views as a function of the market (Richardson 2005, 519).

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Stephanie Clare points out that, in neoliberal society, the issue with LGB people is not their sexual orientation but their lack of self-acceptance. Lacking self-acceptance keeps them from reaching their goals and breaches the neoliberal norms of self-assertion and transparency (Clare 2017, 17). In order to be legible neoliberal citizens, LGB people must know what they want and go after it. Being unclear about interests, even to oneself, is considered a failing in neoliberalism. So long as LGB people pursue the goals of their sexuality privately and regularly, neoliberalism makes no distinction on their sexual orientation (28).

As LGB identities are normalized under neoliberalism, it creates new groups of Others in order to provide a contrast to the "good neoliberal citizen." Often, these Others are people who do not exhibit neoliberal ideals or are not hetero/homonormative, such as poor people, queer people, or trans* people (Richardson 2004, 403). The assertion of similarity between LGB sexual orientations and heterosexuals implies that the association of these identities with gender subversion is no longer applicable (402), and trans* and gender non-conforming people are, therefore, left to combat gender norms and cissexism alone.

Dean Spade also demonstrates how neoliberalism's focus on individuality pushed LGBTQ+ activism toward a focus on legal equality, leaving behind other social justice issues from policing to climate change to wealth distribution (Spade 2015, 30). What began as a transformative social justice agenda in the mid-20th century followed a neoliberal path, shifting into a rights-based agenda focusing on legal reform work. Neoliberal LGBTQ+ activism focuses

on trying to get LGBTQ+ people rights within an oppressive system rather than aiming to transform it (29). Legal reforms, such as hate crime laws, are only possible for or helpful to homonormative LGB people who do not face marginalization from police or the government for other aspects such as race, class, or gender. It leaves behind LGBTQ+ people for whom the police are a danger, and laws do not always apply in favor of protecting the homonormative LGB people (34).

Neoliberalism also makes gaining financial and legal support for the LGB community a complex task. Under neoliberalism, the state is expected to avoid interfering with individual communities, including with financial support. Though sometimes LGB organizations receive funding from the government, there is not a lot available, and most of it is community-based and not aimed at individuals. Therefore, LGBTQ+ organizations must seek money from elsewhere. Often, the only options are grassroots community donations or corporate sponsorship deals (Richardson 2005, 525-526). Organizations can get far more money and power from sponsorships, so they are often the preferred option. However, relying on corporations means these organizations are first accountable to the corporate interests that fund them and less accountable to the communities that rely on them. When it is impossible to support both, satisfying the companies and retaining money is often prioritized (528). These corporations are often known for terrible labor practices or environmental effects, but LGBTQ+ organizations continue to partner with them.

There is a perception that it is impossible to achieve total justice and emancipation, so efforts at liberation must compartmentalize oppression and responses to it. When LGBTQ+ organizations buy into this view, they become a single-issue group that ignores other social justice needs in order to receive funding (Spade 2015, 35). For example, the Human Rights

Campaign is one of the most influential mainstream LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations in America, boasting one of the largest and most politically engaged voting blocs (" Leading the fight for LGBTQ+ rights." accessed 2024). However, they ask that you "consider supporting these companies that support the work of HRC" on their "sponsors" page ("Corporate Sponsors" accessed 2024), which includes companies like Amazon, Lyft, Northrop Grumman, and BP oil. All companies have atrocious social justice records:

- Amazon is currently attempting to destroy the National Labor Relations Board, which protects workers' rights (Hadero 2024).
- Lyft is an app that facilitates unregulated gig work and is notorious for poor working conditions and low pay (Zipperer et al., 2022).
- Northrop Grumman is an American military defense company (Northrop Grumman accessed 2024).
- BP oil is responsible for the environmental disaster known as the BP oil spill (Borunda 2020).

2.3.2 The Neoliberal University

Geographers Noel Castree and Matthew Sparke write that universities have historically had the odd position of being a part of the state, contributing their knowledge to its goals, as well as being a place from which to challenge its norms and imagine different futures (Castree and Sparke 2000, 223-224). However, the marketization of education, commodification of knowledge, and the pressure to produce have changed the university (224). Education scholar William M. Sullivan says that the concept of an institutional "purpose" in higher education is often a source of division. Therefore, the university ignores purpose and uses bureaucracy to guide the institution.

Without an overall institutional purpose, higher education has pivoted to neoliberal individualism: it exists to research and teach for economic development and individual mobility, leaving aside questions of social, political, and moral purpose. American universities no longer have a public mandate or purpose, training students in marketable skills instead of investing in knowledge that is of societal importance (Sullivan 1999). Today, universities are transnational financial corporations focused on generating income through research and training rather than education, and student-consumers want marketable, not critical, skills (Shore 2008, 289).

Economic anthropologist Christian R. Rogler defines the *neoliberalization of the university* as the marrying of economic logic and the academic field (Rogler 2019, 63). When a university is neoliberalized, it is expected to function and manage like a corporation, with productivity as the highest priority. There is increased competition for funding, an expansion of managerial control, greater performance pressure, and precarious employment for academics. Neoliberalization allows the university management to take the symbolic and economic profit from academics' work without offering much in return, leaving academics underpaid and overworked (63). Additionally, the performance of every teacher, student, or institution is quantified, calibrated, ranked, rewarded, or punished in order to ensure quality outputs (Shore 2008, 286). As neoliberalization continues, a college education becomes valuable primarily to enhance human capital and create economically valuable knowledge. Education that does not contribute to this goal becomes a luxury that most people cannot afford, and fewer and fewer universities come to offer it, primarily to elites (434).

In the neoliberal conception of education, students are consumers. Therefore, they must accept responsibility for their education choices, especially regarding student loan debt, which they must pay off even if their education fails to facilitate a lucrative career. If education does

not give students skills that increase their status, it is the student's fault and no one else's. This makes education a risky business in the student-consumer model (Schram 2014, 429).

Professors Carol Mutch and Jennifer Tatebe wrote about their experience teaching students with neoliberal expectations for their education. For student-consumers, the products of a neoliberal university are its courses, qualifications, and credentials. Students choose from these in an effort to attain economic security and future participation in global markets (Mutch and Tatebe 2017, 223). Students who viewed themselves as consumers expected instant gratification and rejected knowledge that might make them uncertain or fearful. They get upset when taught things they feel would not be helpful for participation in the global economy (229).

Sociologist Rachel Brooks interviewed student union representatives in six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Spain) and the UK. She found that the European representatives generally disliked the term consumer being applied to them (Brooks 2021, 632). To them, viewing students as consumers and emphasizing education's purpose for individuals rather than society pushed higher education to focus on economic outcomes and the labor market. However, the British representative held a different view from his European counterparts. He saw value in a student-consumer model, believing that students ultimately received a service: education (633). European student union representatives assumed politicians and university bureaucrats held a fundamentally different view from them on how higher education should operate and were the source of the encroaching shift to a consumer model that students were actively working to resist (633).

In contrast, the British representative did not articulate where the student-consumer model originated and did not criticize his government in any way. Brooks theorizes that one reason for this split could be that Britain's economy is broadly neoliberal, and the EU countries

have a wider variety of economic ideologies, from social democratic to corporatist to post-communist. Therefore, British student unions may feel there is no point in challenging neoliberalism while it is so embedded in British society, and a more pragmatic approach would make quicker gains (Brooks 2021, 635). Because America's economic system is also based on neoliberalism, the same viewpoints as the British representative are likely prevalent in American universities, meaning student-consumer culture is similarly entrenched.

Another way the neoliberal student-consumer model has changed the fabric of higher education is through the advent of majorism. According to academics Coleen Carrigan and Michelle Bardini, *majorism* is a term that describes the value system that causes science and tech (STEM) majors and their practitioners to receive preferential treatment. Because STEM fields are expected to provide the most economic benefit, a neoliberal university views them as the superior choice of major (Carrigan and Bardini 2021, 44). Additionally, because of the student-consumer model, other students view STEM education as the best investment. Majorism assigns worth not only to the majors but also to the students who choose them. Students' worth to university administration and their peers is based on their chance of future success in the market (48). Majorism exposes how students expect a university education to provide specialized skills for the workforce, not knowledge for other reasons such as liberation or knowledge for knowledge's sake (51).

2.4 Bureaucracy

One central understanding that emerged in this study was the importance of bureaucracy and bureaucratic organization and dynamics in materializing neoliberal logics, sociopolitical ideologies, and norms. As formulated by sociologist Max Weber, *bureaucracy* is a system of administration based on a bureau—written files and the people who manage them (Weber 1978,

957). People, called bureaucrats, who are specially trained for their roles and expected to remain objective, follow rules, and administrate situations based on established formulae make up a bureaucracy (975). Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization and aims to reduce everything to a formula, desiring total simplification (Graeber 2006, 11). Bureaucracy is today's most common form of administration because modern communication networks, more rapid than anything before, allow the bureau to flourish. A shift from other forms of administration to a bureaucratic system is called *bureaucratization.* When organizations desire total objectivity in their considerations, bureaucratization is considered the best way to create them. It ensures administration is done according to set rules, without regard for individuals or the circumstances involved (975).

David Graeber argues that state bureaucracies shape terms of human existence by controlling bodies, citizenship, and truth through administrative discourses. They gain the power to do so through violence. This violence comes in many forms, with one obvious one being the police and military. Violence is a form of human action that has predictable effects on others without understanding those it is acting on (Graeber 2006, 8). Therefore, the systems run by bureaucracy are partial to violence because its predictable effect lends itself well to schematization. The more parts of life dominated by bureaucracy, the harder it is to recognize that the system relies on the threat of violence (7). One form of violence that is nearly invisible in everyday life is structural violence. Structural violence occurs when structures are embedded with and maintain social inequality, which creates a looming threat of harm (6). It is on the oppressed to learn to navigate forms of bureaucratic violence, from the police to structural violence, because the bureaucracy can simply rely on their predictable effects without any negotiation required (10).

Dean Spade notes two arms of modern government bureaucracy that inflict structural violence: administrative law and classification data. *Administrative law* is the rules that govern bureaucratic administrative agencies responsible for a population's access to life chances. Bureaucratic administrative systems, while allegedly neutral, are sites that reproduce and implement racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, transphobia, and ableism (Spade 2015, 73). Reproducing these issues maintains the social inequality necessary for structural violence. *Classification data* refers to the ways bureaucratic structures categorize a population. The categories are taken for granted, appearing as ahistorical and apolitical truths. The schema that organizes data does not just sort them into pre-existing categories. Instead, it shapes them into categories that classify people according to bureaucratic desires (76). Population-level interventions require intentionally sorting the population based on categories rather than targeting individuals for their behavior or traits. The characteristics of a category are defined and applied by the state, creating vectors of vulnerability and security for individuals (74).

However, anthropologists Anya Bernstein and Elizabeth Mertz point out that, in reality, bureaucratic policies are not instantly applied. Bureaucracy means there is a process, and it is possible for people to negotiate exceptions to the purportedly objective rules within or around bureaucratic expectations (Bernstein and Mertz 2011, 6). While the mechanics of bureaucracy are meant to eliminate individual agency, a bureaucracy is staffed by bureaucrats, who are not a single type of person. Bureaucrats are simply people who work for a bureaucracy and, therefore, still retain the ability to perform individual actions despite possible consequences from their jobs (7). One example of this negotiation comes from Lauren J. Silver's ethnography of public bureaucracy in America's child welfare system. A public bureaucracy is a government-funded organization whose administration is based on bureaucracy. Silver found that cultural narratives,

identity stereotypes, and the material environment shape a public bureaucracy's purportedly objective negotiation between clients and bureaucrats (Silver 2010, 275).

Bureaucrats expect the client to present a system or socially sanctioned identity for a bureaucracy to recognize them as valid and eligible to receive essential services (Silver 2010, 275). Successfully navigating bureaucracy relies on everyone maintaining the stereotypical "Other" and "bureaucrat" throughout an interaction. However, when these roles break down and a connection between the two is made, exceptions are negotiated on the ground (288). For example, one of Silver's interlocutors, requesting a low-income housing placement, connected with a bureaucrat over their shared identity of black motherhood. The bureaucrat called the interlocutor back to her office and found her a placement right there, allowing her to skip the traditional bureaucratic procedures that involved long waits and the potential for rejection (287).

2.4.1 Bureaucracy and Gender

One foundational bureaucratic data category that directly affects trans* people is gender. Every verification system, from government to commercial, collects gender data, which is a massive issue for trans* people and trans* politics (Spade 2015, 77). Visibility is not always a safe or rewarding state for trans* people. Being visible while trans* means being surveilled constantly by the government, society, and even your community. Increased visibility can also lead to increased threat of marginalization or even violence (Nicolazzo 2021, 527). However, trans* people are often not given the option to remain invisible. When specific data becomes a standard classification method, people believe having the data is necessary for the bureaucracy to function (Spade 2015, 76). This prevents people from imagining other futures, such as ones where gender is no longer a required category and bureaucracy continues to run smoothly.

Instead, people are trapped navigating a structure that reinforces their marginalization, a form of structural violence.

Even when trans*ness is provisionally accepted in spaces by US federal and state bureaucracies, there are extra rules in place surrounding their gender. Trans* people cannot just declare they are trans* and have their official government gender marker changed. Instead, they have to follow bureaucratic procedures to access this acceptance. Recognition of trans*ness often relies on how well a person adheres to the medical model. The medical model is the belief that disability, transgenderism, and intersexuality are all biomedical problems that can sometimes be cured or eliminated. For trans* people, the "cure" under the medical model is a sex reassignment surgery to align their sex characteristics with their desired gender identity.

The US government relies on the medical model to certify trans*ness, wherein hormones and surgery are considered the only way to prove someone is serious about their trans* identity (Hall 2015, 90). This privileging of the medical model trickles down and becomes an expected norm for trans* people to fulfill. While trans* people undertake gender reassignment surgery for many different reasons, often it is a requirement to gain access to gendered structures that do not align with their assigned gender at birth. Most gender classification policies require proof of medical diagnoses, care, or surgery. However, different organizations have different requirements for what counts as proof. Policies vary from government to the private sector and even government office to government office. At times, the decision to reclassify can rely on one clerk's opinion on what is sufficient evidence (Spade 2015, 79).

2.5 Trans* Existence in Higher Education

Education professor Chase Catalano researched how undergraduate transmen in a midsize university understood their gender identities while attending higher education. The students had

concerns about being "trans enough," for both their peers and the university bureaucracy. The medical model of trans*ness being privileged even within the trans* community has led to discourses surrounding social and medical transition that the transmen had to navigate in conjunction with gendered bureaucratic structures. Therefore, identity discourses are present even in the trans community and are affected by the prescription of the medical model. Some trans* students believed transness required replicating gender norms, while others believed transness involved transgressing gender binaries. This meant trans students had to expend energy not only navigating the student body and bureaucracy but also the expectations of their trans* peers (Catalano 2015).

However, Z. Nicolazzo, Erich N Pritcher, Kristen A. Renn, and Michael Woodford worked together to uncover how created queer kinship networks between trans* students contributed to student success in higher education. They defined *queer kinship* as relationships between queer people that are formed by actively choosing and continuing to provide support and care to others (Nicolazzo et al. 2017, 307). They found three domains of trans* student connection—material, virtual, and affective—impacted students' success. Higher education institutions could aid in developing kinship networks to increase trans* students' success (305). They also found how important it is to attend to trans* students' feelings about their experiences at university, which facilitating these trans kinship networks can do (316). So, while the trans* community at university can be a source of tension, it can also be a necessary source of support.

