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How Trans Students Encounter Cisgenderism in Higher Education at the Intersection of Location and Region: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Trans Students' Experiences in Understudied Cities in the Southeast

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HOW TRANS STUDENTS ENCOUNTER CISGENDERISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF LOCATION AND REGION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TRANS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN UNDERSTUDIED CITIES IN THE SOUTHEAST

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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HOW TRANS STUDENTS ENCOUNTER CISGENDERISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF LOCATION AND REGION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TRANS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN UNDERSTUDIED CITIES IN THE SOUTHEAST

CORTNEY JOHNSON

EDUCATIONAL STUDIES IN DIVERSE POPULATIONS, METROPOLITAN CONCENTRATION

ABSTRACT

Despite evidence showing the resilience and success of many Transgender students in higher education and the increasing prevalence of supportive campus policies, this is an emergent population with growing, varying, and diverse needs that are often not met by institutions and practitioners. The Southeast is a unique place for the LGBTQ+ community that has been understudied, and although the experiences of Trans students and how cisgenderism impacts them has been captured more broadly, this study is focused on the experiences of Trans students at urban institutions in the Southeast. Using Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodology and Critical Trans Politics as a theoretical framework, I critically examined how, if at all, students talked about their experiences of cisgenderism at three different campuses in connection to region and location. While the data collected were complex and nuanced, the prevailing findings were that these students felt they experienced more cisgenderism because of their location in the South but felt that being in an urban center mitigated the negative experiences they could have had if they were in more rural locations. Participants also provided crucial information about their experiences as Trans students connected to campus climate in the South,

relationships with staff and faculty, and experiences with anti-trans legislation in the region. Notable themes included identity as a Southerner, administrative violence and support on campus, binary vs. nonbinary gender experiences in the South, and urban exceptionalism, among others.

Keywords: Transgender, higher education, Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Trans Politics, cisgenderism, the South

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Erica. My editor, spouse, and Imzadi. Love ya.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began working on this PhD journey because I thought it was something I was supposed to do as a higher education professional. I soon discovered that obligation alone would not be enough to motivate me to finish this degree. When I began working with LGBTQ+ students in higher education, I felt more connected to my work and the community. In the last few years, it became apparent to me that LGBTQ+ students in the South would be the focus of my research. Although this journey has be arduous, it has never felt burdensome, and I fully believe that is because these students are such a bright spot in my life. As a Queer person who came out later in life, I never thought I would have the ability to serve these students. Honestly, these students have given *me* so much: perspective on my own experience, a sense of pride in my identity, and a community of care. I hope this research can support them the way they have supported me.

I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge my family, friends, and colleagues who have provided me ceaseless help. Having this community of cheerleaders provided the support I needed to keep going when things got tough. I cannot thank you enough for the check-in phone calls, supportive curiosity about my research, and sincere understanding of my busy-ness.

To my Co-Chairs, Dr. McKnight and Dr. Bodine Al-Sharif, thank you for reading hundreds of pages and helping me meet these intense expectations. A special thank you to Dr. Bodine Al-Sharif—your mentorship and faith in my abilities have been invaluable in this journey. I am so grateful for all you have done for me personally and

professionally. To my committee, thank you for all your time spent helping me reach this important milestone in my life and career. Your dedication to education, the development of PhD students, and support of this research is so meaningful.

Finally, I would like to thank the participants of this study. Your voices and experiences are so important and deserve to be amplified. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to get to know you and your stories. I hope that our work together on this project will inspire some changes to campus culture and regional climate and remind others that Queer people exist and persist in the South.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is neither radical nor reactionary to embrace a trans identity. Nontransgender people, after all, think of themselves as being women or men, and nobody asks them to defend the political correctness of their "choice" or thinks that their having a sense of being gendered somehow compromises or invalidates their other values and commitments. Being trans is like being gay: some people are just "that way," though most people aren't. We can be curious about why some people are gay or trans, and we can propose all kinds of theories or tell interesting stories about how it's possible to be trans or gay, but ultimately we simply need to accept that some minor fraction of the population (perhaps including ourselves) simply is "that way" (Stryker, 2017, p. 5).

Susan Stryker is a historian who has shaped the conversation about Transgender history for the past 25 years. Here she introduces us to the concept that some people are Transgender (Trans) and some people are not. She emphasizes that this identification is normal and natural, and no one should have to defend themselves for being authentically who they are. Simply put, Trans people exist. Some exist in broader terms than she has outlined here. Not all Trans people think of themselves as being women or men: some see themselves as existing on a gender spectrum, and others with no gender at all. Regardless of the specific identification of each person, gender is what each person says it is for themselves.

Stryker says that it is not radical to embrace Trans identities, and although I agree with her sentiment—Trans people should not be politicized—society and culture have done just that. Transgressing assigned gender roles, the gender binary, and other societal expectations around gender often leaves Trans people as a vulnerable population pushed

to the margins. While it is important to allow marginalized populations to speak for themselves and lead efforts towards justice, it is incumbent upon researchers to seek out these voices and amplify them to challenge the marginalization faced by so many.

Statement of Problem

As visibility of the Transgender (Trans) community has increased over the last few years, so has the opposition to Trans rights. The Trump administration rolled back many Obama era protections for Trans individuals, including the reversal of language set forth in the "Dear Colleague"[1] letter that had afforded some protections to Trans students. Within the last year, there have been numerous Title IX infringements targeting Trans students, including imposition of limitations on bathroom usage, and many health protections are currently in limbo for Trans youth. In 2017, 14 states considered legislation that would diminish rights for Trans students in schools. Even in states where the statewide legislation ultimately failed, some individual school boards still have their own policies that discriminate against Trans students. In the summer of 2020, a Virginia school board defended their 2015 policy that banned Trans youth from using bathroom facilities that aligned with their gender and instead mandated they use the bathroom that correlated their sex assigned at birth, but the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the policy violated students' Title IX rights and the 14th Amendment equal protection clause (PBS, 2020; Walsh, 2020). That same summer, "The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit concluded that Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the law

[1] Copy of the Dear Colleague Letter can be found here: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf

prohibiting sex discrimination at federally funded institutions, also protects transgender students from discrimination based on their identity," interrupting federal guidance that stated sex discrimination did not include gender identity (Anderson, 2020; Simmons-Duffin, 2020). The 11th circuit includes Alabama, where House Bill (HB) 303 currently sits in committee. This bill "would deny gender-affirming medical care by a physician and criminalize such care from providers, including counselors. It also includes a range of criminal penalties" for providing such care to minors (ACLU, 2021). Although the recent Title IX decisions set a precedent which may impact language put "forward by the Trump administration that defines 'sex discrimination' as only applying when someone faces discrimination for being female or male and does not protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity," it does not have an effect on medical rights and regulations, allowing HB 303 to persist in the Alabama legislature (Simmons-Duffin, 2020). These current events highlight a common narrative in the experience of Transgender people: experiences of discrimination and oppression are all but expected within institutions such as healthcare, government agencies, the justice system, and higher education. Although certain institutions like the NCAA are pushing for Trans inclusion in college sports (NCAA, 2011), research still tells us overall that "each of these systems and institutions is failing daily in its obligation to serve transgender and gender non-conforming people, instead subjecting them to mistreatment ranging from commonplace disrespect to outright violence, abuse and the denial of human dignity" (Grant et al., 2011, p. 8). I will delve more deeply into this narrative to illuminate how these systemic barriers manifest for Trans students in the institution of

higher education and expound on the experiences of students whose stories are often overlooked.

Looking more broadly from the national level, there are several reports that summarize the experiences of Trans students in higher education around housing discrimination, harassment from peers and staff, campus climate, and academic achievement. In 2011, The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality published a report on the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), with 6,450 transgender and gender non-conforming study participants from all 50 states and U.S. territories. They found that 19% of respondents who were "expressing a transgender identity or gender non-conformity in higher education" were denied access to gender-inclusive housing, 5% of whom were not granted housing on campus at all because of their gender. In conjunction with experiencing increased rates of housing insecurity, approximately 11% of respondents were unable to seek financial aid. Similarly, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) examined the experiences of over 27,000 Transgender people in the United States and found 24% of participants had had "classmates, professors, or staff at college or vocational school [who] thought or knew they were transgender [and] … verbally, physically, or sexually" harassed them, and of those respondents who had been out on campus, 16% had left college because of that harassment (James et al., 2016, p. 136). More recently, in a 2018 Williams Institute report reviewing current research on Trans students' experiences in higher education, researchers found evidence of both bias and support on many college campuses (Goldberg). This report found a multitude of barriers for Trans students connected to unwelcoming campus climate, a lack of campus resources (including mental health and

medical providers), and a lack of support from teachers, mentors, and other staff members. Goldberg also found that the "presence of trans-inclusive policies/supports was related to a greater sense of belonging and more positive perceptions of campus climate," and this was attributed to things like "gender-inclusive restrooms, non-discrimination policies that are inclusive of gender identity, and the ability to change one's name on campus records" (p. 6). Similarly, positive findings were reported in the 2011 NTDS survey that concluded Trans students have a higher rate of educational attainment with "47% receiving a college or graduate degree, compared with only 27% of the general population" (Grant, p. 33).

Despite evidence showing the resilience and success of many Transgender students and some increase in supportive campus policies, this is an emergent population with growing, varying, and diverse needs that are often not met by institutions and practitioners (Catalano, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016b; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Rankin & Garvey, 2015; Renn, 2017; Seelman, 2014; Singh et al., 2013). The inability of institutions, faculty, and staff to serve Trans students adequately is primarily due to a culture of cisgenderism that persists within higher education and throughout most of society (Beemyn, 2003; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018; Seelman, 2014). Cisgenderism is the "underlying assumption or belief that cisgender identities are more 'normal,' 'healthy,' and 'real' and therefore are treated as 'superior,'" and this is often reflected in the goals, values, and norms of colleges and universities, usually indirectly and unintentionally (Seelman, 2014, p. 6). Research on cisgenderism in higher education, research on the experiences of Transgender students in higher education, and most research on the Trans community overall has focused

primarily on the experiences of people outside of the Southeast or in these larger reports not directly connected to region (Stone, 2018).

Currently, there is a research gap on the topic of Trans student experiences in higher education in the Southeast. Although some research exists about the Trans experience in the southeastern part of the country, the majority of research on Trans people is focused on the Northeast and Bicoastal areas (Stone, 2018), and virtually no research exists on Trans college students in the South. Research tells us that sociologists "understudy" LGBTQ+ people in both the South and Midwest, specifically in rural areas, but also in more ordinary cities that may not be seen as "gay-friendly." In fact, in an audit of sociological research, only 10% of the studies done on Trans life focused on Transgender Southerners (Stone, 2018). In the same study, the researchers found that "62% of sociological studies on LGBTQ urban life are conducted in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, [or] Los Angles [and] only 14% of sociological research is on small cities" like Birmingham (Stone, 2018, p. 6). Interestingly, the outsized focus on bigger, more gay-friendly cities does not align with the geographic distribution of LGBTQ+ people. A Williams Institute Report found that 35% of LGBT people live in the American South, a population equivalent to the number of LGBT people in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest regions combined (Hasenbush et al., 2014; Stone, 2018). According to the same report, approximately 500,000 Transgender people live in the South (2014). Although research on the LGBTQ+ community and Transgender people specifically has increased over the last two decades, there is very little geographical diversity within the research conducted in the United States, and thus the experience of all LGBTQ+ people is not fully captured. Therefore, this research will include the

experiences of 11 Trans students at 3 Research I Southern universities in ordinary cities and investigate how these students talk about their experiences of cisgenderism as connected to location and region.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical discourse analysis is to expand our current knowledge of Trans experiences by focusing on students at Southern urban institutions of higher education and critically examine *how* they talk about their experiences of cisgenderism on campus. The Southeast is a unique place for the LGBTQ+ community that has been understudied (Stone, 2018), and although the experiences of Trans students and how cisgenderism impacts them has been captured more broadly, virtually no research has been done focusing solely on the experiences of Trans students in the Southeast. In addition, pursuing this research through Critical Discourse Analysis allows me the flexibility to connect emergent themes with the larger political narrative in order to acknowledge and address the oppressive forces affecting Trans people. In creating a more comprehensive understanding of this diverse population, the hope is that practitioners and institutions will be better equipped to address problematic policies and cultures in a way that is specific to this region, helping to promote the life chances of many Transgender students within higher education.

Significance

As stated previously, the South is home to more than a third of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States (Hasenbush et al., 2014). There has been little research

done on the LGBTQ+ population in this geographic area, specifically in Southern urban cities; this is notable because nine of the of the 25 cities with the highest percentage of same-sex couples are in the South (Stone, 2018). Stone hypothesized that interest in the South is "stymied by myths of Southern queer invisibility and overwhelming oppression" (p. 7), essentially saying that researchers assume the narrative will be that of oppression without investigating and that most people do not consider the South when they are thinking of LGBTQ+ narratives. LGBTQ+ Southerners continue to exist and persist in large numbers in this region and yet receive only 3-4% of domestic fundraising that is done for the community by larger non-profits such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) (Khan, 2014). Although there is truth to the narrative of oppression—there are many barriers and dangers that exist for the LGBTQ+ community in the southern United States—it is important to mention the strength and resilience of this community and acknowledge the powerful history of the Queer South that is often forgotten (Nicolazzo, 2016a; Rogers, 2018). The South may be less accepting than other locations, but LGBTQ+ people continue to live here and deserve to have their stories shared, even if they reinforce the tale of Southern oppression that many already expect. I plan to approach this process through a critical discourse analysis, which will allow for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural issues that impact the experiences of Trans students in higher education in the South.

Research Questions

There is a breadth of research looking at campus climate for Transgender students in higher education which elucidates the difficult experience faced by most (Effrig et al.,

2011; Garvey, Rankin, et al., 2017; Garvey, Sanders, et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2019; Hoffman & Pryor, 2018). Although Trans students' perceptions of campus climate have improved over time (Garvey, Sanders, et al., 2017), research has consistently established the college campus as a difficult and sometimes dangerous place for Trans students to navigate (Thorpe, 2017). On the whole, Transgender students experience harassment more than cisgender students (Effrig et al., 2011), Transgender students do not feel they receive the resources they need (Dugan et al., 2012; Garvey, Rankin, et al., 2017), and they are often seen as a monolith by faculty and student affairs staff, further exacerbating the lack of resources (Catalano, 2015). Trans students have reported feeling "chilly" conditions from discriminatory faculty who create hostile classrooms and campus environments by silencing and harassing them, ultimately inhibiting their learning (Garvey, Sanders, et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2015). Colleges and universities still have difficulty creating campus climates that are welcoming and supportive of Transgender students. Garvey et al., put it succinctly in their research on campus climate, explaining that campuses "still foster and perpetuate oppressive forces of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and cisgenderism" (2017, p. 813).

Although research already tells us that Transgender students have a more difficult time on college campuses than their cisgender counterparts (Effrig et al., 2011) and that LGBTQ+ communities in the Southeast are undervalued and underserved in terms of both research and resources (Hasenbush et al., 2014; Khan, 2014; Rogers, 2018; Stone, 2018), there is little known about the intersection of these two issues. This critical discourse research is guided by one central question: How, if at all, do trans students talk

about their encounters with cisgenderism on college campuses in connection to location and region?

Sub-questions for the study include:

1. How do they contextualize their experience connected to an urban campus location?
2. How do they contextualize their experience connected to the Southeastern region?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Trans Politics (CTP) serves as the theoretical framework for this research. This lens is like Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1999) in that it provides a foundation for understanding how oppressive systems manifest for Trans people in our current culture and society, specifically with a focus on genderism and cisgenderism. To properly understand the experiences of Transgender students in higher education (or in any social location), we need the important context that CTP provides, historically and otherwise, regarding how "population-level operations of power" harm Trans people (Spade, 2015). Spade describes his theory as (a) examining how larger systems of oppression (including racism, sexism, capitalism, xenophobia, settler colonialism, and ableism) create and sustain violence against marginalized people, and (b) "explor[ing] the specific vulnerabilities of trans populations in these systems" (p. 92). This theory, therefore, encompasses an analysis of two perspectives: a view of the complex web of power perpetrated by various institutions and the harm they cause, and how that harm affects Transgender people specifically.

The harm of population-level operations of power can be uniquely understood via the Trans experience. Spade writes:

> [the] trans experience can offer a location from which to consider the broader questions of the neoliberal cooptation of social movements through law reform and the institutionalization of resistance, and from which to reframe the problems of violence and poverty that impact marginalized populations in ways that give us new inroads to intervention (2015, p. 49).

In considering how to address these larger systems of oppression, Spade suggests we seek answers from members of the Trans community, who are uniquely situated to understand current and past issues with movements originally meant to support the most marginalized and where they fell short in that support. He continues by saying such an "analysis necessitates contextualizing law reform in a set of broader understandings about power and control and with demands for transformation rather than inclusion and recognition" (p. 91-92). With regard to the culture of cisgenderism that exists within higher education (Garvey et al., 2019; Renn, 2017; Seelman, 2014), these same principles can be implemented, not necessarily through law reform, but in the shifting of that oppressive culture and the creation of policy and changes in procedures that will "address the violence and marginalization that shortens trans lives" and "re-conceptualize how those conditions are produced and examine what kinds of resistance will actually alter them" (Spade, 2015, p. 50). This theory provides a framework for this study which acknowledges the oppressive system in which Trans students live and operate while simultaneously centering their voices as the key to bringing about positive change.

Overview of Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research method, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach, framed through Critical Trans Politics, allows the researcher the ability to assess if findings are connected to larger political narratives to address larger societal ills with the goal of bringing about social change (Fairclough, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Data analysis will be completed using intertextuality. This approach analyzes "social change from a discourse perspective," looking at the language of the participants through a horizontal (analyzing at each interview individually) and vertical (analyzing at each interview in comparison to one another) analysis to give a deeper context and understanding of what they have shared (Fairclough, 2015, p. 38; Kristeva & Moi, 1986).

Data were collected using a questionnaire (Appendix A) and semi-structured interview (Appendix B) via Zoom or phone call. This interview format will maintain consistency between interviews while still allowing the interviewer the flexibility to pursue more information from the respondent should they share something that warrants follow-up or requires clarity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data will be collected from participants who are Trans identifying, under the age of 25, and attend a Research I school located in the southern region of the United States (*NASPA Regions & Areas*, 2018).

Assumptions

This research is grounded in three theoretical assumptions. First, gender and sex are not inherently connected, and a person's sex assigned at birth should not be basis for

the assumption of one's gender. Second, Trans people exist without question. There are many theories and political perspectives that challenge this notion that will not be included in this research because they are often based in the biases and prejudices of the reporter rather than fact. Third, cisgenderism is a form of oppression that is harmful to Trans people and is pervasive in all institutions that Trans people interact with.

Although we may be assigned a sex at birth, we must understand that definition placed upon us has no bearing on our current gender. This concept can be expanded upon with the understanding that sex and gender are distinct and therefore socially constructed. In "Gender Trouble," by Judith Butler, this concept is explained: "[G]ender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex…If gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (2011, pp. 9-10). Having a specific gender is therefore not an automatic outcome of what one's sex assigned at birth is; it is simply a set of biological traits that should have no impact on the cultural definition of gender assigned to a body. Butler explains further:

> Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two (2011, p. 10).

Although most people ascribe to the gender binary, indicating that they are women or men, Butler acknowledges here that there are more than two genders. Similar to Stryker, Butler recognizes that most people who have male bodies will define themselves as men and most people who have female bodies will define themselves as women, but not exclusively so. We all have a gender identity, and those who live as their "assumed sex" may find more social acceptance than those who reject the assumptions others make about them and those who reject the gender binary altogether.

Being Trans is sometimes seen as a relatively new concept. In actuality, Trans people have existed for centuries (and longer). Stryker writes that "[p]eople who contradicted social expectations of what was considered typical for men or for women have existed since the earliest days of colonial settlement in what is now the United States" (Stryker, 2017, p. 45). Furthermore, the Two-Spirit people from Indigenous communities have existed for centuries before that (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, (LGBTQ) and Two-Spirit Health*). In our current political climate where elected officials publicly state there are only two genders and to "trust the science," the message is both intentionally harmful and incorrect (Shepherd, 2021). To combat these messages, this research assumes the dignity and worth of all Trans people and does not question their identity or their existence.

Cisgenderism in its simplest meaning is the oppression of Trans people. This research acknowledges that systems and institutions created in the United States were made by and for cisgender people and therefore do not serve the needs of Trans people and intentionally and unintentionally further subjugate them (Spade, 2013). This overarching system of marginalization experienced by Trans people also exists and is

maintained by systems of higher education (Hoffman & Pryor, 2018; Pryor, 2018; Seelman, 2014). Further information on these assumptions around sex, gender, and cisgenderism can be found in the literature review portion of this research.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research is affected, as all research is, by the limits and boundaries of the research and researcher. Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that we ask ourselves what perspective and experience we, as researchers, bring to the research—to acknowledge our own biases and be transparent about what perspective we come from. Wodak and Meyer (2009) suggest the same practice and challenge all researchers in their role as people with power to be reflective of their position and purpose. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) further recognizes the researcher as playing an advocacy role for groups that endure marginalization and oppression and encourages research that focuses on contemporary issues that can have significant implications on human well-being (Fairclough, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA also acknowledges that institutions are inherently not transparent—they need this type of critical analysis to help identify any issues, including practices that promote injustice (Fairclough, 2009). There is dissonance here as well: many institutions tout equality and justice yet still reinforce problematic policy. Therefore, research that is conducted using this method not only gathers information from participants but also takes into consideration the larger sociopolitical context of the time, location, and institutions in play (Fairclough, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

With this in mind, I accept that part of my role as the researcher is both to push against the cisnormative and heteronormative forces embedded in the institution of higher

education and also to make space for participants to freely voice their experiences with no expectations or assumptions from me. I understand this is not possible without my own investigation of my own feelings and biases related to the topic and connected to my own identities as a Queer cisgender person.

Due to the limited pool of potential participants, data was collected from a relatively small minimum of 10 participants at three Research I institutions. The small sample size provided only a snapshot of understanding via the participants who were a part of this research, and the findings may not be generalizable to the larger population. However, the information gathered will provide an in-depth analysis of the students who do participate. Interview questions will reflect an intersectional approach to understanding these students' experiences, focusing on gender but inclusive of other identities that are important to them (i.e., race, socio-economic status, ability status, nationality, sexuality, or others).

Terms and Definitions

Here is a list of important terms and definitions that will be used frequently throughout this research. All these terms are taken from other scholars and researchers who have a keen understanding of these terms and their usages.

Agender: "This is an identity signaling that one does not have, identify with, or align with any gender. Being agender does not mean people do not know their gender. Rather, it means not having or identifying with any gender." (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section)

Affinity Space: "[A] relatively non-hierarchical interest-based "affinity space," suggesting that these are especially common and important types of spaces in contemporary society, offering a powerful vision of learning, affiliation and identity" (Gee, 2005, p. 12), affiliation of identity, in the context of this research, meaning a space that is meant just for Trans students.

Clock: Or clocked, "the term "clocked" is used to reflect that someone transgender has been recognized as trans, usually when that person is trying to blend in with cisgender people, and not intending to be seen as anything other than the gender they present" (Ennis, 2016).

Cisgender: "This term is used to identify nontrans* people. The prefix cis means 'on this side' and is used to describe people who do not experience dissonance between their assigned sex at birth and its corresponding socially ascribed gender" (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section). In the same way that sexuality can be viewed as a dichotomy between straight and Queer, with Queer used as an umbrella term for a wide array of identities that are unified by their divergence from straightness, gender can be viewed as a dichotomy between cisgender and Transgender, with the word Transgender encompassing all identities that are not cis.

Cisgenderism: "Cisgenderism refers to the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community" (Lennon & Mistler, 2014, p. 63). This term will also be used to describe the oppression felt by the Trans community within the institution of higher education, formally *institutional cisgenderism*. This term comes from Seelman (2014) to "label the behavior,

goals, norms, and values of higher education institutions that reflect an underlying assumption or belief that cisgender identities are more 'normal,' 'healthy,' and 'real' and therefore are treated as 'superior' to transgender and gender non-conforming identities"(p. 6). This systemic advantaging of cisgender people purposefully oppresses Transgender and gender non-conforming people.

*Critical Discourse Analysis: "*Critical discourse analysis (CDA) brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 9)

Critical Trans Politics: "A branch of critical theory, the three central tenets of CTP are the resilience of trans* people, trans* people's resistance to the pernicious effects of genderism, and coalition-building as a strategy for achieving wide-scale liberation" (Nicolazzo, 2016a, p. 539)

Deadname: Or deadnaming, is using a person's birthname, or former name, of a Trans person. This may be done accidentally or on purpose to try and invalidate that individual's transition or experience.

*Gender: "*This term describes the social discourse regarding how people identify, express, and embody the socially ascribed norms relating to their assigned sex at birth. Gender operates as a floating signifier for the ways individuals practice, do, or otherwise live in relation to these social norms. Precisely because of its ethereal status, gender has the ability to change and continues to change across time and context. Such (potential for) change, however, defies current social conceptualizations of the term in Western

thought, which mark it as a naturalized, immutable fact that is always already tethered to one's assigned sex at birth" (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section).

Genderism: "Genderism is an ideology that reinforces the negative evaluation of gender non-conformity or an incongruence between sex and gender. It is a cultural belief that perpetuates negative judgments of people who do not present as a stereotypical man or woman. Those who are genderist believe that people who do not conform to sociocultural expectations of gender are pathological. Similar to heterosexism, we propose that genderism is both a source of social oppression and psychological shame, such that it can be imposed on a person, but also that a person may internalize these beliefs" (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 534).

Gender Fluid: "A gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders, but may feel more man some days, and more woman other days" (Bolger & Killerman, The Safe Zone Project)

Gender Nonconforming (GNC): "a gender expression descriptor that indicates a non-traditional gender presentation (masculine woman or feminine man)," or a "gender identity label that indicates a person who identifies outside of the gender binary." (Bolger & Killerman, The Safe Zone Project)

Genderqueer: "This term denotes how some people intentionally queer, or destabilize, their gender identity, expression, or embodiment. This term is similar to gender-fuck, but it could be understood to be less political, radical, or overt in orientation. In other words, where genderfuck is an attempt to radically shift public perceptions of

gender, genderqueer is a more individual attempt to identify, express, or embody a positionality that is consonant with an individual's desires." (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section)

Nonbinary: "Nonbinary is an emerging terminological preference among younger generations who consider binary gender identity to be something more relevant to their grandparents than to themselves. Because transsexual and transgender people do not conform to the social expectation that people who are assigned male at birth will be men or that people assigned female at birth will be women, they can be considered gender-nonconforming and might be as genderqueer or nonbinary as anybody else. In practice, however, these terms usually refer to people who reject the terms transgender and transsexual for themselves, because they think the terms are either old-fashioned or too conceptually enmeshed in the gender binary." (Stryker, 2017, p. 24).

Passing: "This refers to the ability to be socially (mis)read as having a particular gender identity. Although some trans* people see passing as positive, it can also be a burden, or what trans* people feel they must do because of the threat or reality of violence. Passing can also be a positionality that is ascribed by others to an individual (e.g., "You pass as …"). Again, this has potentially positive and negative effects for trans* people, as the politics of passing are not easily discernable" (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section), akin to the word stealth.

Sex Assigned at Birth: "This term describes the social discourse regarding how people are assigned to one of two supposedly natural, immutable sexes (i.e., male or female). Although some individuals are born as intersex, there is still intense pressure from medical practitioners to operate on intersex babies to modify their sex assignations,

so they align within the binary of male/female. This, then, has the effect of reifying the fallacious assumption of sex as a binary discourse." (Nicolazzo, 2016b, "Trans* Students in College" Glossary section).

Transgender: For the sake of this research, this is "an umbrella term to cover the widest possible range of gender variation" this includes "identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman that are prefixed by trans but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrois, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid," as well as gender non-conforming and anyone who does not identify as cisgender (Tompkins, 2014, p. 27).

The South: According to National Association of College Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA) the Southeast region is defines as: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (*NASPA Regions & Areas*, 2018). These states are frequently grouped together because of their geography and perceived similarity of culture, as well as a shared history in the enslavement of Africans, secession from the Union, and the birth of the Civil Rights Movement.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in a five-chapter structure. The first chapter provides an introduction to the topic, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the research, guiding research questions, theoretical framework, an overview of the methodology, assumptions made by the researcher, limitations and delimitations of the research, and important terms and definitions. Chapter two provides a review of pertinent literature. This includes information on critical perspectives of

gender, specifically the difference between gender and sexuality, and the importance of intersectionality in this work. It also covers the topics of cisgenderism, campus climate, and the South as a region and social clime. The next chapter covers methodology, including research protocol; information about the study site and participants; data collection, storage, and analysis; credibility and trustworthiness of the study; as well as ethical considerations and researcher positionality and reflexivity. Chapter four will go over the findings, including themes and subthemes discovered. The final chapter will provide a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the field of research focused on Trans experiences in higher education, there is a geographical gap which leaves out the experiences of Trans students in the South. The goal of this research is to provide an analysis of the experiences of Trans students in this region of the United States and to normalize the critique of systems of power through amplifying the voices of these students that often go unheard. Through this research, it is my hope to provide what other critical discourse researchers have offered, a better "understanding of the nature and sources of social wrongs, the obstacles to addressing them and possible ways of overcoming those obstacles" (Fairclough, 2009, p. 167).

