Intersectional Transfeminist Student Activism: 
Transforming U.S. College Communities Through 
Everyday Anti-Cissexism Resistance

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Abstract

Trans student voices and activism have been the impetus for trans inclusion on college campuses. Yet, institutional narratives on trans inclusive campus communities cast the administration as changemakers driving gender diversity initiatives - ignoring trans students’ agency and activism. By focusing on trans students’ everyday gender liberation activism our project emphasizes trans students’ daily work to create trans liberatory campus communities through intersectional transfeminist praxis that centralize their standpoints.

Keywords: Cissexism, Gender Liberation, Trans, Intersectional, Transfeminisms

If cis folks want to call segments of higher ed privileged bubbles of safe spaces...that’s fine. Just let us have them! Because the need for safe spaces and gender neutral or gender liberated restrooms [and] classrooms, stems from the fact that mainstream society, you know, “white-straight, cis, male, affluent, neurotypical, and able-bodied society” is a system designed to protect those in positions of power and authority...trans folks, I think, simply wish to have a sanctuary or a share in public society...[T]he maintenance of “safe spaces” is to contest or escape the onslaught of hate that trans communities and in particular Black and Brown trans young adults face (V, trans student activist, NJ state college, 2017).

Historically, trans student voices and activism have been the impetus for trans inclusion on college campuses (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Case, Kanenberg, Enrich, & Tittsworth, 2012; Johnson, 2014). Yet, most institutional narratives on efforts to create trans inclusive campus communities cast the administration as benevolent changemakers driving gender diversity initiatives while ignoring trans students’ agency and activism. We argue that trans students’ resistance to cissexism on campus dispels narratives that locate the institution as the instigator of social change. The continuum of trans students’ resistance involves open acts of defiance and covert daily challenges to cissexism that include what one trans participant calls “cutthroat cis-heteronormativity” (V, 2017). Compared to their cisgender peers, many trans students, particularly trans students of color, are targeted for verbal, physical, and sexual violence at disproportionately higher rates simply for existing as non-normatively gendered bodies (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). For this reason, trans existence is resistance. Trans students who resist cissexism risk intensified discrimination and hate violence on campus (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Johnson, 2014). Despite the dangers they face, trans students are not waiting for institutional authorities to create equitable campus communities.

Rather than concentrating solely on legal reform efforts to address violence and discrimination, this article focuses on attempts to improve transgender students’ quality of life in higher
education (and beyond), particularly at our college, a New Jersey state public institution, from the vantage point of trans student activism. To date there is little scholarship that highlights the activist work of trans students on college campuses (Johnson, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017a). Our research contributes to a small but growing field of scholarship that reconfigures the narrative on higher education to center the work of trans students, redefining activism in the process.

Trans epistemology, intersectionality, feminist, and critical trans politics are key theoretical frameworks, perspectives, and analytic tools that constitute the feminist mixed methods approach shaping this research. To honor and make visible the labor, struggles, and voices of trans students, we researched in dialogue with them, applying a feminist methodology (Hesse-Biber, 2013) to collect and organize data. In this way, our research crosses disciplines, integrating feminist, trans, people of color, whiteness, and higher education studies. The interdisciplinarity of a feminist approach allows us to combine theories and methodologies to access and explicate trans students’ variegated experiences of oppression and daily resistive practices.

By focusing on trans students’ everyday gender liberation activism we begin to shift the dominant discourse from one defined, in part, by negatives and erasures to one that prioritizes trans students’ subjectivities or standpoints (Collins, 1990). Our project emphasizes trans students’ daily work to create trans liberatory campus communities through intersectional transfeminist praxis that centralize their standpoints. Trans student subjectivities are central to the development of what Nicolazzo (2017b) called “trans* epistemologies,” that is, the unique way in which trans students “creat[e] truth and knowledge” (p. 4) in order to transform higher education or create gender liberated campuses. Generated through a careful articulation of trans people’s various standpoints is trans* epistemologies. In this case, trans students produced digital testimonios (Anzaldúa, 1987), or testimonies, that convey their standpoints and epistemologies—i.e., their uniquely transgender perspectives, knowledges, and truths.

Trans student testimonios reveal that despite its location on the cutting edge of policy shifts that address trans students’ rights, our college, a New Jersey state public institution (NJSPI) remains a site of structural cissexism. NJSPI is a community that trans students must constantly work to make tolerant, if not accepting, momentarily supportive, if not dependably safe, and moderately accessible, if not wholly inclusive. Policy and legal changes are vital to trans people’s liberation, but formal rights alone will not create trans inclusive and liberatory communities. Some of NJSPI’s trans student activists discern the limitations of policy change driven by neoliberal approaches to diversity and inclusion. One trans student, Zara, called neoliberal inclusion practices a “numbers game” that forecloses students’ ability to transform campus communities due to the overemphasis on providing basic accommodations—which often only exist on paper or online (Erlick, 2018).

For our college’s trans student activists, instituting concrete long-lasting change demands intersectional transfeminist politics. The politics of intersectional transfeminist activism are grounded in an understanding of the significance of intersectionality to emergent transfeminist theories and positions. Jack Halberstam (2018) argued that “[i]ntersectionality remains a very important tool within any attempt to understand the historical arc of relations between trans* people and feminist and queer communities precisely because, while white women were often exclusively focused on issues of womanhood, people of color could not afford a singular focus” (para. 21). Intersectional transfeminism is a lens through which some trans student activists come to understand the complexities and consequences of overlapping, co-constitutive identities and oppressions. For these students, intersectional transfeminism provides a framework for envisioning and creating a campus community that is affirming and inclusive of trans people across lines of race,
class, ability, sexuality, size, immigration status, and so on. We only need to listen to their voices and follow their lead.

To that end, we begin by contextualizing trans student activism within the emergent field of trans studies in higher education, then we explain the theories and methodological approaches that undergird our research followed by an analysis of the intersectional transfeminist frameworks, and practices that inform and animate trans student activism. We conclude with a summary of our findings and discuss trans student activists’ visions for creating gender liberated campuses.