Susan B. Marnie takes a look at how trans* students must fend for themselves in a university's bureaucracy. Students at university, especially in the beginning, are required to disclose their assigned gender at birth or out themselves as trans*. No other options are afforded to them, which can cause stress during an already stressful transition period (Marnie 2017, 224).

Cis people see nondiscrimination policies, access to gender-affirming healthcare, and LGBTQ+ organizations as what makes a university welcoming to trans* people. However, the issues are more profound than what these policies address. The most impactful change for trans* students would be eliminating cissexist practices and policies, such as the requirements for medical transition for having gender markers changed and ensuring people only use bathrooms that match their assigned sex at birth (225). Unfortunately, universities do not try to address this, leaving the onus for change on the marginalized community itself (218). Instead, the onus should be on the university to do the right thing for their trans* students rather than forcing them to fend for themselves (228).

One place trans students have been forced to advocate for themselves is in student housing. Marnie and Nicolazzo examine how trans* activists in American universities have pushed housing and residence life professionals to consider how best to accommodate trans* students (Nicolazzo and Marnie 2015, 162). The solution found was gender-inclusive housing, where students can sign up to be roomed with people regardless of the gender marker on their government ID. A barrier to gender-inclusive housing is that trans* students are required to "out" themselves to gain access, often to people whose views they do not know and who they do not feel comfortable with (162). Marnie and Nicolazzo push institutions to take some initiative and hire trans* professionals, educate cisgender faculty, students, and staff, and reconfigure existing facilities to ensure they are inclusive (172).

However, housing is not the only place trans students have a hard time at university. Therefore, gender-inclusive initiatives should expand out from housing. Examining university classrooms, Jonathan Pryor found that trans* students had contentious experiences with coming out, instructor interactions, and peer support in the classroom (Pryor 2015, 440). The classroom

is an especially vulnerable place for trans* students since they have to navigate coming out (or not) and the potential of being clocked as trans* (442). Pryor found that it was easier for students to be out in smaller classes, where it was easier to gauge how people would react (446). When the classroom context signaled a supportive environment to trans* students, it enabled them to be more open (453).

3 METHODS

For this project, I focused my data collection on GSU undergraduate students who self-identified as trans*. Specifically, I centered on students who fell into the 18-22 age range of emerging adulthood, considered the "typical" age for college in institutionalized nations (Arnett 2000). Students I spoke to about my project were excited to become interlocutors, and soon, I ended up with a small but meaningfully coherent group of four people who identify as trans*: a friend, his roommate, and two people from a class for which I TAed in Fall 2024. Participant observation and autoethnography also played a prominent role in my study. My experience at GSU's Multicultural Center and general participation in LGBTQ+ life on campus inform my autoethnographic considerations. Additionally, I engaged in direct participant observation focusing on major LGBTQ+ events GSU advertised on their Panther Involvement Network (PIN) student involvement site. Events advertised on that site are open for all GSU students to attend, so while they are marketed for specific groups, they are not exclusive to them.

3.1 Ethnographic Techniques

Ethnography is an approach to studying society and culture that uses the researchers as the primary tool of data collection (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 15). It is a way of discovering what people do and why they do it, and it is a tool researchers use to create an information base on which they apply academic theories (16). Ethnography is valuable because it is a way of discovering what people do and why they say they do it before the researcher applies any interpretation or analysis to these actions—it puts forth people's interpretation of their own local and contextually specific culture as equally valid and valuable to academic theory or professional viewpoints (2). Ethnography holds everything it studies as contextual. All cultural actions are impacted by a complex web of institutions, history, political and economic factors, physical

environments, and people unique to the exact moment and location of the ethnography. One cannot understand culture without first understanding this context (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 18). This is the ethnographer's job. The challenge is that most contexts are not explicit and are often irregular. An ethnography must attempt to grasp them all and convey them in an understandable way (Geertz 1973, 10).

The enormity of this challenge is rendered manageable by narrowing the view. By taking a focused view, ethnography takes the broader concepts and orients them toward particular manifestations, such as smaller, more straightforward places and actions (Geertz 1973, 20-22). In my study, I have done this by focusing on the relationships between a single organization (Georgia State University) and a narrow range within a specific community (18-22-year-old queer students). I am also co-creating with my interlocutors. Using ethnography, I want to recognize how vital that context is to my interlocutors' conceptions of their lives: any analysis or academic theory I can apply comes second. My work is guided by my interlocutors' own interpretation of their lives.

Of course, ethnography is not a perfect method. Anthropology constantly debates the mechanics and ethics of using others' voices, and ethnography is constantly being questioned and reworked. It is also a broad genre, with significant variations in all aspects, from methodology to narration and voice. I draw from various ethnographic schools of thought in this work. Many anthropological perspectives deeply influence my writing, from the classic ethnographic technique of thick description to the more recent approaches of autoethnography and ethnography as a co-writing exercise.

First and foremost, I orient my ethnographic work through Clifford Geertz's method of thick description. Thick description is done by describing an action one takes and including an

interpretation of the thought and intention behind the act. In this view, any act follows a simple path: it is done, then it is perceived, then it is interpreted. Without this path, an act would never really occur because an act is not simply the action done; it is also everything that comes after the doing. The act is, in fact, a symbol of something more that requires interpretation to be understood (Geertz 1973, 7). Acts are, ultimately, symbols that stand for one or multiple interpretations. Without the public, there is no one to interpret the symbols. Therefore, thick description holds culture itself as a public endeavor.

Without the ability to interpret a symbol correctly, one cannot "do" the culture they are in. To participate in culture requires context. The ethnographer's job is to figure out the context, interpret the symbols within said context, collect the discourse around it, and convey all of that through an ethnography. By doing this, the ethnographer does thick description (Geertz 1973, 14). Thick description is invaluable for an ethnography about the queer community. Signs and symbols of queerness are rarely explicit and often presented and reified through contextual acts. Similarly, the structures of bureaucracy and neoliberalism often require contextual interpretation to understand.

An ethnography only opens itself to alternate reasonings when it can push limits, bear witness, and empower its interlocutors (Biehl 2013, 587). Viewing ethnography as theory shifts theory from something to apply after data collection to a tool that illuminates how interlocutors theorize their lives. When done this way, ethnography interacts with a broader swath of the world and welcomes unexpected twists from collaboration (575). Ethnography-as-theory means I can co-create an impactful work for my interlocutors, privileging their view of themselves and their circumstances rather than relying on prescriptive, top-down theories that may be irrelevant

to them. Any discoveries are made jointly between my interlocutors and myself, and we work to create something they understand and see themselves in.

However, recognizing that ethnography can be theory is not where we finish expanding the realms of anthropology. I also join Clifford Geertz in recognizing ethnography as fiction. In this case, fiction does not mean fictional in the sense of "not real," but is simply a way to acknowledge that the data in ethnography are not an immutable fact. Instead, it is the ethnographer's "constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to (Geertz 1973, 9). Because of these deep layers of social trapping, ethnographies can be referred to as "true fictions" to recognize that they are as accurate as possible while still being someone's creation. I believe viewing ethnography as "fiction" is a way to acknowledge the partiality of cultural and historical truths (Clifford 1989, 6).

Ethnography is an act of interpretation by the anthropologist writing and the informant conveying their story. By keeping the paradigms of ethnography-as-theory and ethnography-as-fiction in mind while completing this work, I opened myself up to ethnography's shifting, creative nature. Though ethnography's ultimate purpose is to convey culture, accepting that task's partiality opened new possibilities. I want to stress that this does not mean my findings are inaccurate or the information I share is false; it is simply a small piece of an uncapturable whole. I have created this ethnography by trying to capture everything and presenting what I can.

This project also includes data gathered through autoethnography. Autoethnography is currently used to study social and cultural phenomena through an anthropologist's personal experiences (Wall 2016, 1). My autoethnography is about my time working in GSU's Multicultural Center, where I spent two semesters there as a graduate administrative assistant (GAA). It provided invaluable insight into how GSU's administration operates, how students

interact with university-sponsored organizations and GSU's DEI initiatives. Combining my perspective as a staff member, student, and researcher enables me to use my personal experiences to understand the social and cultural world in which they occur. When crafted into an autoethnography, my experience becomes the foundation on which I built this work.

Autoethnography involves using a narrative to place the self in a social setting (Reed-Danahay 1997, 9) and then ethnographically interrogating the situation to glean new cultural insights. Autoethnographies show the author's interactions in social and cultural spaces, challenging the depersonalizing nature of spaces with complicated power relations (Denshire 2014, 883). It goes beyond the writing of the self to show the self in conversation with culture, and the author eschews the traditional "objective outsider" perspective of ethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997, 6). Autoethnography utilizes personal experiences to illuminate hard-to-see situations and attempts to understand personal life through an anthropological lens (Wall 2016, 7).

Autoethnography also offers unique insights into the professional life of an anthropologist and how that has unique social and cultural dimensions. It can combat how disembodied narratives of professional work are (Denshire 2015, 136) and showcase how they are cultural constructions, too, opening space for dialogue around professional workspaces. In this case, I use my experiences within GSU's bureaucratic structures to evaluate and interpret other data. I did not just use my memories but also personal communication from that time, meeting notes, and journal entries to construct a detailed narrative to use as data. My experience led to unique insights and shaped the course of this project, which is why autoethnography is a significant element.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

A project with such a vulnerable population always involves ethical considerations. I anonymized and erased all identifying information on my interlocutors and others from my files. I made every effort to protect my interlocutors by using methods such as respondent-driven recruitment and allowing interlocutors to approach me about being interviewed instead of me approaching them. All of my interlocutors were out publicly, so there was no risk of being outed through involvement in this project. While it is unlikely that participation could affect their enrollment at GSU, my interlocutors were not shy about criticizing the university, so anonymization further enabled them to speak their minds. I have endeavored to keep my interlocutors safe, prioritizing their well-being above everything.

I submitted the proposal for this project to GSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in my second semester at GSU. IRBs exist to ensure that all research done at a university is up to moral and ethical standards. However, IRBs were originally created for the hard sciences and are now applied to all research. Therefore, they often have trouble evaluating proposals from social sciences like anthropology. They do not know how to handle nontraditional data gathering, such as that used for autoethnography. This has led to issues for anthropologists interested in more experimental data-gathering methods, who may get their study applications rejected because the IRB does not know how to handle them (Sparkes 2024, 108).

In my research proposal, I informed the IRB that I would perform interviews, participant observation, and autoethnography. My evaluator focused on how I would maintain anonymity and confidentiality for my interlocutors and those who were implicated in my participant observation and ethnography. For my interlocutors, I assured the IRM that I would provide an informed consent form, destroy interview recordings after transcription, keep transcriptions on a

locked USB drive, and use pseudonyms in my ethnography. Participant observation would be at public GSU student events, and no identifying information would be collected. For my autoethnography, I also assured my evaluator I would use pseudonyms and that everyone involved in my story would be a public hire of GSU. With those rules established, the IRB approved my ethnography.

A more complicated ethical position for me is that I attend, work at, and will graduate from GSU. My entire life is currently entangled in this institution, and while this work is not all critique, there are elements of it. The impetus for this thesis, as well as data for my critique, is my experience working for GSU's Multicultural Center. Ethically, I have aimed to walk the line between constructively critiquing an organization I am a part of, offering an insider perspective, and taking the anthropologically traditional "outside approach." I base the information I share about working at GSU on personal observations and generalizations made about behind-the-scenes at GSU as my own. However, through autoethnography, they become valid data.

Autoethnography is one of the most ethically fraught forms of qualitative data gathering. It involves thorny ethical questions such as "Whose story is it? Are anonymity and confidentiality even possible? Does this autoethnography harm oneself or others?" (Sparkes 2024). Interrogating these three questions was integral to the ethical inclusion of autoethnography in this project. However, autoethnography has no easy answers, and often the results are messy and undetermined. To some, autoethnography is a fraught method that scholars should not undertake. However, I see it as creating a form of data collection that embodies the complicated threads of thought that are present in many basics of this project, from the term queer to the foundations of ethnography.

The question of "whose story is it?" is often at the forefront regarding autoethnography. By writing and sharing the story with my name on it, it seems as though I own it, but that is not exactly true. Stories are born out of a web of experiences and relationships with other people. Therefore, there is no story that is ever truly one person's. Others are always involved or even implicated (Sparkes 2024, 111). However, some elements of this autoethnography are "mine" in a sense. I chose how to craft the story, including some things and excluding others. I also chose how to analyze the experiences, meaning the conclusions were mine and mine alone. Finally, I was the one who represented the people in my autoethnography in the ways that best suited my story (Sparkes 2024, 113). In my autoethnography of the Center, I focused on the aspects relevant to this project's topic—meaning it was a story of deficiencies in certain areas and mistakes in others. However, that was just a small slice of the larger whole of my time at the Center. By choosing what to focus on, how to craft the story, doing my own analysis, and representing people my way, I ensured everything was told through my perspective, making the story my own as much as possible.

Like most autoethnographers, I struggled to avoid implicating others while writing a story about myself (Sparkes 2024, 114). I assured the IRB that I would give everyone pseudonyms, which allowed me to write an autoethnography. However, during the editing phase, it was brought to my attention that anonymity and confidentiality were not guaranteed, even with pseudonyms. I was writing about public people, hired by a public university, often in fairly critical ways. Therefore, I reworked my autoethnography, attempting to keep them out of it as much as possible. To do so, I stopped referring to them by name and instead used made up job titles to represent their role in the office. I shifted emphasis from specific actions and decisions and onto how the power of bureaucracy and administration made certain instances legible. In a

way, this does remove individual agency, but the sacrifice in detail precision was necessary to achieve the proper level of involvement and distance. Everything was meant to be about the structure and function of institutional jobs, not the people who held them, so I attempted to formally limit their involvement to that sphere.

When debating the possible harm of this work, one main issue that arose was with informed consent. Whether or not an author should seek informed consent relies on elements such as time, context, setting, and the relational circumstances of those involved (Sparkes 2024, 118-119). I had not considered going into my job and soliciting informed consent for a work that, at the time, I had not even considered creating. Afterward, when I realized I would utilize my experiences for this work, I wrestled with how that would involve others. My stories had created a work that was heavily critical of the institution I had worked for and from which I would graduate. The precarity of working within GSU's institutional structure meant that showing individuals in a negative light could threaten their livelihoods, so it was essential to maintain separation between criticizing the institution and the realities of individuals working within it.

I was worried about how the university would react to my critiques: would it affect my project? My graduation? Would it create tensions for my former bosses and coworkers? I had to be careful to write this work in a way that would not allow the institution to shift attention onto individuals and away from where it is needed—the bureaucratic structures and ideologies of the neoliberal university. I removed the presence of individuals from my autoethnography as much as possible and focused on the system they operated within. I concentrated on anonymity and confidentiality, expecting to lose pieces from my story, for its impact to fade. Instead, I found almost a perfect representation of the results of bureaucracy: virtually nothing changed with the elimination of individuals. Ultimately, it was the work of the institution that invited my critiques.