This chapter will summarize four important areas of literature and research related to the topic of study. First, there will be a critical perspective on gender presented from two views: distinguishing gender and sexuality and the importance of the intersection of identity connected to race and gender. These perspectives provide better understanding of the framework for research. Next, an exploration of cisgenderism delves into the origins of the term, its meaning, and its manifestations in higher education. Cisgenderism is a pervasive, oppressive force that affects Trans people in any system. Justification of this assumption is provided, and a better understanding from the research is outlined. Third is an overview of the current climate for Trans students in higher education from institutional, classroom, and co-curricular perspectives. Finally, research on region and

location of Southern, urban, ordinary cities is presented to frame the scope of work, including what we already know about the culture of this region and what research is missing in terms of LGBTQ+ experiences in the South.

Critical Perspectives on Gender

This research takes a critical perspective on gender, sexuality, and identity development, meaning that literature will be presented that evaluates the importance of differentiating between gender and sexuality, shifting the focus to be on Trans students specifically and not the entire LGBTQ+ community. Further, it establishes a simple acceptance of identity for Trans people with no further investigation of Trans identity development or questioning of why students identify the way they do. Deeper analysis of multiple intersecting identities is also presented. These critical perspectives provide framework for the assumptions that Trans students experience marginalization in systems of power and oppression.

Sexuality and Gender

Research studies on the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in higher education, like studies of other marginalized identities, are important to the work of practitioners and institutions alike to better serve these students and address their academic and co-curricular needs (Rankin & Garvey, 2015). However, much of this research spans the entire LGBTQ+ community, which includes both gender identity and sexual identity. The LGB and Q stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer, which are terms that are often used to describe a person's sexuality or sexual orientation (Stryker,

2017). The T and Q stand for Transgender and Queer (Queer also being an umbrella term that can be used for both sexuality and gender), and these terms are used to describe someone's gender. Both of these identities, gender and sexuality, are different psychosocial constructs that are important to separate (Nicolazzo, 2016b; Renn, 2007). Although these identities are different, it is common practice for college campuses to conflate them into one group, the "LGBTQ+ community" (Renn, 2017). In her research on the identity development of LGBT student leaders, Renn describes the ill-guided practice of college campuses and researchers considering lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in one research focus, which "masks the important differences between sexuality and gender identity" (2007, p. 312). Similarly, in her book, *Trans* in College,* Nicolazzo echoes the dangers of not seeing these identities as distinct: "this conflation of sexuality and gender by those on and off college campuses not only is highly reductive but also threatens to overlook the distinct experiences of trans* students" (2016b, "Trans* Students in College" section). Seeing these two groups as separate helps to normalize Transgender identities and Transgender people, and instead of seeing these groups as one, the distinction challenges the assumption that LGBTQ+ people are all the same and need similar resources. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) agree that there is importance in the normalization of Transgender identities to challenge these assumptions and that normalizing Transgender identities will also help to dismantle the idea of "dual gender systems," thus "promoting greater freedom from rigid gender roles" (p. 32). Dismantling rigid gender roles is a concept that originates from Queer and Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, who helped to standardize the idea that sex and gender are different: gender is socially constructed and learned, with no

inherent or natural determinants from sex assigned at birth (Beemyn, 2003; Butler, 2011). This deconstruction of gender and sex challenges the notion of gender roles as inherent, good, or right and instead promotes the idea of gender as more fluid, with sex having no intrinsic connection to an individual's gender identity.

Although these theories distinguishing sex and gender have existed since the 1990s, society has not fully accepted them as true. For example, even though there are identity development models focused on the social construction of gender, there are also identity development models around gender that are focused on, and based in, biological essentialism, the idea that sex determines gender or that they are one and the same (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This notion of biological essentialism or determinism reinforces the idea that there is a societal expectation wherein gender is determined by sex assigned at birth. Two common terms exist to help describe the difference between those whose sex assigned at birth aligns with the societal expectations of one's gender and those who do not. When someone's sex assigned at birth neatly aligns with societal expectations of gender, that person is labeled cisgender. For example, I was assigned female at birth and I identify as a woman; therefore, I am cisgender (cis). For someone whose sex assigned at birth does not neatly align with those societal expectations, there are a wide array of specific terms that they might use to describe themselves; however, an umbrella term to describe this person's gender would be Transgender. In early research on these terms, instead of the term cisgender, the term "traditionally gendered" was used to describe one's gender identity as existing within what society deemed an acceptable range of behaviors and expressions, perhaps also inadvertently reinforcing the idea that being cis is normal or natural and being Trans is not (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This is

untrue: there is nothing unnatural about being Trans and there is nothing normal about being cisgender, and something that is normative is not inherently normal.

Challenging societal gender norms is not unique to a particular culture or time period, and thus the definition of Transgender continues to evolve in meaning and Transgender people continue to push against societal expectations of what is acceptable behavior and expression. In 2005, Bilodeau and Renn wrote that the term Transgender, in contrast to 'traditionally gendered,' "focuses on individuals whose gender identity conflicts with biological sex assignment or societal expectations for gender expression as male or female" (p. 29). Similarly, Stryker (2017) wrote that this term implies a move away from the sex and assumed gender assigned at birth. She went on to say that at the time, some in the community were critical of the broad use of the term Transgender and said it should refer "only to those who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth," and that other terms should be used "for people who seek to resist their birth-assigned gender" (p. 19). This critique was meant to reinforce the gender binary and the idea that the term Transgender should mean only people who transitioned from male to female and vice versa; according to these critics, those who are nonbinary or gender nonconforming should not use the term Transgender at all. However, in her book, *Transgender History*, she used this term to refer to the "widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities," taking a stand against those who would use the term Transgender to reinforce the gender binary (p. 19). Because of this disagreement over the definition of Transgender, the term Trans* with an asterisk at the end was created to acknowledge the importance of challenging the gender binary within the Transgender community (Tompkins, 2014). The asterisk is a computer coding tool that

prompts a search engine to find "every possible variation" and thus Trans* is "meant to include not only identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman that are prefixed by trans- but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid" (Tompkins, 2014, p. 27).

Broadening one's understanding of what it means to be Transgender is important when researching this population. Although for many the term calls to mind only a person transitioning from male to female (MTF) or female to male (FTM), the Transgender experience is not monolithic (Catalano, 2015). There is an expansive Transgender community that is ever-changing and growing the definition what it means to be Transgender (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Stryker's definition provided above identifies Transgender as meaning a transgression of the gender binary, deviating from the tired trope that boxes Transgender people into a single narrative of MTF and FTM. Many Transgender people exist entirely outside of the gender binary. For example, there are Transgender people who identify as agender, others who identify both as non-binary and as women, and still others whose gender changes from day to day—therefore, if you do not identify as an assigned female at birth (AFAB) woman, or cisgender woman, or as an assigned male at birth (AMAB) man, or cisgender man, you may very well fall under the Transgender umbrella.

Research on identity development within the LGBTQ+ community has focused mostly on Lesbian, Gay, and sometimes Bisexual students (Cass, 1979; Jones & Abes, 2013). These developmental models are often generalized to the whole community, as stated previously, and erroneously assume the experiences of these diverse identities are the same. These models are usually based on stage models which do not adequately

address the fluidity and complexity of Transgender and Bisexual experiences; these experiences tend to challenge binary sexuality and gender identities and are not well understood by current research (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). In their research, Goldberg and Kuvalanka (2018) found that many students did not question their gender identity until coming to college and many did not know the underlying campus climate for Trans students until they began this exploration. For many students, college is the first time they are away from home or family and have the chance to explore this identity, both in how they outwardly express their gender and in internally challenging the gender their family had assigned them since birth (Beemyn, 2003). Especially in the South, many LGBTQ+ young people who do come out before college use higher education as a place where they may feel safer to explore their identity further (Weber, 2015). However, this research is not focused on why students transition or how they come to know their identity, although that is an important part of the story; the main focus of this research is on the experience of Trans students within the confines of the institution of higher education.

Multiple Intersecting Identities

When discussing successful movements and action, Spade describes these organizations as sharing structural similarities, one of which is "using an intersectional framework for understanding the multiple vectors of vulnerability converging in the harms members face," with vectors including racism, sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, homophobia, ableism and so on (p. 109). This intersectional framework comes from the theory of intersectionality, created by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Although this theory

originated to address a lack of legal precedence to describe specific discrimination faced by Black women, this theory has had a significant impact on social movements and scholarship far outside of law schools (Crenshaw, 1990). Crenshaw's work explains how people who have multiple intersecting oppressed identities, for example women of color, face unique barriers "not captured by racial justice movements that use male experience as the norm or feminist movements that use white women's experience as the norm" (Spade, 2015, p. 10). Spade discusses the unique connection between gender and race by describing political resistance as connected to identity:

> It is part of a critical political resistance that raises demands like an end to wealth and poverty, an end to immigration enforcement, and the abolition to all forms of imprisonment…. [M]ore broadly [it] is a particular frame for understanding how processes of gendered racialization are congealed in violent institutions (Spade, 2013, pp. 42-43)

Gendered racialization is the idea that gender norms do not exist in broad terms: all race and gender norms are connected and therefore the movement for Trans liberation is deeply connected to the anti-racism movement. Therefore, we must center both race and gender in these movements to help "keep our attention on simultaneity and avoid the kind of single-vector analysis that falsely universalizes the experiences of white people or men" (Spade, 2013, p. 45). Understanding systems of oppression in this way reminds researchers and activists alike that constant self-reflection, particularly from those who have identities that have been a part of those "universal" experiences (white men), is necessary when participating in movements that center the "leadership of people facing

the most direct harms from systems of subjection," reinforcing the idea that liberation will only come when the voices of Trans People of Color are centered (p. 7).

Cisgenderism

When contemplating the theoretical underpinnings of the oppression of Trans people, what usually comes to mind are transphobia and sexism. These terms are important to the creation and understanding of cisgenderism as a theory, but they do not adequately describe the subjugation of Trans people. The term transphobia has been more frequently utilized in writing and common conversation than the term cisgenderism. Even though it is used more commonly, the term transphobia "addresses fear of trans-identified individuals instead of capturing the critically central and evidently flawed assumptions that underlie the pervasive cultural system of prejudice and discrimination directed toward the transgender community" (Lennon & Mistler, 2014, p. 63). Similarly, the term sexism is more focused on describing the "power and privilege aligned with 'maleness,' as it focuses on men, and that which is masculine, as being valued above women and that which is deemed feminine" (p. 64). This is different from cisgenderism, as cisgenderism encompasses the idea that people (of both binary genders) receive more power and privilege when their gender and sex assigned at birth align with one another. For example, if a cisgender woman refused to support a change of bathroom or housing policy on a college campus that would create more space for Trans individuals in the form of gender-inclusive restrooms or residence halls, that would not be a person reinforcing sexism: it would be classified as cisgenderism, as the act is oppressing Trans people specifically.

The term cisgenderism began to be used more widely in the mid 1990s and gained more traction in the early 2000s (Cava, 2016). In 2007, Serano published "Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity," a seminal work on the experience of Trans people and systemic oppression. In this book she wrote, "The gender-entitled belief that all women are (or should be) feminine and men masculine—which some have called *cisgenderism*—gives rise to transphobia, a gender anxiety that is directed against people who fall outside of those norms" (p. 90). Although this definition does not completely encompass what cisgenderism means today, it provides an important perspective on the manifestation of cisgenderism in our daily lives: even if we do not mean to, "we are constantly and actively projecting our ideas and assumptions about maleness and femaleness onto every person we meet" (p. 90). In other words, all cisgender people are socialized to make assumptions about the gender of those around them, inherently reinforcing cisgenderism even if they do not mean to. Serano coined this as "cissexual assumption," which is the assumption that all cisgender people make about others' experiences of gender, the belief that the alignment of "their [own] physical and subconscious" sex is the norm, erasing the possibility of Transness or gender non-conformity (2007, p. 165).

These assumptions and erasure are not only relevant to individual or peer to peer forms of oppression. Seelman builds from Serano's theory to address institutional cisgenderism, specifically in higher education. She uses the term institutional cisgenderism to

> label the behaviors, goals, norms, and values of higher education institutions that reflect an underlying assumption or belief that cisgender identities are more

> ‘normal,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘real’ and therefore are treated as ‘superior’ to transgender and gender non-conforming identities. Such institutional patterns result in systematic privileging of cisgender individuals and identities and marginalization of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and identities (2014, p. 6).

Cisgenderism in higher education has a substantial negative effect on Trans students. The proliferation of cisgenderism, although being addressed on some campuses, goes unchecked in many places (Seelman, 2014).

In Higher Education

There are a few theories and assumptions I will be working from when pursuing this research. Firstly, all universities and institutions of higher education, willfully or not, are steeped in cisgenderism (Goldberg, 2018). Secondly, because of this, Trans students experience cisgenderism on campus, in the classroom, and in their co-curricular experiences. These two points encompass and acknowledge the complex experience of being Trans on a college campus in higher education and in general. When your gender falls under the Trans umbrella and there is a binary gender system at play in society, or specifically at a university, then you will likely experience cisgenderism.

Preston and Hoffman (2015) coined the term Traditionally Heterogendered Institution (THI) to describe an institution of higher education where cisgenderism and Trans-oppression manifested. This is like the concept of a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), which is an institution shaped and fashioned to suit the needs of white students, staff, and professionals. They wrote, “[T]he THI is defined as an institution that,

despite the desire to create programs supporting LGBTQ students, upholds and promotes a heterogendered discourse through institutional structures and foundation" (p. 82). For example, even though there may be efforts to provide programming for LGBTQ+ students (such as an LGBTQ+ center or LGBTQ+ competency training program), the school itself may still reaffirm those THI values that oppress Trans students through sex-segregated housing policy, binary bathroom enforcement, failure to normalize the use of pronouns, and so on (Preston & Hoffman, 2015).

Similarly, Pryor (2018) discussed using THI as a conceptual framework in their research. They wrote, "as colleges and universities reify heterogendered norms, thus centering straight and cisgender identities, scholars have called on practitioners in higher education to rethink and reshape the systemic limitation levied against LGBTQ college students" (p. 35). Thus, there is harm caused to Transgender students when the system and institution are shaped by and for cisgender and heterosexual people. A Williams Institute report echoed this finding, stating that universities "reinforce societal genderism in practices, policies, and norms" and that when students seek to express their genders freely and authentically, they "encounter pressures to conform to socially constructed gender norms in terms of appearance, dress, and pronouns" (Goldberg, 2018, p. 4).

The concept of cisgenderism reveals ideas and behaviors labeled as "normal and good" by larger society and helps to articulate how and why cis students may view Transgender students as 'other' and how campus policies or staff may treat Trans students as less-than, even if unintentionally so (Pryor, 2018). Bilodeau (2007) conceptualized four defining characteristics of a binary gender system to help assess how institutions maintain oppressive environments for gender-variant students. These are: (a)

implicit labeling of people as male or female, (b) negative social repercussions when individuals deviate from gender norms, (c) institutional privileging of cisgender people and oppression of Transgender people, and (d) institutional invisibility of Transgender people.

Research has provided many specific examples of how cisgenderism manifests in higher education, sometimes daily, for Trans collegians (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). A few examples: staff and faculty who do not know how to support Trans students or include Trans content in their classes (Seelman, 2014); gender-segregated housing, unclear or inflexible housing policies, students who were told they would receive housing accommodations and did not receive them, and even students who were kicked out of housing (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015; Thorpe, 2017); lack of gender-inclusive bathrooms or changing rooms (Beemyn, 2003; Thorpe, 2017); forms or databases that do not recognize students who are gender non-conforming, gender fluid, or non-binary, as well as databases that do not allow students to use a preferred name or pronoun (Bilodeau, 2007) .

In her research, Thorpe (2017) provided a more in-depth perspective on gendered spaces in post-secondary education. She wrote, “The university, like most social institutions, is built upon a system which requires individuals to choose from identities that would seek to render them comprehensible in society,” meaning those which conform to a gender binary and gender norms (p. 1). An important perspective that she included is how vital these facilities are for students, particularly restrooms, which are a public amenity that all should have access to and feel safe using. Unfortunately, bathrooms are often a source of great fear for many Trans students, and some will go the

whole day without using the facilities for fear of negative reactions from peers. Thorpe also shared the importance of institutions challenging structural cisgenderism and binarism to make spaces safer and more inclusive for Trans students: upholding gender-segregated housing and binary bathrooms reinforces the rejection of all those who do not conform to the gender binary. Another important example of exclusive spaces that she provides comes in the form of Trans students seeking resources on campus such as counseling, medical support, or disability support. Often, Trans students find themselves educating service providers in these areas on their own mental health, disability needs, and medical needs; if these providers are not receptive to a student's gender, they may not receive the support they are seeking from these resources.

Campus Climate

This portion of the literature review focuses on how research has defined the experience of Trans students in higher education from three different perspectives: first, from the overarching view of higher education as an institution; second, from a classroom perspective, including interactions with professors and instructors; thirdly from a co-curricular standpoint, addressing what current research says about Trans students' experiences outside of the classroom on campus.

Institutionally

From an overarching perspective, it has been well documented that Trans students experience marginalization in institutions of higher education. Specifically, Trans

students experience higher levels of victimization than their cisgender counterparts (Effrig et al., 2011). This has been categorized by researchers and summarized here by Singh et al. in a research study that showed what a group of Trans youth had to say about their needs on campuses. There were four major themes identified: campuses could become more inclusive if there was 1) Trans-affirming language campus wide, 2) training on Trans students' concerns for students, staff, and faculty, 3) Trans-affirming health care access, and 4) a community of Trans allies on campus. The students expressed these needs because of negative experiences and a desire for self-advocacy (Singh et al., 2013). Other researchers and research studies have echoed these findings. Catalano (2015) wrote specifically about the experience of Trans men on college campuses and the lack of supports that exist for them. In his research, he challenged the notion of thinking about a community of students who may have similar identities as also therefore being a monolith. Resources for Trans students are important and remembering that each person in the community has a different experience is equally important. This aligns with a self-reported lower level of achievement across educational outcomes for Trans students, which may be due to a lack of self-confidence and a lack of support (Dugan et al., 2012).

This lack of support coincides with the cisgenderism that thoroughly permeates higher education as an institution. An analysis of a midwestern university with 'high marks' for diversity and inclusion concluded that the university "constructs LGBTQ+ students as vulnerable, lonely, and seeking assistance, and positions the university as the key to LGBTQ+ students' educational and social success" (Preston & Hoffman, 2015, p. 72). A similar finding in Pryor (2018) shared that although the university they were researching was renowned for their inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, the deficit view of

LGBTQ+ student needs and THI/cisgenderist mindset of the university made for conflicted feelings on the part of the LGBTQ+ students themselves.

Acknowledging the complexity of this issue is important: holding both truths that 1) some universities have supports and in place for Queer and Trans students and 2) these supports can be seen as deficit-focused and reinforcing systems of oppression is imperative. Universities that have supports in place for Trans and other LGBQ+ students that address needs from a deficit mindset or from a non-community-centered approach can reinforce genderist and heterosexist norms and thus reinforce oppressive systems. For example, in a case study from a midwestern university that claimed to be supportive of Trans students working in their offices, a Trans student staff member serving as a Resident Assistant (RA) was told he could be an RA on the floor that matched his gender identity. He was later denied this and subsequently the ability to choose for himself whether this situation was safe for him or not. The university decided for him, under the guise that it was in his best interest to be on a floor that served only women. However, making this decision for him was in fact genderist and paternalistic (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015). This example, which is far from unique in the research on Trans students, invalidates the resilience that Trans students have showcased in their use of kinship and community-building to navigate genderist and hostile environments (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). In fact, some research has shown that Trans students were academically successful despite the cisgenderism they faced because of the resilience and kinship they had built for themselves (Nicolazzo, 2016b).

Despite an overarching hostile and cisgenderist environment that currently exists for Trans students in higher education, over the last two decades, campus climate has

improved overall for LGBTQ students (Renn, 2017). There has been "a positive relationship between campus climate and year of graduation, outness, academic training, and LGBTQ academic experiences," telling us that, indeed, where students felt the ability to be out and be themselves, the atmosphere was better (Garvey et al., 2019, p. 240). Further, they found that those who disclosed their identities at a higher rate had more "positive perceptions of campus climate" (p. 240). However, the progress is not consistent across the nation or across institutions. This is particularly true for Trans and LGBQ students because there are no federal protections along the lines of gender identity or sexuality; for example, gender is not a stable legal construct and the official definition varies from state to state, making it very difficult for Trans students to change their gender markers both on campus and legally, should they wish to do so (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015). Renn (2017) argues that institutions need to do a better job of providing those protections that the government has failed to provide, specifically identifying supports including counseling and health care that meets the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

Co-Curricular Experiences

Looking more specifically at LGBTQ+ student experiences within co-curricular activities and education outside of the classroom, we find that there is a correlation between campus climate and student success. A more welcoming and affirming climate facilitates a better experience for LGBTQ+ students, and the converse is true as well (Garvey, Rankin, et al., 2017). In a 2019 research study, Garvey et al. wrote that there is "a negative relationship between campus climate and LGBTQ+ co-curricular experiences,"—a more unwelcoming environment means a poorer experience for

LGBTQ+ students (p. 240). This was also true in another study discussing the experience of LGBTQ+ students at a midwestern university and how they interpreted certain campus features as welcoming or unwelcoming, discussed through pictures they had taken (Pryor, 2018). In their pictures, LGBTQ+ students described certain locations as feeling unwelcoming and uncomfortable, specifically in spaces that were connected to Greek life and recreational sport activities. In the same study, some feelings of exclusion and discomfort came from Christian spaces on campus as well. Overall, they thought there was not enough space for Blackness and Queerness to exist freely and openly.

One study looked specifically at the Trans experience within LGBTQ+ support offices. The researchers found that much of the programming done by LGBTQ+ centers was mainly centered on sexuality, rather than gender (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Further, the programs and events that were geared towards Trans students were primarily *about* Trans students, not *for* Trans students (2014). The programs were mainly educating cisgender people about the experience of Trans students, which felt clinical in nature and did not provide social supports or community-building opportunities.

Classroom Climate

Continuing to look at the experience of Trans students in higher education, we shift the focus to the classroom. Research has found that faculty can be a major source of support for LGBTQ+ students (Garvey & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2012; Linley et al., 2016). Faculty are in a position to help and, Linley argues, should take a larger role in ensuring LGBTQ+ students have the ability to leave "the margins and [seek] the center of the higher education experience" (2016, p. 61). In Linley's research, of the 60 students

interviewed, 35 discussed meaningful things faculty had done to make their experience better within higher education. There were a number of themes that emerged from these interviews as notable, in both formal and informal ways. Here are the formal ways: confronting homophobic language in the classroom, challenging cisgender heteronormative discourses from students in class, shaping course content beyond normative curricula to include LGBTQ+ scholars and source material, and being knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ issues within the class content. Informally, outside of classroom, these were shared: affirming identity, supporting wellbeing, advising a LGBTQ+-focused student organization, showing up at LGBTQ+ events on campus, being 'out' and in a position of power, and completing SafeZone or other professional development to support LGBTQ+ students (2016). These themes were distilled from examples shared by the participants in the study and were cosponsored by the researchers as important actions professors could take to make campuses more inclusive. It is important to note, however, that only a little over half of the participants provided these examples of supportive professors—not an overwhelmingly large percentage. This coincides with other research shared by Dugan et al. (2012): in their research, they state that it is more difficult for MTF Trans students to find mentorship from professors than other students. This could be seen as an example of a cisgenderist and hostile environment that makes it hard to see Trans students as normative.

The South

The South as a region is difficult to define; this area is thought of by many as a place filled with hate, religious zealotry, and political inflexibility. To others, the South is

a place filled with pride, grounded in a vibrant history, that moves just a little slower than everywhere else. There is no doubt the South has a noteworthy history that is defined by the many plantations built by enslaved Africans and yet simultaneously defined as the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, there is research that tells us the South is less welcoming and supportive of LGBTQ+ people, People of Color, and religious minorities (Boso, 2012; Johnson et al., 2020; Rogers, 2018). Nevertheless, these communities persist here. The South is home to both justice and injustice, to white supremacists and Queer Black revolutionaries, to Southern Baptists and avowed atheists, to debutantes and Drag Queens; the South is complicated. And yet, it is often seen as very homogenous, bigoted, and backwards. It is common to see remarks on social media dismissing the entire region and its citizens out of hand because of this prevailing narrative of the South. These same assumptions may be the reason why this region is often ignored by researchers and looked upon with distain in the world of academia.

Of the research that exists about Trans students in higher education, the overwhelming majority of it was conducted outside of the Southeast. The literature shared thus far has not specifically mentioned location as a part of the research itself, only to disclose location for context of the reader. The amount of research being done on the LGBTQ+ community is already limited, particularly on Trans students in higher education. The research is even more limited when speaking about the experience of LGBTQ+ students in higher education in the Southeast specifically (Stone, 2018).

Contextualizing the experience of this population in a metropolitan framework provides an important perspective about the different experiences Trans people have, educationally and otherwise, looking through both a regional and a geographical lens.

This context also helps to frame the research question and overarching focus of this research looking at the experience of Trans students in higher education in the Southeast. Although some research exists about the Trans experience in the southeastern part of the country, most research on Trans people is focused on the Northeast and Bicoastal areas (Stone, 2018), and virtually no research exists on Trans college students specifically in the South. Research tells us that sociologists 'understudy' LGBTQ+ people in both the South and Midwest, specifically in rural areas, but also in more ordinary cities that may not be seen as "gay-friendly." In fact, in an audit of sociological research, only 10% of the studies done on Trans life focused on Transgender Southerners (Stone, 2018). In the same study, the researchers found that "62% of sociological studies on LGBTQ urban life are conducted in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, [or] Los Angles [and] only 14% of sociological research is on small cities" like Birmingham (Stone, 2018, p. 6). Interestingly, the outsized focus on bigger, more gay-friendly cities does not align with the geographic distribution of LGBTQ+ people. A Williams Institute report found that 35% of LGBT people live in the American South, a population equivalent to the number of LGBT people in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest regions combined (Hasenbush et al., 2014; Stone, 2018). According to the same report, approximately 500,000 Transgender people live in the South (2014). Although research on the LGBTQ+ community and Transgender people specifically has increased over the last two decades, there is very little geographical diversity within the research conducted in the United States, and thus the experience of all LGBTQ+ people is not fully captured.

This portion of the chapter will be broken down into two different themes. The first is a discussion of how the social climate of the Southern region impacts the

experience of LGBTQ+ people in general, looking at the states defined by the National Association of College Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA) as the Southeast: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (*NASPA Regions & Areas*, 2018). Next is an exploration of how Transgender people persist in both rural and urban areas.

LGBTQ+ Experiences in The South

As stated previously, the South is home to more than a third of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, and nine of the of the 25 cities with the highest percentage of same-sex couples are in the South (Stone, 2018). Additionally, "African-Americans who identify as LGBT or who are in same-sex couples also see the greatest representation in the South" (Hasenbush et al., 2014, p. 8). When thinking about representation in the South, one narrative that is important to mention is that of Trans People of Color. In the South, Trans People of Color "live multidimensional lives that are affected not only by their gender identities, but also by their socioeconomic status, race, age, and geographic location" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 74). On the whole, however, there has been little research done on the LGBTQ+ population in this geographic area, specifically in Southern urban cities; Stone hypothesized that interest in the South is "stymied by myths of Southern queer invisibility and overwhelming oppression" (p. 7), essentially saying that researchers assume the narrative will be that of oppression without investigating and that most people do not consider the South when they are thinking of LGBTQ+ narratives. LGBTQ+ Southerners continue to exist and persist in large numbers

in this region and yet receive only 3-4% of domestic fundraising that is done for the community by larger non-profits such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) (Khan, 2014). Although there is truth to the narrative of oppression—there are many barriers and dangers that exist for the LGBTQ+ community in the southern United States—it is important to mention the strength and resilience of this community and acknowledge the powerful history of the Queer South that is often forgotten (Nicolazzo, 2016a; Rogers, 2018). The South may be more unaccepting than other locations, but LGBTQ+ people continue to live here and deserve to have their stories shared, even if they reify the tale of Southern oppression that many already expect.