Literature Review

Higher education trans studies is a small but important and expanding field with few studies that centralize trans students as change agents. The limited body of scholarship on trans college students offers crucial insights into their gendered self-conceptions, experiences of anti-trans discrimination, and persistence in the face of cissexism on campus (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009; Catalano, 2015; Dugan, Kusel, & Simoumet, 2012; Jourian, 2017; McKinney, 2005; Nicolazzo 2016a, 2016b, 2017a; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015; Pusch, 2005). A large body of work focuses on strategies for creating trans inclusive campuses (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Squire & Beck, 2016). Several reports examine the status of trans students’ rights especially after 2001, the year the Transgender Pride Flag was first publicly displayed and over a year after Transgender Day of Remembrance was first observed (de’Carlo, 2018; Lambda Legal, 2016; Leveque, 2017; Sausa, 2002). These studies included testimonies from trans students who engaged in organized and unorganized daily acts of resistance to cissexism on campus. For instance, filing a lawsuit to gain access to campus bathrooms that align with a student’s (trans)gender identification served as a formal or organized resistive act carried out with the help of others; while, a lone individual’s insistence that campus offices update official school records to reflect their chosen name and correct pronouns demonstrated an informal or unorganized resistive act (Lambda Legal, 2016; Transgender Law Center, 2015). Most of the literature documented the isolation, transphobia, enmity, and violence to which trans students are subjected (Nicolazzo, 2017a). Establishing a record of trans students’ oppression is necessary to developing effective strategies for creating gender liberated campuses. A singular focus on oppression, however, is an incomplete portrayal of trans students’ lived experiences that are also defined by persistence and resistance to discrimination. Scholarship that analyzes anti-trans oppression while acknowledging and emphasizing trans students’ ability to endure, and in some cases, thrive in these repressive contexts advances a narrative that both educates cis people and empowers trans students.

Higher education trans studies introduces and explores a long neglected and crucial experience in the world of academia, but there is a dearth of scholarship on trans students with multiple identities. Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, and Savage (2002) and Nicolazzo (2017a) offered insightful studies into the ways disability structures trans students’ identities and experiences of cissexism. The ways ableism, cissexism, and white supremacy converge at an ideological and institutional level, however, remains an uncharted terrain of scholarly inquiry. The virtual absence of comprehensive studies on the positionality of trans students of color on college campuses is particularly disturbing given the greater rates at which they are targeted for discrimination and violence compared to white trans students (Grant et al., 2017). Higher education trans studies tends to centralize white trans students’ experiences while providing no meaningful interrogation of whiteness as an intersection with transness. There are a few notable exceptions to this trend such as Beemyn’s (2019) anthology, Trans People in Higher Education, which includes multiple works that name
and interrogate whiteness as an intersection with transness; T. J. Jourian’s (2017) discussion of the ways in which race and white supremacy are invisibilized and enacted through white trans masculinities even as these forces shape and constrain trans masculinities of color; Johnson’s (2014) intersectional analysis of trans student activists’ racial, sexual, dis/abled, religious, and national identities; Nicolazzo’s (2016b) examination of Black non-binary trans students’ experiences of isolation on campus due to racism in white cis and queer spaces and cissexism in Black cis spaces; and Brook’s (2016) report on Indigenous trans students.

Scholarship on trans students as change agents on college campuses documents the institutional and microaggressive cissexisms to which trans students are subjected as well as their resistance to it (Case et. al., 2012; Johnson, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a). Nicolazzo’s (2017a) Trans* in College: Transgender Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and Institutional Policies for Inclusion, the most recent book-length exploration of trans students’ experiences on campus, makes a vital contribution by highlighting trans students’ agency. Nicolazzo emphasized trans students’ “resiliency practices,” or coping mechanisms, and survival strategies. She also explored the “hidden” and open liberatory acts that constitute the exhausting daily labor of confronting cissexism on campus. To create trans affirming campuses, she insisted that institutional authorities go beyond policy shifts and grand declarations on diversity and inclusion. Building on the work of Dean Spade (2011), Nicolazzo (2017a) encourages administrators and faculty to adopt a “trickle up” (p. 138) approach to creating change that centers the needs of the most marginalized and endangered groups on campus. In so doing, institutional authorities privilege trans students’ voices and concerns, an indispensable step towards creating gender liberated campus communities. Scholarship on trans student resistance demonstrates that where institutional authorities fail to acknowledge and elevate their needs and concerns, trans students are not waiting for them to end discrimination. Trans students persist in challenging and enduring cissexist oppression on campus.

Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

To honor the labor, struggles, and voices of trans students, we conducted this research in dialogue with them, applying a transfeminist approach (Koyama, 2003) to the interview methods used to collect, organize, and analyze our interview data. A transfeminist research methodology that centers trans people, acknowledges the multiplicity of their social identities, supports their struggle for liberation, and allows us to identify the ways in which trans students mobilize their truth and knowledge to create trans inclusive campuses. A transfeminist methodological approach also permits us to discern and analyze the liberatory potential of trans students’ everyday activism (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017). We weave trans students’ testimonies together with the emergent literature on trans students in higher education and legal reform approaches to transgender rights on college campuses. Our transfeminist interview research method provides a framework for understanding trans students’ everyday actions as important practices by emphasizing specificity—the sort of attention to particular instances that complicates an understanding of overgeneralized, taken-for-granted, and totalizing views of being and knowing. Feminist inflected research critically investigates the dialogic relationships between agency and social structures, subverting the notion that subjects are passively produced through institutions and highlighting the ways subjects produce themselves with and against material and ideological forces (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Our own intersecting identities and positionalities in higher education stimulated our interest in trans students’ subjectivities, experiences of oppression, and resistive practices. As non-
binary trans identified professors assigned female at birth (AFAB), we live at the intersections of privilege and oppression and use interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship as tools to interrogate and challenge social injustice. One of us a Black middle class immigrant and untenured faculty member whose teaching and scholarship merges Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS), African American Studies, and U.S. History, and the other, a white U.S. born first-generation tenured faculty member with working class roots whose teaching and scholarship blends WGSS, Transnational Feminist and African Studies. For us, trans students and trans inclusion are central to a broader liberatory project. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from, teach, mentor, and support trans students who work to make their campus safe, affirming, and transformed.