While I am proud of the autoethnography included in this project, it was not without its ethical quandaries. Others needed to hear this story, but the method of telling had to be delicate, walking a careful line of storytelling, anonymity, and verification. I was careful to apply an ethical lens to my writing. Unfortunately, because of the complicated nature of this work, I am sure there are aspects I did not consider and decisions that others would not have made. My experience at the Multicultural Center was so valuable and informative that I could not have done this project without it. Nevertheless, autoethnography requires gentle handling to be a successful qualitative data-gathering method. Engaging in ethical debates and considerations rather than running from them enabled me to deliver a fuller, more trustworthy autoethnography.

I also hold the unique honor of being a member of my subject population. To fully disclose my position, I am an agender bisexual person who uses any pronouns and identifies as transgender and queer. Not everyone who identifies outside the gender binary also identifies as transgender. However, I define the trans in transgender as transgressing normative gender roles, not simply dividing between male and female. In the process of this work, I have been spending time engaging critically with my community. This means I have to make extra effort to avoid propagating my biases and opinions in this work. It also means I feel pressure to represent my interlocuters in an empowering way in light of my connection to their individual struggles and the sociocultural context. My interlocutors trusted me and allowed me to represent them not as a researcher but as a fellow community member. I wish to honor their trust and our shared experiences as well as possible. I hope this project brings some deeply desired discussion change, or if that fails, it makes my community feel seen.

3.2.1 Positionality and Reflexivity

I believe firmly in acknowledging one's positionality and actively practicing reflexivity, especially because of my connection with my interlocutors. Positionality means acknowledging that my social location significantly impacts my writing (Alcoff 1992, 6). Reflexivity means considering my biases and how I see my interlocutors while capturing their culture in my ethnography (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 791). Doing these means asking: what current situations allow me to work in this particular place and with this particular population? Who and what preceded me in working with these interlocutors? Why does society want to know about this community in the first place (Abu-Lughod 1991, 473)? However, I cannot just look at history. I must also interrogate my connections to the community I study globally and in the particular (472).

My community of study and I share much overlap. I am a queer person attending GSU, though I am a graduate student and my community of study is undergraduates. I have also used or attended events thrown by many university departments where I am asking questions. Part of my ethnography is a personal account of my time working with GSU's Multicultural Center from the perspective of a queer person. Because of this, I could be considered a native anthropologist. I say "could" because the definition of that term is complicated and shifting. Because of the nature of today's global world, many available identities may be open or hidden depending on an anthropologist's work (Narayan 1993, 673). Native has a broader meaning than ever before, creating difficulty in determining what positionality is necessary to be a native anthropologist (Narayan 1993, 673). This definition is complex because, within anthropology, there is no such thing as a true outsider self—the anthropologist always stands in complex interrelation to the Other they are studying.

However, the term native anthropologist is challenging to dismiss because its particular positionality is so rich. Native anthropologists bring unique views to the field, explicitly informed by their backgrounds (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 800). However, they face many challenges in negotiating the dual identity of community member and researcher (793) as well as occupying a deeply fraught location where they must travel between speaking "for" and speaking "from" their community (Abu-Lughod 1991, 470). When speaking for the anthropological "Other," the native anthropologist also speaks for themselves. That is why the designation of native anthropologist is so essential; it signifies someone who speaks with a complex awareness of and investment in the reception of their ethnography by their home community (469).

It is daunting to label myself a native anthropologist. However, if our chosen definition is someone studying their home community with a deep care for their reception of my ethnography, the term fits me perfectly. I strove to complete my work with the backing and acknowledgment of my community. The students I worked with were not simply my interlocutors or even my co-creators. They were fellow community members who had faced struggles and triumphs similar to mine. My work reflects that complex interconnection between myself as an anthropologist and a community member.

3.3 Data Collection

I had four interlocutors for this project: Jerma, Thaddeus, Blue, and Charlene. All four identify as trans* and are all on hormones and at various stages of medically transitioning. Jerma, Thaddeus, and Blue are transmen, while Charlene is a transwoman. Jerma and Charlene are anthropology majors, Thaddeus is a history major, and Blue is an engineering major. I befriended Jerma through the department, and he introduced me to his roommate, Thaddeus, when he heard I was looking for people to interview for this project. Both were fourth-year

students. Blue and Charlene were first-year students who took the Intro to Cultural Anthropology class I TAed. While introducing myself to the class, I described my project, and both approached me afterward, asking to be interviewed.

I mixed unstructured and structured interviewing styles. Unstructured interviews allow interlocuters to express themselves at their own pace and have greater control over the situation (Bernard 2018, 164). Semi-structured interviews ensure I solicit the information I need from my interlocutors. Immediately following the semi-structured interviews, I turned off my recorder and began an open conversation with my interlocutors. I did the unstructured interview portion immediately after the semi-structured portion so the topics would be fresh in my interlocutors' minds. The unstructured portion allowed me to see which topics my interlocutors latched onto and wanted to discuss more. By mixing the two interview styles, I was able to obtain a fuller view of my interlocutors' experiences while still getting answers to specific questions.

I had planned on doing respondent-driven sampling. It is the preferred method for recruiting marginalized populations, such as queer people, because it ensures they are there to share their experiences willingly (Bernard 2018, 151). The central conceit of the method is that interviewees will share your contact information with people they know who fit the target demographic, who then reach out to you if they are interested in participating. This way, all interlocutors come to the interview ready to talk about potentially uncomfortable topics, and there is a level of trust because someone they know vouched for me (151). However, in the end, Thaddeus was the only interlocutor I met through respondent-driven sampling. I interviewed all four interlocutors over a meal in a bakery on campus, getting their permission to record and transcribe the interviews.

Each interview lasted approximately an hour, including the unrecorded unstructured portions. I talked with Jerma outside of this interview and taught Charlene and Blue until the end of the semester but did not involve them in any more of the research. However, I did have a second conversation with Charlene. She updated me on a situation we discussed in her interview and permitted me to use that second conversation as data. I also follow Thaddeus and Jerma on social media, though we have not talked on any platform. These four were not just interlocutors but co-creators and co-theorists in my work. All brought unique insights and experiences and shaped my findings in their image—as it should be. This is a small slice of the trans* community at GSU, which is not minuscule but not enormous either. While the small number of interlocutors limits my findings and introduces some bias, in the sense that there are surely dimensions of the community I did not capture, its cohesiveness makes me confident in my findings.

Participant observation is done by participating in cultural activity, so one is not simply hearing about culture from others or observing it from the outside but learning it firsthand. An anthropologist can gain insights into “hidden” aspects of culture through this. These are parts of a culture that remain outside the awareness or ability of people within the culture to explain (Musante 2015, 251). Sometimes, cultural beliefs and practices are so embedded that people do not realize they are happening, and other times, they can be something people assume is universal and do not realize is culturally specific. For this reason, participant observation is not the same as casually interacting with a community. It requires collecting and recording information gained from participation, which is then incorporated into the analysis (252). Part of participant observation for this project was carrying out my everyday life on campus. I am a trans* student, and from the moment I arrived at GSU, I was living the structures I have been

observing for this project. Additionally, I worked for GSU's Multicultural Center, which gave me an insider perspective on GSU's bureaucracy. I have participated queer social life at GSU for two years. Not all of these experiences were focal points for data, but all gave me insider knowledge and information to incorporate into my analysis.

I used focused observation at four events to complement the immersive participant observation I engaged in during this project. I used them as test cases against which to check my hypotheses and generate concrete notes. I wrote notes in a notebook or on my phone throughout the events and did a full write-up immediately after leaving. At the events, I focused on the amount and type of participation around the LGBTQ+ support structures. I used this focused observation to complement the immersive participant observation I engaged in during this project.

All test cases were on GSU's downtown campus in Student Center East, Student Center West, or the Urban Life building. Three of those events were explicitly advertised as LGBTQ+ or queer. The smallest had around ten attendees, and the largest had over 200 attendees. The Multicultural Center hosted "Community Connections (C2): LGBTQ+," which is an ongoing event described as a mentoring program; Alliance hosted "A Very Gay Welcome Back," which was to welcome students back from winter break; Alliance and Student Health Services jointly put on "Be You Be Well: FREE HIV & STD Testing" which offered discreet testing and safe sex supplies; Student Life held the Student Involvement Fair, where university and student-led clubs advertise themselves to the student body to try and attract new members. Alliance and the Multicultural Center both had tables at the event.

Additionally, I pursued two other avenues of research. The first is an autoethnographic recounting of my time working in the Multicultural Center. The second avenue was joining three

queer-focused Discord groups: LGBT+ @ GSU, PANTHER PRIDE 🌈✨, and Alliance at GSU to do online participant observation. These groups are open to GSU students through the GSU server hub, an option Discord gives universities to create a hub that students can sign into with their student IDs in order to access the servers of every university-affiliated group or servers created by GSU students for GSU students. Moderators manage the hub and determine which servers are available. All the Discord groups but Alliance at GSU were completely separate from any physical club or organization at GSU. All servers required members to claim what are called "roles" before allowing them full access. Roles are a function of Discord where an account gets labels attached to a specific server. The labels can mark an account with a certain title (such as the role "bisexual" in one of the servers that indicates the account owner's sexuality), or they can be functional, allowing an account access to certain channels.

4 LOCATION

Grounding ethnography in its spatial, social, and historical location is essential—nothing exists in a vacuum, and my findings are meaningless without these multiple, layered contexts. GSU is a typical state university but is also a product of unique circumstances. Likewise, my interlocutors are shaped by the surrounding social and political climate. Understanding trans* lives at Georgia State University must begin by situating the institution in the cultural and political context of the American South.

4.1 The South

The "American South," as it is known, is a unique region of the United States with cultures and customs distinct from other regions. The U.S. Census Bureau includes 17 states in the South: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Washington D.C, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia (America Counts Staff 2021). The popular image of the South is that of a rural, straight, white, conservative majority. However, it is home to 58% of America's black population (Frey 2021), and, on average, 4.2% of a Southern state's population is LGBTQ+ (Williams Institute 2021). Despite the South's size, most of its marginalized communities live in cities, reflecting a broader historical pattern of large metro areas being destinations for minority groups in the United States (Frey 2019).

Georgia mirrors the diversity of the South. It has a total population of over 11 million, with 14% being nonwhite ("QuickFacts: Georgia" 2022). LGBTQ+ people account for 4.6% of the 11 million (Williams Institute 2021). However, despite Georgia's diversity, it is a politically conservative state. In 2024, Republicans hold the offices of governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and both chambers of the state legislature. The Republicans have held, at minimum, the

office of governor and both chambers of the state legislature since 2005 ("Party control of Georgia" 2024), when I and my interlocutors were all under the age of five.

The Atlanta metro area is the ninth largest in the U.S. It is home to a population of 5.6 million people ("Atlanta, Georgia Population 2024" 2024), 449,127 of whom live in the city proper. It is also the most diverse city in Georgia, with 59.2% of the city proper being nonwhite ("Quickfacts: Atlanta city" 2022). Atlanta holds significant political power as a liberal stronghold. The current and last 28 mayors have all been Democrats. The city's political landscape is also marked by diversity, with its last six mayors being black and two being female (Coyne 2017). In terms of the total LGBTQ+ population, Atlanta ranks 9th among all cities in America, with 4.6% of the city identifying as LGBTQ+. Therefore, it is proportionally identical to the state in density of LGBTQ+ people (Conron et al. 2021).

Georgia's political and population profile gains significance in light of the recent wave of conservative anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric mobilization sweeping the US. Nationally, hate crime incidents against LGBTQ+ people rose steeply from 2021 to 2022, with over 20% of 2022's single-bias hate crimes being motivated by sexuality or gender identity ("FBI Releases" 2024). At the state and federal levels, there has also been a rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation across the country. In 2015, legislators nationwide introduced 155 anti-LGBTQ+ bills. While that number seems large, it is minuscule compared to the more than 500 bills introduced in 2023 (HRC Staff 2023). Much of this legislation has focused on trans* people: in 2023, more than 30 states introduced bills banning gender-affirming care. Though not all the bans passed, at the height of this legislative push, more than half of trans* youth in America were at risk of losing access to gender-affirming care (HRC Staff 2023).

In addition to anti-LGBTQ+ bills, legislation aimed at squashing broader diversity efforts in schools and on college campuses has been introduced across the country. This affects LGBTQ+ people along with all marginalized communities attempting to acquire an education or even exist as they are on campus. In 2024, eighty-four anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) bills were introduced nationwide (Chronicle Staff 2024). They have this name because most legislation is aimed at DEI statements and the offices and initiatives universities implemented to protect and support historically marginalized groups. Of these 84 anti-DEI bills, 24 have legislative approval or have become law, and 33 have been tabled, failed to pass, or vetoed. In states where these laws have passed, DEI departments are now subject to intense regulation and scrutiny (Chronicle Staff 2024).

In the South, all states but Virginia have introduced an anti-DEI bill. Alabama, Florida, and Tennessee have passed their bills into law, but Georgia's recently failed to pass. However, its mere introduction prompted the University System of Georgia (USG), which is in charge of public universities in Georgia, to preemptively change its internal policy to prohibit mandatory diversity training and diversity statements in hiring (Chronicle Staff 2024). The threat of potential anti-DEI legislation was enough that USG changed established policies to avoid repercussions if the bills became law. Because GSU is a public university, it must follow USG policies and state law. Therefore, it must adhere to the university system's new regulatory framework or risk significant repercussions. At its loosest, dismantling DEI structures would considerably constrict how the university can support marginalized communities. At its strictest, the bills could force GSU to dissolve those support structures completely.

In contrast to all the bad news, the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia is celebrating a recent victory. Despite the conservative government and Republican majority, homophobic

legislators in Georgia failed to advance any of the more than 20 introduced anti-LGBTQ+ bills. These included attempts to enact a religious "right to refuse" service law that was potentially a license to discriminate against marginalized communities, an attempt to bar trans* and nonbinary students from using the school bathrooms that match their gender identity, a plan to install sex education regulations that verge on "Don't Say Gay"-style restrictions, a bill that would ban trans* students from participating on the school sports team that aligns with their gender identity, and an attempt to restrict drag performances (Wolf 2024). The proposed legislation attacked a wide range of the LGBTQ+ community, but thanks in large part to the efforts of the community, none of the bills gained enough support to be passed. There are ongoing efforts to stifle LGBTQ+ life, but they can be combatted. The LGBTQ+ community is resilient and will survive, even in Southern states like Georgia.

4.2 Georgia State University

These political dynamics have a special bearing on GSU as the largest and most quintessentially urban institution of the University of Georgia System. Georgia State University was founded as the Georgia Institute of Technology's "Evening School of Commerce" in 1913. During the Great Depression, it was split from Georgia Tech and became an independent college, but it was not kept independent for long. In 1947, it became the University of Georgia's Atlanta Division. However, this also did not work, and it was quickly made independent again in 1955. At first, the new school was called the Georgia State College of Business Administration, but the "of Business Administration" was dropped in 1961, leaving it as Georgia State College (University Library 2023).