Research does tell us that it is difficult for the LGBTQ+ community to live in the South: there is more transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia compared to other regions (Rogers, 2018). Over time there has been increased acceptance of gay and lesbian people, specifically those who identify as cisgender and are looking to participate in normative communal activities like joining the local church (Johnson et al., 2020; Rogers, 2018), but this same acceptance is not afforded to others in the community whose identities challenge the gender binary, like Trans people or non-binary people, or those who identify as bisexual, a sexuality that is seen as challenging a binary sexuality concept. These two groups do not find as much acceptance as gay and lesbian people because they cannot easily emulate heteronormative and cisgenderist norms (Johnson et al., 2020; Rogers, 2018).

Although these norms are prevalent throughout the United States, here they have been heightened by geographic location: this is a region defined by "political conservatism, heightened evangelicalism, high unemployment, and rurality" (Johnson et

al., 2020, p. 72). These cultural norms are also connected to the inflexible preservation of a Southern subculture that reinforces traditional gender roles and attitudes predicated on patriarchal values and expectations (Rogers, 2018). Although these attitudes are not unique to the South, they are augmented by regional identity. In an environment like this, the Trans community, and specifically non-binary people, may feel amplified prejudice and discrimination, as their identities are an affront to the norms upon which the culture is grounded. Further, this cultural emphasis on gender stereotypes creates a hostile environment for any person looking to explore their gender identity, and they are thus forced do that exploration within a more dangerous setting. This increased marginalization and stigma have also been tied to negative mental health outcomes for Trans people, with over 50% of the Transgender population in the South having experienced suicidal ideation (Johnson et al., 2020).

In addition to the cultural norms and expectations hindering Trans support in the South, Southerners in general face lower wages, a lack of social services (including public transit, housing, and healthcare), and high unemployment rates (Johnson et al., 2020). When comparing the South to other regions, specifically urban areas in the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast, there are far fewer resources offered to the Trans community and there is less acceptance overall (Rogers, 2018). This is supported by Garvey et al. (2017), who in their research using the National LGBTQ Alumnx Survey, found that the region where a college or university is located can have a significant impact on LGBTQ student experiences.

Ordinary Cities

As stated previously, research on the LGBTQ+ community in the southern United States occurs far less often than in other locations, despite the large LGBTQ+ population in this region. Stone wrote that this happens because of a sociological phenomenon called "metronormativity" (2018). This is the assumption that in order to be fully out and thrive, LGBTQ+ people must move from their homes, presumably in the South, to a "place of tolerance" in a big city. This thought process marks certain locations like San Francisco and New York City as more ideal for Trans people and places like the South as "monolithically intolerant and inhospitable" (Stone, 2018, p. 2). This contributes to the invisibility of LGBTQ+ Southerners, which causes researchers to presume they will not find a population to study and therefore study other, more viable locations. Metronormativity also reinforces the narrative that urban areas like the cities mentioned are more accepting of diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and other identities, in contrast to rural locations—and according to research, that narrative is correct. Garvey et al. found that LGBTQ graduates from campuses located in urban locations had an overall more positive experience rather than "those who completed their undergraduate degree in a town or rural environment" (2017, p. 814).

In studying urban-rural differentials, research has shown that rural locations have more homogeneity in terms of religious identity, race, socioeconomic status, and education level (Boso, 2012). Rural communities are characteristically poorer and less racially diverse, have lower educational outcomes, and are less open-minded and more isolated (Gray, 2009). In addition, these locations are usually labeled as more conservative than urban and suburban areas. These descriptions are subjective, however,

and can be seen differently depending on region and location. For example, rural New England will look different than rural Alabama due to cultural and geographical differences (Boso, 2012). Overall, rural areas are more dangerous for the LGBTQ+ community compared to urban areas (Boso, 2012; Gray, 2009; Weber, 2015). This may be because "rural areas lack visible LGBTQ communities and gathering places that are readily available in urban and suburban areas in the form of LGBTQ neighborhoods, community centers, clubs, bookstores, coffee houses, churches, and newspapers" (Weber, 2015, p. 24). The overarching narrative when comparing rural and urban experiences is that generally Trans people "throughout the United States experience daily hardship as a result of transphobic or cissexist stigma, prejudice, and discrimination [and] trans southerners do so in a region that is marked by its rurality and its heightened conservatism and evangelicalism" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 71). Comparatively, in an urban area, while transphobia, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination still occur, it is perhaps to a lesser extent. There is more acceptance, more diversity, and a broader array of resources available to the LGBTQ+ community in urban areas. Often, this narrative captures only the extremes: the difference between an LGBTQ+ person in San Francisco and another in rural Montana. There is, however, a thread missing from this research—a middle space, specifically the "ordinary city" mentioned by Stone (2018). This is an urban space by definition, but smaller, less globally-known, and understudied; research tends to focus on larger wealthy cities and misses the complexity, diversity, and peculiarity of these smaller "ordinary" cities (Robinson, 2006). There is a need for a more complex understanding of Trans lives in places that are less seen. From a non-Southern perspective, the LGBTQ+ community in the South, both in rural locations and in smaller

urban cities like Birmingham, is invisible, and it is hard for an outsider to fathom Trans people living in a place that is so unwelcoming (Gray, 2009; Stone, 2018). However, new research and perspectives can help outsiders understand more about how so many LGBTQ+ people persist in the region (Stone, 2018). I had many preconceived notions about what Southern Queer life would be like before living here, and I can personally confirm that there are so many rich and complex discourses that have not been captured by the existing research. Therefore, the research I plan to capture will be specifically in these ordinary cities, like Birmingham.

Summary

This review of pertinent literature provides a comprehensive context for this study. I have explored critical perspectives on gender and the manifestations of cisgenderism for students in higher education. Overall, the literature shows that the campus climate for Trans students is unwelcoming and Trans students experience marginalization from the institution, in the classroom, and in co-curricular experiences. This coincides with the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the South generally. I have also presented justification for future exploration on this topic as there is little to no research of Trans students in higher education in Southern states specifically. This study helps to fill this research gap by highlighting the experiences of Trans students in the South and providing an analysis of their experiences across multiple states in this region through a Critical Discourse Analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to understand the experience of Trans students in higher education as they persist through a system shaped by cisgenderism. This research focuses on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the participants' reporting of their experiences, allowing for the inclusion of current political narratives to elaborate and illuminate any findings. This chapter includes rationale for using qualitative methods for the research, specifically a critical discourse analysis through an intertextual lens. The contents of this chapter include: (a) qualitative methodology, (b) CDA methodology, (c) study site and participants, (d) data collection and procedure, credibility and trustworthiness, (f) ethical considerations, and (g) the role of the researcher.

Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative research method is being used to answer this central research question:

How, if at all, do Trans students talk about their encounters with cisgenderism on college campuses in connection to location and region?

Sub questions for the study include:

1. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to an urban campus location?

2. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to the Southeastern region?

Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people make sense of their experiences and the meaning they connect with those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and to "understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a particular study address a problem or issue" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 45). They do this through the exploration of a group or specific population, looking to learn things about this group that are not easily quantifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This exploration should be thoughtful, with ethical considerations, as these groups and populations are often made up of silenced or marginalized voices. This research is also often done with the goals of empowering people from a specific population to tell their own stories, encouraging others to hear their voices, and addressing the power imbalances that manifest in our society—power imbalances that can also manifest between researcher and participant if not addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This research is often defined by four characteristics: the "focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). The research process itself is highly detailed in order to capture the full depth of the data, producing findings that are meaningful to both the researcher and to the population being researched. Often the research is done in the hope that it will be utilized to help this particular group through policymakers or others who have the authority to make meaningful changes in the community (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For all these reasons, qualitative research will best serve to answer the research questions posed above. This research seeks to better

understand, rather than merely attempt to quantify, the experience of Transgender students in higher education, specifically in the Southeast, with the goal of making this population more visible and addressing barriers they may face on campus that are specific to their region and location. A qualitative method will allow for an in-depth understanding of participants, how they make meaning of their own experiences, and an outcome that supports the equitable treatment of this group.

Philosophical Assumptions

This research is grounded in both Critical Trans Politics and Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical framework and methodological approach, respectively. Therefore, the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions made throughout this research come from a critical interpretive framework. A critical interpretive framework provides important assumptions about the nature of reality for participants, how they know that reality, the way their diversity or perspectives are valued, and my approach to inquiry. Overall, I am concerned with "empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them" by cisgenderism and other manifestations of gender oppression, and therefore I am acknowledging that these systems of power and oppression exist and harm Trans people (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 29).

Ontology

When reflecting on the nature of reality from a qualitative research perspective, as the researcher I must embrace that there are multiple realities: a reality for me as the

researcher and a reality for the participants in the study. To acknowledge this, participant experiences are shared in their own words in the findings section and were used as the basis to help define themes and subthemes discovered. Considering the ontological assumptions from a critical perspective, Creswell and Poth write that "reality is based on power and identity struggles" and that privileges and oppressions are connected to our identities including "race or ethnicity, class, gender, mental ability, sexual preference" and so on (2016, p. 36). This aligns well with Critical Trans Politics which also identifies larger systems as oppressive, particularly for gender minorities. This also highlights the importance of centering the voices of Trans people in the struggle for liberation (Spade, 2015).

Epistemology

The epistemological assumption within qualitative research is that the researcher must attain a certain familiarity with the participants to gain a depth of knowledge and fully understand their experience. To do this, I will collected data from participants in multiple forms, two short surveys and a 90-minute-long semi-structured interview. When considering this data, the assumption is that "[r]eality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control [and that] [r]eality can be changed through research" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 36). One of the goals of Critical Discourse Analysis is to make these larger systems of oppression more transparent through critical research. Exposing these systems allows for a closer examination from the researcher, participants, and reader—thus sparking challenge to a system that is often oppressive (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Axiology

A crucial component of qualitative research is the researcher's ability to "make their values known" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 21). This axiological assumption acknowledges the value-laden nature of gathering data and data analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis also acknowledges the power a researcher can hold in their study and deems it critical to name this bias (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In considering the previous epistemological and ontological assumptions about systems of power, it is only logical to address the identities of the researcher and participants within those systems. Using a critical interpretive framework concedes that "power relations are everywhere" and there needs to be a statement of positionality and reflexivity from the investigator (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 62). I have provided these statements in the sections below. Beyond this, I must acknowledge my own agenda in this research—a hope that this study will provide at least some small movement towards a more ethical world where the gender binary is not used a means to marginalize certain genders.

Methodology

The methodological approach to inquiry for this research is a Critical Discourse Analysis through an intertextual lens. This critical perspective, like other critical theories, starts with "assumptions of power and identity struggles," moves to document and assess those struggles, and ends with a "call for action and change" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 36). Data analysis will be done looking at the language of the participants through a horizontal and vertical analysis to give a deeper context and understanding of what they

have shared (Fairclough, 2015, p. 38; Kristeva & Moi, 1986). A methodical process will be followed to ensure the data collected in each stage is increasingly robust and that each step of the analysis adds additional layer of meaning.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The main function of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is providing a "better understanding of the nature and sources of social wrongs, the obstacles to addressing them and possible ways of overcoming those obstacles" (Fairclough, 2009, p. 167). In all variants of this methodology, there are three main concepts used to analyze discourse: critique, power, and ideology (Reisigi & Wodak, 2009). The analysis of discourse, however, does not necessarily mean simply counting how many times a participant mentions a certain word. Although that is a viable method within Discourse Analysis, CDA pushes the researchers to investigate policies, narratives, speeches, and conversations to "find notions such as racist discourse, gendered discourse…and many more—thus stretching the meaning of discourse from a genre to a register or style, from a building to a political program" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, pp. 2-3). CDA is not focused on a linguistic unit specifically, but rather in studying the complex social phenomena of discourse connected to the experiences of people within power structures.

The goal of these analyses is not merely to critique these systems of power. CDA further aims to "produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 7). This is often difficult because dominant ideologies are so widespread as to appear neutral or normal and therefore go largely unchallenged. CDA acknowledges that institutions are inherently not transparent—they need this type of critical analysis to

help identify any issues, including practices that promote injustice (Fairclough, 2009). There is dissonance here as well: many institutions tout equality and justice yet still reinforce problematic policy. Therefore, research that is conducted using this method not only gathers information from participants but also takes into consideration the larger sociopolitical context of the time, location, and institutions in play. CDA sees the researcher playing an advocacy role for groups that endure marginalization and oppression and encourages research that focuses on contemporary issues that can have significant implications on human well-being (Fairclough, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Critical Discourse Analysis is not without its limitations. Like many qualitative methods, there is no one set way to utilize this approach; there are a breadth of researchers who have used CDA in different ways to suit their particular research studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Researchers have approached CDA from interdisciplinary perspectives and used it in conjunction with other research methods. At the same time, this is the critique of many qualitative methods: they rely too heavily on the researcher's intuition and are claimed to be "soft" and too relativistic, as per the evolving definition of qualitative research in the SAGE handbook (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Yet despite these critiques, CDA (like most qualitative frameworks) helps advance a narrative of justice and make calls for social change. Creswell and Poth (2016) explain that "interaction[s] among people…are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences," but qualitative research makes room for this data (p. 46). CDA, in the tradition of qualitative research, aims to allow the researcher an "understanding of specific issues or topics—the conditions that serve to disadvantage and exclude

individuals or cultures, such as hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity, or inequities in our society" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 32).

A qualitative method, more specifically Critical Discourse Analysis, aligns well with the goals of this research. It is abundantly clear that Trans people, especially Trans People of Color, face discrimination and prejudice in social, cultural, and institutional spheres; CDA allows for research to acknowledge the role social structures play in the marginalization of groups and charges the researcher with including that data point in their gathering and analysis to ultimately increase the accuracy of their findings.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for this research is Critical Trans Politics (CTP). In alignment with Critical Discourse Analysis, the main goal of Critical Trans Politics as a theoretical framework is "to address the violence and marginalization that shortens trans lives," and the lives of those who are most marginalized (Spade, 2015, p. 50). To do this, Spade challenges societal conceptualizations of how oppressive conditions manifest for Trans people and then examines what type of action and resistance will remove those barriers. For example, the contradictory nature of anti-discrimination law: "discrimination is understood as the act of taking into account the identity that discrimination law forbids us to take into account (e.g., race, sex, disability) when making a decision, and it does not regard whether the decision-maker is favoring or harming a traditionally excluded group," a seemingly hypocritical practice that provides no actual support to marginalized populations under the guise of support and equality (p. 43). Similarly, when looking at hate crime legislation that is meant to protect Trans

people from acts of violence one must ask, “Is this actually protecting Trans people in the most effective way?” Spade suggests that it is not. He fully acknowledges that Trans people are the victims of hate crimes and these acts of violence should be condemned, but there are larger issues facing Trans people. This type of legislation reinforces the idea that the largest singular threat to Trans life is hate violence, a notion that promotes misunderstanding about what causes early death among Trans people. In an interview about CTP, Spade says, “Trans people are dying from the daily violence of not being able to get basic necessities because systems are organized in ways that require everyone to be gendered in a particular way” (Spade, 2013, p. 43). Focusing legislation on the idea that one person may harm or kill a Trans person because of their identity misses the harm that larger institutions are causing Trans people every day because of their gender. For example, Trans people have limited access to health care and doctors are not as well versed in the needs of Trans patients as their cisgender patients (Johnson et al., 2020). The criminal justice system also relies on gender when sentencing and locating prisoners, therefore criminalizing gender in the process, and those who are not in the “norm” are treated more harshly (Spade, 2015). These systems are often seen as neutral in their delivery of care and societal support, but they are political and diminish the life chances of Trans people because gender norms shape every aspect of our society. Reconceptualizing how we understand “the dispersion of power helps us realize that power is not simply about certain individuals being targeted for death or exclusion by a ruler, but instead about the creation of norms that distribute vulnerability and security” (p. 3). Increasing the life chances of those who are most marginalized requires protecting

them from not only individuals who would cause them harm but also from institutions that inherently do so.

Administrative violence is an overarching theme throughout the theory of CTP. Here, Spade expounds on this type of violence emanating from large, societal institutions or programs meant to provide welfare for all:

> These programs operate through purportedly neutral criteria aimed at distributing health and security and ensuring order. They operate in the name of promoting, protecting, and enhancing the life of the national population and, by doing so, produce clear ideas about the characteristics of who the national population is and which "societal others" should be characterized as "drains" or "threats" to that population (p. 57).

Being Transgender makes it difficult to utilize many welfare or social programs, as these programs use gender norms to classify those receiving benefits. Therefore, the message sent to and received by Trans people is that they are "societal others" and undeserving of the same life chances others may have. Spade writes, "gender classification often governs spaces such as bathrooms, homeless shelters, drug treatment programs, mental health services, and spaces of confinement like psychiatric hospitals, juvenile and adult prisons, and immigration prisons" (p. 77). These gender classifications are unable to accommodate those who are difficult to classify, resulting in misgendering which creates "a major vector of violence and diminished life chances and life spans" (p. 77).

CTP argues that instead of using "equality law," like anti-discrimination policies or legislation, or hate crime law to address the barriers facing Trans people, we must better understand where those barriers are coming from and address those head on. The

root of many or most of these barriers come from administrative governance like state agencies and federal agencies, including educational institutions (also, Departments of Health, Motor Vehicles, Corrections, Child Welfare, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Prisons, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency). Instead of seeing these entities as neutral and "sorting and managing what 'naturally' exists…administrative systems that classify people actually invent and produce meaning for the categories they administer," and the categories that they choose to use simultaneously decide who will receive security and support and who will remain vulnerable (p. 11). It is not enough to have college campuses that have non-discrimination policies, gender-affirming spaces, and student organizations that support gender minorities—it is imperative that these institutions assess how their policies and practices diminish the life chances of Trans students and make changes to address those systemic barriers.

Research Protocol

To contact participants that meet the criteria for the study, gatekeepers were utilized to gain insider access to this group (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Gatekeepers include LGBTQ+ center advisors at universities that met the research criteria. Advisors were contacted by email to discuss ways in which to secure access to participants. Once participant access was granted, emails were distributed requesting informed consent from participants to ensure their willingness to participate and understanding of potential risks. With consent granted, participants filled out two surveys, the first to capture general demographic information, as well as the type of school they attend and location of said

school. The follow-up questionnaire obtained initial responses to questions about participants' feelings of cisgenderism on campus and if the region has affected their experience as a Trans person. This can be found in Appendix A. Once both forms were completed, a time was set up for a Zoom interview using the questions found in Appendix B. All Zoom interviews were recorded. Once interviews were completed, I transcribed them verbatim. Analysis was conducted utilizing critical discourse analysis through an intertextual lens.

Study Site and Participants

Research sites included three different universities located throughout the Southeast. The Southeast is defined by one of higher education's overarching professional bodies, the National Association of College Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA), as including: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (*NASPA Regions & Areas*, 2018). Potential gatekeepers were identified from 15 different institutions. This was done to maximize options in finding participants, these institutions are located in Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Each site meets the following criteria: it is a Research I university; it is located in the Southeast; it is in a city deemed "ordinary" (based on population of metro area). Ordinary city in this case refers to a city that is usually overlooked by researchers and with a population larger than 300,000 in the greater metro area. The parameters of a Research I university in an ordinary city in the Southeast that is under-researched provide a basis of comparison among these different school experiences. So many institutions of higher

education have different qualities in terms of size, affiliation, and so on; narrowing the type of school provides some consistency in findings.

Three universities were a part of this study, all were given pseudonyms. Urban Alabama University (UAU) is in Alabama in a city with a population of a little over 200,000. The university does not collect demographics of LGBTQ+ students. It does have some LGBTQ+ services, offering Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) options through student health, a few LGBTQ+ student organizations (some that are university funded, some that are not), and a Trans specific support group through counseling. Urban Texas College (UTC) is in a city with a population of almost 400,000. There are LGBTQ programs offered through their Multicultural Office and two student organizations—they do not offer HRT directly but advertise supports in helping students find free services in the city. They also offer counseling services that are specifically supporting LGBTQ+ students. The third university is Urban Texas University (UTU) with a population around 135,000. UTU has a LGBTQ+ office that serves as a resource for all LGBTQ+ students—they offer an array of programs and trainings to help make campus a more accepting and affirming place.

Participants in the study identified as Transgender in the broadest sense of the term (please see definition in chapter 1). Essentially, any student who does not identify as cisgender was eligible for this study. Any student who identifies as Transgender (non-cisgender) would likely be impacted by cisgenderism on campus and therefore had valuable experiences to contribute to this research. Students were enrolled fulltime at the selected institutions and were between the ages of 19 and 25. Students over the age of 25 are defined as “non-traditional” students, potentially impacting their desires to fully

engage in the offerings of that campus (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). The goal of recruitment in terms of racial diversity was to be reflective of the demographics of the southern region based on percentages estimated by a 2016 Williams Institute report on race and ethnicity of adults who identity as Transgender in the United States. According to their estimates, approximately 23% of the Trans population in the South identifies as Black or African American (Flores et al., 2016). Here is a chart of all participants from the study including their location, race, and gender identity. All participants were asked what pseudonym they would like to be called, two participants did not respond to this request and were randomly assigned a name. Moving forward in this work, pronouns provided by participants, listed below, will be what is used to refer to them.

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Gender	Pronouns	Race	State	Major	School
Rom	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	AL	Psychology/ Pre-Med/ Chemistry/ French	UAU
Graham	Transgender	He/Him They/Them	White	AL	Psychology	UAU
Ro	Nonbinary	Any	Black/ African American	AL	Psychology	UAU
Cecilia	Transgender	She/Her	Asian	AL	Nursing	UAU
Nidell	Gender Fluid, Nonbinary, Gender Nonconforming	They/Them	White	TX	Biomedical Engineering	UTC
Ben	Transgender	He/Him	White	AL	Mechanical Engineering	UAU
Chrys	Genderqueer	They/Them	White	AL	Psychology	UAU
Kai	Agender	They/Them He/Him	Black/ African American	AL	Early Childhood Education	UAU
Catherine	Transgender	She/Her	White	AL	Psychology	UAU

Beth	Transgender	She/Her	White	TX	English Composition	UTU
Kira	Transgender	She/Her	White	AL	Biomedical Engineering	UAU

Data Collection

In 2015 it was estimated that there were about 360,000 Transgender students in higher education (Nicolazzo & Marine). As many schools do not include this demographic question in their admissions or entry information, there is only an estimate available. As of 2015, there were over 18 million students in higher education, and this estimate is about 2% of that number. Even taking into account the fact that there are more LGBTQ+ people in the Southeast and that this number is from five years ago, the current Trans population at any given university in this region is bound to be rather small. Therefore, participants were recruited through purposive sampling, specifically network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I reached out via email to prospective participants within my network at my current institution and through gatekeepers at other institutions that meet the criteria of college or university in the Southeast in an ordinary city. Snowball sampling was also employed (Creswell & Poth, 2016)—all participants were asked if they knew any other students fitting the research criterion and if they might like to participate. Research best practices encourage continuing research until saturation is met, meaning that incoming data is redundant of what has already been found (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Considering this best practice and the size of the population in question, I put forth a minimum sample size suggestion of 10 participants hailing from 3 different urban, Southeastern, Research I universities in ordinary cities. This minimum was exceeded, 11 interviews were held with participants from 3 schools that met this research

criteria. I also worked towards finding a minimum of 2-3 participants of color, specifically who are Black or African American. Two of the participants identified as Black/African America and one identified as Asian.

For an approach using Critical Discourse Analysis, there must be a discourse to analyze. Because of this, the main method for data collection will be a combination of questionnaire and interview. Questionnaires provided an initial text of students' experiences with cisgenderism on campus, and the follow-up interview allowed for clarity around their initial responses and provided rich data for analysis. These were semi-structured interviews with a list of questions to ask at each interview to maintain consistency between interviews. This format allowed the me the flexibility to pursue more information from the respondent when they shared something that warranted follow-up and required clarity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were transcribed by me, and both questionnaire and interview transcript were used as the text for analysis. The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix B.

Data Storage

To protect the confidentiality of participants, all names and locations were given pseudonyms. Once participants completed the questionnaire, I had access to identifiers such as participant email and IP address. IP addresses that are made available through the Qualtrics survey responses when downloaded to an Excel document were deleted prior to being saved. No data was collected through email. Any email correspondence was only utilized to recruit, provide Qualtrics links, and set appointments for Zoom interviews with participants. Further, all documents utilized the participants' assigned pseudonyms to

maintain confidentiality of participant ID for data collected, and all data was stored on my personal laptop with file encryption protection, and I am the only person with access to this information.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2016) explain how qualitative analysis takes data from particular to general, with the researcher defining codes from the data they have collected. This is meant to show what ideas and themes emerge from the data: the researcher may find something mundane or expected, or they may be surprised at what emerges. They also share that "often the best qualitative studies present themes analyzed in terms of exploring the shadow side or unusual angles" (2016, p. 49). One way to find these themes is through developing tables or matrices and using these visuals to help break down data and see what themes or codes emerge.

Pulling from Huckin (1997), when using Critical Discourse Analysis, it is important to analyze data from three levels: the text, the discursive practice, and the larger societal contexts that impact the content. The text in this context is the questionnaire and the interviews; text can mean both talk and text, according to van Dijk (2003). The discursive practice in this context would be understanding that "social and political acts"—in this case, the oppression stemming from cisgenderism —influence the participants and analyzing how participants are expressing their experiences of cisgenderism in specific situations (van Dijk, 2003, p. 81). And finally, "text-analytic activity cannot be done in isolation; rather, the analyst must always take into account the larger context in which the text is located," therefore tying the analysis to the institution of higher education as well as larger political narratives with no restrictions on the scope

of analysis (Huckin, 1997, p. 88). In summary, the main goal of CDA "is the close analysis of written and oral texts that are deemed to be politically—or culturally influential to a given society" (p. 88).

Huckin (1997) suggests a few ways to complete this analysis. In the first phase of analysis, Huckin recommends refraining from using a critical lens in the initial readings of the transcripts, in order to withhold any preconceived assumptions about the macro discourses impacting participants. After this first reading, revisit the text from a critical perspective. The researcher must seek out an understanding of the participants' interviews as a whole, and then analyze the data sentence by sentence and later word by word.

Intertextuality

With these guidelines as a starting place, I have utilized intertextuality as the analysis for the data. Intertextuality analyzes "social change from a discourse perspective," which is closely connected to the frameworks used with Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015, p. 38). Specifically, intertextuality looks at the ways texts intersect with one another (Kristeva & Moi, 1986). Like the matrices Creswell and Poth described (2016), intertextuality provides an approach using an X and Y axis for analysis of data collected. One axis holds the text content itself (interview transcriptions and questionnaires), and the other axis provides subject and addressee (themes). Like CDA, intertextuality posits that text does not have as much meaning in isolation as it does in context with, in this case, other words. Looking at the language of the participants through a horizontal and vertical analysis will give a deeper context and understanding of what they have shared. Using the questionnaire and transcripts from the interview as the

discourse, I combed through each participant's discourse separately, using the horizontal axis, looking for the three main concepts of CDA: critique, power, and ideology. Then I examined each discourse in comparison to one another along the vertical axis. Through these steps, the intertexts were revealed. These overlaps were coded and put into a chart of overarching and developing themes. These themes were reviewed again, in comparison to the horizontal axis, for any subthemes. The themes and subthemes were compared to current sociopolitical realities for Trans students in the South. After data was collected, based on best practices (because I am not a member of this community), I utilized member-checking throughout the analytical process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants were excited to be part of the member-checking process. Including participants provided an added layer of analysis to confirm that the themes that emerged felt accurate to the participants and faithfully encapsulated their stories in a way that was true their own voices.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

When considering credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research, it is important to remember that findings do not always align with the subjective nature of each layman's perspective of reality. Our reality is "multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered," in contrast to the premise of many quantitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). Due to the political nature of this research, it can be assumed that there are some who would disagree with the findings, regardless of steps taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, thus cementing the importance of prefacing this section with an

understanding that we all have very different views on what is true and right in our own realities. Wolcott (1994) shares a similar sentiment on the incongruity of validity and urges the researcher instead to find qualities in their data "that [point] more to identifying critical elements and wringing plausible interpretations from them, something one can pursue without becoming obsessed with finding the right or ultimate answer, the correct version, the Truth" (pp. 366-367).