To amplify the voices, center the vantage points, and support the resistive efforts of trans students on our campus, we invited several trans student activists at our college, NJSPI, to participate in this research project through two confidential online questionnaires. The design of the questionnaires function as digital interviews in which we posed open-ended short answer questions. In these digital interviews, we asked students to name their intersecting identities, discuss their experience of being trans on campus, and describe their activist strategies for negotiating campus cissexism. To ensure accurate reporting of student responses, allow time for thoughtful response and editing, and to preserve the authenticity of student voices, we distributed the questionnaire through email. After reviewing their initial responses, we followed-up with requests to expand on or clarify their answers. The six participants included in this research are trans identified, although they vary in how they locate themselves within the broad category of trans (see Table 1).

The questionnaires connect to our overarching research questions: How much are trans students included, considered, or consulted in the creation of college and university policies, task forces, and practices? How much do these changes reflect trans students’ activism and concerns? When institutional policies are changed, in what ways do the changes make trans people more vulnerable?

**Telling Our Stories: Toward Transfeminist of Color Standpoints and Epistemologies**

*My hope is that my activism—telling my story, pushing for better conditions, creating spaces for us to exist—will be able to show cis people what challenges we actually face and make them think about the various things that they take for granted. (Zara)*

Our questionnaire method builds on the political tradition of emphasizing lived experience through testimony. Latina feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Latina Feminist Group, 2001) developed the practice of *testimonio*—giving testimonies that tell life stories—as a way to reclaim and generate knowledge based on lived realities, thus politicizing their identities and fostering possibilities for coalition building. This approach is buttressed by the work of women of color feminist *standpoint* and *situated knowledges theories* (Collins, 1990) which adduce that research on relations of power must start with the lives of marginalized people who are socially located in ways that heighten their awareness of inequality. Collins argued that because of their positionality within the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class, Black women as a group possess a distinctive standpoint and situated knowledge—a “unique angle of vision” (p. 22) and expertise on the social world. Rooted in everyday experience, Black women’s standpoint is marked by an intersectional under-
standing of oppression and a history of struggle against it. We use Collin’s (1990) standpoint theory as an entryway into trans experiences of struggle and resistance. It is through the process of giving testimony that we are able to access the lived experiences that constitute transfeminist standpoints and epistemologies. Feminist research thus authorizes testimonies of marginality as a site of epistemic authority and privilege.

We link the concept of testimonio to research on trans college students’ campus activism. Johnson’s (2014) analysis of trans students’ testimonios, or stories of their lived experiences, led him to conclude that individual (versus collective) action is activism when it serves an “emancipatory role in the lives of...students” (p. 6). Historian Robin Kelley (2011) uses the term infrapolitics to describe working-class Black people’s unorganized daily acts of resistance to white supremacy. We interpret trans students’ activism through the prism of infrapolitics as everyday, unorganized acts of resistance to cissexism. Trans students’ activism includes daily gender affirming actions that, as V stated, permit them to “express vital and authentic parts of [themselves]...” and facilitates their safety and survival in cissexist campus communities.

**Demographic Information of Research Participants**

The trans student activists in our study understood themselves as occupying multiple vectors of difference that fundamentally shape their trans identities and experience of being trans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Trans Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity/Nationality</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Other Noted Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>Trans Non-binary</td>
<td>White U.S. American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>they/them/their</td>
<td>Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS)</td>
<td>Bisexual Mentally ill Graduate student AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>Mexican Jewish Person of color</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>English &amp; WGSS</td>
<td>Working class Graduate student Educator AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Major/Minor Identity</th>
<th>Programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>Trans-</td>
<td>Jewish Israeli</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>WGSS</td>
<td>Queer Femme Fat Disabled First-Generation College Student AMAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>woman</td>
<td>“off-white”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>White U.S. American</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>they/them/ze/hir</td>
<td>Biology, Public Health &amp; WGSS minor</td>
<td>Queer Soft femme Middle class Graduate student AFAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Non-binary or trans</td>
<td>Romanian Person of Color</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>they/them/their he/his//him</td>
<td>History &amp; WGSS</td>
<td>Femme Adopted Gender fluid Middle class Graduate student AMAB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that this research is institutionally specific and as such, is not a representative sample, nor is it meant to be generalizable. We argue that localized contexts are important as they are differentially embodied, varied, and disparate. The site of our study, NJSPI, is a small, state public comprehensive college whose students, faculty, and staff are predominantly White, cis, and middle class. The campus has a small community of trans students that are also majority white and middle class. While NJSPI’s trans students receive structural support and affirmation that does not exist at most colleges and universities (Campus Pride, 2017a), they are continually subjected to cissexism on campus. An intersectional transfeminist politics inspires and fuels the daily resistive practices that facilitates their survival in the face of persisting discrimination.

Intersectional Transfeminist Theories and Activism.

Intersectional feminisms is a key theoretical framework shaping this research. Intersectionality, first conceptualized by the Combahee River Collective (Eisenstein, 1978), a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), discussed in Collins’ (1990) conceptions of Black feminist thought,
and expanded upon by Collins and Bilge (2016), is built on the premise that oppressions based on race, gender, class, sex, and sexuality are interlocking, inseparable, and experienced simultaneously. Intersectionality theories connect to the complex work of trans student activists as they critically engage with existing bodies of knowledge, institutional policies and practices, and the politics of everyday life.

Our work also builds on the revolutionary work of transfeminist scholars, artists, and activists of color (Cardenas, 2016; Green & Bey, 2017; Gioseff, 2015; Koyama, 2003; Tsang, 2012; TransWomen of Color Collective, n.d.; Vaccaro, 2010). Koyama, a genderqueer Asian intersex activist and writer, coined the term trans feminism in 1992, which she described as “a movement for and by transwomen who view their liberation [as]...intrinsically linked to the liberation of women and beyond” (p. 203). While cis feminists have traditionally framed sexism as rooted in patriarchy, some transfeminists argue that the gender binary (e.g., being non-consensually assigned female or male at birth) is a more useful way of understanding sexism’s many forms, especially discrimination against and the marginalization of gender nonconformists (Enke, 2012). We use Koyama’s (2003), Nicolazzo’s (2017b), and Stryker’s (2006) transfeminist theories to emphasize and map an alternative epistemological genealogy of transliberation in relation to students’ everyday anti-binarist activism (Bettcher, 2017; Bettcher & Garry, 2009; Cardenas, 2016; Enke, 2012; Enke, 2018; Hines, 2017; Koyama, 2003; Nicolazzo, 2017b; Stryker 2006). By doing so, we situate transfeminisms as arising from various tensions within trans and cisgender women of color feminisms and theories, including dominant queer (white/cisgender) theoretical framings of trans liberation (Bey, 2017; Cohen & Jackson, 2015; Green & Bey, 2017; Green & Ellison, 2013; Snorton 2017). Moreover, we emphasize the transfeminist concepts of intersectional cissexism (anti-trans discrimination that intersects with other forms of oppression) and racist transmisogyny (racially infused hostility against transwomen of color) as significant entry points into exploring what we call trans visibility practices or erasure resistance. The terms trans visibility practices and erasure resistance describe the variety of covert and open ways trans people push back against cissexist discourses and practices that silence and exclude them or render them invisible.