During the university's time as Georgia State College of Business Administration, it made its first effort toward desegregation. In 1956, the NAACP helped three black women—

Myra Payne Elliott, Barbara Pace Hunt, and Iris Mae Welch—sue for the right to attend the college. They won the case, becoming the NAACP's first federal court victory for integration in Georgia. Unfortunately, the state legislature quickly passed more laws to avoid desegregating. Georgia State College of Business Administration did not officially integrate until 1962, six years after the women's initial court victory (Craig 2020).

The school finally became Georgia State University in 1969. The name was changed to recognize its academic advancements, namely the ability to confer high-level master's and PhD degrees (University Library 2023). Today, GSU has over 54,000 students and over 5,300 full-time faculty and staff. It is one of the most diverse universities in the nation, with only 24% of the student population identifying as white. The largest demographic group is black (non-Hispanic) students, who comprise 41% of the student body (*A Public Research University* 2021). This demographic makeup means GSU is a predominately black institution (PBI). However, GSU has not applied for PBI grants or been recognized as a PBI by the federal government ("Predominately Black Institutions" 2015). It also holds the distinction of being ranked fourth in the number of degrees an American university confers on black students (Diverse: Issues in Higher Education accessed 2024).

GSU has over 400 student organizations and a university-run Student Engagement division with many different student-oriented departments to cater to their students (*A Public Research University* 2021). My work focuses on one Student Engagement division, the Multicultural Center branch of its Cultures, Communities, and Inclusion (CCI) division, and one student organization, the Alliance for Gender and Sexual Diversity. The Multicultural Center is directly funded and staffed by GSU, while Alliance is a student organization that only receives tangential university support. These two groups represent the most powerful LGBTQ+ support

structures available at GSU. The Multicultural Center (hereafter referred to as "the Center") and Alliance are run differently. GSU employees staff the Center, and it does not focus solely on LGBTQ+ students. It oversees all groups not included in CCI's two other departments: Black Student Achievement (BSA) and Latinx Student Services and Outreach (LASSO) ("Cultures, Communities, and Inclusion" accessed 2024).

However, what GSU and the Center mean by "culture" is extremely vague. Culture is a term the Center uses without defining it in official material. The CCI website states that CCI supports "students' identities," under which it includes "racial identities, ethnicities, gender and sexuality, faith and spirituality, nationality and citizenship, and other affiliations and communities of commonality, such as first-generation college students, adult and parenting students, military-connected students, and more." ("Cultures, Communities, and Inclusion" accessed 2024). The communities that fall into these groups are considered cultures. More casually, my coworkers and I would joke that the Center considered any group for which the federal government had designated a day, week, or month a "culture."

When conducting a historical overview of LGBTQ+ centers in higher education, Susan B. Marnie found that, since the 1970s, universities have been creating centers to cater to their LGBTQ+ students (Marnie 2011, 81). Since this trend began in the 70s, LGBTQ+ centers have proliferated and are now common in American higher education institutions. In the neoliberal university, administrators see a center as providing a service to LGBTQ+ students and adding an extra incentive for student-consumers to choose their university (89). Centers tailor themselves to the specific needs of their institutions and attempt to provide a necessary service (85). However, support for LGBTQ+ centers is not total. Centers at public universities often get their funding from student fees, which can cause objections because some students do not want to

support LGBTQ+ students (84). This creates uncertainty around funding sources and sometimes unrest among the student body.

Student fees also support the Multicultural Center at GSU, but I do not know of any pushback among students. It also does not entirely fit what Susan B. Marnie found to be the “average” makeup of an LGBTQ+ center. Based on her data, most staff at university LGBTQ+ centers are female, over 90% identify as LGBTQ+, most are white, and master’s and doctoral degrees are common among them (Marnie 2011, 91). In the 2023 spring semester, the Multicultural Center at GSU was staffed full-time by three women and one man, but all were black, mirroring the racial makeup of GSU. The Gender and Sexuality Coordinator was LGBTQ+, but none of the other staff members were, despite participating in organizing LGBTQ+ programming. Finally, only one member had a master’s degree. Of the others, one had a bachelor’s degree, and the other two had associate’s degrees.

Centers often claim to support the entire LGBTQ+ community, but in reality, they differ in how much the different subpopulations get involved (Marnie 2011, 94). Specifically, full participation of trans* students is challenging for centers to achieve (95). When Marnie connected with trans* researcher J. Nicolazzo to further study trans* participation in LGBTQ+ centers, they found that they do not focus on activism and education for trans* students (Marnie and Nicolazzo 2014, 266). Going through 200 events listed by LGBTQ+ centers, they found only two events that could be linked to fulfilling the needs of the trans* community, while most events that did involve trans* issues were about trans students, helping others understand them, rather than focusing on addressing trans* students’ needs (271).

Regarding advocacy, LGBTQ+ students have primarily been responsible for making changes on campus. While administrators and faculty have championed social justice causes on

campus in the past, advocacy is still largely student-driven, with administrators and faculty only joining after the students begin mobilizing (Marnie 2011, 104). Among current students, there is an expectation that LGBTQ+ centers should be a space for LBGTQ+ advocacy. They should assist the students with activism and push for change in their own right (97). However, the neoliberal turn in higher education has caused students and administrators to see centers as a service provided to students rather than a student-centric place for community, advocacy, and growth. In this view, the existence of centers is enough to negate the need for student advocacy—if an LGBTQ+ center exists, the university is providing for LGBTQ+ students. Therefore, the staff of LGBTQ+ centers can disregard efforts to promote equity and justice in favor of what they see as an already accepting status quo (Marnie and Nicolazzo 2014, 274).

4.2.1 The Center and Alliance

While the Center is responsible for such a wide range of identities—or, as it calls them, cultures—it does have aspects that cater explicitly to LGBTQ+ students. There is meant to be a full-time staff member in charge of this initiative, whose title is the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator. The Coordinator is supposed to be in charge of all LGBTQ+ programming, be the university sponsor for Alliance, and spearhead new LGBTQ+ support initiatives. However, no one was at that post when I joined during the 2022 fall semester. The previous one had left for Georgia Tech's LGBTQ+ office at the end of spring 2022. By the time someone new was hired, halfway through the spring 2023 semester, the office had been without a Gender and Sexuality Coordinator for nearly a year.

The new Coordinator left after just three months, citing "mismanagement of the office." The main thing he had done during their brief tenure was to rework one event, LGBTQ+ Community Connections, in a way that, as I show below, had a negative impact on trans*

students. Finally, a third Gender and Sexuality Coordinator was hired in the fall 2023 semester and has been there since. While the Center was without a Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, all LGBTQ+ functions of the office fell to the other three coordinators, who did not have much first-hand experience with the community, and the LGBTQ+ student employees, who had much less autonomy and control over the programming. Unsurprisingly, therefore, LGBTQ+ resources and programming suffered.

One physical resource the Center has for the LGBTQ+ community is the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center (GSRC). The GSRC is a room for individuals and groups to reserve for social events, meetings, and more. It is within the Center's office, not a separate space, but it has a door that can close and is tucked away down a back hallway. It is decorated with pride flags and student art on the wall. It contains desks, pushed to form a table, with chairs. There is also a working T.V. and sound system. There are also comfortable chairs lining the room and an official table for clubs and organizations to put fliers ("Student Engagement: Multicultural Center" accessed 2024). Initially, a shelving unit in the room contained literature on the LGBTQ+ community, board games, and a karaoke machine. The shelving unit is still there, but the Center now uses it for storage. The books and literature on other communities were moved to a separate library room. In doing so, the one unique space for LGBTQ+ students on campus has pushed another step toward becoming nothing more than an LGBTQ+-themed meeting room.

Finally, the Center has celebration events like Pride Prom and Lavender Graduation. Pride Prom is a dance party held in October to celebrate LGBTQ+ History Month. Lavender Graduation is a separate graduation ceremony for LGBTQ+ students, held to honor their unique struggles. The Center invites LGBTQ+ students to sign up to walk in Lavender Graduation and asks that GSU's student body come out and celebrate their achievement ("Student Engagement:

Multicultural Center" accessed 2024). The Center is sure to advertise its LGBTQ+ events as explicitly LGBTQ+, but ultimately, attendance is open to all students. There are no barriers to prevent any students from attending LGBTQ+ events, which facilitates a welcoming environment.

Alliance is an entirely different experience. It is a student organization, not a division of GSU, so it is student-run and staffed entirely by student volunteers. It was founded in 1982, well before the Center, and is the oldest LGBTQ+ alliance in Georgia. Its mission is to create programming catering to, as well as advocating for, queer and ally students at GSU. Alliance is one of the largest student organizations on campus, with over 1,200 members ("Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity" accessed 2024). Its most consistent events are those for which it partners with the Center as a cohost, but it has lots of one-off programming throughout the semester. Alliance's programming emphasizes opportunities for advocacy and student support. It engages with protests and social justice causes in the city, not just at GSU, getting students involved in the surrounding community. This contrasts with the Center, which is firmly located within higher education. While it will bring in speakers and performers from outside GSU, it does not encourage students to venture out and connect with the broader Atlanta community.

4.3 The Necessity of Support

The Center and Alliance are crucial to attracting students to GSU. In a national survey of current and prospective college students, 76% said they would prefer colleges with no state restrictions on discussing race, gender, and other "divisive topics" and that this is important to their enrollment decision (Gallup and the Lumina Foundation 2023). Indicatively, two of my informants talked about taking GSU's LGBTQ+ support structures into account when choosing to attend. By putting material resources toward supporting the LGBTQ+ community, GSU

shows its commitment to supporting marginalized communities and their right to free existence on campus, even in a state actively legislating against them.

The same Gallup poll also established that supporting LGBTQ+ students does not just attract LGBTQ+ students to a university. All students seeking a free and accepting learning environment look for a university supporting LGBTQ+ students (Gallup and the Lumina Foundation 2023). Therefore, GSU's support may not simply reflect its social justice orientation. However, accessing support structures is vital for LGBTQ+ students. With only 4.2% of the South's population identifying as LGBTQ+ (The Williams Institute 2021), attending GSU is likely the first time many LGBTQ+ students have had the chance to participate in an active community.

Additionally, 55% of LGBTQ+ Southerners say their lives are far from ideal in terms of their ability to access opportunities and community (Davis-Matthews 2023), and GSU's support is an avenue to life improvement for LGBTQ+ students. The prevalence of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and rhetoric in the South means the Center and Alliance are required to do more and often face more pushback than LGBTQ+ support structures in more progressive states. For queer students in the South, there is more anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment to address and more reliance on LGBTQ+ support for help and community building.

Ultimately, the Center and Alliance play a pivotal role in helping LGBTQ+ students, as a marginalized group, to find community and support in their lives. They do this by hosting events, social media advertising, and advocating for students. The existence of LGBTQ+ support structures at GSU shows that the institution is committed to supporting marginalized students in their university careers. This support is not only a draw for potential students but is especially important for students in these communities. Despite legislative attacks on the LGBTQ+

community in the South, the Center and Alliance remain, indicating that GSU is a safe space for LGBTQ+ students.

5 TRANS* STUDENTS NAVIGATING GSU

I waited for Thaddeus outside the bakery, watching a river of people stream past where I was sitting on the concrete side of a planter. It was early afternoon, so the campus was busy, and the rest of the downtown crowd was present, too. Students and professors, business people, tourists, the unhoused—all made up a crush of people scurrying between the tall buildings. I gazed around, guessing which one of these people may be Thaddeus—he is the only participant I had not met before our interview, so I was unsure what to expect. Jerma, one of my interlocutors and a friend of mine had connected us: Thaddeus was his roommate and, based on the recommendation, a perfect fit for my research. We had been texting, but I had not even thought to ask what he looked like until it was too late, leaving me to try and pick him out of the crowd. I was looking for someone who reminded me of Jerma just because I knew they lived together. Piercings and dyed hair, maybe, with some eclectic shirt. A little emo, a little alternative. I was aware I was stereotyping—just because they lived together did not mean they had the same aesthetic—but it was all I had to go on.

I had looked down at my phone for a second when I heard someone call my name over the crowd and the wind caused by the tall buildings. I looked up, grinning, and finally met Thaddeus. He was exactly what I expected: dyed pink hair, a lip piercing, casual clothing. As we walked into the bakery and ordered our lunch, he told me he had walked from his dorm. The crowded sidewalks had slowed him down, otherwise he would have been as early as I was. As typical of my interlocutors, he gave a token protest when I insisted on paying. We sat at a table for two toward the back of the bakery and began eating while I pulled out my phone and started recording for the interview.

I interviewed all my participants this way: at the same bakery, buying them lunch and eating while we talked. I am a creature of habit, and it was where I felt most comfortable. While working at the Multicultural Center, I learned that no college student could turn down the allure of free food. It helped that they knew what we would be talking about and were genuinely excited to share with me. Mainly because I was “like them”—queer and trans—and for once, they could talk about their identity without having to explain every little piece they were referencing. I knew the slang, the struggle, the joy, the community. We could skip the surface-level definitions and get straight to the good stuff. There was some of that on my side, as well. All four of my interlocutors were familiar with the more queer theory-based or academic terms I used, like homonormativity or bureaucracy. Some because it was a part of their major, and others because dissecting queer theory was fun for them.

Ultimately, my interlocutors' experiences are what provided me with data; their words guided my research, and their lives formed this work. Over a table in my favorite on-campus bakery, we discussed trans* existence in all its messy, painful truth. They shared their joy and frustrations with me, while at times, the eatery played its music over Bluetooth speakers so loudly we had almost to yell to continue our conversation, and people came and went at the tables around us. The rest of this work is a collection of their lives and mine, all analyzed and applied to the realm of higher education.

5.1 Transition

In a process of discovery that extends throughout the lifepath, LGB adolescents go through a period of questioning, experimentation, and conflict before beginning to express their sexuality outwardly (Rosario et al. 2006, 47; 54). My interlocutors and I experienced a repeat of these periods when coming to terms with our gender. We all discovered our gender identity

similarly, but at different times and with different catalysts. I came out as bisexual in middle school, but it was not until I was getting my undergraduate and formed a close online friend group of queer and trans* people that I began to consider I might not be cisgender. It took a long period of self-discovery to settle on agender, and even that might change—I do not believe in entrenched, unchanging gender.

None of my interlocutors were "babies" (a colloquial term for trans* people who have just begun to identify as trans), but some had been out for longer than others. All of my interlocutors knew they were trans* in or before high school, though not all came out at the time. Trans* people are like LGB people in that, unlike other minority groups, in the overwhelming majority of cases they are not raised in a community of similar identities (Rosario et al. 2006, 46). Trans* people face instructions on gender from their families, peers, authority figures, and even strangers, as well as pop culture and the internet (Cavanaugh and Luke 2021, 145).

Thaddeus was closeted in high school and chose GSU because he thought he would have an easier time being openly queer at a university located in the liberal city of Atlanta. Once he started at GSU, he came out and began socially and medically transitioning. Blue, on the other hand, has known he was trans* since he was in middle school. Blue came out to his family, then began socially transitioning, and soon after, medically transitioning with his parents' support. Jerma was outed as a lesbian when he was in middle school, but despite starting puberty and "being the most upset about anything I'd ever been in my entire life," he did not realize he was trans* until his first year at GSU. That is when he began his social and medical transition. Like Thaddeus, Charlene remained closeted throughout high school. She came out to her friends in Charlotte, NC, but after her family moved to the more conservative city of Savannah, GA, she went back into the closet. After starting at GSU, she socially transitioned and is currently

working on beginning her medical transition. Though all knew they were queer and most knew they were trans* before college, they all believed college shifted their perspective on how to “be” trans*.