This research utilized multiple methods to ensure credibility and trustworthiness in data collection, data analysis, and findings, including a researcher journal, member-checking, and researcher reflexivity. Borg (2001), describes a researcher journal as "enabl[ing] researchers to develop greater levels of metacognitive awareness and reflective depth" in the research process (p. 170). After each interview I wrote a researcher journal entry which allowed me to do two things (1) "clarifying concepts and their implications for the research" (Borg, 2001, p. 170) and (2) acknowledge, express, and examine my feelings, two important steps in the research process and analysis of data. Beyond this, I utilized member-checking, described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). This allowed the participants to confirm that their views had been captured accurately. As a part of the member checking process, participants were emailed a document with an outline of the categories, themes, and subthemes that emerged and quotes from each participant that embodied these themes. Using this document, they were asked if their quotes matched the themes and subthemes provided. This also gave participants the opportunity to edit anything they had said for clarity or word choice. Eight of the participants responded that they felt their words were correct and accurately reflected the themes and subthemes they

fell under, the other three did not respond. This process ruled "out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed" (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 126-127). Researchers can "share the results of data analysis, such as the list of codes and themes, with the study participants," and I shared my finding with participants to ensure accuracy and to help identify any of my own bias (Ivankova, 2014, p. 267). In that vein, I am open about my connection to this research and biases I perceive in myself, and I freely share those with the readers in the sections that follow. It is important to be explicit in terms of "how the researcher affects and is affected by the research process" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249).

Ethical Considerations

Following best practices, and to ensure the safety and security of my participants, I have obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to complete research for my study. All participants have given full, informed consent before participating and were knowledgeable of the purpose of the study, steps and procedures for participation, confidentiality, any benefits or risks associated with participating, and fully understanding they have option to leave the study at any time.

Role of Researcher

Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that we ask ourselves what perspective and experience we, as researchers, bring to the research—to acknowledge our own biases and

be transparent about what perspective we come from. Meyer and Wodak (2009) suggest the same practice and challenge all researchers in their role as people with power to be reflective of their position and purpose.

Reflexivity

Currently, I serve in the capacity of advisor to several Queer and Trans students at an urban public institution of higher education in the Southeast. In this role, I have the privilege to empower, support, and encourage LGBTQ+ students in their academic and personal goals. I also plan educational trainings for the campus and community to increase awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and promote allyship and advocacy for this community. I also identify as a member of the Queer community and identify myself as Queer in terms of my sexuality. I mentioned previously that I also identify as cisgender and therefore am not a part of the Trans community, specifically. I share this to acknowledge that my research is focused on a community of which I am not a member and commit to a reflexive process as I use my research to amplify voices that often go unheard.

Positionality

In my position on campus, I serve as a gatekeeper with access to many LGBTQ+ students. I will utilize this position to invite student to participate in this study. I also realize students may view me in a position of power due to our unique relationship. However, I do not serve as a faculty member and have no ability to affect their grades or academic experience at the institution and therefore the students should not feel

compelled to participate unless they personally want to. This power dynamic should not influence participants from other universities.

Summary

I have outlined the methodology from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. I will use a Critical Discourse Analysis looking through an intertextual lens and the theoretical framework of Critical Trans Politics. I have provided my philosophical assumptions as a critical interpretive framework to bring clarity with regard to the impetus for this work. Using critical theories allows me the flexibility to address the power imbalances that exist in our society and incorporate them into my overall research. More specific processes of data collection and data analysis are explained, as well as the how credibility and trustworthiness are maintained throughout the process. As I am invested in the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students and their future success within higher education, I have also shared my positionality and reflexivity in connection to this work. Moving forward, I will share my findings from data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This qualitative study included 11 participants identifying as Trans in the broadest sense of the term (Stryker, 2017). At the time of the interviews, all participants were undergraduate students at Research I universities in ordinary cities in the South. Two participants attended two different schools in Texas, and the other nine participants all attended the same university in Alabama. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using an intertextual lens was used to better understand the shared language and experiences of these 11 participants. This study addresses a research gap in the literature: there is very little known about the experiences of Trans students in higher education in the South. The results from this study provide a more nuanced understanding of this population and their experience in this region.

In conjunction with CDA and findings from the literature review, Critical Trans Politics (CTP) was used as a theoretical framework for this research. CTP provides necessary structure and language in understanding the experiences of Trans students as they navigate through these institutions. Data were collected via an initial survey to determine eligibility, a more thorough questionnaire, a semi-structed interview, and multiple email exchanges with participants (as a part of the member checking process). The analysis of the data began with a vertical examination of each interview to determine overarching categories. An analysis of these categories across interviews exposed

similarities and differences between participants' experiences, creating the themes and subthemes. Further horizontal analysis across these themes and subthemes was done to find shared language and meaning among participants, revealing the intertexts. This chapter is organized around the five overarching categories that emerged: (a) Trans experiences in the South, (b) anti-Trans legislation and politics, (c) experiences of both cisgenderism and support on Southern campuses, (d) identity in the South, and (e) location: urban vs. rural.

In this chapter, I will provide an in-depth understanding of each category's themes and subthemes. Within each category are multiple themes and subthemes, and under each of these are quotes from participants that highlight them. Intertexts will be revealed through the shared language and shared experience of participants using quotes from their interviews. I have included all pertinent quotes across participants that address each theme or subtheme, along with analysis. The analysis also highlights dissonance among participant responses where consensus was not found. This additionally serves as a reminder that these participants are not monolithic, and their responses are not always generalizable across the "Trans experience." Although participants did often have similar experiences that unified them, their stories also differed—giving me insight into the complex and unique experiences of these 11 students.

Themes and Subthemes

Horizontal analysis of the participant interviews within each category and the member checking process produced the themes and subthemes. The research questions were used to guide the creation of the interview protocol and subsequent categories for

data analysis. The research question and sub-questions are as follows: How, if at all, do Trans students talk about their encounters with cisgenderism on college campuses in connection to location and region?

Sub-questions for the study include:

1. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to an urban campus location?
2. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to the Southeastern region?

This question and sub-questions helped to frame the analytical process in that they facilitated the creation of categories, themes, and subthemes from the data. The process included immersing myself in the data—reading and rereading the interviews, first without a critical lens, simply looking for shared language among the texts, and then with, considering the larger context in which the text is located. I emailed the findings to participants to ensure data were not misinterpreted. From there, I finalized the themes and subthemes and connected them back to relevant literature. Within each of the five overarching categories, (a) Trans experiences in the South, (b) anti-Trans legislation and politics, (c) experiences of both cisgenderism and support on Southern campuses, (d) identity in the South, and (e) location: urban vs. rural, there were several themes and subthemes that formed. Although participants had varying and diverse experiences connected to their gender, shared experiences, and shared language emerged from data collected, helping to highlight how these students experienced the region and their universities through the lens of gender.

Trans Experiences in the South

The interview protocol (Appendix A) specifically asked participants about their experiences being Trans in the South; therefore, this overarching category is a logical outcome from the data collected. While the themes that emerged from this category are similarly not unexpected, they do tell a very nuanced story. Within the larger category of *Trans Experiences in the South*, there are four themes: (a) Southern climate and culture (both negative and positive), (b) cisgenderism and homophobia in the South, (c) identity as a Southerner, and (d) optimism about the South. Within the themes there are a number of subthemes, including positive and negative perspectives within climate and culture as well as connection and disconnection to Southern identity.

Southern Climate and Culture

Negative Feelings. In response to questions regarding Southern climate and culture in terms of negative experiences, there was shared language among a majority of the participants who reported that the South is religious, conservative, bigoted, closed-minded/unaccepting, and hostile/unsafe as connected to their gender or sexuality. Here are quotes from participants that fall under each of these descriptors. These quotes were pulled directly from participant interviews; some have been shortened for conciseness, and all quotes were shown to participants for review and approval.

Religious

> Catherine: [T]he general religious climate in the South, like I know no one's gonna change how religious the South is. That's just kind of ingrained in the identity of the South …. This is a culture where, like it or not, faith is going to be a big deal.

Beth: [The] best way to describe [the town where I grew up] is we have 16 churches within two miles and one of them is a mega church …. We jokingly refer to it as Six Flags over Jesus just because of how huge it is. It has a slide inside of the church, a Starbucks, and all these other things. It's just absolutely wild.

Kira: The South is just so stereotypically conservative and religious, and that's just not me in the slightest. So, I feel like the culture of the South is just like completely the opposite of my culture.

Conservative

Ben: [T]ransphobia is such a political thing. So, people who are conservative are just much more likely to be transphobic because … even though it shouldn't be, it's very intertwined with their politics. I'm not really sure what I would change [to make the South more inclusive], because I think that the only way to change things would just be for people, for the culture just to change in general.

Catherine: And then it's the most general religious conservatism here. Probably not as strong as one of the rural areas, but it's still prevalent in there, and religious conservatism tends to be pretty ass to Trans people.

Beth: Unique would be the very polite way of saying [how I would describe the South]. The South is a very diverse place, but I was raised in a rather conservative area that held very strict values when it came to sexuality and gender expression.

Kira: … going back to the concept of the South being more conservative, and thus being conservative and being Trans are just like complete opposites of each other. Like they can't really mix, it feels like. Whereas if you live somewhere that was, I guess, more liberal or more just understanding or just have a less rigid and religious culture would be a good start.

Bigoted

Rom: [O]nce you get to it a bit more; it can be a lot more bigoted or have a lot more prejudices that they don't let show at first. The, I guess, quiet bigotry, is how you could say it.

Chrys: Well, I guess for most of my life, it's kind of taken on the connotation as ignorant, bigoted, and not open to change.

Looking at these three groups of quotes—religious, conservative, and bigoted—there is quite a bit of overlap among participant answers, particularly across the religious and conservative topics. Catherine spoke about "religious conservatism" being prevalent in

the South, and Kira described those who are conservative as opposing the existence Trans people, with another implication being that conservatism is connected to the religious culture of the South. Catherine pinpointed the intersection of these three topics when she said that "religious conservatism tends to be pretty ass to Trans people," a sentiment consistent with findings of other research (Barton, 2012; Campbell et al., 2019).

Only two participants used the term bigoted to label the region. Chrys used the word as more of a descriptor of preconceived notions many have of the South, rather than of the region itself. Rom brought in the concept of "quiet bigotry" and later shared that a Southern turn of phrase, "bless your heart," is often said when passing silent judgement on others who may not fall into the norms of accepted behavior. This dovetails with some of the participants' description of Southern climate as closed-minded and unaccepting, as well as the starker depictions of the South being hostile and unsafe.

Closed-Minded/Unaccepting

> Rom: What I had been shown was a very narrow bubble and very narrow point of view: always help people, always be nice to people, always be a good person. Then when I get out there and realize a lot of times there was an asterisk next to that with, "unless they're *these* [emphasis added] types of people."
>
> Catherine: [It's a] culture in which just being LGBTQ … [is] looked down upon a lot more in the South, and that kind of informs their decisions and socializing. And [Queer people] not saying things that could get you "othered" or whatever … seen as something less than the status quo, and something that just, in many people's eyes, isn't good.
>
> Graham: Yeah, definitely like using the right name and pronouns, 'cause people in the South are just generally more closed-minded and so they might not agree with it and so they won't do it.
>
> Cecilia: Southerners have a very tunneled vision and opinions. And because when I came here [from another country], my family needed help and we were all settling in—we were just kind of expected to know a lot of things because of … our nationality.

> Ben: [The climate] definitely doesn't feel super welcoming …. That's part of the reason that I am stealth …. I'm very aware of the fact that if I was out, like if I wear a little Trans pin on my shirt everyday … I definitely would face a lot more issues …. Even if [people are] accepting, they will treat you a little differently …. In the South it's a little harder to be Trans, compared to some other areas in the country.
>
> Kira: I would say yes, [there are more obstacles than other places]. 'Cause the South is much more conservative and not really as open-minded as other places, so … places that are really kind of inclusive of the community would feel a lot better and a lot more understanding of our issues and where we're coming from.

Hostile/Unsafe

> Rom: But I would say the overall climate, most of the South, there are a few areas, like you have your safe havens like Nashville and all that, Nashville, couple places in Louisiana, some parts of New Orleans, that are a lot safer, but overall, it's a hostile climate in the South for Trans folk.
>
> Beth: [I] would definitely say [Trans issues are] more pronounced in the South, because I feel like Trans people in the South will go through a lot more stress because we are in a not 100% open … welcoming environment which definitely adds a layer stress besides just like, "Oh, am I going to transition properly? Oh, am I going to be 100% safe while doing this?"
>
> Kira: I would say overall it feels kind of hostile. There's always kind of this thought of having to figure out if someone you're talking to is accepting, or like if you ever go in public, having to always kind of look over your shoulder and make sure no one's trying to follow you or saying weird shit about you or giving you weird looks. So, it just kind of makes you always feel a bit more cautious just because of the culture of the South and just how unfriendly it is towards Trans people.

Rom talked about receiving messages about who is acceptable and who is not, with Queer and Trans identities falling into the category of "not." Catherine, who described the culture in the South as othering those who do not meet or otherwise fall outside of the "status quo," also received this message. Cecilia also received this message about being different, although in her case she felt it from her perspective as an immigrant from another country. Ben preferred to remain stealth in his gender expression for this reason: he did not want to be othered or treated differently and so chose not to put a Trans pin,

for example, on his backpack or where others could see it. Kira shared a possible reason for this fear of being perceived as Trans: a lack of empathy and open-mindedness from Southerners, qualities which might be easier to find in more liberal areas. All of these issues also contribute to a more hostile environment, which Beth said creates an added layer of stress while transitioning, because one is not only worried about the medical transition itself (many medical procedures can cause stress on their own) but may also be worried about physical safety during that process. Kira described handling this worry by always looking over her shoulder because the culture in the South was unfriendly. On a national level, Trans people experience discrimination in basic elements of life at extremely high rates (James et al., 2016), and Trans students experience this victimization on college campuses specifically (Effrig et al., 2011). These participants, however, shone a unique light on these experiences of discrimination and victimization from their perspectives of living in the Southeast.

Positive Feelings. Although there were more negative experiences shared in terms of climate and culture, four participants shared positive experiences as well. Looking at responses about Southern climate and culture in terms of positive experiences, here is what participants shared:

> Catherine: I feel like there is [a] much more general culture of politeness to strangers than I feel is kind of in a lot of places. But then again, I have never lived anywhere else, so I have no idea if it's as uniquely Southern or something.
>
> Ro: Southern people are friendly, like my mom. So, you know, it's just kind of like being surrounded by a bunch of people that are just like my mom all the time, and so it's ok.
>
> Beth: It’s cool in the past couple of years that the South has been slightly more accepting and less of the “I'm afraid of getting hit on the streets” sort of way, so

> that's something, and that definitely feels great that there are communities in Texas, in the area where I am, that [are] very accepting.
>
> Chrys: When I travel, I notice there are big differences …. I think, here in the South … and part of this has to do with my family culture as well, but I think culturally, there's a sense of community in the South and … it's small things, like we smile at people on the sidewalk. We make eye contact. If someone holds open a door, you say, "Thank you." If somebody asks you a question, you respond with yes, ma'am, no sir. You know, stuff like that. We have this culture of being kind and communal.

Despite the general climate being portrayed by a majority of participants as overwhelmingly negative, these four also noted the positive side to the culture of the South. Both Chrys and Catherine discussed the prevalence of politeness in their interactions with others. Chrys discussed there being a sense of community amongst Southern people as well. Ro said that people are generally friendly, just like their mother—Ro is originally from Michigan, but their mother was born and raised in the South. Beth acknowledged that the climate is moving away from a semi-violent atmosphere to more of an accepting one; although this change has been gradual, it is indeed happening (Broadhurst et al., 2018).

Cisgenderism and Homophobia in the South

Cisgenderism and homophobia in the South was a subtheme that came up which is connected to the overall climate and culture in the South for Queer and Trans people. These three statements needed their own section within this theme because although related to the overall climate, they highlight a more severely negative experience.

> Chrys: Here in the South … people will kick you [out]. Parents will kick their children out of their home for being transgender, and I say that because I've witnessed it. I had several friends in high school who were kicked out of their homes and who were couch surfing throughout their entire high school career because they came out to their parents or because they were outed to their parents.

> Beth: [Being] bisexual [is] very cool, very nice, people love it. You can always compare yourself to David Bowie. When it comes to [being] transgender, definitely a much more frightening experience. Frightening I feel like is actually too much of a hyperbole, but it is a little more scary. I'm not gonna say it's bad because of the individual. It's bad because there are still a lot of people in Texas who are very, very transphobic, and it's very sad.
>
> Rom: Down here, and again, it's not clear-cut lines because there's no such thing as clear-cut lines, you'll get this up North and vice versa … you're a lot more likely to get somebody just screaming in your face about how you're a fag and you're going to hell. … Outside of the university and outside of that area, I have had people try and fight me before …. But just the way the culture is here in the South … everything just feels like the extreme versions of what your grandfather says at dinner.

What Chrys shared is unfortunately a more common occurrence for LGBTQ+ youth than may be known, and this experience is not unique to the South, it is a national issue: "family rejection and discrimination and violence have contributed to a large number of transgender and other LGBQ-identified youth who are homeless in the United States – an estimated 20-40% of the more than 1.6 million homeless youth" (*National Center for Trans Equality*, 2020). Beth and Rom brought in the perspective that rejection and discrimination in the South specifically can be quite frightening and violent.

Identity as a Southerner

Participants were asked if they identified as a Southerner, and there were two areas where participants fell: identifying as a Southerner and feeling a connection to the region, or not identifying as a Southerner and feeling disconnected from the region. Some participants had complicated connections to their identities as Southerners. Some fit in both categories, based on what they said at different times during their interviews. For

context, participants also shared their descriptions of what “Southerner” meant to them. Here are some of the ways they described Southerners:

> Graham: 'Cause if I think of a Southerner, I think of someone that has a really deep country accent, lives in a small town, hunts, drives a truck, stuff like that.
>
> Nidell: The Southerner sort of identity or stereotype, a lot of what comes to mind … the picture I get in my head that I would most associate with is very, very religious. The connotation of the stereotype, for me, is a little more rural, although my experiences have definitely been with the urban setting. But I think the biggest thing I would say is definitely the Christian … probably somewhere around the middle class, I think of that, and I think that's the biggest connotation that comes from me. Like I said, from growing up, a lot of the area around me was like that.
>
> Kai: Southern. Pretty much that good old hospitality, sweet tea, just that nice, deep Southern drawl, includes lots of country music. That's pretty much what immediately comes to mind. And, of course, a whole lot of church.
>
> Beth: When I think of [a] Southerner, I definitely think of someone who's … suburban, you know? Someone who definitely is [from] a suburban or country area, ‘cause that's all the Southerners I know. Obviously there's some Southerners who live in places like [larger cities], where it's a big town, there's a college town, or what have you. But when a Southerner comes to mind, the very specific image of khakis, belt, and a blue and white pinned button-up, you know?
>
> Ben: I feel like the basic definition of just being from the South fits that pretty well. Yeah … I mean, you might think of the stereotypical kind of accent, I don't know. Being from the South, to me, I just think of the average person, 'cause I mean these are the people that I've just grown up around.
>
> Kira: I don't know …. I've never really thought of a definition, I guess. Just generally someone from the South. I guess … I don't really have any kind of elaborate metaphorical definition.

Graham, Nidell, Kai, and Beth shared the images that came to mind when they thought of a Southerner or stereotype of a Southerner. Some descriptors included having a deep accent, living in a small/rural town, being a hunter and/or driving a truck, and being religious. Beth described a Southerner as being middle class and also dressing in a certain way, but overall the other three participants described very similar images in their

responses. Ben and Kira, however, challenged the idea that there is a specific image for a Southerner. They said that being a Southerner simply means living in the South—an important perspective and reminder that these descriptions are not true for everyone.

Connection to Southern Identity. Participants also shared if they saw themselves as a Southerner or identified as such. Four participants said they felt a disconnection to this identity, including one who shared that they felt both a disconnection and connection to this identity. This participant, along with three others, shared that they had a positive connection/identified as a Southerner.

Disconnection

> Rom: I identify with a lot of the Southerner stuff that falls short of politics, religion, and all that. I feel like I'm a Southerner up until that point.
>
> Nidell: Yeah, so in all things but actual birthplace, I am not …. I was born here, yes, but in terms of identities, very much not. I know with family this doesn't exactly transfer over exactly, but my family is very much what I would consider Southern, Southern identity. Doing things like really into sports, so football, high school football, basketball, all those sorts of things, and I very much, even growing up, was not the biggest fan of a lot of those …. I wouldn't say that I'm a Southerner, but I was definitely born here.
>
> Catherine: I just don't really have much of an idea of regional identity. I don't really tie too much …. It also helps that where I live, I have not lived for a long, long time …. I mean, I guess I'd be fine calling myself an [Alabama City]-er. I have a nice little saying: "I like [Alabama City], this is the cool part of the South. The rest of the South, 'eh.' [Alabama City]—we cool."
>
> Kira: It just kind of adds this feeling of just like, not necessarily not being accepted, even the lesser case though, more just like not belonging. And it's like I said earlier that culture in Alabama [is] just completely different from myself as a person. So, it feels like there's a massive disconnect when you know I'm living in Alabama, which is a state that I just vehemently hate and would also probably not like me either.

Positive Connection

> Rom: I'm a Southerner when it comes to the tenets of what everybody proclaims a Southerner is, like being the fella who'd give somebody the clothes off your back. And also, man, I love some barbecue.
>
> Graham: So my identity as a Southerner is kind of contradicting. But because obviously, Southerners can be anyone, so for me, I'm a Southerner, but I'm also Trans and liberal and stuff like that. And so stereotypically, I definitely think of a deep redneck when I think of a Southerner, but then as myself, I don't consider myself any of those things, but I still think I'm a Southerner.
>
> Chrys: I consider myself a Southerner, but I don't consider my boyfriend a Southerner. And it's a lot of things. It's grammar, it's attitude, it's food preferences. And so he grew up in Colorado and then lived in Virginia and now lives here in Alabama, and so he doesn't have an accent, he does not have a Southern accent, and I think that's kind of part of being Southern. That's the trademark. He doesn't like sweet tea, which I think is crazy. But there are also just attitudes that are that are so different. We have very different attitudes about hunting, we have very different attitudes about nature, we have very different attitudes about guns, and those are things [that we feel differently about].
>
> Beth: Yeah, no, I … definitely feel like a Southerner …. It started off as a joke when I said, "Yeehaw!" But now I'm like …, "Oh no, no, that feels right actually." I say y'all a lot, obviously. I feel like y'all is less of a Southern thing now, more [a] everywhere [thing], just because it's just very, very useful to have. I definitely feel like a Southerner. I'm not sure if I have a full-on country twang, but I definitely have talked to people from the North, 'cause one of my friends, he's from Chicago and he's like, "Oh yeah, I could tell you're from Texas just by talking to you."

Rom and Graham exemplified a complicated connection within this identity—being both Trans and a Southerner. Rom shared that they felt like a Southerner in some but not all ways, and Graham said that he was a Southerner that broke some of those preconceived notions others might have of Southerners by being both liberal and Queer. Nidell shared that they didn't feel like a Southerner in the same way that their family did, expressing a somewhat similar sentiment to Catherine, who liked the city she was living in but did not have much of a regional identity overall. Kira had had a more negative experience with the South, believing that Alabama the state hated her as much as she hated it. On the other side of the coin, Chrys felt the need to gatekeep this identity, implying that being a

Southerner was something you could only earn with proper experience and tastes—tastes that Beth had grown into as someone who frequently said “yeehaw” and “y’all,” solidifying that this identity felt like a right fit to her.

Optimism About the South

Research shows, and participants shared, how hostile and unwelcoming the South can be for Queer and Trans people (Johnson et al., 2020; Rogers, 2018; Weber, 2015). A counter to this dominant narrative is highlighted in both the participant responses already shared and in the participant responses below. These responses continue to complicate the more negative prevailing storyline with their optimism about the South, challenges to preconceived notions about the South, and their surprise at the size of the Queer presence in the South that participants encountered while living and attending school in the region. The theme “Optimism about the South” encompasses the positive experiences and thoughts that participants shared outside of the overall “Southern climate and culture” theme.

> Ro: You see people thriving despite everything and … there's hate and oppression everywhere, but I think sometimes in the South it's that added pressure of everybody just assuming that you can't be LGBT or you can't be intelligent or you can't be informed. Like there's no way that you're working with Planned Parenthood or whatever. Like, “You don't even know what you're talking about, 'cause you're not from California or New York.” And that's not fair, 'cause so much of these grassroots things start in the South, because that's where they're needed the most.
>
> Rom: I have a lot of problems with UAU, with [Alabama City], with Alabama as a whole … but I still got a place in my heart for it and I want to see it become better. I want to see it become something I can be proud of.

Misconceptions about the South

Ro: Oh yeah, and then also even the way they depict Southerners like the way they depict homophobes in media. They always go to somebody that looks country and Southern and it's like in [the] Taylor Swift video, "You Need to Calm Down." … The way they depict the homophobes and stuff …. Why are you assuming that just 'cause someone is Southern and country that they're homophobic and not gay? That just reiterates this idea that gay people don't exist in the South, and they do, and Trans people …. It's just like if they do, they want to get out and they're trying to get to New York or California …. Just because they're a white person in a trailer park doesn't mean that they can't be gay, and they wear camo doesn't mean they can't be gay … or gay people in the military. Just 'cause it's a tough dude in the military, … just 'cause he's a big dude in the military doesn't mean he's not gay ….

Chrys: People are not necessarily unaccepting but just uneducated about [my gender]. And you know, kind of within the context of the South, that's understandable, because again, we don't acknowledge it. We don't really talk about it. So when people do meet me and they do have those questions, it gets tiring. I will say that it does get tiring, but generally I do want to educate them and answer those questions because I would much rather me, someone who is Trans and genderqueer, answered those questions than someone who is cisgender to answer those questions.

Unexpected Queer Presence in the South

Graham: And at first I was only worried about it because I never thought that I would be going deeper [into the] South in my life. But then I came and toured and realized that I don't feel like I'm in Alabama or the Deep South when I'm in [Alabama City]. It just feels like a city, like it could really be kind of anywhere except for accents and stuff. And I was told by everyone that it's a very liberal place, and when I was on campus I saw gay people and saw stuff about LGBTQ+ Student Organization and they were handing out pronoun pins at something I came to before I was a freshman and I was like, "Wow, that's crazy." … I had never been somewhere in the South that does stuff like that.

Nidell: So our LGBTQ+ department, one of the big things they say they hear from a lot of students is [they] show up to an activity fair or something where they're presenting and a big question they get is like, "Oh, I didn't realize that we had that," 'cause we're in Texas. So that gets brought up a lot. And just not realizing that that's necessarily offered, although … it's become more and more visible as I've been here.

Kai: I would say for sure in the South, 'cause I was surprised when I started going to UAU that there were resources like that at all. 'Cause at my previous college they tried to have [a student group], even though it was mainly more just for LGBTQA and other identities. It was just very miniscule. But having to have resources for transgender individuals, it's just, it's more that you don't see that a

> whole lot. Especially here in Alabama, as far as I'm aware of. 'Cause even when I've heard from people from other schools, they'll even go and mention UAU and the resources that we have here.

Rom voiced their desire for the South to be something they could be proud of, and that despite some of the issues that they had encountered, they had hope and optimism for this region. Ro shared a lot on this overall topic, acknowledging that LGBTQ+ people not only live and thrive in the South amidst oppressive forces but also spearhead grassroots organizing to help make change in the South where it is needed the most, though it benefits everyone. In this same sense, Spade has framed Trans liberation as liberation for all, much the same way Ro touched on the idea of the importance of making change in the South (Spade, 2015). Ro also challenged some misconceptions of the South they had heard before—that LGBTQ+ people are not Southerners and vice versa. They also touched on the idea of metronormativity, LGTBQ+ peoples' migration away from the South (Stone, 2018), and challenged the idea that there are no LGBTQ+ people in the South, when in fact, that is where one third of the LGBTQ+ population lives (Khan, 2014). Graham, Nidell, and Kai all shared their surprise when coming to a campus somewhere in the South that had resources and representation for LGBTQ+ people—although still limited, resources and support for LGBTQ+ people in the South are continuing to grow (Broadhurst et al., 2018).

Anti-Trans Legislation and Politics

Across the country there are a number of states introducing, voting on, and in some instances passing anti-Trans legislation. Broadly, this legislation includes

prohibiting health care for Transgender youth, single-sex bathroom facility restrictions, excluding Trans youth from athletics, restrictions of identification documents, and providing religious exemptions to employers and businesses who do not want to work with or serve Trans people (ACLU, 2021). Various of these types of bills exist in the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Montana, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and Wisconsin (ACLU, 2021). Eight of the 11 participants brought up anti-Trans legislation in their interviews, even though they were not asked about it directly; another participant did not speak specifically about the laws being introduced but did talk about the political atmosphere in the South that is anti-Trans in nature. Although anti-Trans legislation has been introduced in other parts of the country, participants felt like this was distinctly a Southern issue, and it came up for participants from both Alabama and Texas. While this legislation has not all passed, there was still a consensus that it is prevalent in The South. Some participants brought this legislation up on their own; most brought it up when asked what they would do to make the South more Trans inclusive.