Kenji Yoshino’s (2006a) covering theory adds critical insight into the institutional forces that prompt trans students to resist erasure. Yoshino interrogates the normative standards and assimilation practices impacting the civil rights of minority groups. Yoshino uses the term covering to describe the hegemonic practice of expecting, encouraging, pressuring, or compelling subordinate groups to change the way they express themselves to assimilate into dominant society. Through covering, dominant groups explicitly and implicitly demand that subordinate groups conform and downplay aspects of their identity in order to facilitate their success, safety, and survival. Higher education institutions that self-identify as trans inclusive, but fail to function as such, are engaging in covering practices that force trans students to conceal their gender identities, adopt normative gender presentations, and repress their gender non-normative views in order to protect themselves from cissexism. Yoshino (2006b) argued that many current forms of discrimination do not target subordinate groups as a whole. “Rather, it aims at the subset of the group that refuses to cover...[or] assimilate to dominant norms. And for the most part, existing civil rights laws do not protect individuals against such covering demands” (Yoshino, 2006b, para. 11).

Trans students’ daily intersectional transfeminist activism is a mechanism through which they resist covering practices. Intersectional transfeminist discourses stress the multiple oppressions that are enmeshed in cissexism. For example, transphobic violence is largely perpetrated against “trans people who are poor, who are of color, and/or on the trans female/feminine spectrum” (Serano, 2007, p. 46). However, as Talia Mae Bettcher (2017) observed, “since trans men
are also vulnerable to sexism, transphobia, and the inter-blending thereof, trans feminism would be ill advised to exclude them from its purview” (p. 2). Ultimately, we suture women of color feminist theoretical approaches to a trans* epistemology in order to center trans students’ voices and experiences in a narrative of change on college campuses.

**Living Our Authentic Selves: Intersectional Transfeminist Student Activism**

In the sections that follow, we explore NJSPI trans student activist’s philosophies and practices. Through our narrative analysis of their digital testimonios, we collaboratively organized their responses around common patterns and themes that emerged from their testimonios. Intersectional transfeminist theoretical perspectives informed our thinking in the organization of the data, resulting in the themes highlighted in the following sections: *trans activism histories, cissexist oppression, institutional inclusion myths, intersectional identities, labor, and intersectional activism.* The contours of the following sections are marked by excerpts from student testimonios. We foreground these headings to signal that we are literally and symbolically following students’ lead.

**Trans Activism Histories in the Making**

The history of trans students’ anti-cissexism activism on college and university campuses is quite literally a history in the making. This is not to say that trans students’ activism is new. Trans people were as present and active in the earliest queer campus movements as they were in the broader queer resistance struggle that played out, in part, on the streets of San Francisco, Greenwich Village, and Washington, D.C. from the 1950s through the 1990s (Beemyn, 2014; Feinberg, 2006; Frye, 2000).

Trans student activism in higher education is one sphere of this larger trans liberation movement. Two years after the Stonewall Rebellion, Gay Liberation activist groups such as the Student Homophile League were established “at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the [U.S.]” (Beemyn, 2014, p. 22). For decades, trans students worked to foreground trans people’s concerns in anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-immigrant, and anti-imperialist movements (Feinberg, 1998).

Over the last four years participants in our research at NJSPI engaged in various forms of activism. For example, Alexandria’s activism included raising awareness about and serving immigrant and U.S.-born trans people of color in impoverished communities, and Andy’s sexual violence prevention activism on campus addresses the experiences of trans students, students of color, students with disabilities, and students with intersecting gender, race, and ability identities.

With their activism, trans students are filling a void generated by institutional neglect. Zara, an undergraduate Jewish transwoman, names, analyzes, and experiences cissexism on campus, including the college’s abandonment of trans students. She noted that offices and departments tasked with supporting trans students are chronically “understaffed...and while [the department that hosts her major] has a bit more institutional support, its academic status and limited budget curtail its ability to fully support trans and other marginalized students” (Zara). To Zara, the “lack of funding indicates an unwillingness from [NJSPI] to ‘put its money where its mouth is’ in terms of supporting [the campus’] marginalized and trans communities.” Her comments highlight trans students’ ability to identify and assess power relations on campus, critique a vacuum of structural support, and hold institutional authorities accountable to official declarations of diversity and inclusion.
An Overview of Everyday Anti-Cissexist Resistance: “Calling out Cissexism in Everyday Life”

Trans students’ shared experiences of exclusion and symbolic erasure catalyzes their everyday resistance. Zara poignantly stated, “[C]is people do not realize what I have to face every day.” She suggested that, in action, cissexism is a caustic form of “[i]gnorance. As a rule, cis people just don’t get it, or else they don't care.” She views cissexism as a barrier to the cisgender college community developing an understanding of how discrimination impacts trans students. In this context, the work of being trans, addressing cissexist microaggressions, combatting trans-invisibility, and resisting internalized cissexism is a vital form of activism (Pitcher, 2016).

Trans student respondents described the daily activist labor that is intrinsic to being trans. Jack stated that their activism “took the form of calling out cissexism in everyday life, like insisting on...[correct] pronouns, refuting biological essentialism, and asking how...those around me...includ[de] trans individuals.” Dean Spade (2018) stated that cisgender faculty, administrators, and students who misgender trans people practice the “hostility and erasure” that most trans students face. Misgendering is a form of symbolic erasure that invalidates trans students’ identities, stifles their voices, and for some, contributes to anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Spade, 2018). When Jack challenged pedagogical practices that uphold binarist gender norms, then, they not only engage in the daily praxis of erasure resistance and the production of “trans*-centric” truth and knowledge that is potentially transformative; Jack is fighting for his life and the lives of every trans student on campus. Jack’s activist work, their individual unorganized anti-cissexist resistance is a vital everyday act of survival (Nicolazzo, 2017a).