Before college, my interlocutors adhered closely to heteronormative conceptions of the gender binary. Charlene, in particular, was what she termed “chronically online.” People use the term to indicate participation in an echo chamber online where LGBTQ+ people are very rigid about gender and sexuality categories and have negative views on the term queer and anti-normativity. However, seeing people expressing different kinds of queer performativity at GSU widened her perspective. She came to appreciate queerness for the ambiguity she had disliked about it. Blue also found his perspective shifting from more rigid to more fluid, though in his case, it was about his own gender identity. He said he was formerly very binary in terms of his identity, attempting to adhere to rigid masculine gender norms. However, at GSU, he began to live a more fluid existence.

Having been closeted through high school, Thaddeus appreciates GSU as a place where he can be open about his identity. He sees his gender identity as "an ongoing and continuous journey because you're always learning new things about yourself and the different levels of comfort you have, and those levels of comfort can change over time." Blue believed he would have reached his conclusions about fluidity without college, and it was just a function of his journey and of growing up. Similarly, Jerma does not think GSU "made" him trans*, but he believed being around queer people "gave him a push" and helped him figure out his gender identity faster.

Figuring out gender identity involves navigating social and medical transition. Desire and access to medical transition are two fraught topics that trans* people have to confront. There are

vast swathes of the trans* community that believe trans* people not interested in medical transition are not “really” trans* (Catalano 2015, 417). Holding medical transition as the ultimate way to “be trans*” harms those who lack access to medical care, who are primarily minority communities like low-income people, people of color, and youth (Spade 2015, 80). Even my interlocutors, who lean more queer, desired some form of medical transition. However, to them, it was hormones, not surgery, that were the most essential medical access point for transness. Only two, Thaddeus and Jerma, even mentioned surgery: they wanted top surgery so they could stop wearing binders.

Accessing gender-affirming care is extremely difficult. It requires a diagnosis of gender dysphoria as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Hall 2015, 90)—the same handbook psychologists and psychiatrists use to diagnose mental illnesses. My interlocutors believe that requiring gender dysphoria—a negative feeling—to be the marker for trans*ness feeds into the idea that being trans* is wrong. Blue found it strange that a diagnosis was necessary at all, believing people should be able to choose their gender without an evaluation of his psyche. However, all my interlocutors went through the diagnosis process in order to receive gender-affirming care. They did not believe they were using hormones to "cure" misaligned sex and gender, but they still had to play the medical system and the medical model and get diagnosed to receive their hormones.

Blue went through this process as a minor, something that is becoming increasingly rare due to the wave of anti-trans legislation sweeping the nation. As of 2023, 30.9% of all trans* people aged 13-17 in the US can no longer access gender-affirming medical care, regardless of a gender dysphoria diagnosis. Some states have extended this ban to include adults or implemented other barriers, like preventing public funds like Medicare from covering gender-affirming care

(HRC Staff 2023). As a result, Charlene was still having trouble gaining access to hormones at the time of our interview despite having socially transitioned.

5.2 Performativity

My interlocutors carefully managed their performativity to maintain their desired gender expression. To be taken seriously as a trans* person requires performing a normative gender and being actively en route to the full embodiment of your chosen gender's norms (Catalano 2015, 418). A legible trans* identity has pros and cons, depending on location and timing. Visibility and invisibility are hugely important for trans* people. It is an internal struggle and an external pressure (Nicolazzo 2021, 517). Queer people have a long history of being "onstage" in a sense, being seen in ways that can be both empowering and humiliating (Clare 2003, 257).

Charlene, who has not begun her medical transition, presents as heteronormatively feminine as possible to ensure others read her as a woman. Blue, Thaddeus, and Jerma all remember feeling similarly before starting hormones. However, after hormones, they felt able to play within the gender binary in new ways. Thaddeus describes it as, “When I was like first starting on campus, before I had started T or really started seeing the effects. I definitely tried to appeal to a more heteronormative, like gender expectation of like how I should present.” They felt required to present based on heteronormative gender roles until their gender became medically “official.”

After beginning their medical transition, my interlocutors had symbolic gender capital to fall back on if others accused them of faking their transness or calling it “a phase,” and they began playing with their performativity. Once they began experimenting, my interlocutors found GSU to be hugely accepting of queer performativity, far different from the environment at home. Charlene attributed this to its location: as a diverse campus in a diverse city, “[t]hey don’t have

to rely on a caricature to like, spot gay." Some took advantage of it, and some did not. Thaddeus and Jerma, who want to be seen as queer more than anything else, embrace pronoun pins, dyed hair, facial piercings, and explicit shirts to showcase their queerness. For example, Jerma's favorite shirt, which reads "HOMO" in all caps across the chest, gets compliments and laughs on campus. However, he does not wear it when he is home because he does not "want people staring at me in Wal-Mart like I've sacrificed their child to the devil."

The division between campus and home was even starker for Charlene. On campus, she has begun her social transition, using she/her pronouns, growing out her hair, and expressing performative femininity. However, at home, her family ignores the fact that she came out and gets upset when she performs femininity. Therefore, she has to divide her presentation between campus and home. She cannot afford two wardrobes, so her response has been to wear things that she feels are feminine, but she can twist slightly so her parents read them as masculine. She says, "Like, I think this just a guy's turtle[neck], but I can wear it in a feminine way, and then when I get home I just put on slacks and... no one even knows." Instead of Jerma and Thaddeus's more eclectic performativity, she adheres tightly to the heteronormative gender binary, swinging wildly between performing a feminine and masculine gender identity.

Charlene's trick of having people read her performativity differently depending on who is observing is more common for my interlocutors than I expected. Blue identifies differently in different communities despite presenting to everyone in the same way. He identifies himself as transmasculine, trans* non-binary, or as a trans* guy, depending on what would involve the smallest explanation to the other person. Jerma is transmasculine nonbinary but does not go out of his way to correct those who assume he is simply a transman or non-binary. Finally, Thaddeus finds labels too stringent and does not correct people's assumptions of him as long as they read

his performativity as masculine. As he says, "I usually just tell them I'm bi, not [anything more specific] just because then I have to like, go on a long rant like about what that means." Despite not shifting their performativity in any way, my interlocutors know how certain groups read their performativity and how they should handle the situation to avoid invasive questions.

My interlocutors felt able to identify more openly within their communities. While there are different perspectives on performativity and differing levels of acceptance within the queer community—from the different definitions of trans* to emphasis on homonormativity versus queerness—Thaddeus felt that queer people still default to befriending other queer people. He says, "...we know that we'll find like acceptance of some variety... on the whole, I think there's always that level of understanding... that is not there with like cishet people." Jerma felt GSU events exposed him to a greater variety of performativity, saying, "...there were definitely like a lot of people that were different to me in a way that was interesting to me." He felt seen and at home with other queer people, even though there were differences. Blue, who attends LGBTQ+ events on campus, feels the same sense. He sees a "kind of divide with how certain people think that queer people should act. Which I think is like lessened in a space where it's mostly queer people."

However, even within purportedly queer spaces, Blue finds that LGB people still expect trans* people to act and look a certain way. He thinks homonormative LGB people are all too willing to pressure him to conform to gender norms. Cis people on campus, both LGB and straight, expect an easy answer as to what category trans* students fit into. This expectation meant that if my interlocutors did not know how to navigate people's questions, people pressured them to adhere to heteronormative gender performativity. Blue attributed the pressure to present for the cisgender gaze to the fact that people are "...more comfortable speaking to you... when

you conform to what they expect." At the very least, all my interlocutors except Charlene kept their gender expression performatively masculine to their peers.

Maintaining performativity is a way that trans* people, if not passing as not trans*, avoid being clocked as former women (Catalano 2015, 22). "Clocked" means being perceived as trans* even if people do not want to be. Even homonormative LGB people can be responsible for perpetuating gender norms despite actively resisting sexual norms. For example, Blue experienced microaggressions from a cis gay male student during his time as a member of the Student Government Association (SGA). They were discussing queerness, and his friend accused him of caring too much about what fellow trans* people think about him because he presents like he is "wearing a uniform." When Blue asked what he meant, "he was like,' Well, you know, you kind of like accessorize, like dress like every other trans* person.'"

To me, Blue's performativity is consistent with male gender norms (short hair, a flat chest, and boxy clothing) with an alternative style, so I found his friend's perspective strange. However, Blue's colleague read his highlights, rings, and nose piercing not as alternative but as signifiers of his trans*ness. This situation casts an intriguing light on homonormativity at GSU. To Blue, it was further evidence of "a large group of gay people, especially gay men who like the fact that they have privilege and want to keep that privilege. And so they are okay with not including trans* people in the community." Blue's colleague was homonormative and did not present a stereotypical version of a gay man (flamboyant, feminine, hypersexual), and what he viewed as Blue's "stereotypical" trans* performativity frustrated him.

Blue believed his colleague's advice to adhere more closely to heteronormative masculinity was, to his colleague, meant to be helpful and kind. Blue perceived it as his colleague saying, "...people accept me because I conform… why don't you do the same thing?"

without considering the base difference between sexuality, which has been subsumed into neoliberal privacy, and gender, which is an embodied and administered reality. This situation also shows how complex and extreme heteronormative gender norms are—even Blue, who began his medical transition in middle school and presents largely normatively, cannot match the ideal. While he once thought of this person as a friend, after Blue left SGA and realized the man had no intention of understanding Blue's transness, they grew apart.

Blue and his colleague's location also impacted his colleague's perception of him. They interacted within the professional, largely heteronormative environment of SGA. While the club did not have rules on how members could present, they were subject to deeply entrenched norms of respectability. Professional dress was expected, which meant facial piercings, dyed hair, and tattoos were all considered out of place. The meetings were also based on a routine that was the same every time, following a specific formula required for any new introductions. That meant Blue's presentation, which did not adhere as strictly to heteronormative masculinity as it could have, may have still read as "off" to other SGA members.

In environments where trans* students were not sure of the reception of their gender identity; they did not feel entirely comfortable when others clocked them as trans*. One place this occurred was in classrooms. While my interlocutors embraced queer performativity on campus, in classrooms, it was a different story. Unless the class was small or their gender identity was relevant, my interlocutors preferred for their trans*ness to go unnoticed. However, at times, they would be clocked as trans by their peers, who would bring it up without giving them the chance to have their trans*ness remain invisible. Thaddeus mentioned when a group of fellow students asked him what his pronouns were in class, giving him the twitchy feeling of "they totally clock me." Professors are also unintentionally guilty of this. Jerma described

situations where a professor sees him in class while doing introductions and asks only them for pronouns or adds a pronoun category to introductions where there was not one before. I had the same thing happen to me a lot in undergrad.

None of these people had malicious intentions and, in fact, usually did so from a place of kindness and a desire to be accommodating. Unfortunately, we do not live in a world where asking for pronouns without reason is common. Instead, it creates a nerve-wracking situation for trans* students because trans* existence is so fraught and being openly trans* is dangerous. If you do not know a person's opinion on trans* people, being clocked by them is terrifying, no matter their intentions. However, in smaller classes where it is easier to gauge the classroom climate, trans* people will happily provide their unique perspective (Pryor 2015, 446). Thaddeus did so in his theater class, where he brought a trans* perspective to a conversation that his professor valued. During a conversation in class about code-switching in daily life and how that impacts theater, he brought up code-switching with trans* people. According to Thaddeus, she loved the conversation and emailed him after class saying, "...hey, could you like send me some like- send some articles about that because I want to read more about it."

5.2.1 Majorism

My interlocutors had to negotiate their gender identities not just on campus or in specific classrooms but in their chosen majors. During my interview with Blue, he explained he felt very disconnected from his trans*ness with his major. He said, "...it's hard because it's like being seen in that space and kind being like, I don't know, I think that a lot of people, when they first meet me, they think I'm cis and so it's like, kind of difficult because It's hard when other people's perception of you doesn't really match, like how you feel yourself." Blue had to wrestle with the fact that he does not always want to share that he is trans*, but if he does not, it feels like there is

a piece of him that is missing. He wants to be visible, but it is not easy because he is unsure how people will react in the professional context of his major.

Blue's issue is an extension of majorism unique to the trans* community. Students who identify as queer tend to gravitate to the humanities and social sciences, while majority groups dominate the STEM fields (Carrigan and Bardini 2021, 45). Therefore, Blue's connection with his gender identity is already out of place in his major, which other students believe should not affect his core self or be salient to what he does. Acknowledging someone's gender identity and how it could relate to their work is seen as unnecessary in the perceived objective and acultural world of STEM.

Besides his gender identity, Blue is the model of the stereotypical STEM student under majorism--white, middle-class, and performatively masculine. His performativity, combined with STEM’s lack of interest in acknowledging gender identity, meant that other students often perceived him as a cis man, reabsorbing him into the gender binary. Blue experienced his trans*ness being overwhelmed by the heteronormative interpretation of his “correct” gender. Therefore, the wholeness of his self was made invisible, even as his desired gender was recognized (Catalano 2015, 420).

While Blue wanted others to read him as performatively masculine, it also created a strange, uncomfortable situation when people read him as cis instead of trans*. He felt for not sharing his trans* identity, knowing he was benefiting from cis male privilege that was unavailable to him before he transitioned. He expressed feeling deceitful, like he was lying in classes when people perceived him as cisgender. However, he struggled with whether or not to reveal his trans*ness, unsure how peers would react or if it would cause professional consequences for him.

My other interlocutors, who were majoring in the social sciences, did not experience this situation. Instead, they understood their queerness as a significant part of their majors and research. Trans* students often find it easier to be out in smaller, discussion-based classes (Pryor 2015, 446), which are standard in the humanities and social sciences but not STEM. Thaddeus, Jerma, and Charlene all utilized their trans*ness to bring a unique perspective to classes where they felt safe to be out. Thaddeus talks about a moment in a theater class where the lesson was on code-switching in daily life. He brought up code-switching in a trans* context, and his classmates and professor were open and accepting, with the professor even asking if Thaddeus could send her some articles on the topic. Jerma and Thaddeus both plan to go to graduate school in their fields and focus their thesis on queer topics, with Thaddeus acknowledging, "...I think I make my queer identity very central to a lot of the work I do, like. Yeah, it's very important to me."

This level of openness and the relevance of personal identity to a major is not something Blue feels. Furthermore, the other three recognize that their identity is relevant to their majors because of their non-positivistic nature. Charlene credits her anthropology major with helping her understand her trans*ness and making her identity salient. However, she says, "If I were majoring in a STEM field like physics, there wouldn't be that much overlap and it [her transness] wouldn't be as important to me, personally." While Jerma, Thaddeus, and Charlene see their gender identities as lending new dimensions to their major, Blue sees his as a hindrance. He grapples with how his identity fits into his larger goal of being an astronaut, worried that, in order to be taken seriously, he will have to adhere closely to heteronormative masculinity and make his trans*ness invisible.