> Chrys: In the South as a whole, [there are] probably not [enough supports for sexual minorities.] Just look at Arkansas and the laws that they have passed. Yeah, you know, look at North Carolina and the bathroom thing, everything that happened.
>
> Beth: Step one, [repeal anti-Trans] legislation. Step two … [change] preventive measures like, “Oh man, Trans women can't do these sports, because they're just naturally going to be better” … which I feel like is very degrading towards literally everyone in that situation.
>
> Cecilia: [T]he bills that we’re passing … we're not thinking logically on what we're doing …. We're spending so much money to pass things to block people and

> discriminating [against] people when we can be using that money to open up more opportunities.
>
> Graham: The most recent thing is that I would not have the laws that make it illegal to treat Trans minors and that would be a great start for the South. And then letting them play sports, and just more individual people being accepting of Trans [people] and also just gay people, different people from them.
>
> Rom: Especially, and government-wise, I mean, everyone in the Queer community knows about the bills that are trying to get through, trying to be passed lately. It's exhausting, really is …. It feels like every bit of progress that's made, every bit of work that's put into trying and making things better, trying and making things easier, trying to make things less hostile, we put years of work into doing that, trying to make it better. And then a bill gets passed in a week that undoes everything we've worked on for years.
>
> Ro: They're always trying to pass legislation …. I would have them stop all that. I mean, you can't even move forward on small stuff if you're constantly making big laws, or even if those laws don't get passed, it's like they're doing it for a reason. They're still trying to submit these ideas and make you remember, even though it didn't pass, "We don't accept you and we don't want you here. And we will try to police who you are."
>
> Nidell: With a lot of legislation specifically for transitioning, I really feel like, as a lot of people probably do, the restrictions are so heavily in place already, and so a lot of people that I know, myself included, have the worry, you know, if there's ever a want to get onto any sort of [medical] transition, they want to transition in any sort of form, whatever that looks like, the process is so difficult. It's such a deterrent from actually trying to go through with it. And then for people that aren't sure, you know, people that are interested in things like puberty blockers and those sorts of things are being completely limited out. And then at that point they become 18 and it's like, "Okay, now you can choose to transition." At that point, you're still ostracized and unaccepted in a lot of circles.

The first few responses above just mention the bills: that they are aggravating, degrading, exclusionary, and a waste of resources. Rom spoke about feeling like there had been progress made and the heartbreak that ensued when a bill like this was introduced. Ro shared about what messages the bills sent to them personally: "we don't accept you," specifically emphasizing the policing of gender in society. Nidell also shared a more personal account of how these bills affected them, making them feel restricted in thinking

about their future transition, should they want one, or anyone else who was considering that as an option.

Within this category, a theme also emerged discussing this issue as feeling Southern in nature. Ro, Nidell, and Catherine talked more about this legislation and its connection to the South, specifically the states where they lived, Alabama and Texas.

"It Feels Southern"

> Ro: It's kind of annoying, 'cause every year Alabama finds a way to try and pass some kind of specific legislation against Trans people, no matter how small it is. It's just like other states are whatever, but it's like Alabama puts it at a goal for each year … Some states will be like every four years, they'll try and push a little something, something. Alabama makes it a literal focal point every year. They're like, "We *will* [emphasis aded] do this," and it's like … Jesus Christ, I swear I've heard the HHB or whatever like 85 times, so that's kind of annoying …. The expectation I think of the South to be whatever, and then people kind of just …. It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the state legislators and stuff. They're like, "Well, they're expecting us to do this, so we need to go ahead." And it's like, ain't nobody even … the general population is not asking for anti-Trans legislation, even if they're transphobic or whatever, they're not actively like, I mean not the general public …. But then here go Alabama in every corner and it just makes you always feel like it's just always reminding you like, "Hey! Knock, knock …." You know? They're coming after you, no matter where you are, you know?
>
> Catherine: Well, absolutely 100% like hell [I face more/different obstacles]. The law in our own state is out to get us …. Oh dear God, that fucking bill …. We killed it, but like … the one that [banned] any Trans person under the age of 19 from any gender affirming care, the Trans women in sports law, it's all bullshit. They're all solutions in search of problems …. It's just politicians feeling like they have the freedom to play political football with our lives.
>
> Nidell: A big thing definitely is [the climate is] just very unaccepting, you know? … There's a lot of invalidation and considering … people who identify that way to, like I mentioned before, say things like, "Oh, you just have, like, a really weird fetish," or, "You just think that 'cause you've been brainwashed by whatever type of thing." And I think that's shown up in a lot of different legislation, like with Texas. It's recently like there's a lot of anti-transgender legislation going into place and it's very disconcerting to see.

These three accounts provide a deeper understanding of how participants felt about this legislation and its connection to the region. Ro laid out the overwhelming nature of living somewhere that feels like there is a social expectation to "come after you." They also elaborated on the idea that the general population might not even want this legislation in place, and yet it endures. Catherine also shared a similar sentiment about the state being "out to get us," and that she felt that politicians were determined to pass these bills regardless of how it affected the stability of Trans lives. Catherine was specifically talking about House Bill 1/Senate Bill 10. This bill was passed by the Alabama Senate 23-4; it was sent to the House but did not pass due to the legislative session ending before they could vote on it (ACLU, 2021). This bill would not have affected any of the participants directly as they were all over the age of 19; however, even though it did not pass, this bill—and all anti-Trans bills—had had a largely negative effect on the participants of this study.

Experiences of Both Cisgenderism and Support on Southern Campuses

The focus of the data I gathered was on the experience of Trans students on their campuses, specifically if they experienced cisgenderism and how that experience affected them. From what participants shared about their experiences as Trans students on college campuses, many themes emerged within this category: (a) campus climate, (b) administrative violence, (c) administrative support, and (d) faculty/staff interactions. This was where the most robust data were collected, and there are many subthemes within each of these themes.

Campus Climate

Within the campus climate theme, subthemes such as positive and negative aspects of climate emerged. Participants shared about their perceptions of campus as a welcoming place but also shared both some general negative experiences as well as more extreme experiences of bigotry. Interestingly, there was a third subtheme of responses that did not fit neatly into either of these areas: some participants described their campus as being physically in the South yet feeling different and more welcoming than the South in some respects.

Positive/Welcoming Climate. Graham, Ben, Chrys, Kai, and Catherine all attended the same school in an urban location in Alabama. They were all undergraduate students, and all had positive impressions of the Urban Alabama University (UAU) where they went to school. Catherine and Ben spoke about why they decided to go to UAU:

> Catherine: But it's also just kind of the best school in the South to be LGBT. Like I specifically framed a lot of my college searches on that because, you know, you get coming from the worst possible place, I wanted somewhere good. And there is a website called Campus Pride Index, that one that rates different campuses, and at 2.5 out of 5 … UAU was the best one in Alabama.
>
> Ben: [I came to UAU] in part because I knew that it was fairly LGBT friendly, at least compared to other campuses in the South, specifically in Alabama. I know places like [College Town], Alabama, they aren't terrible, but it definitely seemed from my position to be a little worse …. When I came to tour [UAU], there were little signs out. I think I came during, may have been during Pride Month actually, [and] the [Multicultural and Diversity] department had some signs out with like the Pride flag on it and stuff and I was like, "Okay, this is like it's gonna be a little safer." If I had been trying to go to a school that was specifically really good for my major, I probably would have gone somewhere else. But the fact that it felt safe to be just existing on campus was a big plus for me.

Both Catherine and Ben came to UAU because it seemed like the best option in the South and because it was LGBTQ+ friendly—Ben discovered this on a tour and Catherine found this information through the Campus Pride Index, a great resource for LGBTQ+ students looking for Queer and Trans inclusive schools. Most participants, when asked why they came to UAU, said the main consideration was proximity and/or cost.

Graham, Chrys, and Kai shared about having positive interactions with people on campus.

> Graham: So, I think campus for Trans students at UAU is really great. Because one, I think just in general it's a very accepting campus—I haven't met a single person that is actually homophobic or transphobic, they just are uneducated—and the school, people that actually work for the school, are very supportive …. When I first changed my name and was like, "I'm Trans," I sent it in a lot of groupmes and stuff, just like in a small little thing, and it was like, "By the way, I go by Graham now and like he/they." I got, from everything, tons of support. A ton of people liked the message and then a lot of people were like, "I'm, like, so proud of you!" And so, some of them were for my classes, 'cause people have groupmes for classes. So yeah, I definitely felt I have not had a single unsupportive person say anything to me ….
>
> Chrys: [My bosses] have all corrected people when I've been misgendered. And there was an incident with a coworker who found out my deadname and used it in front of a resident who, thankfully, was someone that I knew from high school, and the resident backed me up and said, "No, their name is Chrys." And when I brought it up to my boss, it was handled. It wasn't just like, "Oh don't worry about it. He's just ignorant." It was addressed. So, stuff like that is really important to the culture, just knowing that there are people who will stand up and who will protect you.

Graham reported that after he came out in multiple group chats with friends and classmates, they were incredibly supportive of his correct name and pronouns—he touted this campus as being great for Trans students, and he reported that he had not encountered a single unsupportive person in his experience. Chrys described positive interactions with one of their residents who stood up for them, correcting a coworker who

used their deadname to refer to them. Further, Chrys said that their supervisor in housing followed up with the coworker to make sure that the issue would not occur again.

When Kai came to UAU, they felt excited to find community and to no longer be the only person with their gender and sexual identity on campus, unlike their previous experience at another school.

> [W]hen I first started coming to UAU, [I was] all excited that I actually met other people that felt the same way that I do … so I didn't feel so alone anymore and as if there was something wrong with me …. I felt like that for the longest time, even when I was learning to just accept that about myself. It just felt really comforting that, "Hey, I'm not the only one!"

And when Kai was asked if UAU was reflective of the more negative national climate for Trans people, they said,

> Oh, I wouldn't necessarily say so. I feel like they're a bit more progressive … or at least trying to take more steps to be better for its students … [but] still has a long way to go. It's starting to look a little bit more like college campuses that you would see over in California or farther up north or whatnot.

Beth and Nidell both attended schools in Texas. Beth attended Urban Texas College, and Nidell attended Urban Texas University—both urban campuses in metropolitan areas. Beth and Nidell shared more about the campus climate at their schools:

> Beth: At UTU it feels like Trans students would be pretty safe because we have a pretty good community here. I've personally talked to some people who were, you know, out and presenting [as their correct gender], and it was really cool. In one my Latin classes, I was able to talk to a girl who was like, "I'm presenting." I was like, "That's very, very nice of you. Absolutely wonderful. Love to see it." So I feel like in that case it's very good. It's obviously, you know, there's some give and take. Not everyone there is, you know, sharing the same opinion, but I've never seen anyone complain too much about it, which is pretty nice.
>
> Nidell: [A]t least in the circles that I'm in, I've had times where I've gone into work trainings with painted nails and I've had people be like, "Oh, nice, those look good!" And I'm like, "Okay, this is this is nice not having to worry about that." … And people are like, "Oh, yeah, your hair is longer. It looks nice. I'm a fan of it." So in various aspects like that, we have a lot of accommodating programs and resources. And then a lot of the people, staff, and students on

> campus I think are really accepting, even if they're not as informed. So, I think specifically all of the different resources that bring it up for entering students to think about, is definitely very helpful to making it more accepted, definitely, I would say.

Beth and Nidell both shared that their campuses were accepting of Trans students. Beth shared an example of a classmate who was out which made her happy and excited. She still acknowledged that there might be some growing pains in terms of the whole campus being supportive of Trans students, but overall, she felt it was safe. Similarly, Nidell talked about playing with their gender expression and receiving positive feedback from classmates and peers, and they also mentioned resources and accommodating programs on campus to support Trans students

Negative Climate. Although most participants had had positive experiences on campus and reported a climate that was generally safe and welcoming, many students had also had bad experiences, exposing the more negative side of campus climate. When asked about the general campus climate Chrys said, “I think it's okay. I don't think it's great. There's definitely room for improvement, but it's not outright hostile, which is good,” giving a lukewarm endorsement of the campus. Part of the problem, Chrys shared, was a lack of acknowledgement of the existence of LGBTQ+ students, both via campus programming and resources offered. They said,

> UAU is an interesting case because while they do have support for LGBTQ [people], it's not explicit. You kind of have to go through weird back channels to find it. They do have a gender clinic, but they're not allowed to advertise to the general public, and I feel like that tells you a lot about the South. But they do have really great resources that I'm very happy to utilize. … I think just more acknowledgement that we exist … but it would be nice to see us acknowledge outside of that. Like, “LGBTQ+ History Program” is great and I appreciate it and everything that it is, but it would be nice to be included in the narrative beyond that, if that makes sense.

Like Graham, Chrys noted that there were resources available to Trans students at UAU. However, while Graham found the process of getting HRT to be very accessible, Chrys felt that resources were almost hidden, rather than advertised. This goes hand in hand with their second critique, that there was not enough programming on campus or acknowledgment from administration that LGBTQ+ students exist. Rom also had a complicated relationship with the climate: they said that campus was safe, but only because LGBTQ+ students made it that way:

> So, I would say that UAU's campus is a safe place for Trans and Queer folk because of Trans and Queer folk, not because of UAU or anything UAU has done. We made it a safe space because we had to make it a safe space because we had to have a safe space.

Rom is essentially saying that the work of making UAU a safe place for LGBTQ+ people has fallen on the shoulders of LGBTQ+ students (Broadhurst et al., 2018).

Nidell and Ben were both quoted earlier as saying their campuses were welcoming. However, Nidell shared that although they might have felt that the campus was safe, they would not have been comfortable fully expressing their genderfluid and nonbinary identity:

> I identify as genderfluid/nonbinary, so it changes a little how much I would like to express it, you know, depending upon the day. And so … knowing [how] people [are], I think for one, showing up to campus and doing [differing gender presentations], so some days presenting some ways, and some days changing that, would be very jarring for a lot of people, and so that is, you know, a potential turn-off.

Ben shared a similar sentiment regarding his academic department, saying that while the department believed they were being inclusive of everyone, he did not feel comfortable being close to the other students because of the conservative climate they had created:

> Even if to them I may be included, I feel a little excluded from a lot of the culture in the mechanical engineering department. I wouldn't say [the] majority is

> conservative, but it's definitely a much larger percentage than other majors on campus. And even if they aren't conservative, there's always still the worry of, like, will I be treated differently once they get closer to me?

Kira shared a similar sentiment in the idea that a more conservative campus makes for a less welcoming place for Trans students, with this conservative mindset coming from a board of trustees comprised of conservative white men who might lack the ability to empathize with the diverse group of students they serve:

> The South is much more conservative and not really as open-minded as other places, so … places that are really kind of inclusive of the community would feel a lot better and a lot more understanding of our issues and where we're coming from. But it feels like a university in Alabama run by a bunch of conservative white dudes isn't gonna understand shit about us.

Specifically addressing the climate of the campus, Kira said that although Alabama City, where UAU is located, might be an overall welcoming place for Trans students, the campus was not. In response to the question of if campus climate is reflective of a negative climate for Trans people in general, she said,

> I would say [Alabama City], no, but UAU, on sort of the institutional and bureaucratic side of it, yes. Except they just, I feel like they kind of try to play politics with it more, or they're kind of trying to put on this face like they're doing the right thing but they're not.

Echoing the tone of Chrys's comment about the administration providing yet hiding resources for Trans students, Kira criticized the bureaucratic nature of the institution, saying the administration at UAU was playing politics instead of doing 'the right thing' for Trans students.

Three participants who attended UAU mentioned specific instances when the administration failed to address targeted hate on campus. In 2019, it was discovered that a teaching assistant at UAU was a member of a white supremacist message board and that another faculty member had written some tweets that led students to believe he might

have white supremacist sentiments. Participants shared that UAU's lack of response to these revelations made them feel uncomfortable. Another incident concerned an anti-LGBTQ protestor who took up the sidewalk outside of the student center for a few days, shouting homophobic and transphobic language as students walked by. This happened on two different occasions; Kai and Rom discussed the occurrences that took place in 2019 and 2021.

Both Kai and Rom talked about their experiences seeing the protestor on campus. Rom said that they usually felt safe on campus, "excluding the protester telling a bunch of us we were going to hell for being gay and for being fags, that was at UAU like two months ago." And Kai went more in depth about the incident in 2019:

> [O]ver a year ago we just had this weird guy on campus. He had an umbrella, and he had a Bible in his hand and he was pretty much yelling out at people and trying to condemn them for just various random things. And I remember even him yelling out when I was just walking by just about to go grab some food, [him] saying that I was going to hell for my identity. Especially 'cause I had a rainbow umbrella on me and he decided he was going to be vocal about that. And I just remember me and whole lot of other students just feeling incredibly uncomfortable and bringing it up to officials and it just taking so long for them to do something about it. So it felt like a time too where it just felt like UAU kind of let students down for a pretty good while. But I'm glad that it didn't continue as long as it could have.

Here Kai brought in a sentiment shared by Kira earlier, asking the question of if the administration was 'doing the right thing' for its Trans students. Kai expressed concern over the length of time UAU officials took to deal with this situation that made them feel uncomfortable. Rom also spoke about taking the matter into their own hands by buying six large pizzas and handing them out to students in an attempt to counter the negative atmosphere created by the protestor with the joys of free food and community building.

The other incident mentioned by participants was the discovery of white supremacists among the faculty on campus. In discussing their response to this information, Rom shared a similar lack of faith in the campus administration's willingness to handle this issue in a way that would make campus feel safe for marginalized students:

> … all that [white supremacist] stuff, that shows what the university truly thinks about their marginalized student and faculty body. So not just the policy as it applies, not just the policy as it's written down, but the policy as it's applied. Both need to be taken into account separately, and then I suppose looked at separately, and then a conclusion drawn from them together. But here, I definitely say so, because in most places there's not going to be a big argument on whether or not you need to get a Skinhead out of a department. Hopefully, at least.

Rom was frustrated by the lack of action taken against the employees who were found to be a part of a white supremacist organization. They felt that the standard that UAU was using to determine if these two individuals should be terminated was incorrect, because at any other institution Nazis would not have been allowed to remain on campus. Ro shared a similar concern regarding the same issue. When asked what they would change about campus to make it more Trans inclusive they said,

> Probably, you know, having white supremacists …. 'Cause white supremacists usually tend to be also transphobic and stuff, so that doesn't help. And there's probably, in a lot of staff and faculty, if they can be white supremacists, they can be transphobic and stuff too, and it's scary to not know that ….

This experience left Ro wondering, if UAU allowed for white supremacists to be on campus, how did the administration truly feel about the needs of their Trans students and other marginalized populations? They were scared to not know whether their professors would support or condemn who they were. Negative campus climate for LGB and specifically Trans students is a well-documented phenomenon (Dugan et al., 2012; Garvey, Rankin, et al., 2017; Preston & Hoffman, 2015) that is not just relegated to the

Southern region. The concerns voiced by Ro, Rom, Kai, Nidell, Chrys, and Ben align with the experiences of other Trans students nationally.

My School vs. The South. Most participants generally agreed that their campus provided the sort of supportive environment described above. However, about five responses complicated this by contrasting the positive campus climate with the surrounding city area, state, or region. These students had shared language around this idea that the South might feel unsafe or unwelcoming, but the campus where they were in attendance was different in a positive way. Here is what Graham said:

> I'm in the South, but doesn't feel like it, so it doesn't feel like UAU is really representative of a Southern school …. So that part of being a Trans student, like if you're interested in Hormone Replacement Therapy, it's crazy …. It's very, I think a Trans students experience at UAU is very unique just to UAU than the rest of the South.

Graham spoke specifically about being in the South yet not feeling like he was in the South because of UAU's level of support of Trans students, especially in the sense of making Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) accessible to its student population. This surprised Graham: he did not think a school located in Alabama would give him such easy access to something that felt so stigmatized in this region. Ben also had a positive perception of UAU. When asked what he would change about the South to make it more Trans inclusive, he avoided the answer, essentially saying the South could not be changed; however, when asked what he would to do make UAU more Trans inclusive, he said,

> I feel like UAU, it's a little easier to add some stuff, because I do get the feeling that UAU in general is much less conservative compared, you know, even [Alabama City], I don't feel like it's very conservative. UAU definitely feels even less so.

Ben equated a more liberal campus community with a more open-minded campus community, one that was more willing to change and be more inclusive of Trans people, especially compared to the rest of the South. Chrys expressed a similar sentiment when comparing UAU to the rest of the region:

> I was nervous about staying in the South for college because I didn't know how the culture would be different from my high school. My high school was this protected bubble, almost, and I knew that I was going to lose that bubble. And so, I was very nervous to stay in the South for college, but I got to UAU and was surprised to find that people were generally open. And I think a lot of people come to college to learn and to open their minds, so when I say that and I try to teach them things, they're open to that. Versus the South in general, people, when they meet me, aren't necessarily there to learn, and so when I try to educate them, they're not as open to it.

Like Ben, Chrys felt that the people on campus were more open to education and had a greater willingness to learn about the Trans community as compared to the rest of the South—separating the campus community from the region.

Both Beth and Nidell described a starker difference between their campuses and the areas where the campuses are located:

> Beth: … you know, just a little bit more of a societal fear of how society is going to react. Not too much about how specifically my classmates are going to react or my teachers, but you know how everything else can be, just on the street and what have you.
>
> Nidell: [I]t depends on the place, the different environments, but I feel like there's definitely some places around the country that you could express yourself one way on campus and express yourself that way off of campus. I feel like there is almost a disconnect where there are a lot of things that I would feel comfortable with, or at least more comfortable doing on campus, that I would not really think about at all doing off campus.

Beth and Nidell were both saying that they felt safer in their gender expression on campus vs. off campus. Beth said she was not worried about her classmates or teachers and their reactions to her gender expression, she was mostly concerned about what would

happen to her “on the street” off campus. Nidell said that there were places where both the campus and surrounding city or community were safe places to express yourself; however, that was not the case where they were located. Interesting to note, the only participant that outwardly challenged this was Kira, who said in the previous section that although Alabama City was accepting, she did not feel her campus was. Regardless, many Queer and Trans students seek out higher education in hopes of finding open and affirming communities to explore their gender or sexuality. This is sometimes the first time they have the independence and autonomy to do so (Beemyn, 2003; Weber, 2015).

Administrative Violence

Contributing to the negative campus climate for Trans students is administrative violence, a term and framework coined by Dean Spade (2015). Administrative violence describes the ways that institutions hurt marginalized people, specifically Trans people, via policy and procedure that is made and implemented without Trans people in mind, a form of cisgenderism. This section opens with a depiction of the general ways that the administration is out of touch with the experience of Trans students and then goes into the subthemes of (a) exclusionary policies (encompassing several offices and polices that act as barriers to Trans students), (b) a false diversity narrative, and (c) barriers to academic success, explaining how all these issues ‘just add up’ in a way that negatively affects Trans students academically and emotionally.

Rom was asked what they would do to make UAU more inclusive for Trans students. They said the largest barrier to Trans inclusion at UAU was

> … administration. Full stop. Administration. Administration is filled with the same people who are only like the third replacement in their positions since UAU

> started. They are these people who have been in these positions too long. I feel like I'm talking about politics, but it's not that different, is it, when it comes down to it? The biggest obstacle to UAU moving forward in treating its students and faculty equitably is for there to be new administration at UAU …. And here, part of it is administration in large part ignores the student body so much. We don't feel like we have a say in anything. 'Cause, I mean, even with the Student Government Association, even that stuff feels like kiddy power, I guess, is what you could put it. It doesn't feel like they actually have any input, and the input they do have isn't listened to. It's a party planning committee. Party planning committee and a good face to try and show diversity when they don't want to actually support that diversity through administrative policy.

Rom's comment here that those in leadership roles at UAU had been in their positions too long and no longer had the best interest of students at heart is similar to what Kira said about the "conservative white dudes" running the university not being able to understand their Trans constituents. Rom also reported that the means the university had given students to voice concerns were not a dependable way to make change on campus. This lack of faith in UAU's administration was also echoed by Ro, who said,

> UAU doesn't do anything to protect their students, but that's just in general. Like, that's not even specific. That's just anybody that isn't a white person in the Student Government Association is not getting protected. Like, if you're not a white student orientation leader, then I don't know what to say. So UAU definitely doesn't do much to protect us or anything like that.

Ro also identified a certain subset of students who might be protected by the administration, specifically white students who were leaders in the orientation office or student government, implying that everyone who did not fall into that category was not being protected by the university. Cecilia also shared that as a student from a low socioeconomic background, she did not feel like the institution was doing enough in terms of providing resources for low-income students on campus:

> … I get the feeling of guilt for using my own campus resources. Where there is an option to pick up food at the pantry and stuff like that, but I always have that feeling where there isn't enough for everybody, because that's what I've noticed just in general with the education system.

At UAU there is a food pantry for students to use. Cecilia explained here that when she had utilized this resource previously, she felt like there was not enough for everyone and would feel guilty taking what she needed, and because of this, she would often go without eating. Even if it is not directly tied to her Trans identity, this may be an example of what Ro was discussing—not all students feel 'protected' by the administration.

Another component of administrative violence is how services are rendered to people and if they are gendered unnecessarily and negatively affect Trans people in a way that shortens life chances (Spade, 2015), and in this case, affect Trans student's ability to do well in school or be successful. This, in tandem with university systems that usually assume all students are cisgender (Preston & Hoffman, 2015), left participants feeling unsupported. Participants were asked about policies, procedures, organizations, and physical locations on campus that helped them on their journey towards graduation or hindered them.

Exclusionary Policies. A large issue that students specifically from UAU discussed was the school email system that was unaccommodating to Trans students who often (but not always) have a name change as part of their transition. Chrys shared, "I would say letting us change our names on our email would be really nice. It's a really small thing, but it would be really nice." The system at UAU allows students to change their email alias, which is the email itself: example@uau.edu. However, the name that appears in the "From" line displays a student's legal name, which in some cases for Trans students means their deadname.

> Graham: I hate that when people email me it has my deadname in it. And so I understand why it would be bad if people could just change the email whenever

> they wanted to, but I think if they just did something that allowed Trans people to do that, it would be really good. Because it's pretty bad, seeing your dead name all the time. And then you have to give your email to people, then it just adds a whole other thing. They'll be like, "Why is that name in there? That's not your name." So I definitely think that's something that is kind of bad, but I understand why it is …. You're warned when you make it that you can't change it, but when I made it, I never thought that my name would be different. So it is kind of like I understand it, but also I wish that it wasn't the rules.
>
> Kai: I know there was one point where I was trying to get that situated with my email address. And as far as I know they might be getting closer to being able to change it to where your chosen name is on there. Because I know that my birth name is still on my email address, So I can't stand whenever I check my emails and see it there. But it's nice at least have the option to where I can make it kind of like a signature so when I do send an email it just kind of reminds the person that, "Hey, I don't go by that name." But it would be nice to have the option still change that.
>
> Catherine: But even then, the people on campus tend to be pretty nice and the campus is a bit of [a] mix. Yeah, you can put it in your preferred pronouns, but also a lot of the emails and documents still use your legal name, which is a pain, and you gotta go through some hoops to get that actually changed.
>
> Kira: [W]hen I first got accepted into UAU, my mom took it upon herself to create my UAU account. And that issue aside, she decided to make my [UAU Login] an acronym of my deadname, so that is forever ingrained into my UAU account. I can never change that. And on top of that, that's now my email address. I can set up an alias, but at the end of the day, an acronym for my deadname is still a [log in] that I have to use everywhere. And then, to add more on top of that, my legal name shows up in my email, so anytime someone emails me anytime I'm in Microsoft Teams for my job, it's just broadcasting that deadname to anybody who wants to see it, and it just feels so shitty.

These five students highlighted an issue that brought them a lot of emotional turmoil that a cisgender person might never really have to consider. What may seem like a small issue to some can have severe emotional consequences for Trans students. If a student is not out to their classmates, professors, or anyone connected to the university system and uses their email address to contact them, they could be immediately outed to that person. CTP essentially asks what the purpose is of requiring a legal name to be connected to this

email system (Spade, 2015). Not having appropriate identification can create difficult and sometimes dangerous situations for Trans people (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016).

This issue was not confined to students at UAU. Here Nidell from UTU explains an issue they had with another online system that did not allow for pronouns or name changes:

> I don't know if it would be feasible, but as simple as …. So, Microsoft Teams, right now it doesn't really have an easy option for setting pronouns, so if that was possible that would be one very helpful thing. I know in some you can change your name, but our university, at least in the engineering department, pretty much only uses Teams, and so there's not really an option to do that. And then also I think really just standardizing using pronouns and introductions is very helpful in that, because I feel like if I had started my freshman year and all my classes people were introducing with pronouns, even though at the time I wasn't comfortable with it, by the time I had gone through maybe my gender exploration would have been a lot earlier, or by the time I had gone through it, I would feel a lot more comfortable being open with that to people.