Some of the daily resistive labor of being trans is internal. V, an undergraduate trans student of color, is clear about the psycho-emotionally assaultive nature of cissexist microaggressions and the repressiveness of cisnormative gender and sex classifications. They recognize trans rights as crucial, but struggle with internal fears of transgressing cisgender norms that many trans people experience as “cutthroat.” For V, the work of combatting cissexism starts with self-reflection. V stated, “Activism around trans issues, for me, was...about dismantling my inner prejudices and notions around gender and the intersecting oppression that keeps us closeted.” V’s comments highlight the problems with a trans inclusive strategy that largely focuses on legal reform without addressing the cissexism embedded in the institutional and broader campus culture. In their everyday lives, trans students are subject to the direct control of legal and administrative systems that V recognizes as “designed to protect mainstream society...those in positions of power and privilege...[i.e.,] white-straight, cis, male, affluent, neurotypical, and able-bodied society.”

For some trans students, coming out relieves the burden of internalized oppression. The act of openly self-identifying as trans is an empowering trans visibility practice for some trans people who are navigating binarist communities. Andy is a white non-binary trans undergraduate student who most people perceive as cisgender. Trans people who are misread as cisgender are constantly confronted with the decision to resist erasure by disclosing that they are trans or conceal their gender identities and remain undetectable, which could protect them from discrimination and violence (Yoshino, 2006a). Andy chooses open resistance to erasure, a trans visibility practice. They discussed their experience of coming out in a majority cis campus community. Andy began to identify as trans as a first-year student at another institution, asking close friends to refer to them using they/them pronouns. As a sophomore, they transferred to NJSPI where they had greater freedom to explore and express a non-normative self-identification:
Not long after I was at [NJSP]...I felt comfortable introducing myself to strangers as [non-binary trans]. Part of what made me comfortable doing so...despite negative responses from people close to me claiming feminine gender expression meant I “wasn’t really” trans, I faced nothing like that at [NJSP]...[M]y friends became a strong support system and having a fresh start—[being at] a school where no one knew me—gave me the confidence to be stricter with people. [I]t made more sense...to allow myself to be stricter with pronouns because there was no “excuse” of having known me in the past—I could remind people politely and hope the response wasn’t something about how it was hard to change—there was no change; I...was [always] trans at [NJSP].

Andy’s openly expressed non-binarist gender identity, the intentionality in and routineness of making themselves visible as trans, which includes an insistence that cis people use the right pronouns, illustrates the everyday activist work inherent in being trans in any space. The presence of trans students’ bodies and the articulation of trans gender perspectives ruptures the cisnormative culture that undergirds institutional cissexism on campus.

Inclusion Myths/Exclusion Practices (a Provocation for Resistance): “I Don’t Feel very Included or Welcomed; I Feel Barely Tolerated, to be Completely Honest.”

Trans student interviewees shared the feeling that some college communities are more amenable to non-normative gender identities than others,1 but even on these campuses many trans students feel isolated and lack institutional support. They attribute this lived reality, in part, to the absence of trans employees. Alexandria, a transLatina graduate student, said, “Despite [NJSP] being a progressive campus, there was no representation of trans staff or support...regarding my [gender] identity.” In their testimonies, trans students asserted that institutional reform should address the gender segregation of higher education employees.

Trans students unequivocally stated that opportunities to connect with trans faculty and staff would make their experience of the campus’s gender culture more positive. Throughout college, Jack, a white non-binary trans undergraduate student, says there were many indications of their discomfort with a cisnormative gender identity. Seeing trans people in official positions on campus, connecting with trans faculty and staff, would have helped Jack to understand their gender identity conflict (Garner, 2014). Jack said, “I didn’t know being trans...was a possibility; those thoughts were there but I had no context. If I had more queer and trans role models...I would have figured it out much sooner.” A faculty and administration that includes trans people is critical to stemming trans students’ disproportionate dropout rates and fostering an inclusive campus community (Grant et al., 2011). At institutions that have few or no trans employees, trans students’ work of surviving the social isolation wrought by institutional cissexism is a daily act of resistance (Pryor, 2015).

Several of our respondents noted the paradox in an institution crafting and adopting inclusion statements and discursively promoting itself as inclusive versus practicing inclusion. Zara emphasized that for her, there is “a distinction between inclusivity and a welcoming atmosphere/climate.” She astutely stated that for marginalized and underrepresented students, “welcoming is what brings you in and inclusivity is what makes you stay.” Zara continued,

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1. Andy is a transfer student and interviewees frequently referred to their time at other colleges, visiting friends on other campuses, etc.
[T]o many trans students…welcoming refers to actively encouraging trans students to come to the college and involving us in [the development of] documents such as the mission statement of the college. Inclusivity, on the other hand, refers to the state of being automatically included on campus—for example, having well-funded, accessible services to meet [trans students’] basic needs, using [trans] inclusive language automatically without prompting or self-congratulation, and centering or at the very least including transgender voices.

Zara said that she and other trans students feel as though NJSPI has failed to create a campus community that is both welcoming and inclusive. She asserted that institutional authorities “make half-hearted gestures towards trans equality…[that] are inclusive in theory only.” V agreed when they said institutions with a “serious commitment[...to] trans liberation and holistic equality” must reject superficial statements on diversity and inclusion. In the absence of a better informed campus community and policy enforcement, Zara sums up the sentiment of many trans students: “I don’t feel very included or welcomed; I feel barely tolerated, to be completely honest.”

Zara’s frustration with the institution and its failure to act comprehensively on its commitment to inclusion is compounded and complicated by her acknowledgement that she does not always openly challenge trans exclusive practices on campus. Zara, who describes herself as “a pre-estrogen trans girl,” is frequently perceived as a cross-dressed cis man. She sometimes does not correct faculty, staff, and students who misgender her because that work “is intimidating and exhausting.” Zara grapples with her own invisibility and silencing as a transwoman while also carrying the burden of choosing, at times, not to engage in the trans visibility practice of explicitly advocating for herself in the face of cissexism. The work of resisting her symbolic erasure would be constant if Zara chose to challenge every act of misgendering. In these instances, Zara bears the weight and assault of symbolic erasure even as she persists and endures in being who she is: a transwoman. In a context of unrelenting discrimination where Zara knows her “safety…cannot be guaranteed”—in the moments when she chooses self-preservation—Zara both embodies and signifies what it means to practice resilience and erasure resistance through persistence and existence by being trans.