5.3 Community

When asked whether or not he attended events on campus, Jerma gave a quick no—not even LGBTQ+ events. The only event he had attended in the last few months was one his major threw, an Anthropology Day Cookout. In his words, he attended "Because they had food. I was like, oh yeah." Aside from that, he casually mentioned attending Pride every year but nothing else. That was, until we started talking about figuring out gender, then his mind was jogged. "Oh, no, I lied earlier, I did- freshman year- yeah- go to this group that met every Friday. I don't remember what the actual term was, but it was at the Multicultural Center. We all called it gay club." He credited the club with introducing him to people with differing sexual and gender identities, which helped him figure out his own. It is where he met his friend group and current roommates, including Thaddeus.

One Friday at "gay club," the group spent hours in the LGBTQ+ Resource Center watching Lady Gaga music videos. It had nothing to do with the topic they were meant to discuss that day, something like intersectionality or familial relationships—Jerma could not remember. But after a brief conversation about their weeks, the meeting had devolved into pure fun. It was not a random type of fun, though; they were celebrating queerness—Lady Gaga has long been a queer icon and was an openly bisexual celebrity long before the mainstream accepted LGBTQ+ celebrities. It seemed unimportant, but together the group spent an afternoon celebrating queer joy and a trailblazer. When Jerma shared stories of "gay club," they all had that undertone. While meetings might not have always stayed on track, the space to connect with fellow LGBTQ+ GSU students was invaluable and used with enthusiasm.

The importance of this group to Jerma's gender journey is not surprising. Attending university is a way for young people to gather and develop a vocabulary for their identity (Grilo

et al. 2023, 10), and peers have a significant impact on queer people's process of developing their identity (Cavanaugh and Luke 2021, 147). Meeting people with different gender identities and expressions can interact with and sometimes contradict those from family, authority figures, pop culture, and even strangers (145). For Jerma, it was the physical event "gay club" that filled this purpose. The Center's then-Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, who later left to head Georgia Tech's LGBTQ+ Center, ran the club when Jerma and Thaddeus attended during their first year. The group met every Friday. It was organized around a book of weekly topics that were introduced and discussed casually. However, afterward, the event would devolve into more of a hang-out session—or, as Jerma called it, "random shitfuckery." It is this event that Thaddeus and Jerma credit with helping them form a community on campus.

Having a support network in place helps trans* people be successful at university and resilient through tough times (Nicolazzo et al. 2017, 313). One way of forming this support network is through queer kinship, which involves actively choosing to provide support and care for peers. It is not always easy for universities to track or legitimize queer and trans* kinship, so it is often on the individuals to negotiate and create their own networks (307). However, students are often very busy, juggling school, work, and social lives, and trans* students have extra pressure from cissexism and political attacks on their identity. These stressors make it difficult to find time to form these networks. Because these networks are vital for trans* student success, university staff must develop ways to help students build these support networks (315). GSU is hosting physical events hosted by Alliance and the Multicultural Center, such as the "gay club." However, though Thaddeus and Jerma emphasize how vital the gay club was for them, they also stopped attending when they returned for their sophomore year and have not attended since.

While GSU-hosted events help to meet other trans* students, Jerma says, "the actual clubs themselves are not necessarily—they don't—they're not necessarily [used] as like a support system or necessarily an educational system." The primary purpose seems to be to create community networks, but once students form these community networks, the organizations become redundant. Thaddeus says the people who attended "split off into different friend groups" after their first year and stayed connected that way rather than through the event. Thaddeus is still friendly with most of them, saying, "I may not be like close with them, but like when I see them on campus I'm like, oh my god hey!" Also, Jerma and Thaddeus are still friends and roommates. To them, once they formed their community network, the event structure was not needed to maintain it—and they had gotten too busy to continue attending. During my interviews, Blue and Charlene were in their first year, the same age Thaddeus and Jerma began attending gay club, but neither is highly involved with LGBTQ+ events on campus. Besides, gay club, as Thaddeus and Jerma knew it, was dissolved in the time between Thaddeus and Jerma attending and Charlene and Blue enrolling in GSU, though the event lives on in a different form.

The literature suggests that LGBTQ+-specific student organizations are necessary for trans* students to access the support they need to be successful (Nicolazzo et al. 2017, 310). Physical locations that embrace students as trans*, including clubs and offices, are vital. However, my interlocutors were often too busy to attend the events or even just uninterested. Thaddeus spent most of his time focused on academics and a part-time job, which resulted in him graduating early but not having any spare time. As he put it, "I got to Alliance meetings sometimes... But really, I'm so busy right now, I do not have a lot of time to do a lot of things between classes. And I work as well." Jerma says, "I find that a lot of stuff, if it happens after like 5:00 PM then I'm like, oh my god, I want to be in bed, I want to be in my home. I want to go

to sleep." Charlene is also, in her words, not "a party-hardy" and enjoys being in the library more than attending events. She sometimes attends Alliance meetings, but her preferred place for kinship is in her weekly rendezvous with the philosophy department. Blue is busy with other clubs and is heavily involved with the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) group on campus.

University-provided digital spaces are another option for trans* students, enabling them to connect with GSU's trans* community without attending physical events. Online resources are crucial for queer students, enabling them to explore alternative genders and sexualities freely and often anonymously. The creation of online spaces for LGBTQ+ people decenters the importance of physical space for queer people (Browne and McCartan 2020, 190). These upset the professional services model, where GSU organizations host events by creating a counterpublic for trans* students to organize themselves (Nicolazzo et al. 2017, 314).

GSU provides counterpublics using the server app, Discord. There are three servers offered on Discord for LGBTQ+ GSU students. One is attached to Alliance, and the other two are organized by student volunteers, not connected to any physical group. However, none of my interlocutors use these servers, and they are generally sparsely interacted with. Alliance's server updates whenever Alliance posts on social media, and there is some interaction in the gaming channel of students sharing things like Gamertags to connect. Another server has a question of the day channel, where a question is posted daily and sometimes receives interactions. The final server is pretty much inactive. Despite these being possible sites for queer connection, none of the three have students actively using them as such.

5.4 Housing

GSU's housing structure was a source of frustration for my interlocutors. Jerma has lived on campus since his first year and has roomed with Thaddeus since his second year. They are two of the 5,500 students living in GSU's six downtown residence halls (*A Public Research University* 2021). However, they did not feel the housing office took any effort to understand them. Jerma complained that they "... don't exist to actually understand me as a person. And most of the time I have to just pick the best fit option instead of the one that is real." Part of this is because of the prevalence of gender as a classification category, which is not unique to university housing (Spade 2015, 76).

Nevertheless, in this context, gender is the determiner of everything about GSU's on-campus student experience, from dorm type to roommates. Housing's gender categories often adhere to the heteronormative gender binary except for a clunky third category, classifying people into "man, woman, or other," which was problematic for my interlocutors. Because of issues with government identification, unless they had changed their gender marker on their official ID, they were stuck identifying as their assigned gender at birth or lumping themselves into "other," a catchall category that did not represent them. Jerma acknowledges how difficult it would be for housing to faithfully understand and categorize the thousands of students it is responsible for, but that does not change how awful and dehumanizing the current system is for trans* people.

According to Thaddeus and Jerma, even worse is how housing handles preferred names. Sarcastically, Thaddeus quipped that he "...wished there was some way for housing to stop deadnaming queer students." Jerma seconded that with a story: despite changing his preferred name in every GSU system possible, the texts that the university and housing send out refer to

him using his deadname. Additionally, housing requires that guests be checked in by a current resident using the resident's government ID. This is true for all GSU campuses, but other universities may have other rules. GSU holds that the rule is for safety, but for trans* students, it often involves being outed to random resident assistants. In contrast, unlike the messaging system, the housing check-in system only refers to students using their preferred name. Therefore, when a trans* student checks in a guest, they must prove they are the person in the system.

Other than with check-in, Charlene says the resident assistants are "usually chill about it…We have name tags on our doors." she said, and "The RAs offered to change mine from my legal name to my preferred name." However, that was as much as they could do. Thaddeus explains, "...like your GSU ID, it has to have your legal name on it because it's a government ID... Every single time I start a new school year, I have to message my RA and be like, "Hey in the system it's going to have this name that is not my name that I go by. I go by this name." So I have to immediately out myself to my RA." Navigating the housing system requires determining when and how to out oneself as trans*. Therefore, navigating housing as a trans* student creates enormous stress in a place they are supposed to consider a safe home.

These experiences reflect a larger point in how American universities handle housing. Trans* students have to request gender-inclusive housing and subject themselves to interviews with and questions from administrators they do not know and do not feel comfortable with to access it (Nicolazzo and Marnie 2015, 162). If they do not, they are given housing assignments based on the gender marker on their government ID. However, getting a gender marker changed depends on many different factors, from medical transitions to state policies (Spade 2015, 79).

Charlene, who has not started her medical transition, has no chance of getting her gender marker changed in Georgia, where medical transition is a requirement.

Therefore, for Charlene's first year in the dorm, GSU housing gave her roommates based on her gender assigned at birth: male. She says she got lucky because all her cis male roommates are okay with her gender identity, but she still finds it challenging and a reminder of the way official structures view her gender. After she joined GSU, she discovered that the university offers gender-inclusive housing. GSU is not required to provide gender-inclusive housing, since there are no federal protections against LGBTQ+ discrimination in public accommodations or education (Davis-Matthews 2023) but does so out of a commitment to recognizing the diversity of its students. Despite this acknowledgment of diversity, GSU requires the same interview and questioning process as other universities. Charlene could not find someone to guide her through it—not even in Alliance or the Center.

In a later conversation, Charlene updated me about her attempts to access gender-inclusive housing. She had connected with three trans*-accepting cis women, and they decided to room together. They went through the interview process and gathered together to choose their rooms during the time slot, but the system locked them out before they could. Charlene's government ID lists her gender as male, while the other three are listed as female. Despite going through the process of applying for gender-inclusive housing, ostensibly making her gender identity legible for GSU housing, the online system had not caught up. Charlene called housing and, after nearly an hour, was transferred to someone with the power to override the online system, so everything was eventually resolved. However, a simple bureaucratic oversight added further stress and the experience of marginalization to the process.

Charlene was frustrated that she spent months completing the entire complicated, stressful application for gender-inclusive housing only for the system to fail and to have to ask for an exception regardless. Both Jerma and Thaddeus had a similar situation to Charlene in their first year, but in reverse: they were roomed with cis women based on their assigned gender at birth being female. However, instead of applying for gender-inclusive housing, Jerma and Thaddeus joined with two of their other transmasc, assigned female at birth friends, and decided to room together. To housing, it looked like a group of people with the same government gender marker rooming together, precisely as usual. To Jerma, Thaddeus, and their friends, it was a group of transmasc students gaming the system.

Jerma, Thaddeus, and Charlene, my three interlocutors who lived on campus, agreed that housing was the most hostile location. They all had a laundry list of stories where the housing bureaucracy had marginalized, insulted, or frustrated them. Traditionally, the onus for change-making has been on trans* students themselves (Nicolazzo and Marnie 2015, 168). Trans* activism on college campuses has pushed housing and residence life across universities to consider how to reduce the stress on trans* students using their services (Nicolazzo and Marnie 2015, 162). GSU has participated in this by offering gender-inclusive housing, but other aspects still lag behind. GSU needs to do as trans* activists have suggested for housing professionals at all universities: reflect on their biases and learn more about best practices for trans* residents (Nicolazzo and Marnie 2015, 168).

6 TWO OF GSU'S LGBTQ+ SUPPORT STRUCTURES

The week before I began my classes at GSU, I made my way to the Multicultural Center for job training. For one week, the full-time staff sat with the six graduate students and MSW interns around a table in the GSRC and gave presentations, talks, and even demonstrations of our jobs at the Center. They taught us how to log in to the accounts needed to run the social media, what surveys to give out, the hours we would be working, and what events were most important for the Center. Finally, that Friday, the GAA who had worked there last semester gave a presentation on Cultural Respect that he had created for the Center. The following Monday, work started. That week was an important introduction to how things at the Center worked: four days of training on how the office bureaucracy worked and one day of training on the cultures we were supposed to support.

6.1 The Center

When Data for Progress asked LGBTQ+ adults in the South what they found most valuable about having access to LGBTQ+ spaces, 27% answered the ability to make friendships and connections, 22% responded that they create a feeling of belonging, 17% answered it made them feel safer, and 14% said the access to resources (Davis-Matthews 2023). For trans* and nonbinary emerging adults, there is an added benefit to LGBTQ+ spaces: only 53% of cis women and 55% of cis men aged 18-14 find interacting with other LGBTQ+ people somewhat or very important, compared to 84% of trans* and nonbinary people in the same category (Davis-Matthews 2023).

These findings show how important GSU's Multicultural Center is for its LGBTQ+ students. On college campuses, these LGBTQ+ centers are places of engagement for students and allies. They are safe places to explore and affirm variant genders and sexualities. In an ideal

university, activities at these LGBTQ+ centers are created and driven by student desires and needs (Marnie 2011, 90). However, this is not always the case, and the formation of LGBTQ+ centers at universities is not always focused on helping students. Instead, with the neoliberal turn of higher education, some universities see LGBTQ+ centers as a way to signal they are LGBTQ+ friendly relative to other institutions so they can attract more students (Marnie 2011, 89).

I worked at the Center for one school year, from fall 2022 through spring 2023. The Multicultural Center is the bottom of a line of culture-focused offices at GSU. The central, overarching office is Student Engagement, under which there is a Communities, Cultures, and Inclusions (CCI) division. CCI includes three offices: Black Student Achievement (BSA), Latinx Student Services and Outreach (LASSO), and the Multicultural Center (" Cultures, Communities, and Inclusion" accessed 2024). Both BSA and LASSO only have one full-time, non-student staff member. However, the Center had three when I joined: an engagement coordinator, a program specialist, and the director, who was also an associate director of CCI.

There was another position for the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, but it had been empty since the spring 2022 semester when its former holder left to run another LGBTQ+ Center. I was one of three Graduate Administrative Assistants (GAAs) the Center hired for that year. The office was also staffed with undergraduate student assistants on work-study and four MSW interns working at the Center to complete their final internship credits before graduating with their master's in social work. Together, we all formed the basic structure of the Multicultural Center: the director on top and the full-time staff below her. The three GAAs reported directly to the engagement coordinator, while the student assistants and MSW interns reported directly to the program specialist.

My fellow GAAs and I were well-versed in work involving multicultural populations. I was pursuing a Master's in anthropology, and the other two were pursuing their Master's in Gender and Sexuality Studies and Public Policy, respectively. However, the Center's full-time staff did not mirror our academic knowledge. They all had high-level degrees in the roles of human resources and higher education, not culture. When navigating the opaque requirements of university bureaucracy, they knew better than anyone. However, they were often unintentionally ignorant when working with the many "cultures" for which they coordinated programming. For example, when celebrating Mardi Gras, the full-time staff handed out fliers listing the wrong history of the celebration. They also did not appropriately celebrate Jewish, Muslim, and Indian holidays or address the occasional instances of classism, ableism, and Islamophobia said by students in the office. The staff lacked relevant background and training, so at times the principles of cultural respect and inclusion were upheld only in writing, not spirit. For example, encountering things like differences in wealth, style or social ability could sometimes be dealt with as inconveniences to be overcome. To the full-time staff, "cultures" were something the federal government defined and mandated attention to, and all their characteristics could be understood by reading a sheet.