Not only did Nidell address the issue of using a platform where pronouns could not be easily displayed, they also talked about how great it would be if pronouns were normalized on these online platforms and in classes, and that this might have made them feel more comfortable exploring their gender sooner. This issue is less about putting Trans students in situations that could potentially out them and more about acknowledging that changing systems to be more Trans inclusive could have a positive impact on climate and therefore a positive impact on Trans students (Garvey et al., 2019).

Housing on college campuses for Trans students has a history of being difficult to navigate (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015). Participants were asked to share about their experiences interfacing with housing or living on campus:

> Rom: If I do remember correctly, a lot of it ended up being very binary on the questions. I think you had male housing, female housing, and both. And then gender and same gender was on a separate part, almost like it was added in as an afterthought onto a pre-existing system.

> Ro: I know they added that thing where they were like, “Will you be comfortable living with someone of a different gender identity?” And I was like, “Well, I don’t even know how to answer this question. 'Cause if I say yes, if you put me with a cis man I wanna hurt somebody.” So, it was kind of an odd question. I understand what they're trying to do, but it was like …. I mean, I know there's some people that wouldn't mind living with. Some people wanted to live with a coed thing, but I was like, “I'm not living with no cis-man. I'm scared.”
>
> Cecilia: … and then in the roommate matching system, you have the option to write notes that they can read, and I wrote there, but I don't think that was even acknowledged at all. Yeah.

Rom, Ro, and Cecilia were all sharing their experiences with the housing application process at UAU. Rom and Ro spoke about the clunky questioning in the application that made it hard to interpret how they should be filling out the form to meet their needs for rooming with someone who they would feel safe living with. Cecilia shared that she was instructed to write a note in the comments section if she wanted to notify housing that she would like a roommate that was affirming of her gender, and she said that they did not read the comment she was instructed to write. Ben also shared about his experience; initially he felt accommodated by housing, but later he had an issue after his first roommate moved out:

> Freshman year, I also lived in the dorms, which overall I'd say it was a good experience. I told them beforehand that I wanted to be roomed with someone else who is Trans or nonbinary, and they did that. My roommate was nonbinary, so it was pretty cool. They did move out halfway through the spring semester, and then I think they because my legal gender has not been changed yet, they assumed I was a female and they tried to room me with someone who also was and then, so I just had to call and be like, :Hey, don't. Remove this person,” and then they did it. It’s a bit annoying to have to experience that, probably 'cause that's something a cis person would never have to deal with, but it's not any fault of their own. … I don't blame housing for that. It's just something that happens, and it’s kind of annoying to deal with.

Ben noted a flaw in the system that assumed his gender based on his sex marker on file. Ben’s experience was thankfully an easy fix, and the housing office was able to address

the issue—leaving Ben only feeling kind of annoyed. However, best practices in the field of housing encourage examining "current practices in housing and residence life for their effects on trans* students" to ensure that students continue to feel safe on campus (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015, p. 172).

In terms of other offices on campus and their gender inclusive policies, students were asked about recreation centers as well as Sorority and Fraternity options on campus. Most participants did not say this was a large part of their experiences and could not comment much on the positive or negative atmosphere they created for Trans students on campus.

Unfortunately, bathrooms are often a source of great fear for many Trans students, and some will go the whole day without using the facilities for fear of negative reactions from peers (Thorpe, 2017). Participants were asked about their comfort using restrooms on campus and the accessibility of gender inclusive bathrooms should they have wanted to use them:

> Nidell: I've never seen one around campus unless it was just a family bathroom, right? And so having that option on campus, I feel like, would be more assuring if, you know, one day I decide, "Okay, well, I want to actually present this way." It's a much more reassuring feeling of like, what if I need to do something, having that as an option.
>
> Beth: Oh, that's where it gets fun. I have not seen any on campus. It's all, you know, man/woman bathrooms. Although they do have one really fun one, so, you know, it's people running and that's about it. But I haven't seen any gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, no.
>
> Graham: But I definitely, I mean, if I was on campus, I would definitely use the gender neutral one before I used the men's, but I would feel comfortable using the men's restroom here.
>
> Ben: Probably the biggest things that affect me are just trying to find a safe bathroom. I do usually use the men's bathrooms anyways, but it is a much more stressful situation, just because I'm always very hyper aware in those spaces, you

> know …. I'm very hyper aware of am I spending too short of a time in the stall and then they'll know that I don't have a penis, and then, I don't know, be transphobic to me? And some buildings on campus, like the Engineering Building does not have gender neutral bathrooms, so [I] either have to walk 10 or 15 minutes across campus, which isn't practical if I only have a short break between classes, or I have to just go in there and sit on the toilet a little bit longer …. That's one of the most common things.
>
> Kai: The main place, for me at least, has been at the student center because there's gender neutral bathrooms that are located there. But say if I were to go to another building, for example, then I'm kind of having to look at the gender and go from there and it's always a hassle. 'Cause I'm trying to debate, "You know, maybe I can hold it for a little bit longer," and just it kind of gets annoying 'cause you feel like it shouldn't be that big of a deal and yet it does feel like a big deal, 'cause it's I'm having to choose what I don't identify as.

Both participants from the Texas universities, Beth and Nidell, shared that there were no gender inclusive bathrooms on campus. Nidell shared that this was not reassuring for them should they ever want to explore their gender further as they might not be able to find a bathroom they would feel comfortable using. Graham shared that he would feel comfortable using the men's room but would prefer to use a gender inclusive bathroom should there be one available. Ben and Kai, however, voiced some frustration with a lack of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus. Kai would have preferred to use a gender inclusive bathroom because otherwise they would be forced to use a bathroom that they did not identify with, which could be uncomfortable. Ben spoke on his experience of being hyper-aware of his surroundings as bathrooms did not feel like an inherently safe place for him to be. These findings align with experiences of Trans students on other campuses either not feeling safe using the bathroom with which they identify, traveling out of their way to find a safe bathroom, or just "holding it" until they are in a safer place (Beemyn, 2003; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016; Thorpe, 2017).

A False Diversity Narrative. Within the administrative violence theme, a unique subtheme emerged: a sense of "false diversity" or the idea that the institution was speaking a narrative of support for diversity and students from historically marginalized backgrounds but doing very little to actually support them. Participants, including Graham and Beth, shared that one benefit of living in the South was the level of racial diversity—particularly at these universities. Kira, Rom, Ro, and Cecilia, who also appreciated this diversity, pushed this discussion further in addressing the issue of universities touting their value of diverse people and promising a welcoming environment for said people, leaving them feeling disappointed by the university when it did not follow through on the promise, an issue students have experienced at other schools as well (Dirks, 2011).

> Cecilia: Because the university says that in the [university creed], it says that diversity and stuff like that [they are important], but they go against their words in a lot of the departments. And those departments have a lot of funding, like dining and housing. They have probably a lot of funding to change things like that, right?
>
> Kira: I don't want to say it's two-faced, but it's kind of two-faced when the university spouts diversity and equality …. But from my experience, it's kind of bullshit …. I would really say one of the biggest obstacles is just either not being aware of, or there physically not being any real resources for us. 'Cause the few that are there are kind of hidden in the back corners of the Internet somewhere. And then I can't really even think of many Trans-specific resources that are actually helpful …. So yeah, I just don't really have a lot of, I guess it's just kind of more of a lack of faith in most departments at UAU, or just like I don't have any faith that they'll actually (a) understand my problems, and (b) actually fix them …. Or sometimes it just feels like you're screaming at a brick wall. So yeah, I would say maybe just actually back up their words with action and stop just playing politics and trying to act like they're inclusive 'cause it makes them look good. Instead, actually be inclusive.

Here Kira and Cecilia talked about issues with the university not living up to what they had promised their students in terms of feeling welcome as a Trans individual and not offering enough resources to support them. For Kira specifically, a result of this was her

no longer believing the university would ever really understand the issues she had, nor offer any solutions to fix them. Rom offered a similar critique when discussing the university reprimanding a faculty member for wishing ill on a notable conservative talk show host who had recently died. Rom did not understand how the university could reprimand a faculty member in this way and yet not also reprimand staff who were exposed as participants in a white supremacist messaging board:

> UAU just, they don't have a line. They have, you know, those bendy straws that you'd get as a kid at a carnival or something that just twists and go all kinds of different directions …. That's what UAU's line is …. And that's another big difference, targeting of a group versus an individual, valuing equality over equity, also ignores any context or nuance to the situation. And UAU has about as much nuance as a bright red brick on the sidewalk …. We don't care about being equitable, all we care about is being equal.

Rom harshly critiqued UAU for not being more consistent with upholding their values as an institution, condemning the university for picking and choosing who would be held accountable based on the whims of the administration versus a more concrete standard. Rom also brought up the problematic idea of the university valuing equality over equity or giving everyone the same opportunity as opposed to the resources they would need to be successful. This was a critique also shared by Ro, who spoke about their frustration with the university not providing affinity spaces for people with similar marginalized identities.

> But they don't allow safe spaces 'cause they don't want anybody to feel left out. But it's like … then we feel left out because we're constantly being oppressed. I don't really care if white people are mad that they can't come into this room for 20 minutes …. I feel like other places might not be as whatever about maybe having safe spaces or whatever because they don't feel like there'll be backlash for them. I feel like UAU is trying to compensate … I don't know if that's the word … trying to juggle the idea of like, 'We wanna be super diverse and safe for everybody,' but also realizing that with that diversity comes people that are adverse against it. And they wanna make everybody happy, versus making the people that they're supposed to be making safe, happy.

Ro surmised that the university did not allow these spaces because it might make more privileged students feel uncomfortable if there were a space that existed where they were not allowed. Ro said this was unfair to the students who were promised an inclusive and welcoming space, which sometimes means being in a space that is just for students with similar identities to them, such as just Trans students (Garvey et al., 2019). CTP explains that institutions often "declare themselves race and gender neutral but are actually sites of extreme racial and gender violence," or in this case profess a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere but leave students feeling confused and lied to (Spade, 2013, p. 68).

Barriers to Academic Success. While the issues above might seem small on their own, participants expressed that all these obstacles can "add up" and become barriers to academic success. Here is what participants said on the topic:

> Ben: [M]ost of the stuff that affects Trans people on campus, it's a bunch of little things that just add up, like maybe not having access to a safe bathroom in the place where your classes are, and maybe in your email you can't change your name, and that's just annoying to deal with. And so even if it doesn't directly stop you from doing well in class, it can just add to stress. Obviously being stressed is not good for doing your classes. 'Cause, at least for the stuff that I heard, there haven't been a whole lot of cases of very blatant transphobia on campus. I mean, I'm sure there have been some, but from the people I talk to, it's not like people are going into class and then the professor, you know, says a slur and then you have to drop the class or something. But I definitely think maybe feeling uncomfortable, just a general feeling of being uncomfortable, it can make you maybe not want to pursue your degree anymore.

> Kira: Honestly, at least a couple times a week I just think to myself, "What if I just transferred to another school that was probably less of a hassle to deal with?" Like the only reason I haven't genuinely considered it is because I have so many connections here at UAU that I can't possibly uproot all of them. But if it weren't for that, I probably would just moved schools by now …. Yeah, [the university doesn't] understand, really, our needs, or really our perspective. It feels like they don't really grasp the full magnitude of how meaningful it is to have a correct name on an account. I kind of get that vibe of like, "Okay, what the fuck ever. It's not that big of a deal. Why are you complaining about it?"

> Kai: I guess one way that I've been able to describe it with a therapist that I go to regularly, it's kind of like having the odds against you, almost. Especially being in the South, because there's not really a whole lot of acceptance that's down here. It's still slowly growing, but it's slow. It's getting a bit better but is taking some time.
>
> Graham: So that's just basic baseline stuff that could affect it, but I think not being able to get the right name on your diploma can definitely affect that too, for just colleges in the South in general. Because then it's just sad, 'cause it's like a name is on there that you don't identify with and so it doesn't even feel like you did it, and then it just gets harder for if you do eventually change your name and then it's like, well, why isn't this diploma in your name?

Participant answers throughout this theme confirmed what research has already told us: cisgenderism manifests in higher education, sometimes daily, for Trans collegians (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). This stems from unclear or inflexible housing policies (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015; Thorpe, 2017), a lack of gender-inclusive bathrooms or campus climate to ensure students feel comfortable using the facilities they identify with (Beemyn, 2003; Thorpe, 2017), and inflexible databases that do not allow students to use a preferred name or pronoun (Bilodeau, 2007). These barriers may not result in academic failure for Trans students in general (Nicolazzo, 2016a), but it is important to take stock of what is being communicated by these participants in particular. Ben said, “a general feeling of being uncomfortable, it can make you maybe not want to pursue your degree anymore.” Going to school is hard enough; navigating school with these additional issues makes being Trans on campus unreasonably difficult.

Administrative Support

Participants also shared feeling that they had received an overwhelming amount of administrative support from the university. This support came from offices on campus,

including the counseling center, student organizations, student health services, and housing. They also felt supported by several policies and procedures, particularly around databases using correct pronouns and diplomas having a correct name.

Student Health Services and Counseling.

> Graham: I think the process, in particular for getting hormone treatment, is insane that that exists here. And when I had my counseling appointment for it to get my letter, the counselor that I had, she said she used to work for the Flagship campus and she said, “We don't have anything close to this and they're not even close to getting something like this,” … [and she] was super great. And she was like, I could just tell the whole time, and she even told me, she was just happy for me, and I could tell through the whole thing and she was just so happy for me. And that made me feel so good, 'cause it's like, oh this person that's literally the person that's gonna help me get this is so happy for me and proud of me. And it was just a really good feeling.
>
> Kira: [G]etting HRT actually made me look forward to the future of like, hey, I could finally be myself, and so thus I actually want to graduate.
>
> Kai: I guess kind of started with this Student Health and Wellness Center, just being able to have the resources to transition if you choose to, or at least have resources to connect with other people so you could still feel validated or going on to next steps so that you might want to do in life. I just feel like that's pretty much been most helpful thing for sure. If we hadn’t had a Student Health Services, I'm not entirely sure where I'd be today. I wouldn't even know if I even still be enrolled in classes right now.
>
> Rom: I use the counseling services. They're all digital right now, but I felt very welcome. My counselor is a lesbian, actually. She's delightful and has been a huge help as I've been dealing with both the transition of schools and COVID and just trying to get everything in line here. I felt extremely welcome.

According to participants from UAU, at the time of the interviews, in order to get Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), you needed consent from a counselor in the student counseling office, and from there, health services would prescribe a dose based on bloodwork for each individual. This process was immensely helpful to Graham, Kira, and Kai. Not all Trans people want to medically transition, but for these students

specifically, this resource was valuable to them and it was very convenient to be able to get it on campus from providers who wanted to help them. Rom also shared that counseling services in general had been welcoming and provided them with the support they were looking for.

Policies. While there were negative policies that had harmed participants in this study, there were other policies that had helped them.

> Graham: So definitely I think that, just everything UAU does, makes things accessible for Trans people. Whenever I sign up for meetings, I get to put in my preferred name and pronouns, and student health has a way to get hormones, and the fact that they let you change your name and put in your preferred name and pronouns, and how they just changed the Diploma thing. I think that UAU sets up so many things to make campus and going to school here very accepting and accessible for Trans people …. But I think the fact that we can do that has definitely affected me in a good way because I can have the name I want, that I have, that is my name, on my stuff. I don't have to be stuck to having my legal name on everything.
>
> Beth: Yes, like I said, it's really cool. They even allow us to put our preferred names on everything now, like on our student IDs. And we could show up on the student roster that way, and I've never had a teacher here that was anywhere even close to unwelcoming and I feel like that's a very reflective of the culture in general and this campus, and I like that a lot. It's really cool.
>
> Nidell: We just got a new president right before COVID happened, an interim president. And so, a lot of policies that before were not very friendly to the Trans community have changed. So, things like, pretty immediately after, we got options in Canvas for setting pronouns right and having options for that. Things like being able to change your student email, name, your name on Microsoft Teams, how that shows up. There's a service offered through our LGBTQ+ department. Also, being able to put our preferred name on our diploma without needing a legal name change, that's an option that's just recently started. And also, they're starting a learning community for, this isn't for gender nonconforming, but just LGBTQ+ individuals in general. And also including more information talking about this on campus. So, in the required freshman class that I mentioned earlier, one of the sections on identity, it goes into detail on the difference between sex and gender and talking about that, so having like conversations like that.

All three universities are represented in these statements. Participants shared about the policies that had a positive effect on their experiences as students. These policies ranged from having your correct name on your diploma, even if was not the same as your legal name, preferred names on student IDs, preferred names on rosters, pronouns in online class platforms, ability to change email alias/email, preferred names in other databases, living/learning communities for LGBTQ+ people, and even including information about gender and sexuality in a first year experience course on campus. These policies made these participants feel accepted, welcome, and reassured.

Although it might seem like a small detail, it feels important to mention that Graham got

a very affirming reaction from his RA after coming out as Trans:

> My RA, I came out on Instagram and he messaged me, and he was like, "Hey," because we have those name things on our doors, and he was like, "Hey, do you want me to change your name thing for you so it's your name?" And I was like, "Yeah," and he changed it the next day and stuff.

Student Organizations. Participants also had an overwhelmingly positive experience with LGBTQ+ student organizations on campus. Cecilia, who was not out yet on her campus, talked about feeling welcome and motivated to interact with others via online events and in person ones from student organizations at her school:

> Yes, because those organizations that I have been part of … they have definitely helped me interact online. And also, in those in person events, even though I have that double life, it definitely has made me more open and more comfortable to make it to graduation, yeah.

Like Cecilia, other students also were able to utilize student organizations on campus to branch out, make friends, connect with people who had similar identities to themselves, and have positive experiences on campus and online.

> Ben: I went to that … more often freshman and sophomore year. I don't go quite as much anymore. But that was very helpful, especially at first, just for, honestly, making a bit of a friend group, 'cause this was before LGBTQ+ Student Organization existed. So that was my main way of meeting other people who were Trans, and that was actually how I met one of my old roommates, was through there. 'Cause rooming with a cis person is very stressful. It was pretty nice to have on campus.
>
> Chrys: The great thing about my sexuality was that it led me to finding LGBTQ+ Student Organization through which I found a lot of friends and just a really great support group, but also just a really great social group. It's really nice to have the game nights and all of the activities that we do, so I'm very thankful that I found them.
>
> Rom: And I have had positive experiences at UAU as well, mainly when it comes to community, which is hard right now with all the restrictions, but with organizations like LGBTQ+ Student Organization and all that.
>
> Graham: And then I found, like I always saw stuff about LGBTQ+ Student Organization and I never really came to anything. And then I finally got motivated to go to one once everything was online, and I would say that's my main source of making friends now.
>
> Kai: I would say if anything I guess it helps me actually find a group on campus …. So, I was able to find a group called LGBTQ+ Support Group that we have on campus, and I was able to connect with them and meet other people that were similar to me and even have other very similar romantic and sexual orientations, and it just it felt really nice and valid to just be around the people that were like me.

Nidell felt affirmed and validated when they went to a peer-led LGBTQ+ competency training on campus and learned that their organization was inclusive of asexual people:

> I was like, "Oh, what do you think, does asexuality count as part of the program?" and then like the next slide they're like, "So this is what it stands for: LGBTQIA," went through all of them, they put the "A" as asexuality instead of ally and then plus, and mentioned some other ones, and I was like, "Oh, okay!" This is nice to see, validation-wise.

Similarly, Beth attended a program from a LGBTQ+ group on campus that hosted a "closet" event where LGBTQ+ students could find gender affirming clothes:

> The fact that they had a, I said before, pretty good LGBTQ+ Student Group. You know, the closet thing is very helpful, the whole having an outreach program.

> They actually also offer people to, how to get to hormone therapy and what have you, which is really cool as well.

Finally, Kira did not talk specifically about her experience with an LGBTQ+ student organization but about her experience in general as a peer educator on campus. Her position as a peer educator helped her feel more connected to staff on campus and other students, and she felt accepted by those she worked with:

> I'm a Peer Educator of Wellbeing. Yeah, definitely formed relationships with my bosses and other people I've had to work with, and in a way, it's kind of easier with the work that we do. You know that the people are accepting towards you, 'cause most people I've talked to are either somehow involved with Peer Educators of Wellbeing, they're in student counseling, and those people are just given that they're going to be accepting and supportive and understanding, so it's kind of a little less stressful.

Overall, student organizations have had a very positive impact on these participants and on the experience of LGBTQ+ students in general (Nicolazzo, 2016a).

Faculty/Staff Interactions

The next theme in the category of experiences of both cisgenderism and support on Southern campuses is faculty/staff interactions, encompassing the experiences students had in co-curricular spaces, in the classroom, and with the curriculum.

Positive Staff/Faculty

> Chrys: I started wearing pronoun pins during my desk shifts with my supervisor's consent. I was like, “Hey, this is the thing I'm going to do. I understand students can see it, parents can see it, I'm fine with that.” And a parent threw a fit about it, unsurprisingly, but my boss backed me up. And, you know, that's the great part about it, is there are people here at UAU who will take that for what it is and back you up and they'll say like, you know, “If this is what you need and this is who you are, I will do that for you.” So, I'm very grateful to my bosses within housing because all of them have been like that. They have all backed me up.

> Graham: Definitely the advisor for LGBTQ+ Student Organization has definitely helped me. He helped me a lot with, like, one, just he answered my questions that

> I had about being Trans and stuff. And all other people in LGBTQ+ Student Organization, but him specifically, he helped me. He answered my questions about how to get [testosterone] and helped me through the process and supported me, and I kept him updated through it and he just walked me through the process which was super nice because having someone in charge help you through something is always good. My advisor is really cool and really nice and supportive.

Chrys, Graham, and other participants spoke about positive interactions they had with university staff. The two experiences above were the most positive moments shared and highlight ways in which staff can be supportive of Trans students on campus. Faculty also had positive impacts on student experiences. Catherine shared, "Yeah, I've had lots of professors deliberately, you know, I noticed them using my correct pronouns, and it's just, it's awesome." Others shared:

> Rom: In psychology, some professors can be amazing at having this material that has within it a crucial flaw of just like, I believe I said in the survey, the DSM 5 says gender dysphoria is a mental disorder. And then you do have these psychology professors who can see that and go, "Okay, it says this, but that doesn't mean it is. That just means we need to classify it in a way where we could help people."

> Graham: One of my professors even, he starts out all of his emails with like, "Hola amigos, amigas, and amigx." … And so as soon as he emailed me, I was like, "Oh, this is a cool professor that's chill and stuff."

> Nidell: I have had one good experience in particular with one engineering faculty member from the outside community that was brought in that was vocally open about, in their introduction, they were very vocally open about their pronouns, which is something that not a lot of other, like, I can't think of any other professor on campus that have done that, that I've taken in my program or outside the program, and even some of the faculty and staff that's not a big priority for them, you know, not doing that, and that sort of made me feel a lot more close to them, even though I never brought it up at any point. It was just very reassuring to have that sort of not guarantee, but like indication, that if I was to talk about it, they would be ok with it.

> Chrys: There are a couple of professors that I've made really strong connections with. I think, I don't know if you saw this in the group chat, but one day we were talking about [a Teacher], who is [an administrator], but he also teaches film seminars, so I took him for film seminars. And at my encouragement, insistence,

> [he] started offering a Queer cinema class. So that was a great connection to make, and not just in terms of here's somebody who respects me as a person, who respects my gender, and who respects my ideas, but also in terms of this is somebody with connections to the film world.
>
> Kai: I'd say a little over a year ago a professor actually made the extra effort to go and even include different identities in his lesson plans and whatnot, 'cause I haven't had a professor that did that at all other than my psychology class. So it was nice that he created literally a whole lesson plan just talking about that. Even more, the fact that it was in Spanish. He's a professor that I'm not ever going to forget. It's the fact that he just showed that he cared so much. Even if he didn't totally understand, he made an effort to try.

These narratives highlight how important staff and faculty are in creating spaces on campus for Trans students that are welcoming and affirming. Staff and faculty who make it a point to support students through authentic relationship building, inclusive language, and thoughtful curriculum in classes can leave a lasting impact on students.

Negative Faculty. Unfortunately, the opposite is true as well. Participants also shared negative experiences they had with faculty on campus. Ro shared an experience they had with a faculty member challenging their knowledge of the Trans experience when turning in a paper and the frustration they felt:

> Sometimes it just feels like cishet people, or white people, anyone … they feel like they know a little bit and then they'll wanna be acting like they have the same knowledge as you. And I mean, I'm glad you know your little stuff, it's cute, but my lived experience will always trump that.

They also had an experience with a different professor who asked everyone to share their pronouns in class, a practice other participants valued; however, this professor proceeded to misgender Ro even after they had let themselves be vulnerable with the class about their identity:

> … and then on top of that, there was two of us that … used different pronouns or whatever, and then she had the nerve to refer to both of us as female. So, it was

> just like it didn't even matter. So, it was like you put yourself through that stress of having to out yourself to people that you don't even know, and then she didn't even respect it anyway.

Cecilia and Kai reported similar issues, including professors not respecting a preferred name or correct name:

> Cecilia: So, I guess at the university, the most hard barrier would be definitely interacting with professors. Yeah, because some professors just don't really acknowledge any preferred name at all, you know, and they just call you by your legal last name or something like that. Or some professors call students by middle names …. Yeah, that might just not work out as well.

> Kai: Yeah, usually if they're using the wrong name and pronouns, and sometimes even after you'll go in, let them know several times, and in one case, when I was in a class with my best friend, even her bringing it up to the professor and the professor was still continued to use the wrong name and pronouns …. I feel like it could be a bit better in the classroom, though, sometimes. 'Cause even though whenever we're having sign in sheets, we'll have a preferred name pronouns and whatnot, but sometimes the professor doesn't really acknowledge it, and I've had that happen numerous times. I even have it happening right now in classes where I even have to bring it up to the professor and be like, "Hey, that's my birth name that's on there. I don't go by that." So, I think it's just certain things in this system that most likely needs to change, and it's taking a while.

Nidell and Chrys discussed some of the reasons they had chosen not to come out at all in class, explaining that they found it easier to just avoid the name/pronoun conversation altogether because it would make it difficult to connect with that professor or because they did not feel like the professor would be open to the conversation.

> Nidell: If I was more vocally out, it might be more of an issue with … so if I was to be more vocal in classes and other sorts of things about expressing myself, I could see some of the connections with professors being more difficult because a lot of the professors that we have in my department are definitely older, and from … things that they've talked about, whether it's an offhand comment during a lecture or they're talking about something after class has ended, those sorts of things, I've sort of picked up the idea, although I couldn't confirm it, that it might be a little more difficult.

> Chrys: In terms of professors, I probably wouldn't bring it up in class because I may have you for this seven-week class and then I'm never going to have you again. And that was, you know, kind of the case with this [psychology of]

> marriage class, where there were all these little red flags and I was like, “I'm not going to say anything about being bi. I'm just going to say that I'm dating a man because I am …” and I'm not going to say anything about my gender because I'm never going to take this man again. And I kind of took the class on a whim and ended up not really liking it, so I'll probably never take a similar class.

A number of participants also shared that they were indifferent about faculty and not concerned about connecting with them, either because they felt too distant from instructors or because it may not have felt worth it to be authentic with them about their identity due to the potential risks connected to coming out. In response to the question of if they felt like their identity affected their experience in the classroom, Rom said, “Probably less with professors and more with the student body and classmates, 'cause most professors, they got pronouns on the sheet. They're like, ‘Yeah, I have 400 people in this class,’” getting at the idea that they most likely would go unnoticed in a larger class, so it might not be worth their time to connect. Ben expressed a similar sentiment when asked if his identity affected his classroom experience:

> I don't think that that has been affected quite as much, simply because with faculty, you know, most of the time I'm not going to even get to the level where I would need to come out to them. It's much more a professional basis.

Nidell and Chrys shared a deeper trepidation with being authentic with professors:

> Nidell: So, a lot of professors are older and there is sort of the stereotype, you know, that older people are not as accepting of it, and so I think that connotation definitely comes into play with a lot of the faculty on campus that are not professors. They are younger, at least in the departments I've worked in. They come from a background of education or social work or something similar to that. And because of that, because they're not associated directly from a STEM field, which is, you know, in the past, historically, very heterosexual, white, male dominated, a lot more of them come across as more open to a lot of different things. So, I could think of a number of different faculty members that I've worked with that I wouldn't feel comfortable with.
>
> Chrys: [B]ut I think that sometimes my nervousness about whether or not my gender will be accepted makes me more cautious in trying to form those stronger connections. Not knowing if a professor is going to deadname me or misgender

> me makes me nervous to say, “Oh, hey, my pronouns are actually they/them,” and start really forming that connection.