Zara’s safety concerns are well-founded. Trans youth experience alarmingly high levels of physical and sexual assault and harassment in school and Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Black, and mixed race immigrant and U.S.-born youth are targeted for these violations at even higher rates than white trans youth (Grant et al., 2011). One in four trans and gender nonconforming students report being sexually assaulted (Cantor et al., 2015). Twenty percent of trans and gender nonconforming undergraduate students state that campus security officers treated them with “hostility” (Lambda Legal, 2016, p. 39). Many trans students leave higher education due to the highly disruptive nature of cissexist harassment and trauma of violent victimization (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011).

Adopting trans inclusive policies does not guarantee that trans students are seen, safe, and supported. Trans student respondents agree that policy shifts alone will do little to address the cissexist culture trans students encounter daily. As of 2017, 1,036 colleges and universities have trans-inclusive anti-discrimination policies (Campus Pride, 2017b). Of these, 782 institutions made these policy changes after 2008 (Schneider, 2010). While these advances in the trans student rights movement are significant and inspire optimism, it is critically important to note that most colleges and universities—a whopping 75%—have not institutionalized anti-bias provisions for trans students and employees, nor do most state laws protect trans students (Infoplease, 2006).
Nondiscrimination policies provide trans students with an institutional basis for demanding an end to cissexist practices on campus. However, policy change alone does not stimulate a shift in institutional and campus community culture. On campuses with trans inclusive nondiscrimination clauses like NJSP, gender non-normative students are routinely confronted with cissexist administrative, pedagogical, and peer violence. As Jack stated, these institutions “must continue to work to make every part of [the campus]...inclusive.” In cissexist campus communities, trans students’ most effective strategies for daily and immediate self-preservation, liberation, and survival are individual daily acts of resistance (Taylor, 2010).

**Intersectional Identities, Intersectional Cissexism and Erasure Resistance: “Nothing Affects All Queer People the Same Way, Including...Transphobia.”**

Trans students link living their authentic selves to everyday resistance to intersectional cissexism, that is, anti-trans discrimination that intersects with other oppressions, particularly in the form of erasure. Student activists allude to the ways academic institutions discipline students and demand respectability in gender presentation through adherence to white middle class cisgender norms (Yoshino, 2006a). This demand for conformity, or covering practice, is a form of white cis-supremacist administrative violence (Spade, 2011), yet many institutional authorities view trans students as the source of the “problem.” Alexandria, a working class transLatina graduate student, describes her struggle to come out as trans as overdetermined by white cisnormativity:

I have always carried my [transgender] identity with me, but it has been something I kept to myself as I feared I wouldn’t be able to succeed in life if I transitioned. I balanced my personal happiness with what I saw as a need to perform [traditional] masculinity to get through college and become an educator. Although I did not experiment with cross-dressing or drag before I entered college, I knew deep down that the clothes and style in which I presented myself was not [authentic]...[At] [NJSP], I knew there were trans and non-binary students...around me. Despite this, I still felt that as one of the few queers of color, and as a queer brown teacher...there were expectations that I conform to masculin[e] [norms] which made [cisgender] people...comfortable.

Alexandria’s resiliency practice, her tactical decision to conceal her trans identity and adopt a cisnormative gender presentation, was a hidden way of coping with a particular form of racialized and classed cissexism entangled with a “trans* normativity” (Nicolazzo, 2016a, p. 1174) that essentializes trans as the state of having biomedically transitioned. Alexandria’s performance of traditional masculinity reflected white supremacist middle class cissexist norms that permitted her to be undetectably trans, which she experienced as necessary to succeed in college (Aizura, 2014). Being perceived as a middle class queer Mexican cisgender man did not strip Alexandria of her trans identity and trans experience—despite a traditional gender presentation, she was always trans. Further, while presenting as an affluent Mexican cis man did not protect Alexandria from racism, heterosexism, and xenophobia, it did shield her from an intensified degree of transmisogyny.

As Alexandria’s experience illustrates, trans students’ daily resistive actions are defined by the themes of overlapping identities and oppressions. She agrees with Zara’s observation that “even queerness is not...a guarantee of understanding trans needs.” As president of a student-run
LGBTQ center whose participants are overwhelmingly cisgender, white, and affluent, Alexandria devoted her time to exploding racist transmisogynist stereotypes in white cis and LGB spaces. She organized a “Trans Latina Conference,” featuring trans Latina speakers, who she reported:

share[d] with students what they saw as the immediate issues facing transLatinas as opposed to...the [dominant] narrative on college campuses...[M]any [cis] students assumed that the women presenting were sex workers and were surprised that they were business owners and managers. The conversation opened up a discussion of talking with trans women as opposed to talking about them to assess needs for the community...[S]tudents need to understand that transwomen have complex identities, and not every story is the same.

Alexandria’s story about dismantling racist-cissexist stereotypes is a crucial form of erasure resistance. The assumption that transwomen of color are sex workers erases the multiplicity and complexity of their gender identities, sexual practices, and labor statuses—an erasure practice for which Alexandria is targeted. Because she identifies as a transChicana educator and navigates predominantly white queer and heterosexual spaces on campus, Alexandria understands what V means when they say “[t]he oppression of marginalized groups hinges upon the creation and maintenance of myths, stereotypes and blatant falsehoods.” Alexandria asserted that assuming transwomen of color are sex workers criminalizes and endangers them. A transwoman of color who is suspected of performing sex work is vulnerable to street harassment that includes stops, searches, arrests, and/or violence from police (Saffin, 2015). While it is true that the collision of institutionalized white supremacy, misogyny, and anti-trans discrimination pushes disproportionate numbers of transwomen of color into extreme poverty that forces some to perform sex work in order to survive (Saffin, 2015), it is wrong—and dangerous—to assume that all transwomen of color are sex workers.