Throughout the fall 2022 semester, the Center tried to hire a new Gender and Sexuality Coordinator. However, the budget Student Engagement allocated to them was insufficient to be competitive in the job market, and the post went unfilled. Finally, in November, they hired a former middle school teacher for the position. He identified as a bisexual man. After he was hired, he and the engagement coordinator took joint control of the GAAs, so we had to answer to them both. He immediately went about trying to implement his vision of what LGBTQ+ programming should be. This vision involved three "mores:" more engaging events, more

attendance, and more gayness. He took an interesting approach, assigning each of the three GAAs an event to retool in this image. What he was more interested in, however, was the facilitation of one of the MSW interns' events, called Pop Talks, which was a biweekly pop culture discussion group, which he took over. He changed it from a student-led event to one where they talked about topics he brought forward.

After they hired a Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, things settled down with the upper management, but the GAAs began to leave. The senior GAA left at the end of the fall semester to focus on his thesis, and the other left GSU entirely in the first week of the spring semester, leaving me alone. With the engagement coordinator, I was partially responsible for the Center's social media presence; with the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, I was partially responsible for all GSRC programming. Additionally, I still had to do the primary GAA duties of attending the events and helping them run, which involved serving food, checking students in, running audio/visual equipment, and whatever other grunt work was needed for an event. Then, in late spring 2023, the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator left the Center. Knowing the Center was my first job, in our final one-on-one meeting, he informed me that the Center was, in his words, "not a normal office--it's horribly managed and run. I promise you, not all jobs are like this."

The coordinator’s attitude indicated how certain aspects of management and office culture were problematic and harmful (to its cause/mission). For example, sharing feedback or recommendations on behalf of the GAAs was tense because the distinction between professional and personal communications was not always solidly clear. It was also terribly disappointing to me because there was no real impact on the student body. Our events were well attended, but I had students openly tell me they were attending for the catering or the swag bags and walk out

after they were full. Even events targeting the queer community, done in partnership with Alliance, fell short.

6.1.1 My Time At the Center

A significant issue that I still regret is how the new Gender and Sexuality Coordinator restructured the Community Connections: LGBTQ+ (CC: LGBTQ+) event, or, as Thaddeus and Jerma knew it, "gay club." Put together by the previous Gender and Sexuality Coordinator, it was a place for education and community building. After he left, my fellow trans* GAA, who had been there the year before, was put in charge and brought me on to assist. We met every Friday and followed the same formula as the year before, precisely as Thaddeus and Jerma described: conversation on the weekly topic followed by time spent hanging out. It was a lovely event, but it was not very well attended. The Center did not have someone in the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator position to begin advertising the event before my fellow GAA and I came on at the start of the year. Therefore, we had to start from behind with a big advertising push to make sure the campus LGBTQ+ community knew the event existed. Eventually, attendance settled at five students on average, with ten on a well-attended day.

Towards the end of the semester, when our attendance had settled, we had a particularly memorable meeting. Five students had arrived right on time, and we began based on the provided topic—but things shifted about halfway through. Somehow, we began talking about family, and a first-year attendee laid out her fraught family life. She was an immigrant living with her aunt and uncle so she could attend school in the US. Her parents back home held very traditional expectations for her, but she felt that she could not fulfill them. Getting her degree in the arts rather than STEM was enough to frustrate them, and she worried how they would react when—or if—she ever told them she was bisexual. All of us could relate to that fear, and we

each gave her our perspectives on dealing with it. We also assured her that she did not ever have to tell them—that while "coming out" was popular, it was not the only way to be LGBTQ+, and she did not owe anyone knowledge of her sexual identity. The relief on her face at the end of the meeting and how we kept in touch afterward was also so validating. It felt good to help someone using my unique experience.

All our attendees expressed to us and our bosses how important the event was to them and how much they enjoyed it. However, the director and engagement coordinator were unhappy with the low number of attendees. They would encourage us to increase our numbers and complain about our lack of initiative in meetings. Once the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator joined the office, he was unhappy with what he called a "boring" event. After my partner GAA left at the end of the fall semester, the director and engagement coordinator informed me that the Gender and Sexuality Coordinator would be reworking the event, and the beloved "gay club" would be gone forever. Instead, a few lower-attended LGBTQ+ events were clustered under the CC: LGBTQ+ heading. It is only held once a month throughout the semester, and each month has a different theme: relaxation, joy, and education. What happened during the meetings varied from touring the rec center to a karaoke party. The only recurring activity was something that, before becoming a part of CC: LGBTQ+, was called Queer De-Stress Fest. It was (and still is, just under a different name) held around the time of exams and is a time for LGBTQ+ students to relax with each other.

It was not rare for the Center to change good events to increase attendance. The most crucial outcome of any event was not whether it impacted or educated students. Instead, it was whether or not attendance met or exceeded expectations. This was partially because the Center was subject to GSU's bureaucratic structures. Because of higher education's neoliberal turn,

these bureaucratic structures aim to expand the university's "customer base" and improve its rankings (Sullivan 1999; Shore 2008, 287). It also follows neoliberal governmentality's logic of the audit, where one is supposed to self-regulate, self-access, and always aim to automate. Therefore, specific metrics and benchmarks are set for success (Shore 2008, 281). For the Center, the primary metric is attendance. The organization's funding relied on meeting attendance expectations. In a neoliberal university, there is a drive to constantly perform and improve that performance (Rogler 2019, 69). The pressure to hit attendance benchmarks forces the Center to focus on hitting the arbitrary quantitative measurement to the detriment of other objectives like education and understanding.

Therefore, the Center focused on what they called "major events," which they expected to have greater attendance. These were hosted in large areas like the Ballroom or Veteran's Hall and advertised as parties, complete with catering. They were expected to draw more than 500 students. Smaller events, called "minor events," had an expected attendance of anywhere from 10-50 students. These were advertised as panels, groups, or meetings and were generally recurring. If an event had ten attendees or less, it was considered a failure and sent to be reworked. Focusing on numbers created a vicious cycle that made working at the Center feel like a quantitative game, where more bodies meant more funding, rather than looking at the substance of events and what they did for people. To the Center, feedback was always less important than numbers. Good numbers proved to Student Affairs that our events were valuable, which got us more funding. Then, the Center would use that larger budget to throw larger events, which would be better attended and get the Center more funding—becoming a vicious cycle.

The Center hosts other LGBTQ+ events, but none happen as frequently. According to Marnie and Nicolazzo's review, the average LGBTQ+ center's programming is an educational

experience followed by interaction and conversation with the audience (Marnie and Nicolazzo 2014, 271). While I was working there, the Center hosted some of these, but none were aimed at LGBTQ+ students, instead focusing on other cultures. Instead, the Center mostly hosted large, celebratory events. The two biggest were Pride Prom in the fall and Lavender Graduation in the spring. Pride Prom was a prom-style dance party held to celebrate LGBTQ+ History Month. It was open to all GSU students, queer or otherwise, but was themed to reference queer pop culture. The one I helped host had the theme “CAMP” and brought in local drag queens as guests. Lavender Graduation had a much more professional aura, with organizations like the Human Rights Center attending. Lavender Graduation was hosted in April before the official GSU graduation. The Center invited queer LGBTQ+ students to sign up to walk and bring their families to celebrate their achievements.

Pride Prom was one of the most fun events I have ever attended. Everyone there was putting on a show, whether they were wearing jeans or an actual prom dress. One girl I met had exceeded the theme, wearing a homemade approximation of hoop skirts without an overdress. She looked gorgeous, and I featured her on the Center’s social media more than once. It was held in GSU’s ballroom, decorated to the nines, with rainbow lighting around the dark room. We also brought in outside caterers, not just Panther Dining, to make the event feel more exclusive. Lavender Graduation was almost the opposite, with professional, put-together expectations. It was held in the same ballroom, but this time, the room was packed with circular tables decorated with white tablecloths and flowers in glass vases. The Center chose me to speak that night, but when I arrived, my bosses found my outfit did not fit the planned vibe of the event and sent me home. They wanted to impress officials from the state government and the Human Rights Center they had invited to that evening.

Both events were held in the late evening and required significant time investment. Lavender Graduation, in particular, involved a simple application process advertised to LGBTQ+ seniors. However, both events drew large crowds. Pride Prom is a hugely attended event and is very popular among GSU undergraduates. Lavender Graduation brings in community members and graduating students. Both events celebrate LGBTQ+ life at GSU without addressing specific communities and their respective struggles, challenges, needs, or triumphs. This focus on celebration is an issue that plagues trans*-focused programming at LGBTQ+ centers. The balance between celebratory programming and what Marnie and Nicolazzo call mournful programming, meant to commemorate and honor struggle and loss, is difficult for LGBTQ+ centers to get right (Marnie and Nicolazzo 2014, 272).

The Center has not found a middle ground between celebratory, mournful, and helpful programming. Instead, it focuses on the celebratory aspects of queerness--the style, the parties, the pop culture--and ignores the others. The Center is notorious among GSU LGBTQ+ students for not working to address structural inequality or LGBTQ+ politics. Jerma describes the vibe as "...oh man, you guys are great. Anyway, we're just gonna ignore all of this anti-trans* legislation. Yeah… your reproductive rights don't matter. Don't ask us to advocate for anything." The Center aims to celebrate the community without engaging in it, which can feel condescending or exploitative. However, the Center does engage in mournful programming for the trans* community. It just does not do so in a tasteful way, as the following observations regarding how it handled feedback will show.

6.1.2 The Feedback Issue

The Center has a top-down, bureaucratic structure focused on attendance. This focus exhibited itself in how the full-time staff, my bosses, disregarded feedback from students, GAAs,

and the MSW interns. The knowledge split between the two groups was significant. While the full-time staff had higher education and event coordination expertise, the GAAs and MSW interns had the most experience working with marginalized populations. However, our substantive suggestions were not incorporated into center practices. The environment of the Center was not surprising; it simply followed bureaucratic rules. Knowing that did not lessen the frustration when our bosses ignored us.

The situation surrounding one of the Center's mournful events offers a case in point. Once, at the office-wide meeting, we began strategizing what to do to mark Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR), a yearly memorial event for trans* people who have lost their lives to transphobic violence. A cis GAA and the cis male Gender and Sexuality Coordinator came up with the idea of having a slide show of trans* people who had lost their lives that year playing on a loop in the office. The other trans* GAA and I desperately urged them against it. To us, it would make the location inhospitable to trans* people, and we offered that there are ways of remembering our dead that do not involve broadcasting a slideshow with their names, faces, and causes of death. However, they overruled us, and the slideshow was created and run on the office screens. Despite asking for it to stop, the other trans* GAA and I were made to stay in the office with it running until we finished our shifts. Everyone who entered the office that day, from student staff to an Alliance member who came to talk with the engagement coordinator, was subjected to the slideshow.

Another big issue that all the MSW interns and GAAs repeatedly brought up was the use of the term "womxn" in official Center correspondence. Spelling the word woman/women with an X originated in the 1970s and was firmly entrenched in the second wave of feminism. Feminists created it to protest the fact that the word "woman" is derived from "man." However, in the last

ten years, the spelling of womxn has become a dogwhistle term for transphobes (Kumar 2021). Transphobes now use it as a dogwhistle to signal that they are cis women, as opposed to trans* women. When used online, the most common interpretation is that the person using it is transphobic—specifically, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF). The term was controversial from the start, but after its adoption by TERFs, it has become inappropriate to use in LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+-allied circles. However, the Multicultural Center continued to use it in every official Center communication, from event titles to newsletter texts.

Figure 1: "America Has A Problem: Celebrating Womxn in Sports - Title IX Panel Discussion." Panther Involvement Network. https://pin.gsu.edu/event/8924742
Figure 2: "Community Connections: Women of Color." Panther Involvement Network. https://pin.gsu.edu/event/7970286

Of course, my fellow transgender GA and I were incredibly uncomfortable about this. Womxn is a term we both had personally used against us at various points. An MSW intern asked us if we were okay because she knew her boyfriend, who was trans, would not have been. Eventually, we banded together and discussed the issue with our bosses in a meeting. Unfortunately, it did not go well. Our concerns were dismissed as being sensitive and wrong. Our boss told us that she had never seen the term used by TERFs and refused to change the wording, holding on to the notion that it was, in fact, more inclusive, not less. The dismissal was devastating to us. Even worse, however, was hearing from other trans* students on campus.

When I offhandedly mentioned where I worked to another GSU student, the Center's use of "Womxn" would inevitably come up. People at LGBTQ+ events spoke to me about being surprised we were not openly transphobic. We received complaint emails. These were all shared, but without impact.

Many of the Center's missteps seemed to reflect the belief that because they are accepting of and working on behalf of LGBTQ+ people, they *could not* be homophobic or transphobic. This position was invoked when, as often happened, staff misgendered or used incorrect pronouns for both students and employees, including the other trans* GAA, who had changed their pronouns since they began working at the Center, making it "difficult" to remember. Because these errors were unintentional, they were perceived as benign. I should be clear that I am not saying that people at the Center were actively anti-LGBTQ+. They hosted super fun LGBTQ+ events, had an entire room free for LGBTQ+ students to study and meet in, and were the primary support for the LGBTQ+ student group Alliance. Nevertheless, ultimately, the Center floundered when it came to anything non-normative. This was deeply frustrating because we were all working to make a change, but as GAAs, we were disempowered because of our position in the hierarchy.

Our sense of frustration was vindicated the year after I left the Center. Shortly after I left, they hired a new Gender and Sexuality Coordinator. Almost immediately, the term "womxn" disappeared from the Center's advertising and programming. All it took was for someone with power in the bureaucratic system to understand the controversial nature of the term and make a change. While we could not get it done with the small power given to GAAs in the bureaucracy, a sympathetic superior could immediately make an impact. The contradictory nature of

bureaucracy was on display in this change: a group of people were unable to make a change because of their place in the hierarchy, but one person could make the change because of his.

When the Center asked for students' qualitative feedback, it did so in convoluted ways. University bureaucracy required the Center to review and police itself in a process Shore called "regulated self-regulation" (2008, 281). The Center did this through surveys. Officials could use survey insights to strategically direct programs if utilized well (Marnie 2011, 88). However, the Center rarely utilized their surveys to their full potential. The staff pushed GAAs and MSW interns to badger event attendees into taking the surveys, only to disregard any feedback. The results were never brought up in meetings or shared with the rest of the staff. The surveys were extremely unintuitive to users and not well-tailored to their audience, only meant to inform the Center of which demographics attended their events.

When I joined the Center, they were still handing out paper surveys with three categories available for gender (man, woman, or other) and four for sexuality (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other). The MSW interns digitized the surveys, linking them to a QR code that students could scan rather than needing to hand out physical paper copies. However, whether the surveys were digital or physical, GAAs and MSW were required to ensure that as many attendees filled them out as possible. This meant we spent much of our time at events reminding the attendees that there was a survey for them to fill out. The MSW interns were allowed to add more inclusive categories to the surveys when they digitized them. However, including identity category questions on surveys for events that have nothing to do with identity was a function of bureaucracy, not a need for feedback by the Center.