Kira felt some of this same anxiety about being her authentic self with her instructors. She had a TA who did not necessarily invalidate her identity but did essentially tell her that he would not put in the effort to make sure he was not misgendering or deadnaming her:

> I've had one TA, I think it was just one TA, where I told him and he was still accepting towards it, but he was like, “You know I have 100 students. Like, I will probably mess up.” So, he kind of put it on me to remind him of that whenever I contacted him, which wasn't ideal, but I guess it ended up working out? … He told me, “You know, in emails if you could just say, ‘Hey, this is ….’ You know, say your preferred name so I know who it is.” It’s one of those ones where it's like, it's not my job to do this, you should be doing this by yourself, but I mean, sure ….

From having similar experiences, Kai suggested that professors do a better job of listening to their students and spoke about what kind of impact that can have on Trans students:

> More of just listening to [their] students a bit more to see what they want changed, and not having to fight for [fixing other issues on campus] for so long. And especially with professors, being able to be like, “Hey, if your student identifies as this or this, then just be knowledgeable of that.” You know, even though it might look like a really small thing, it could matter a lot. So, it's kind of just pushing to create a bit more awareness, even with really small things.

Faculty had both a positive and negative effect on participants with regard to their gender and desire or ability to be out in their classes and feel respected. Faculty can have a profound impact on students (Garvey & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2012; Linley et al., 2016)—they have the ability to make a student’s experience meaningful or painful, depending on how they choose to interface with them. Although it may seem small, using someone’s correct name and pronouns—an experience the cisgender majority of students can take for granted—is an important step in creating an inclusive classroom.

Class Environment/Curriculum. Participants were asked what the classroom experience was like for Trans students on their campuses. They shared both positive and negative experiences; some focused more on the classroom environment itself, and others more on what was being taught in class. Here is what Ben and Nidell had to say about their comfort levels during class with regard to being out or not:

> Ben: So, I would say that I feel welcome, but not as a Trans person, because they're not even aware that I am Trans. So, I think if I were to come out I would probably feel a little less welcome, but I'm not going to do that. So, in my classes, I feel fine just with the way they perceive me, but if that illusion was shattered, then maybe not.
>
> Nidell: I honestly would probably say no [I would not feel comfortable being out], and I think that's just because of STEM itself and a lot of the students that I know are in it. Definitely in terms of, like, that's not something I would really bring up at all. If somebody, if my professor started going around to be like, "Oh, we're gonna introduce ourselves and use pronouns," I honestly would probably lie and say I use he/him pronouns. And definitely in terms of expression, doing so would be a little more of a challenge.

In a somewhat similar vein, Ro said that they found classes easier to navigate when the teachers were not paying attention to who they were. Ro was asked, do you feel comfortable in your classes?

> It depends, class to class. That one [teacher who asked everyone to share their pronouns], ironically, I felt very not welcome in that class because of that. I think if she hadn't made the point to do that, it would have been better, versus other classes where they don't even bother to do anything because they're like, first of all, you're just going to do work. So I feel the most welcomed in classes with professors that only half know the student names. It's like the anonymity makes it feel nice 'cause I don't have to even worry about telling them something, they just need my assignments in.

Kira, in response to the same question, said that she had mostly felt comfortable, but there were times when other students made her feel uneasy:

> Yeah, a pretty decent amount of the time I do. There have been some moments where, I think it was in either chem recitation or something, where we would get split up into groups and I was in a group of all guys. I would kind of get those stares of like, "What the fuck?" which isn't exactly a great feeling, but that only happened like once or twice.

Kai remembered an instance when they shared their sexuality in a class in order to help their peers understand something about sexual and romantic identities:

> I think it was my sophomore [or] freshman year that we were talking about sexual romantic identities, and I know that the professor was trying to explain it and there were other students in the classroom that were really confused about it. Some of them actually had a bit of a negative commentary to it, just by their tone of voice. But I remember being able to, I raised my hand up in the classroom to explain it a bit more. Even said, "Hey, I identify as that." And so, it was nice to pretty much just being able to voice how I felt and not really be put down for it.

Beth had the opposite experience; she was asked if her sexual orientation influenced her classroom experience at all:

> It does affect me in some way because some people still view sexuality …as a form of degeneracy, which is something I'm very uncomfortable with, 'cause I've definitely seen people voice opinions similar to that which is not very great. Rather an antique ideology there, buddy. So yeah, I'd say that's probably the closest I've had to a unique experience in terms of my bisexuality in the classroom or curriculum.

Rom shared examples of how the content or curriculum in the classroom influenced them:

> One of my examples was from anatomy [class], some scenarios even when it says in the course [curriculum] that sex is separated from gender in these presentations and all that. It ends up being more sex is separated from "unconventional gender," I suppose is the way to put it. Where you almost never hear about anything with intersex anatomy, which is more common than people with red hair or people with green eyes …. And then with me being a psychology and pre-medicine student, I have, first-hand, all that getting thrown straight at me, of just the medical side of how we view Transness and queerness, as well …. And then in cases of psychology or anatomy classes, like I had mentioned before, it can be alienating at times if not handled correctly and can make it where you don't feel welcome because you don't feel like you should exist by the definitions you're being given. And being told, "I hate you, you're horrible, you're going to burn in hell," is one thing, but then when you're somewhere you're supposed to respect

> and trust this person, a place of learning and knowledge, and you're not having hate put at you, you're being told, "You, as you are, do not exist. What you think you are and what you understand yourself to be isn't something that can be. This is a delusion," that is what comes across when stuff like those outdated curriculums are not handled correctly.

The messaging Rom took away from these classes, the implication that they could not exist or that other Trans or Queer identities were seen as delusions, feels troubling. They explained that while there was an expectation that negative messaging would come from those who blatantly do not support LGBTQ+ people, not being included in a curriculum or receiving incorrect information about one's own identity in a class could be just as harmful. Chrys addressed a similar notion of feeling like LGBTQ+ people were ignored in curriculum, even when it was relevant to the topic of conversation:

> This [psychology of] marriage class was particularly frustrating because just so many small things, so many just little micro aggressions. My professor always said he or she, never said they. My professor, we had two chapters that we didn't go over. Guess what they were? Yeah, they were gender identity and LGBTQ relationships. And then, you know, in other classes, people just don't acknowledge it. In developmental psychology, we never talked about same-sex parents. We never talked about how that experience may be different for children …. In terms of the curriculum, we're largely ignored. And, you know, going back to the marriage class, we never talked about gender identities. We never talked about sexual identities, and even when we did talk about studies that mentioned other relationships, it was always homosexual relationships and never acknowledged any other sexualities, any other kind of identities that were in play in those studies. And I think that's a problem with psychology and not just UAU. But in terms of the curriculum, even when it's relevant, we're ignored.

Beth shared that she had a similar experience with regard to the erasure of LGBTQ+ identities in class:

> When the topic of like, oh, they're talking about this person's sexuality in terms of a historical context, so I'm like, "This person, yeah, I doubt that person was straight …" and that's the only way I could say there's been a noticeable difference [in my classroom experience as compared to that of straight students].

Kai had a positive experience sharing about their identity to help a fellow student understand romantic orientation better, but most participants had some negative experiences in the classroom. Ben, Nidell, Ro, Kira, and Beth discussed their discomfort in classes: for some, being out did not feel like an option, some found being ignored by professors preferrable to the alternative, and others were disconcerted by their closed-minded peers. Rom, Chrys, and Beth also shared some negative content or curricular experiences they endured which made them feel ignored and irrelevant.

Identity in the South

A plethora of data were collected about participants' feelings and experiences around gender expression and gender norms connected to both the South and just the general experience of the participants. Through data analysis, there were 4 themes that emerged: (a) gender expression/gender norms, (b) binary vs. nonbinary gender experiences, and (c) other important social group identities.

Gender Expression/Gender Norms

Nidell and Rom shared that the expectations from society and culture played a part in how they did or did not feel comfortable expressing themselves. Although they might have wanted to perform gender in a particular way, they might simultaneously not have wanted to because of how others would see them:

> Rom: As much as I would love to, it is very hard to set yourself into a middle ground. I feel comfortable in the middle ground on basically everything with my identity except for politics, but that's another story. But the middle ground is where I'm comfortable, but at the same time that is the area that makes other people the most uncomfortable, especially down here. I believe the reason for that is because it's not something they know. People like putting things into boxes, and

> when you can't be put into a box people don't like it. So, you gotta go either full girl mode or full boy mode, and the in between is what's going to get you in trouble.
>
> Nidell: I think a lot of it is, at least on campus, there is sort of the idea [of] both what's considered professional and also just general views of people that don't completely lie on one end of the gender spectrum. And so, for people that, you know, want to present right, so I identify as genderfluid/nonbinary, so it changes a little how much I would like to express it, you know, depending upon the day. And so … knowing [how] people [are], I think for one, showing up to campus and doing [differing gender presentations], so some days presenting some ways, and some days changing that, would be very jarring for a lot of people, and so that is, you know, a potential turn-off. And also, I can't think of if there are any positions that enforce any sort of dress code, but definitely in STEM fields, I think what's considered professional is a big hindrance …. I think it's one of the biggest hang-ups in going full force, like, "Yeah, I'm gonna do what I want today." So, where it'll come out is a lot more minor, like, "Oh, I'm just gonna paint my nails," or if I'm gonna do any makeup, it's gonna be extremely light, almost unnoticeable, or my hair is longer, but I'm not going to style it in an in a feminine way. That sort of thing.

Ben shared how he might change his presentation because of how others might perceive him in person versus online:

> Oh, definitely. I have not had any sort of surgeries yet, so if I'm in public, I'm wearing my binder and I'm also just much more aware of maybe the way that I'm walking, the way that I'm just presenting myself. Maybe I'm slouching a little less, or just various stuff like that. Have to worry about the way that I dress a little more, whereas online I don't even have to have my camera on. And maybe I don't even unmute myself during class, depending on what's going on.

Chrys shared the assumptions others had made about their gender identity, which were often incorrect and hurtful:

> [S]o this is where we get back to the complicatedness of not just what I identify as, but what other people identify me as. I think being identified as a woman and being assumed to be cisgender has been an obstacle, because on the rare occasion that we do talk about gender identities in a class, the assumption is that I'm not one of those, I'm not Trans. The assumption is that I'm not genderqueer because I for the most part look feminine and dress feminine, and that's just how I feel happy. But as a result, I'm perceived as a woman. And so there have been obstacles and discussions about like, "Well, why do you have any authority to speak on what transgender people experience?" And it's like, "Hey, have you ever considered that I might be Trans?"

Nidell shared more about their personal experience with gender norms, their family's expectations, and the restrictions they felt around gender that they connected to the South:

> I think there are a lot of things in the South that are considered not acceptable because they don't fall within traditional gender norms …. For example, I remember when I was a kid, one day I was going home from a sports practice and I was like, "You know, I want a ponytail!" And my mom was like, "Only girls wear ponytails. You can't do that." And now it's like, why would that even be a thing? Longer hair in men is much more acceptable now in a lot of places. A lot of people I know it's just like, "Oh, yeah, it's fine. You can do what you want," although there are people that I know here are very against it, like, "No, that's not what you need to do. That's feminine. You shouldn't be doing that." That sort of thing.

Gender is complicated, as can be seen here in participant responses. Participants spoke about needing to consider their own internal feelings about how they wanted or needed to express themselves, how others would perceive them, and how that was rooted in both regional and cultural expectations of gender norms. Navigating these expectations can take a toll. Ro shared that if they lived in Mississippi, where part of their extended family lived, they didn't think they would be able to truly be themselves: "There's no way, if I had to live there, I could be authentic with myself." They explained that a place that was more urban might be better, but this particular location would not be a place where they would be able to be open about their sexuality or gender identity. Rom shared some consequences of not being able to be their authentic self: "You're going to get depressed. I mean, now I'll admit it. I get depressed. I get really insanely bad anxiety. But on the days when I can open up more and be myself more, those are the days when I feel like I can see a light at the end of the tunnel a lot more." Rom also shared that on those days

when they got to express themselves more freely, they felt hopeful for the future, an important takeaway about the joy associated with being able to be yourself.

Binary vs. Nonbinary Gender Experiences

Five of the 11 participants in this research said they identified as either nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, or genderfluid; the other six identified themselves as Transgender. A theme emerged from responses highlighting a difference in how others perceived both of these groups differently. Those who fell into the nonbinary identity were mostly perceived as if their genders aligned with their sex assigned at birth. Their responses to this misperception varied; Rom explained that for them, it was sometimes a matter of safety:

> I mean, I think it would be very ignorant of me to say no, that they haven't, because those are core pieces of how people see you. If I wasn't able to present myself as a straight white cis dude, I would definitely have a lot more struggles than I have; that's undeniable. At the same time, though, I'm not a straight cis white dude, and it can leave me with this option of … I can either be safe or I can be who I am.

Rom shared that they had felt the need to choose between being safe and being who they really were, and that if they presented in a way that aligned with their gender, those around them might treat them differently. They also acknowledged that because of the way they were presenting at the time of the interview, they may have avoided some struggles. Ro helped to break down this experience in the context of the "privilege within the oppression," considering the idea that society may treat you better because you are perceived to be cisgender while simultaneously invalidating your existence as nonbinary—an act of oppression itself. Ro said,

> I know one thing that makes me a little uncomfortable sometimes is that it feels like, I'm guessing, I have a little bit of impostor syndrome, and kind of the privilege within the oppression? It depends, but all this stuff is in my head, and so even when I feel more uncomfortable versus less uncomfortable, nobody sees that and so they don't really know. So, it's all in my head, so sometimes I feel like I have a privilege within it, and it makes me uncomfortable 'cause I'm not really used to having privileges in many of my identities outside of physical ability status and nationality type stuff. So, it makes me feel a little uncomfortable in that regard, because I know it's a privilege in one way, but it's also literally being oppressed. It's like the privilege is that I don't care [about being misgendered] because I'm just a laidback person, but it's still a literal oppression [to be misgendered], so I don't even know.

Due to Ro not caring about what others thought, they said that their journey towards graduation had not been affected by others perceiving them as cisgender. Part of this "privilege" was that Ro could "keep that aspect of [their] life separate from class," and therefore it didn't really affect them as much. They also explained, "[It's] kind of like [having a] shield …. If I don't want to let them know, I don't have to let them know [about my gender]." However, as they mentioned previously, this is not a true privilege: while they might have benefitted at times from others' misperceptions, they ultimately knew that this was a problem. Interestingly, because of their security in their own identity, they stated that it was a problem for the people making incorrect assumptions and not for themselves. When asked if they cared about how people perceived them, they said,

> I care but I don't care at the same time. Sometimes I like to just point it out to people, just to make them nervous. I'll be like, "Why are you cissing me?" I won't even care, I'll just be like, oh, I just want to make them nervous, I just wanna make them think about it. But I mean, I don't really care, 'cause I'm like, I don't even know you …. I mean, the problem lies with them. It doesn't affect me, but I know that it's an inherent problem that they constantly, you know, [are reinforcing] that cisgenderism.

Nidell shared a similar experience: "I would say in a lot of situations people would see me and would assume just I am average, straight, cishet, because of the way that I usually

present," and because of this they felt that they experienced similar benefits to those Ro mentioned previously. Nidell said,

> … since I identify as nonbinary, it's easier for me to go through with some of the currently structured things, like male and female dressing rooms, right? That's a lot easier for me than people who are transitioning. I think it could definitely be more accommodating. I don't know the specifics on it, but I know we have separate dressing rooms. I don't think we have any unisex options, although I know our campus has been talking about providing that. That's something that they're interested in, is in the works, possibly. That's the biggest way I could see it being initiated, was actually using those locker rooms. Like I said, with me, even though it's not accommodating, it's still usable for myself, right? Because I can still present masculine and get by.

In Nidell's responses throughout this chapter, they shared about not knowing what their future held in terms of gender identity or expression, and they discussed the limitations of campus culture, negative interactions with professors, and issues in classrooms that restricted their expression. For the time being they could "get by," but it begs the question, would this exploration be more accessible if not for those issues?

Chrys also shared that they felt their welcomeness in the classroom was directly related to whether others perceived them as being cisgender:

> [P]eople do not outright perceive me as Trans or genderqueer. I think almost everybody I meet perceives me as a woman, and because of that they accept me as a woman, and so that's the environment that I'm going into. Isn't one where people are like, "Oh well, this person is transgender." It's like, "Oh, this is a woman."

Although Chrys might have been "welcome" in class, they were not being fully welcomed as themselves because their peers continued to perceive them as a woman. Kai shared that they were also perceived as cisgender, but it hadn't affected them the same way:

> [N]ot a lot of people are really able to tell that I identify as Trans. And if they do, if it's possibly about a pin on my backpack when I'd be on campus, walking around and what not, and then nothing would really be said much. But I mean, that didn't really affect a whole lot with me interacting with others.

Kai said that not a lot of people could tell that they were Trans. In many cases, Trans people rely on being "stealth" for safety reasons; however, this issue for nonbinary participants was less about "passing" and more about their peers, teachers, and others around them making assumptions about their gender, their pronouns, and their identity in general. It is often an issue of comfort, rather than just safety: being perceived as the correct gender is a positive experience for Trans folks, but really, no one wants to be seen as someone they are not. Ben talked about how being stealth on campus had shaped his experience:

> I am very stealth on campus. I don't experience a lot of the hardships that other Trans people on campus might, maybe like [those who] don't pass as well or who haven't transitioned yet and are in the midst of doing so and that sort of stuff. Because I transitioned before coming to campus, so except for people who have managed to clock me, and usually they are people who are supportive of the community.

Unlike Kai, who wore a pin on their backpack to signify their identity, Ben did not do so, believing, as he remarked in an earlier passage, that he would "face a lot more issues" if he did. Catherine also reported experiencing a positive campus climate, for similar reasons: "It helps that I pass quite well, so I don't really have to worry about being harassed or anything for being Trans. But even then, the people on campus tend to be pretty nice." The experiences of binary Trans individuals like Ben and Catherine may be somewhat different from those of other Trans folks; although gender norms are harmful to everyone, Trans and cis people alike, when Ben and Catherine "pass," there is safety afforded to them because the cis people around them are not going to harass them for not "fitting in." However, for people who are nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming, gender expression has no fixed expectation; therefore, "passing" is simply not an option.

Regardless of whether they had a binary or nonbinary gender, participants expressed that they had to choose safety over authentic gender expression in certain situations. There is a dichotomy between gender expression and "feeling safe": participants said that they often compromised how they expressed themselves so others would perceive their gender incorrectly, just to feel safe. Rom summarized this from their experience:

> And that comes to part of what I was saying about how difficult American grind culture can be on Trans people. Because especially if you don't want to do or you're pre any hormone replacement therapies or any medical transition care, if you haven't had any of that or you don't want any of that, if you want to pass as one way or the other, to the extent where you're not going to get clocked and it's not going to be …. Unfortunately, a lot of it comes down to safety here in the South. A lot of it ends up coming back to safety versus expression.

There are any many people with a binary gender (man or woman) who are not cisgender and do not want to partake in any type of medical transition, and their choices—as well as their gender—should be respected. However, what Rom was saying is that in the South, this might feel more dangerous because people might harass or even physically harm those whom they perceived as Trans. Graham shared a similar sentiment about not wanting to be perceived as Trans:

> But in general, just being careful not [to out myself]. For example, at work if someone ever did ask me anything about part of my identity, I would not tell them I was Trans, just for my safety, just in case it was someone that really hates Trans people and they wanna hurt me, and just stuff like that. You just have to be really careful as a Trans person in the South. And that, people that aren't Trans don't have to worry about.

Kai talked about wanting to be out but having had negative experiences in the past; they later decided to be more selective about who they were out to. When asked if they felt welcome in the South, they said,

> At the moment I don't, 'cause every time I do try to express that part of myself to others, even if it's in a work environment, it hasn't ever been a positive reaction. So, it's usually me having to pick and choose depending on the people around me if it's like, "Hey, I wonder if I can be even more vulnerable and share this part of myself." But so far, it has pretty much been negative every time. I've been learning not to let that stop me so I could at least try to educate others about it, but it can be pretty frustrating still.

Beth and Cecilia also talked about why they had decided not to come out yet. Here are their responses when they were asked why they were not out on campus:

> Beth: [T]he only reason why I'm not fully out is because, I don't know …. Texas especially, it's not *deep* [emphasis added] Deep South, obviously, but it is still pretty scary and there are some people …. You could look at our voting and see that Ted Cruz is still elected, *which is kind of great* [emphasis added], and find out that there's some people who would prefer not to see Trans people out in public out and about.

> Cecilia: I haven't really come out, but I think I've become more aware of the risk because everybody talks about it on campus, of how, "I'm transgender and blah, blah, blah things happen to me …." And then I wish I was just born as another gender or something. Yeah, so I do hear a lot of things …

Beth and Cecilia highlighted some fears that they had regarding why they had not come out yet. Beth talked about the political climate in her state, and Cecilia shared that her peers had talked about negative things happening to them. In both cases, they articulated very legitimate concerns.

Other Important Social Group Identities

As a part of the interview, participants were asked if there were other identities they held that had played a significant part in their journey towards graduation. In response to this question, different participants said that their race, sexuality, ability status, and socio-economic status had influenced their experience. Cecilia discussed the inaccessibility of medical transitions, owing to their expense: "I have been trying to move

towards doing some transitioning stuff, but the costs that have been told to me, they are pretty significant." Cecilia expressed that coming from a lower socio-economic background had affected her college experience, making it difficult to afford things ranging from transportation to school supplies and even necessities like food.

Another identity that was discussed by multiple participants was race. Eight of the participants identified themselves as white on the initial survey they took, one as Asian, and two as Black/African American. Ro and Nidell spoke about how their race had affected them on campus in connection to their gender and sexuality, and a few other white students spoke about their white privilege and how that had impacted them in connection to their Trans identity.

Ro spoke about their experience with race and gender expression, specifically with regard to who is perceived to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community:

> I find also things like this are viewed as a "white people thing." So white people that fit that stereotype of like dyed hair and Doc Martens and stuff like that, I feel like they may feel a little more targeted, just because they're more visible, because they're fitting that stereotype that's built for them.

Although Ro was speaking about how white students who have dyed hair and wear Doc Martens might be assumed to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community because of their whiteness and therefore might encounter more harassment, there is also the implication that Ro did not feel like those external signifiers would show them to be a part of the community because they were reserved for white people.

> With me, I can walk around, and people are just gonna assume …. It's like, "Okay, that's just a little girl, a 12-year-old. What is a 12-year-old doing here?" But you know, a lot of the people in LGBTQ+ Support Group or whatever are white people with colored hair and stuff, and I know they probably wear shorter hair, they probably can feel it more, 'cause people definitely see them as [gender nonconforming or nonbinary, etc] …. White people, I feel like they have the room to present themselves in a way that could make them obviously and clearly gay,

> and they don't have to have that same pressure. Even if they aren't gay, people will still be like, "Oh, well, you look a little gay." I feel like white people have much more room to look gay or look visibly gay, whereas Black people … it's a very specific look, and it's like if you don't look like this and you're not a super over feminized Black man or just a stud for a Black woman … or in between … you know, it's just they don't perceive you like that.

Many LGBTQ+ people will actively choose to dress, wear their hair, or do their makeup a certain way to signify to other Queer people that they are a part of the community, much like Ro described. However, they made the point that these markers are not seen the same way for Black and Brown Queer people, which can feel invalidating or isolating. Ro also talked about how it was difficult for them to feel totally included in Black student organizations on campus as well:

> … Black Orgs, I don't feel like I really feel like going just because they just have ideas of what Black people are and it's like, I like those same things, I am those things, but I'm more than that, and I feel like there's not room for all of that. And maybe there is. It's just like I don't feel like finding it.

Ro spoke to an issue that many students of color experience—feeling like they must choose between their race and their sexuality/gender and not feeling like there are spaces on campus for Queer students of color (Pryor, 2018).

Nidell shared their concern about people in LGBTQ+ spaces perceiving them as a cis man because of their whiteness:

> I think being white has scared me away from some events in the sense that the way that I look, just physical appearance, doesn't necessarily seem as welcoming in certain spaces. So, I've had different events that are LGBTQ+ organized, so through our department or through the organizations on campus, and before when I … had short brown hair and I was like a very stereotypical looking heterosexual male, white male, which even if honestly people probably wouldn't care personally, scared me off in the sense of like, "Okay, what if people see that like, 'Why is this person here?'" In that sense.

These fears prevented Nidell from participating more in LGBTQ+ spaces because they were worried that others would question their presence there.

Graham, Nidell, and Ben all spoke about their whiteness and white privilege both in connection to their Trans identity and separately on its own. Graham said about being a white Trans man,

> I think white Trans people, they definitely have struggles, but I think that as a white Trans person, I have privilege over any other Trans person. Because, and I definitely think even just being a Trans masc person, because one, it just feels more acceptable to people as a whole. To me, the pattern seems to be that people are more accepting of female to male people than male to female.

Graham continued, describing what it is like being white in the South more generally:

> 'Cause for some people being white in the South just means they got an easy life. They don't think about anything twice, they don't have to worry as much as minorities, and like I said, they can always count on someone like them being around them when they go places.

Nidell talked about their experiences of white privilege as a STEM student:

> I think that my race in particular, in some ways it's helpful because I don't get questions that I know other people, other friends that I've had, sometimes have gotten. So, since I'm in STEM, that's my field of study, and engineering, I don't get questions like, “Okay, you think you can do this?” I have had friends that, talking with advisors in high school, I don't think in college, but maybe some of them experienced it, ask, “Okay, are you sure this is what you really want to get into? Are you prepared for the course load?” I've never been asked that before, that sort of thing, and so … I've definitely experienced some of those privileges in that sense.

Like Nidell, Ben talked about his privileges in his engineering major as compared to his friends who were not white:

> I haven’t lived as anything other than a white man on campus, so I haven't experienced what it is like to be a girl on campus or to be nonwhite on campus, so all I can really take from is the experience of people that I've talked to. And so, one of my friends in my major is an Asian woman, so obviously she's very much in the minority in my major and she's definitely had a lot of different experiences for me. She quite frequently has t tell men to stop hitting on her in the major. Various stuff like that, which I obviously wouldn't experience. I definitely just think it's made things easier for me.

Ben acknowledged the privilege he had in his major as a white man: even if he did not feel totally comfortable with the culture or climate of the department, he still may have had an easier time navigating it than his friend. Ben also delved deeper into how white privilege manifested in his experience in Queer spaces on campus:

> A fair amount of the other LGBT people on campus that I talk to and interact with are white themselves as well, so I definitely don't experience any sort of racism in those communities. 'Cause I'm sure even if people aren't being outwardly racist in those communities, you might feel a little excluded if you aren't white. So being in the majority definitely helps in that regard.

According to participants, race can play a huge role in how you are perceived by others, both inside and outside of LGBTQ+ spaces. Participants expressed that being white and Trans can make things a little bit easier to navigate the campus, the STEM field, and even LGBTQ+ spaces. Ro also shared how difficult it can be as a Queer Black person to find space to be yourself.

Sexuality emerged as a subtheme within the other important identities theme. This part of participants' experiences bled into many of the answers that were shared. Six participants discussed their sexuality in many of their responses during interviews. Ro, Nidell, Beth, Chyrs, Kai, and Rom frequently included their sexuality in answers that were specifically focused on gender; these identities are often associated with each other and therefore can seem connected. Chrys and Kai shared how their sexual identities had an impact on how others perceived them:

> Chrys: Yes, I think that my identity as someone who's bisexual has a big impact, especially in terms of dating. Sexuality and gender go hand in hand in dating, and it's really complicated once you put all those things together. So, there were some experiences, like my sophomore year, I was on Tinder like most people, and I can't remember if I had my … pretty sure I had my pronouns in my profile, and people would swipe right just to make fun of me and just to be like, "Why are your pronouns that?" And I will say that this was worse when I was in [Alabama Town] than it was when I was in [Alabama City], but I still had people do it while

> I was in [Alabama City]. I also had people asking for threesomes and I was like, "Whoa, no, that's not what I'm here for. I'm just trying to find somebody [to] date." And especially 'cause I was looking for a serious relationship I was like, "Please read my whole profile."
>
> Kai: I would say people being able to actually accept it as a thing that other people feel, especially with asexuality. 'Cause whenever I have gone and tried to bring it up with others, they'll just straight away say that "Oh, well, you will find the right person," or, "That's not a real thing." And that was always something that bothered me a lot 'cause, well, just because I don't feel the same way as you doesn't mean that you have to invalidate my feelings or what not, or try to even go and fix it in some way. 'Cause I had a lot of people in my life telling me that I was broken because of that … thinking that it was something truly wrong with me. But it took a lot of just researching more information and connecting with others to where I felt more comfortable.