Alexandria practices erasure resistance when she imagines a livable life for transLatinas that defies racist transmisogynist stereotypes. This is very difficult to do in an environment rife with white supremacist cissexist beliefs and institutional barriers to transwomen of colors’ well-being. According to Marquis Bey (2017), “Black and trans* are both disruptive orientations indexed imperfectly by bodies said to be black or trans* and thus can succumb to logics of white supremacy and cissexism” (p. 278). By creating a platform for transwomen of color to generate an anti-racist, anti-cissexist trans-centered truth and knowledge through the articulation of their experiences, shattering stereotypes, and educating white cis LGB students, Alexandria disrupts white supremacist cissexist logics that simultaneously universalize transwomen of color as sexual “deviants” and criminalize those that do sex work for economic survival.

Alexandria’s understanding of racialized gender power relations within interpersonal, disciplinary, and cultural spheres demonstrates the ways that intersectional politics centers structural factors and drives erasure resistance. Thus, Alexandria’s approach counters neoliberal pressures to focus solely on personal inequality as a way to upend trans oppression.

White trans respondents’ erasure resistance is also centrally defined by an intersectional politics that acknowledges that anti-trans discrimination is racialized, and therefore, produces divergent experiences of cissexism for trans people across race lines. As a white middle class trans person, Jack indicated that intersectionality is critical to their activism. They stated,

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[There is] no way to talk about queer people or trans people accurately without specifying raceclass, ability, and so on. To talk about any issue for “queer people” as a whole would be ludicrous [because] nothing affects all queer people the same way, including...transphobia. I incorporate intersectional concerns by not homogenizing all queer or trans people and being intentional when discussing oppression.

Jack’s intersectional activist practices are woven into the process of investigating trans and queer people’s experiences of racism, classism, and ableism. For Jack, intersectional activism and erasure resistance means asking who is reflected in campus events, film screenings, speaker panels, and course materials at a predominantly white middle class cis institution. Similarly, Andy’s anti-violence activism is shaped by the demographics of a predominantly white campus and an awareness of the ways in which their white privilege changes their experience of cissexism. Andy shared their attempts to decenter whiteness and combat erasure by using their skin color and other privileges to connect with trans people of color on issues that “affect [them]...in different ways, usually less harshly”:

[While I hesitate to speak for other people, I...use my position as a white transperson to educate and check other white people as a person [who is not]...vulnerable [to racism]....[Since] my community is very white, and since there is little understanding and knowledge of trans people, I am often talking about myself. Therefore...while...understanding that I hold [racial] privilege, I make it a point to get as educated as possible...and check in with the people in my life...who do not have the same social identifiers as me: trans people of color. While I am trans on campus, I know there are [other] trans people on...campus whose experience is very different from mine because...[they have intersecting] identities [that differ from mine].

Andy’s activism is shaped by an awareness of the ways in which white supremacy renders invisible trans people of color and their oppression. They also know that their whiteness intersects with their trans identity—mediating and often mitigating the anti-trans discrimination they face. Even as white cis supremacy erects countless barriers to the freedom of trans people across race lines, Andy understands that white privilege protects white trans students like themselves from the racist oppression and violences animating the cissexism trans students of color endure.

Zara, who identified as an “off-white” Jewish transwoman, lives in a space where race and gender identity is both liminal and overlapping. She experienced the racialized gender alienation wrought by an intersectional cissexism that leads people to perceive her as a white cis man when her identity as a Jewish transwoman leaves her outside the realm of both Anglo-Saxon whiteness and cisgender maleness. She, therefore, simultaneously occupied a space in between whiteness and Brownness and a space in between binary cisgender identifications. Zara was aware that she accessed the privileges that come with passing as white, privileges that, in white cis spaces, are constrained by her transfeminine gender presentation. Because she is a “white passing” transwoman, police do not profile her as a sex worker when she is on the street—a cissexist assumption that Black transgirls like Cece McDonald regularly face (Pasulka, 2012). Zara’s transfemininity, however, may make her a target for police and civilian harassment and violence—terrorism that, for Cece McDonald, was racist, transmisogynist, inescapable, and compounded with incarceration.

Zara’s alienation from white cis masculinity and embrace of a sense of self grounded in an ethno-gender identification as a Jewish transwoman infuses her daily acts of resistance with
an intersectional ethos. She says trans student activists “must make sure that as many identity categories as possible are accommodated and embraced at all times, or else the work...perpetuates the exclusion and oppression that many of us already face.” For her, “intersectional activism can be as simple as pointing out a queer workshop on intersectionality is being held in a non-ADA accessible room.” While Zara describes this action as “simple,” we recognize this approach as a trans-feminist intersectional praxis that builds an inclusive campus community.

For Jack, the daily labor of intersectional anti-cissexist activism not only leads to emotional exhaustion or gender fatigue, it serves as the locus of a transfeminist politics of anger. Jack described:

In biology classes, I highlighted the history and work of trans people both as researchers and the researched. In [gender] classes, I consistently asked how our work reflected the existence of trans people and transwomen in particular. I accepted the reputation of 24/7 trans advocate and fielded questions or got angry when needed...[T]rans issues were a hypothetical to [cis] students and staff....trans issues would be...[addressed through] theory or understanding transness as a concept rather than a lived reality for people in the room. It’s hard to get [cis] people to take inclusivity seriously when they don’t see or know who it’s affecting in everyday terms.

By routinely questioning the silencing and erasure of trans voices and experiences in the curricula, Jack engaged in erasure resistance that involved the exhausting daily work of educating cis professors and peers. In classes that address trans experiences, Jack reminds us that it is important to go beyond theorizing trans. To understand cissexism, we must explore trans people’s lived realities. As Jack’s testimony reveals, at times, anger inspires trans students’ everyday acts of resistance. Like Audre Lorde (2007), who embraced Black women’s rage as a strategic and subversive response to white supremacy, Susan Stryker (2006) encouraged transfeminist activists to own and express their politicized anger against cissexism: “May your rage inform your actions and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world” (p. 254). For some trans students, the expression of rage is a transformative and liberating aspect of their everyday activism and as such is a legitimate source of resistance.