For example, these are questions from the 2023 Pop Talks event survey:

Demographic Information: Race/Ethnicity/ Nationality *

- ☐ Asian American/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Latinx
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ White/European American
- ☐ Arab American
- ☐ Other:

Demographic Information: Gender *

- ☐ Cis-Male (A man whose gender identity matches assigned sex at birth)
- ☐ Cis-Female (A woman whose gender identity matches assigned sex at birth)
- ☐ Trans Man
- ☐ Trans Woman
- ☐ Prefer Not to Say
- ☐ Other:

Figure 3: "Pop Talks Post Event Survey." The Multicultural Center. Google Forms. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1SMiOnJFdEh_Z34p5T3ZZTX0URndLwKjCpKq_Ij4QdD8/viewform?edit_requested=true

PIN describes Pop Talks as "…discussions about pop culture, national/global news, trigger-warning topics and/or anything related to diversity and inclusion." ("Multicultural Center" accessed 2024). The rest of the survey was about how they found the event, what they thought of it, and any changes they would like. Demographic information was not important to the event. However, it was important to the Center to demonstrate to Student Engagement that they are actively getting attendance from marginalized groups—ultimately, a self-audit.

As should be immediately evident, the Center attempted to divide students into boxes based on culture, sexuality, or gender. It did not provide a way for participants to convey more ambiguous identities. Anyone whose identity was more complicated than a single term was illegible in its surveys or programming. While events were open to everyone, the Center based theming on strict and exclusionary identity categories. Even events based on queerness evoked a single version of what is supposed to be an anti-normative identity. The Center was not interested in changing this set-up, and the staff never showed genuine interest in student feedback and only changed events to gain more attendance.

6.2 Alliance

Where the Center falls short, the student club Alliance attempts to fill the gap. They do this best with on-campus activism, which is especially important for trans* people. Higher education, often complicit in maintaining and enforcing trans* oppression, becomes an important place to make change. Throughout history, students, not student affairs administrators or faculty, have driven the movement for LGBTQ+ empowerment on campus (Marnie 2011, 103-104). Student activism contrasts with career social justice. Career social justice is when one gets a degree titled something like Social Justice, Human Rights, or Justice Studies and then goes on to join a professional organization that pays them for their expertise (Spade 2015, 29).

These organizations include non-profits, often staffed by executives making a large salary and supported by grassroots volunteers, who go unpaid. These social justice structures, legitimized by their professionalization and political support, become seen as more trustworthy and effective than grassroots movements (29). Without active engagement, social justice non-profits become organizations that settle into a routine, providing "services" rather than engaging with the transforming world of human rights and social justice. Over time, these services are institutionalized through bureaucratization, and the transformative goals of the organization become replaced by efforts to maintain a desired position as an "expert" in its service area (Tapp 2020).

Student activism, by contrast, is an inherently grassroots form of organizing. Students are not paid for their services, cannot fully access the professionalized sector without degrees, and are free to imagine transformative futures without the complexities of social justice being their source of income. Within the university, students can safely form grassroots coalitions for social justice. One place student movements often focus is within the universities themselves. Student

movements *for* students within the neoliberal university advocate for student well-being, push for minority representation, and ensure student access (Cornelius-Bell and Bell 2020, 26). However, they can become problematic in the same way as nonprofit organizations. Without engagement and careful consideration, student activism had become merely an addition to the neoliberal student-consumer model--ensuring investment security rather than making change (27).

While theorizing possible alternatives to neoliberal university governance, Richard Hil, Fern Thompsett, and Kristen Lyons find that, rather than simply restructuring the existing governance structures, people should attempt to craft entirely new, more inclusive forms of governance. To them, much potential for these new forms is found in the work of on-campus student activism (Hil et al. 2022, 63). However, the organization of the neoliberal university, where students are the largest demographic, but decision-making lies in the hands of executives, often stymies these attempts. Often, in today's neoliberal climate, executives suppress disruptive activism on campus despite academia's history with leftist social justice movements on campus. In contrast to the university's historic position at the forefront of First Amendment rights and activism, the neoliberal university does not want what it perceives as unnecessary politics on campus, instead focusing on knowledge's role in the global market (66).

Alliance, as a student club, fulfills engages in student activism. While it is a GSU club and the Multicultural Center is its sponsor, it remains primarily autonomous. Alliance is a student-run organization, meaning a board of GSU students controls them. Students put forth their names to run for certain offices, such as President, PIN officer, and secretary, and Alliance members are then invited to vote for who they think should fill that position. After elections, the board works together to fundraise, plan Alliance events, and network on campus. Being students

themselves, Alliance can understand what its members experience and use that to guide its programming. They can also respond more quickly to what students need and activism they want to see on campus.

Recent avenues of activism include joining other student groups in protests against GSU's relationship with Israel and complicity in the Palestinian genocide, promoting local "Stop Cop City" protests, and openly calling for action about the transphobic hate crimes occurring in the US. Alliance has recently worked on campus with the GSU chapter of Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), Faces of Feminism, and the GSU chapter of the Society for Justice in Palestine. Off-campus, they have worked with Stop Cop City activists and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Alliance focuses on continuing the radical work begun by queer elders, even while subject to the constraints of higher education. One way they do this is through coalition work with other student groups.

Contrary to being a siloed bastion of the LGBTQ+ community, Alliance expands outward, connecting with other groups focused on gaining justice for all marginalized groups. Their mission statement on the Panther Involvement Network (PIN) enshrines their focus by including the statements that their purpose is to "achieve queer liberation " and that one of their tasks is "inciting students into activism." Also, on their PIN, they include a resource list for trans* and nonbinary students and articles written by students, the most recent of which is titled "Young Dems Aren't True LGBTQ Allies." ("Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity" accessed 2023).

Alliance holds events with come-and-go expectations. One event, a scrapbook decorating meetup, only had ten to fifteen people in the room at any one time, but by the end, they had over 40 attendees. While that event was advertised as scrapbooking, Alliance members also brought

board/video games, coloring books, and food for people to enjoy. The five tables were packed with people doing a multitude of activities, all while they hung out and talked. No one was left out, whether you were new or not. I tried to hang around the edges of the event to observe better, but that would never be allowed stand at an Alliance event. I was pulled into a game of Uno by some people I did not know and later given free rein to add four or five songs to the event's music queue. In the end, those who chose to scrapbook or color left the event with art projects, and everyone left feeling closer to the LGBTQ+ community on campus.

Alliance rarely hosts events on their own. In terms of solo events, there are usually only one or two a year. These are casual, focused on creating a community and giving queer students a place to relax. They co-host most of their events with either the above student groups or the Center. When co-hosting with the Center, however, it is often in name only. Since the Center is their sponsor organization, we would add their name to any LGBTQ+-focused event we hosted when I worked there. However, they had no say in the events' planning or how they were run. It is different when co-hosting with other student groups: those events are planned and hosted together, with a coalitional focus. This coalitional focus is incredibly impactful for campus activism. Multiple groups can create larger, more impactful protests.

However, coalitional focus also has its issues: it splits student focus between multiple clubs. Alliance has recently had difficulty attracting students to run for office and participate meaningfully in the club. Only one person applied for the president job, and now that most of the current Alliance staff have graduated, the organization is floundering. In my experience and discussions with other students, there are several reasons, from high student burnout rates to other issues grabbing their focus. Ultimately, Alliance is a single-issue club. They could combat this appearance for a while through co-hosting and collaboration. However, LGBTQ+ student

activists appear to be turning their attention to more broadly focused groups. As Blue told me, he does not "do much with Alliance, I'm more involved with YDSA and stuff like that."

Hopefully, students will engage with Alliance again and continue the group's focus on activism and changemaking. The group is influential to campus culture and a historic source of support for queer students. However, groups with a single-issue focus, like Alliance, must work twice as hard to attract students interested in broad activism. On campus, Alliance works in tandem with the Center to create a supportive community for queer students. It focuses on activism and political protection, while the Center focuses on celebration and connection.

Complementary Structures

In an ideal world, Alliance and the Center would be two sides of the same coin. The Center would focus on community building and student success, while Alliance would focus on student activism and political power. However, this is not how things have operated in the last two years. The Center is busy with its multiple "cultures," attendance needs, and navigating bureaucratic structures. Though Alliance's name is attached to the Center's LGBTQ+ events, it only actively collaborates with other activism-inclined student groups, not the Center. This creates a disconnect between the two organizations, meaning they do not know where service gaps may exist that need filling. Student activism is one significant way marginalized students have won representation and resisted the neoliberal turn in higher education. Alliance strives to continue this tradition of resistance and change.

However, structures do not have to focus on activism to be valuable to the LGBTQ+ community. The Center can focus on student advocacy within the bureaucracy of higher education. LGBTQ+ centers were founded with three intentions: social support, community building, and activism. However, because university bureaucracy marginalized them, LGBTQ+

centers did this work piecemeal (Marnie and Nicolazzo 2014, 257). Eventually, this activism won student representation, and the LGBTQ+ center became a part of the neoliberal framework. Within this framework, students have continued to strive to build something better (Cornelius-Bell and Bell 2020, 26). Engaging students meaningfully in neoliberal governance and having a direct impact on bettering the university should be a goal for campus organizations (27). However, the Center does not engage in this kind of advocacy.

There are many reasons the Center avoids engaging in advocacy. Partially, it is because they are so steeped in university bureaucracy that it is difficult to critique it. Additionally, the system can only be contested collectively, and there are enormous costs for individuals or organizations that try to challenge bureaucracy (Shore 2008, 291). However, those are not the only reasons. The other is that the staff is not well-positioned for LGBTQ+ advocacy. As established, none of the staff are LGBTQ+, and the LGBTQ+ part-time hires do not have the bureaucratic capital to push them into advocacy. All of these mean the Center, despite including LGBTQ+ identities under its umbrella, does not advocate for LGBTQ+ GSU students.

7 CONCLUSION

Over two years of work, my thesis transitioned from a study on normativity among undergraduate LGBTQ+ students to what it is now: documentation of trans* existence and university LGBTQ+ structures in higher education. It shaped my life as much as I shaped it and allowed me to collaborate with incredibly awesome informants. I hope it is evident that this work is as much their accomplishment as mine. My findings in this work are messier than I would like them to be, much like my time at GSU. My interlocutors found themselves trying to articulate life in a gray area—how it feels to exist somewhere that does not see you, but at least it does not hate you. Alliance and the Center remain subject to university bureaucracy, and while I have noted small advancements during my time at GSU, wishing for a complete overhaul to fix every problem I found is illogical. It is only fitting that life would throw everything at me to prevent me from wrangling this unruly mess of loose ends into a thesis.

I offer my documentation of trans* life as a contribution of valuable knowledge to the growing trans* epistemology in academia. Critical trans politics demands more than inclusion. It aims to transform the structures of society that rely on gender for classification and control and to build a better, more equal world. Critical trans politics is about the continual work it takes to resist regimes of truth and reality and the continual need to recognize and combat state violence (Spade 2015, 1). In this work, I have contributed to recognizing state violence against trans* people—in this case, several elements of structural violence in higher education. The work of navigating higher education in ways that lessen the impact of structural violence adds an extra burden onto trans* students. What my findings indicate may mitigate structural violence is providing students with the agency to shape collective practice. This is antithetical to the neoliberalized university, with its strict systems of bureaucracy. Universities instead try to

mitigate this burden's impact on trans* student success using LGBTQ+ centers and student clubs. However, at GSU, both organizations have successes but ultimately fall short in different ways.

Despite what one might think after hearing their opinions, overall, my interlocutors shared the belief that GSU was a good place to be openly queer. However, they added a qualifier or comparison almost every time. Charlene believed that GSU students were used to more diversity in sexual expression than other places in the South. When answering the question, "Does GSU support queer students?" Thaddeus answered, not by saying yes, but by saying, "GSU is really good at it in ways that I think *a lot of other universities in Georgia* are not." (emphasis mine). When asked why, he pointed out that GSU is an urban university and, therefore, more diverse than other Georgia universities.

Charlene agrees that GSU has a good handle on the ability to be publicly queer. The primary baseline for her is being allowed to use the correct bathroom, and she can use the women's room whenever she wants. She compared GSU to her family home, where her family ignores her gender identity and trans*ness. Thaddeus pointed out that there is much freedom of expression at GSU that he does not think would be as accepted and celebrated at another university. Both of them felt freer in their performativity on GSU's campus than they would elsewhere. Blue also thinks that people are comfortable being publicly queer at GSU, but he does not attribute this accepting atmosphere to GSU's institutional structures. Instead, he says, "I think that's more so just because of the student culture, but not actually GSU itself because I don't think that they work very hard to do any of that. I definitely think that they could do more." He says that GSU's LGBTQ+ support structures efforts to reach queer people beyond a surface level fall short.

I am unsure what can be done to change these structures that does not involve radical transformation. The Center would require new staff actively committed to pushing boundaries and challenging the university. Alliance is doing what it can to be a leader in student activism, but it relies on student engagement to remain relevant. Recognizing how these organizations fall short is not an attack on what they do well. Instead, it is simply an acknowledgment of what they could do better to support students like my trans* interlocutors. However, enacting legibility on trans* bodies is a process of translation (Snorton and Harritaworn 2022, 309). Making them visible to the public bureaucracy of GSU has risks and payoffs, as seen when my interlocutors had to navigate the gender-inclusive housing system. The expert class of DEI professionals that staff the Center and Student Life could not be removed from the lives of the queer and trans* people they are meant to understand and help (313).

Just by attending GSU, my interlocutors belong to a privileged sect of the queer community. The majority of LGBTQ+ people are poor or working class, and trans* people are even more vulnerable to poverty than cisgender people (Hollibaugh and Weiss 2015, 19-20). This puts them closer to the class of professional experts meant to help them navigate the university. However, they still experienced marginalization at the hands of these people and the organizations they run. Until higher education divests from the heteronormative gender expectations that make up its base classification system, there will be no way for trans* students to live as their gender identity with the university bureaucracy easily.

Nevertheless, my interlocutors built community and lived their lives as freely as possible at GSU. In some cases, they facilitated this community; in others, GSU's LGBTQ+ support structures were the source of events that led them to their community. All my interlocutors believed that GSU was not as bad as other universities in the South might have been. They saw

its Atlanta location as a significant factor for why GSU worked so hard to accommodate and understand queer students. My interlocutors acknowledged events held by Alliance and the Center as a plus, and they attended when they could. The Center had many issues, but hosting events was not one of them. In my and my interlocutors' experience, attendees always felt welcome and had fun. Alliance's advocacy was a draw for my interlocutors, who identified as social justice conscious and perceived Alliance's activist stance as a complement to the Center's inability to engage in meaningful student advocacy.

Based on my findings, the most impactful thing a university could do to support its trans* students would be to eliminate gender-based classification. This is not impossible, but gender, as a classification system, is a deeply entrenched bureaucratic norm. Another option would be to create an LGBTQ+ center that is democratic and actively connected to its student population, entirely separate from the university bureaucracy. However, more minor aspects that are more likely to happen include ensuring LGBTQ+ centers are actively welcoming to trans* students, providing housing staff with best-practices training on trans* housing issues, supporting student activism, and providing trans* students with protection from political attacks. All in all, my interlocutors and I find that GSU tries to embrace trans* identities but falls short beyond performative statements of solidarity. A genuinely impactful trans* agenda on campus would create a better life for and lessen the burden on trans* students.

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