Concluding Thoughts: Creating Gender Utopia by “Push[ing] Trans Issues Forward”

Trans student testimonios (Anzaldua, 1987; Latina Feminist Group, 2001), or testimonies, demonstrate the myriad ways in which trans students engage in struggle against cissexism. Through the lens of infrapolitics (Kelley, 2011), trans students’ everyday unorganized acts of resistance are rendered visible. An intersectional transfeminist politics (Koyama, 2003) both emerges from and inform students’ trans* epistemologies—a uniquely transgender truth and knowledge (Nicolazzo, 2017b) about injustice and propels trans students’ everyday resistance to covering practices (Yoshino, 2006a) that silence, erase, exclude, and inspire hate violence against trans people. Students’ intersectional anti-cissexist activism is marked by an array of individual, overt, and covert efforts to create trans affirming campus communities. The very act of existing, surviving, and succeeding as trans are on the spectrum of daily anti-cissexist resistance as are open demands for inclusion.

Student testimonies about their trans identities, experiences of oppression, activism, and the intersectionality of these domains provide answers to our overarching research questions: How
much are trans students included, considered, or consulted in the creation of college and university policies, task forces, and practices, and how much do these changes reflect trans students’ activism and concerns? When institutional policies are changed, in what ways do the changes make trans people more vulnerable?

An intensive exploration of trans students’ perspectives led us to argue that the dominant narrative about trans inclusivity on college campuses is not only cissexist, it erases trans students’ agency and activism. The erasure of trans students as actors and agents of resistance is the result of what Spade (2011) identifies as the narrow focus on policy change with little consideration of trans students as catalysts or the embeddedness of cissexism and trans exclusion in institutional culture. Further, institutional inclusion narratives suggest there is no need for trans student activism on campus. However, this study foregrounds the necessity of continued activism that is grounded in a politics of intersectionality despite the erasure attempts that occur under the guise of trans inclusivity.

Our research reveals that NJSPI’s attempts to make the campus community more inclusive have made trans people more vulnerable due to the limited reach and application of the college’s “inclusion” practices. Student testimonios demonstrate that, without the broad consultation of trans people, policy shifts can function as a surrogate for substantive, ongoing, concrete institutional change and the necessary everyday labor that effects and produces trans centered inclusion.

The students in our study use intersectional transfeminist frameworks to analyze their lives, campus culture, and college policies. Their testimonies allow us to join scholars who have begun to expose a pivotal and under-examined dimension to anti-trans discrimination by interrogating the intersections of race and trans, cissexism and white supremacy (Beemyn, 2019; Brooks, 2016; Johnson, 2014; Jourian, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016b). We analyze the ways whiteness structures cissexist beliefs and practices, how white privilege changes trans students’ experiences of cissexism, and the ways racist-cissexism operates at an ideological, structural, and interpersonal level.

Trans inclusion can only be achieved through daily resistance to cissexism as it intersects with other forms of oppression. Student testimonies show that an intersectional transfeminist politics is integral to their activism. Zara sums up the intersectional transfeminist activist ethos of each trans student respondent when she said,

[I] incorporate intersectional concerns…[by] elevat[ing] the experiences of other marginalized people, especially non-white folks. To me, intersectional activism addresses both the other facets of my identity that are not related to gender and also considering who is and is not in the space with me.

For these students, intersectional transfeminism is a daily gender liberation practice infused with the enactment of an evolving global empathy, a broad, multidimensional social justice concern, and pursuit of freedom for oppressed groups.

Combating cissexism on campus requires students to creatively navigate an institution that promotes a cosmetic and politically one-dimensional (i.e., non-intersectional) trans inclusivity from the limited perspective of legal reform. These students urge administrators to pursue cultural change and apply intersectional approaches to questions of fairness, discrimination, and structural inequality. At our institution, there exists a trans nondiscrimination policy, students are permitted to change their names and gender markers in some campus records and databases without a court order, they have access to gender neutral bathrooms (albeit less than 1% of campus restrooms are
trans inclusive), a few courses that centralize trans perspectives and experiences, an LGBTQ student-run resource center, and from 2015 to 2017, a Transgender Taskforce that sought to address trans students’ rights on campus. Despite the existence of these crucial policies and policy-based resources, trans students at NJSPI continue to negotiate and confront cissexist microaggressions and structural anti-trans discrimination. V stated,

I see [NJSPI] as more trans “tolerant” than inclusive…”Officially,” the...administration expresses that all [NJSPI] students, including...trans students deserve [an] equal education...and should feel free to be themselves. Yet in terms of actual inclusivity, institutional reforms, and cultural engagements—the school can improve.

In spite of the institution’s pro-trans policies, trans students still challenge and endure cis professors and administrators who refuse to use the correct pronoun and chosen name, they pay tuition to a college whose course offerings marginalize or render invisible their vantage points and lived experiences, there are virtually no visible trans faculty and staff, there are no institutional guidelines for campus employees on the appropriate treatment of students and coworkers who socially transition, and they are confronted by cis students who treat them with hostility and disdain.

Trans students’ daily liberatory activism, then, is a trickle-up approach (Spade, 2011) to creating change that includes personally confronting unfair policies and practices, representing the trans community, educating others about cissexism. Trans students are gender rebels who, as Zara says, “push trans issues forward” by resisting cissexism in ways that go beyond court battles and organized public protests. Trans students’ activism includes daily, self-protective, gender affirming actions that facilitate their safety and survival in cissexist campus communities. By sharing their stories, trans student activists forge allyships and coalitions with other students, faculty, and staff, and link their daily and personal struggles to other legacies of struggle.

Trans students’ everyday activist work—their shared struggle against cissexist administrative violence—transforms campus institutions and culture. Where the space is created for those conversations and actions to occur, there are trans students who will teach cis staff, faculty and students how to change the campus community into one that accepts gender diversity. As V aptly stated, academic institutions that have “serious commitments to trans liberation and holistic equality” must reject the superficial statements on diversity and inclusion that are endemic to the neoliberal project and actively work to normalize gender nonconformity. V suggests that the college should recruit, hire, and provide institutional support to trans faculty, particularly trans faculty of color, whose scholarship and teaching is intersectional and trans-centered.

Andy “think[s] students on campus have the power to have conversations that are utopian—it is our job to...see all the possibilities in the world, especially when [the absence of] such possibilities...means we are in danger.” While Andy believes that trans students have the right to “ask for what...the trans community needs,” they also know that trans students should not have to fight so hard for an equitable education. As staff and faculty, we are not the stewards of students’ dreams. However, we do have the opportunity to support students’ work to create safer, equitable, and just campus communities. Those of us with privileged identities are especially well-positioned to support trans students’ voices and everyday activism.
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