Both Chrys and Kai shared about their sexual identities and how others around them had treated them differently because of it. Stereotypes or stigmas of bisexual people often involve the over sexualization of that person, as Chrys encountered, and Kai ran into a somewhat opposite issue of others assuming that they were broken because of their asexuality and that they would eventually find the right person to break them from this identity that others did not see as valid.

The final subtheme that emerged within other important identities was connected to ability status, specifically neurotype. Several participants identified as neurodivergent and shared how this identity had affected them on campus:

> Rom: [A]lso one huge piece of identity for me, by the way, is I have very severe ADHD. It is debilitating, but it's a huge part of who I am and plays a huge part in my identity as a Queer person.
>
> Ro: So, I have mental illnesses and stuff like that and neurodivergencies. So yeah, it gets hard, especially this last semester. I'm about to turn in something right now and say, "Yeah, I didn't turn it in because I have mental illness and I couldn't do it," so it kind of makes it a little rough. 'Cause some professors are a lot more lenient with that and then some professors are like, "Well, if you can't get DSS … [then I won't give you an accommodation]."

> Catherine: I'm not really sure it qualifies as an identity per say, but not being neurotypical, like ADHD and on the autism spectrum, it definitely had a big impact on a lot of things in my life in general. Yeah, if you can imagine, I don't have anything in specific to say. It's just like those kind of make impacts on my ability to get things done and socialize and all that …. It's kind of gone away a lot. When I was first socializing as a Trans person, it would give so much anxiety over being seen as a guy or coming off as creepy or whatever. I have kind of gotten over it since I just kind of have been out longer.
>
> Kira: I would probably say [autism] just adds to [my Trans identity], this sort of inherent feeling of difference that I've always had. For my entire life, standing in a room full of people, I just feel like an alien, like I was just different from other people. So you mix being autistic with being Trans and it just kind of adds to that effect.

Rom, Catherine, and Kira talked about their neurodivergence as a part of their gender and Ro discussed how it had affected their academic pursuits. In either case, this identity played a part in their experiences. Rom went on to say that many emotional or cognitive issues that Queer people face are connected to their overall negative treatment by society and subsequent feeling of exclusion and isolation. Kira and Catherine touched on this in their responses, with Catherine having a feeling of anxiety due to the potential incorrect assumptions from those around her, and Kira feeling distance from those around her—feelings stemming from how their autism and gender intersected.

Location: Urban vs. Rural

The final category where responses fell was an urban versus rural experience for participants, both in the South and otherwise. Three themes emerged within this category: (a) similarity to other regions, (b) urban exceptionalism, and (c) LGBTQ+ community resources. Participants shared some overarching thoughts on the difference between urban versus rural experiences for LGBTQ+ people. Ro said, "I still appreciate the South and … I mean, I just, I'm not big on rural areas, but there's rural areas everywhere. So, I

can appreciate them. I just don't want to live in them." Similarly, Graham shared his appreciation for the South, but that positive connection was contingent on not living in a rural place:

> Yeah, so my experience in the South has been, I feel like I've had a better experience … [as] a gay Trans person [because] I didn't grow up in a super rural place. … My parents definitely came from more rural places than we lived, and they're boomers, and so they definitely raised me Christian. Just classic Southern raising …. It just wasn't rural *deep* [emphasis added] Deep South, so I feel like that changes my experience from other people that might have grown up in small towns, 'cause I grew up in a suburb of [Tennessee City]. And yeah, I feel like I had a common experience as a Southerner, but a little bit different 'cause I didn't have a rural, really Deep South experience.

Graham rated his experience as better due to his proximity to [Tennessee City] and distance from a more rural, more Deep South location, such as where his parents were raised. Ben gave some context to this idea, saying,

> Most urban areas in general are going to be less conservative compared to the rural areas, and I think a lot of it's just the South has more of those rural areas and less of those urban areas. So, I think [Alabama City], being a larger city, it's a little less transphobic in general.

Chrys shared more about why Trans people might have a different experience in rural places versus urban places. When asked if their experience as a Trans person was worse or different in the South as compared to other parts of the country, Chrys said,

> So, in the South in general, no. I think it's better in cities, in urban places like [Alabama City], it's better places here like Atlanta. And in rural places like where I grew up, no, absolutely not. There's not enough support. Because again, people pretend [LGBTQ+ people don't] exist, and when people do that, that means that we have no access to healthcare that we need. We have no access to any resources because those resources just don't exist there …. I think even generalizing to the South, I don't even think it's the South versus other regions. I think a lot of it is more urban versus rural, because I'm sure the same things that I experienced in a rural town in Alabama, people are experiencing in a rural town in North Dakota. So, I think it has less to do with geography and kind of more to do with population density.

Chrys speculated that their experience living in a more rural part of the South was similar to that of Trans people living in rural locations in other parts of the country, expressing the idea that transphobia and homophobia exist everywhere and are not unique to the South.

Similarity to Other Regions

Chrys and others shared more about how the South is like other regions in the U.S. and these types of oppression are not specific to one region. Chrys said, "I think in terms of ableism, transphobia, homophobia, those things exist everywhere. We, the South, are not special in having those things." Chrys gave more context to what they said about having similar experiences to other Trans people in other regions:

> Again, we just experience it in different ways, but at the same time we sometimes experience it the same ways. So, I think that a lot of Trans college students are probably experiencing the same things I am, where they're fighting against being perceived one way or they're fighting against trying to change their name and trying to get the right name in the system. So, in terms of culture, maybe we experience it differently, but in terms of the systems that are in place, I think there's a lot of similarities.

Cecilia expressed a similar sentiment: when asked if she faced more or different obstacles than Trans students in other parts of the country, she said, "I don't think so, because I feel like we go through the similar things, family and not accepting, and then university just being difficult, and then financially having to figure out medical stuff." Catherine also voiced the idea that university issues that affect Trans students in the South are not unique to the region. When asked what issues might exist for Trans students on campus, she said,

> There's a lot can go wrong. You get a certain individual professor that's really, really bad …. I don't have any experience getting a professor like that, but I do feel like that could make things worse. And then there's general things that just could make things hard for Trans people everywhere. I don't think there is anything particular to UAU, in that regard.

Ro shared that issues that Trans student run into are not confined just to the South; they felt that these institutional issues would persist unless there was a specific college just for LGBTQ+ students:

> I feel like it's kind of the same everywhere. It's just an institutional thing … 'cause, I mean, it's not like it's just in the South. I think people just expect it more in the South. But I have friends that go to schools in like Indiana and stuff and they still feel like this. I don't know, the only place that I'm maybe like, it wouldn't happen, if they have a gay college somewhere, if they had that.

Chrys, Cecilia, Catherine, and Ro expressed that the issues that affected Trans students at their institutions were not unique to their specific university or even just to the South, but rather part of a pattern of marginalization that Trans students faced across the country. Although there was a shared sentiment that Trans issues were pervasive, there was also a general acknowledgement that urban areas provided better supports, resources, and climate for Trans people.

Urban Exceptionalism

Participants shared that they believed there were several issues which either did or did not affect them as Trans people because of their location. Six of the participants from Alabama City expressed that this city in particular was an exception to the prevailing negative climate of the South. Ro shared about their experience living in Alabama City as compared to other places they had traveled:

> But I think being in [Alabama City] is very important to look at, ‘cause it gives you a lot more room to be you, versus when I go to Southern Alabama City, I’m

> just standing there and I'm like, "Are y'all looking at my rainbow lanyard, or no?" I have a friend on Twitter that lives in Southern Alabama City and they're [bisexual] and they're just like, "I just need to get out of here."

Ro felt that having a visible marker like a rainbow lanyard might make them uncomfortable in a smaller Southern city or town, versus Alabama City, where they felt there was more room to be themselves. They explained further:

> I think [Alabama City] is a little reflective of how it maybe it is in cities, bigger cities. Not huge, but just metropolitan. Because when you look at the [election] maps of each state, there's always that little blue piece. I mean, some states have more blue, but there's always that little blue piece, and that's usually their most "city-ish" place, most metropolitan place. And so, I think [Alabama City] is a good representation of those places but not everywhere.

Here Ro brings in the idea that a more democratic leaning place will be more accepting and that this will tend to also be more of a larger city, such as Alabama City as opposed to a smaller, more rural place. Catherine shared the belief that more metropolitan/urban areas are more accepting, with Alabama City being a prime example of this:

> … that's why I like [Alabama City]. It's like the South without the shitty parts …. It has a lot more of that kind of cosmopolitan, urbanized culture in which it's much better to be Queer. And I remember one of the first times we went to [Alabama City], there was this little donation box at the mall for Pride Month and that kind of already tipped me off to know that I was in a better place. And there's a lot of shops and restaurants that are LGBT inclusive.

Catherine pointed out that visible markers in a city can help LGBTQ+ people get a sense of whether a place is going to be welcoming. Kai explained that Alabama City had changed since they were younger into a more LGBTQ+ friendly place, and their perception of this change had to do with the prevalence of these important markers:

> I would say at least for [Alabama City], it feels a bit more positive, especially more in recent years. But … when I first moved here as a kid, I would say it was a lot worse, as far as I was aware of …. But it's more like now in [Alabama City] there might be, in certain neighborhoods I might see, flags flying in front of people's houses and being able to recognize them or going along and seeing murals on

> walls and whatnot. Just being able to see representation a whole lot more now than before.

This outward message of acceptance via flags and murals had a positive effect on Kai's perception of the city. Kira shared a similar perspective connected to the policies and political climate of Alabama City:

> I feel like the campus and [Alabama City]'s the one sort of pocket of acceptance and decency … 'cause it's just so different from the rest of Alabama. 'Cause just the experience of … just the city of [Alabama City], I guess just from a political standpoint, they tend to have more kind of accepting and progressive policies and they tend to have more laws that are focused towards the Queer community. Plus, just from my experience, the community in general just seems to be more open-minded than the rest of Alabama.

In Alabama City, the mayor recently created the position of LGBTQ+ liaison, perhaps having a positive impact on Kira's perception of the city. Graham shared that he felt the city to be much safer than other parts of the state:

> I definitely perceive it as unsafe, not everywhere but like … if I go places outside of [Alabama City] with my girlfriend, 'cause especially for us Trans, but even now, we still look like a lesbian couple. Sometimes I'm like, "We can't hold hands here, and we can't … We're just friends here."

Alabama City felt like a safe and accepting place overall for participants. This was connected to the political climate of the city, outward markers of LGBTQ+ pride such as flags and murals, and restaurants and stores that visibly welcomed LGBTQ+ customers or clientele.

Community Resources

In some of the quotes shared earlier in this chapter, participants mentioned that in urban locations there tended to be more resources for the LGBTQ+ community. Cecilia, Chrys, and Kai specifically mentioned that one resource in particular made Alabama City

feel safer and more welcoming: the Alabama City Acceptance Center (ACAC) and Alabama City Wellness Center provide programming and healthcare that serves the LGBTQ+ population in Alabama City and the whole state of Alabama. Chrys shared, “I felt better coming to UAU knowing that I had [Alabama City Acceptance Center] and knowing that I was already kind of established with them.” Before knowing what the climate would be like for LGBTQ+ students at UAU, Chrys felt comfortable staying in Alabama City for college because they knew that the ACAC would support them. Catherine also mentioned that having pride events in Alabama City helped them feel welcome. Beth also shared that although her campus did not have HRT via the campus health services, they did direct students to resources in the community that they could utilize to receive proper medical support:

> Yeah, it's not like they give you it, but they'll give you resources to help talk to at like the Planned Parenthood here in [Texas City], and how to get it safely, how to deal with certain things and how [your body] changes and what have you, because yeah, it does change your body, definitely, and you need some people to talk about it with.

These community resources focused on supporting LGBTQ+ people have provided invaluable resources that are not usually found in more rural locations (Johnson et al., 2020; Weber, 2015).

Summary

The five overarching categories provide some organizational clarity when looking at the overall findings associated with the research question of how Trans students talk about experiencing cisgenderism within higher education in the South. These five categories are (a) Trans experiences in the South, (b) anti-Trans legislation and politics,

(c) experiences of both cisgenderism and support on Southern campuses, (d) identity in the South, and (e) location: urban vs. rural. Participants were in turn both reticent and forthright in telling their stories about cisgenderism in the South and on their campuses. Transphobia was described as both ubiquitous in the U.S. and unique to the region, the universities assessed were seen as both welcoming and problematic, and cisgenderism was present in the experiences of participants both on campus and in the region more broadly; therefore, dissonance within and amongst the data complicates the common assumption of metronormativity in the South. From this complex dataset, the prevailing findings revealed that these students reported experiencing cisgenderism more because of their location in the South but felt that being in an urban center mitigated the negative experiences they could have had, were they in more rural locations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to capture the voices of Trans students in higher education in the South, a group who often go unheard and unvalued in a location that is generally overlooked by researchers (Stone, 2018). Using a Critical Discourse Analysis framed through Critical Trans Politics allowed me to better understand how Trans students talk about their experiences of cisgenderism within the context of a larger institution (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) and oppressive system (Spade, 2015). While I am not a part of this community, I have a vested interest in the academic and social success of Trans students everywhere, especially in the South where I am located. I have served this population actively for the last three years in my role at UAU and have personally seen the academic, social, and cultural barriers that Trans students encounter in their careers at UAU. Doing a Critical Discourse Analysis through an intertextual lens bases all findings on the words and shared language of the participants. All relevant phrases and quotes were outlined in Chapter Four, allowing the reader and researcher to see the relevant intertexts. This chapter will provide a study overview, summary of findings, implications of this research, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Study Overview

The issues that I saw Trans students facing at UAU mirrored those found in other research about Trans students at other universities (Catalano, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016b; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Rankin & Garvey, 2015; Renn, 2017; Seelman, 2014; Singh et al., 2013); however, as expressed in Chapter One, there has been very little research done on the experiences of Trans students specifically in the Southeast, in fact, very little research on LGBTQ+ populations is being done in the South overall (Stone, 2018). Through relevant literature, Chapter Two revealed that institutions of higher education are steeped in cisgenderism and therefore persist in a way that harms Trans students, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Bilodeau, 2007; Goldberg, 2018; Hoffman & Pryor, 2018; Preston & Hoffman, 2015).

Chapter Three outlined that the guiding theoretical framework for this research is Critical Trans Politics (CTP). In alignment with CDA, the main goal of CTP as a theoretical framework is "to address the violence and marginalization that shortens trans lives" and the lives of those who are most marginalized (Spade, 2015, p. 50). CDA allows for research to acknowledge the role social structures play in the marginalization of groups and charges the researcher with including that data point in their gathering and analysis to ultimately increase the accuracy of their findings through "understanding of specific issues or topics—the conditions that serve to disadvantage and exclude individuals or cultures, such as hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity, or inequities in our society" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 32). Using this theoretical framework and methodological approach, the purpose of this research was to expand our current knowledge of Trans experiences by focusing on students at Southern

urban institutions and critically examining how they talk about their experiences of cisgenderism on campus. The central research question for this study is as follows: How, if at all, do Trans students talk about their encounters with cisgenderism on college campuses in connection to location and region?

Sub-questions for the study include:

1. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to an urban campus location?
2. How do they contextualize their experiences connected to the Southeastern region?

Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview via Zoom. Using the questionnaire and transcripts from the interviews as the discourse, I combed through each participant's discourse separately, using the horizontal axis, then I examined each discourse in comparison to one another along the vertical axis. Through these steps, the intertexts were revealed. These overlaps were coded and put into a chart of overarching and developing themes. These themes were reviewed again in comparison to the horizontal axis for any subthemes. The themes and subthemes were compared to current sociopolitical realities for Trans students in the South. After data were collected, I utilized member-checking throughout the analytical process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Including participants provided an added layer of analysis to confirm that the themes that emerged felt accurate to the participants and faithfully encapsulated their stories in a way that was true their own voices. Categories that emerged were: (a) Trans experiences in the South, (b) anti-trans legislation and politics, (c) experiences of both cisgenderism and support on Southern campuses, (d) identity in the South, and (e) location: urban vs. rural.

Summary of Findings

Category 1: Trans Experiences in the South

Many of the questions asked of participants focused on their experiences in the South; therefore, a category describing participant experiences in the South is only logical. Further, this helps answer the research question regarding how participants contextualize their experiences connected to location and region—specifically, the urban South. Participants had an array of experiences to share about the South in connection to their gender; these experiences fell into four themes: Southern climate and culture, cisgenderism and homophobia in the South, identity as a Southerner, and optimism about the South. These four themes highlight the complex experiences of the participants, challenging the idea that only a singular path of negativity and danger awaits Trans people in the South. Although participants had experienced hardship because of the attitude in the South towards their gender and other identities, a parallel narrative of connection, optimism, and positive experiences in the South emerged as well.

Southern Climate and Culture. Negative responses connected to Southern climate and culture revealed a shared language among participants that describes the South as fostering a harmful religious environment, feeling overtly conservative, promoting bigotry, feeling closed-minded or unaccepting, and being hostile/unsafe towards Trans people. These are the terms that participants used to describe their experiences; all of the participants did not use each of these words, but across interviews there was significant overlap of language and experiences when referring to climate. Religious conservatism was described by participants as a characteristic of the South that felt inherently anti-

trans, in keeping with other research that has articulated that religious conservatism creates an exclusionary atmosphere for Trans people (Barton, 2012; Campbell et al., 2019). Participants also described feeling that the general message from family and society was that Trans people should not be accepted because they fall outside of the "status quo." This is due to a culture of "othering" and a lack of empathy for or open-mindedness toward those who are different from the majority. This climate can make transitioning daunting, make expressing gender authentically scary, and leave participants wanting to remain stealth or even looking over their shoulder while performing day to day tasks. On a national level, Trans people experience discrimination just participating in basic elements of life (James et al., 2016), including attending school, where much of the discomfort participants reported occurred (Effrig et al., 2011). Beyond just discomfort, participants shared a few extreme negative experiences that would be classified more as transphobia. Participants discussed having violence threatened toward them, feeling frightened to be out, and the problem of Trans youth being kicked out of their homes, which unfortunately is commonplace among LGBTQ+ youth (*National Center for Trans Equality*, 2020).

Complicating this narrative, though participants painted the climate of the South as being very negative for Trans people, several of them also had positive feelings toward this region and expressed optimism for its future. In contrast to the exclusionary or even outright hostile culture described above, participants said there is also a culture of politeness, community, and friendliness, as well as a slow growth toward acceptance of all (Broadhurst et al., 2018). One participant noted that not only do LGBTQ+ people live and thrive in the South amidst oppressive forces, but they also spearhead grassroots

organizing to help make change in the South where it is needed the most, with subsequent benefits to the whole country. This idea of the broader importance of making change in the South echoes Spade's framing of Trans liberation as liberation for all (Spade, 2015). This perspective challenges the misconception that LGBTQ+ people do not live in South—an assumption captured by the theory of metronormativity, the idea that LGTBQ+ people emigrate from the South to find community and resources (Stone, 2018)—when in fact that is where one third of the U.S. LGBTQ+ population lives (Khan, 2014). A little over a third of participants felt a connection to this region through their background and upbringing, even going so far as to call themselves Southerners. Three were ambivalent, and the rest did not feel a connection; this broad range of responses emphasizes the complex nature of regional connection for these participants. This complexity simultaneously reifies and yet challenges the notion that Trans people, and all LGBTQ+ people, do not want to be here in the South.

Category 2: Anti-Trans Legislation and Politics

Participants felt that the anti-trans legislation that continues to persist in U.S. state governments is a direct harm to them, even if it does not directly pertain to their specific situations. For example, Alabama House Bill 1/Senate Bill 10, had it passed, would have prevented minors—age 18 and under—from receiving gender affirming medical care (ACLU, 2021). All participants in this study were 19 or older and thus would not have been stopped from receiving desired medical care in the state of Alabama. However, participants discussed the overwhelming and dismaying nature of living somewhere that has a social expectation for politicians and local government to 'come after you,' with

politicians determined to pass these bills regardless of how they affect the stability of Trans lives. These bills pave the way for a climate and culture that is harmful and debilitating for Trans people. Further, they literally create legal jurisprudence that directly discriminates against Trans people and their ability to fully participate in society (Spade, 2015). Even though these bills are not unique to the South, participants felt that this issue was a consistent problem in the South which forced them into a constant battle for their rights.

Category 3: Experiences of Both Cisgenderism and Support on Southern Campuses

The themes that emerged within this category provided rich data that help answer the research questions set forth. The focus of data gathered was on the experience of Trans students on their campuses, both whether they experienced cisgenderism and how that experience affected them. From what participants shared about their experiences, these were the themes that emerged: (a) campus climate, (b) administrative violence, (c) administrative support, and (d) faculty/staff interactions. Just as participants described a very complex relationship with the South, they also detailed a seemingly contradictory relationship with their schools, their professors, their classroom, and their co-curricular experiences. Participants provided many examples of support and community yet disclosed feelings of fear, anger, and disappointment directed at the administration and the exclusionary policies and practices it sustained. Some participants were eager to share about the clear presence of cisgenderism on campus; however, several participants also felt a loyalty to their campus and were more reluctant to acknowledge the seriousness of the disparities they had experienced. This reluctance may have been due to the positive

experiences participants had had—experiences with faculty, staff, student organizations, certain campus policies, and offices actively providing support for Trans student that led to feelings of joyfulness and acceptance. These kinds of positive experiences foster feelings of connection to a campus, especially in a region where supports for Trans students may often feel like they are not "supposed to" be there.

Campus Climate. Within the campus climate theme, several subthemes emerged. Participants described campus as being both a positive/welcoming climate and a negative climate; interestingly, about half also made a distinction between their campus specifically and the rest of the South. On the positive side, participants mentioned things ranging from seeing pride flags on the campus green during a tour to finally feeling like they had the chance to find community with people who had similar life experiences (Renn, 2017). On the negative side, some participants felt that the administration could do more to promote LGBTQ+ programs and resources, while others did not even feel that it was safe to be out in their classes or on campus (Dugan et al., 2012; Garvey, Rankin, et al., 2017; Preston & Hoffman, 2015). A third pattern of shared language also emerged from the data: without any prompting to do so, a number of participants voiced the opinion that their campus was different from the rest of the South. In these responses, the South was described as feeling unsafe or unwelcoming except for their campus, which was seen as something of a liberal oasis, separate from the more conservative atmosphere of the surrounding area. Participants shared that campus felt more open-minded, more welcoming, and safer than the South in general. Many Queer and Trans students seek out higher education in hopes of finding open and affirming communities to explore their

gender or sexuality. College is sometimes the first time they have the independence and autonomy to do so (Beemyn, 2003; Weber, 2015), and in the Southern region, universities are uniquely situated to provide Trans students with not only the independence to explore their identities, but also a feeling of safety and security during this journey.

Administrative Violence. A major contributor to the negative campus climate for Trans students is administrative violence, a term and framework coined by Dean Spade (2015). Administrative violence describes the ways that institutions hurt marginalized people, specifically Trans people, via policy and procedure that is made and implemented without Trans people in mind, a form of cisgenderism. This manifested in several subthemes across all three institutions represented: (a) exclusionary policies and (b) a false diversity narrative, resulting in (c) barriers to academic success for Trans students. The exclusionary policies include a lack of gender inclusive bathrooms (Beemyn, 2003; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016; Thorpe, 2017), ambiguous housing accommodations (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015), and electronic databases (especially email) with limited functionality around using pronouns and correct names instead of deadnames. Critical Trans Politics challenges the purpose of requiring a legal name to be connected to an email system, or having any system that is gender segregated, e.g., housing and bathrooms (Spade, 2015). Not having appropriate accommodations or identification can create difficult and sometimes dangerous situations for Trans people (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). These issues are especially problematic because several participants noted that despite their universities' promises of an inclusive and welcoming space, in

reality they were confronted with the exclusionary policies described above. Participants from UAU felt let down by their school, particularly when the institution's administration failed to take a moral stance against white supremacy and declined to provide programmatic spaces that offered support specifically for Trans students. CTP explains that institutions often "declare themselves race and gender neutral but are actually sites of extreme racial and gender violence," or in this case, profess a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere but leave students feeling confused and lied to (Spade, 2013, p. 68). Participants described UAU administrators as out of touch with their Trans student population, and Spade argues that these leaders are fundamentally incapable of conceptualizing the problem accurately because they cannot fully understand the experiences of Trans students—regardless of any intent to do so (2015). Another component of administrative violence is how services are rendered to people and if they are gendered unnecessarily and therefore negatively affect Trans people in a way that shortens life chances (Spade, 2015), and in this case, affect Trans students' ability to do well in school and be successful. This, in tandem with university systems that usually assume all students are cisgender (Preston & Hoffman, 2015), left participants feeling unsupported. Participants expressed that all these obstacles can 'add up' and become barriers to academic success. These barriers may not result in academic failure for Trans students in general(Nicolazzo, 2016a), but it is important to take stock of what is being communicated by these participants. Ben cut to the heart of the matter, saying, "[A] general feeling of being uncomfortable, it can make you maybe not want to pursue your degree anymore." Going to school is already a difficult endeavor for anyone; navigating school with these additional issues makes being Trans on campus unreasonably difficult.

Conversely, participants described several administrative supports that had positively affected them on their journey towards graduation. Most notably, participants expressed that the counseling and health services on their campuses provided them with invaluable support ranging from counseling/therapy to access to Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), especially at UAU, where the campus has recently made this process more accessible. Other supportive policies included having your correct name on your diploma even if is not the same as your legal name, preferred names on student IDs, preferred names on rosters, pronouns in online class platforms, preferred names in other databases, living learning communities for LGBTQ+ people, and even including information about gender and sexuality in first-year experience courses on campus. These policies made these participants feel accepted, welcome, and affirmed in their identity. Finally, LGBTQ+ student organizations have provided immeasurable support to students: they have facilitated relationship building amongst LGBTQ+ students, provided social support, and fostered a sense of community (Nicolazzo et al., 2017), encouraging students to persist in their academic careers amidst a complicated campus environment.

Faculty Interactions. Faculty can have a profound impact on LGBTQ+ students (Garvey & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2012; Linley et al., 2016)—they have the ability to make or break a student's experience, depending on how they choose to interface with them. Participants described having both positive and negative experiences interacting with faculty and with the curriculum. Participants said that instructors who tried to use their correct name and pronouns positively affected their experience in class. Several participants also said that they felt more connected to the course when faculty

incorporated thoughtful content on gender and sexuality when it related to the overall topic of the class. Along with these positive encounters, participants also had negative experiences where faculty continually used a deadname, incorrect pronouns, or incorporated curriculum that invalidated, erased, or did not acknowledge the identity of the students in the classroom—creating even more barriers to academic success.

Category 4: Identity in the South

Participants were extremely thoughtful about how their social group identities affected their experience of gender in higher education. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community tends to signify that you have thought about your gender or sexuality more than your cisgender or straight counterparts. In the same way, students of color, low-income students, and neurodivergent students will have considered race, class, and ability status more carefully than their privileged counterparts. The participants in this research of course shared in detail about their gender identity and expression; worth noting, however, were several white students shared thoughtful insight into how their racial privilege affected their gender, one Black student who shared how the white Queer community has felt exclusionary, and a number of other participants who discussed how being neurodivergent intersected with their gender.

Binary vs. Nonbinary Gender Expression. Gender is complex, as shown in the participant responses throughout Chapter Four. Participants have considered their own internal feelings about how they want or need to express themselves, how others will perceive them, and how that is rooted in both regional and cultural expectations of gender

norms. These expectations can take a toll: participants discussed not being able to be their authentic selves and feeling unhappy when they were unable to express their gender the way they desired. Gender expression is different for each individual person, and yet there was a general divide in the experience of gender expression for participants who identified as nonbinary (genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, and so on) versus as a binary gender (woman, man, Trans woman, Trans man). Those who fell under the nonbinary umbrella were mostly perceived as if their genders aligned with their sex assigned at birth. This was described by one participant as the "oppression in the privilege," conveying the idea that others may treat you better because you are perceived to be cisgender while simultaneously invalidating your existence as nonbinary—an act of oppression itself. Several nonbinary participants shared that they felt they had experienced more "acceptance" in classes because those around them perceived them as cisgender and in turn benefited from others' misperceptions, but ultimately they suffered because they were not fully seen or accepted as their authentic selves. Regardless of gender expression, the assumption that someone is cisgender is a marker of a culture affected by cisgenderism and creates an unreceptive environment for people with diverse genders (Bilodeau, 2007) .

Participants with a binary gender talked about "passing" or being "stealth" in public. This is often an issue of safety but also one of comfort (being perceived as your gender is a positive experience for Trans and cis folks, although really, no one wants to be seen as someone they are not). While gender norms are harmful to everyone, trans and cis people alike, when Transmen and Transwomen pass there is safety afforded to them because the cis people around them are not going to harass them for not "fitting in."

However, for those who are nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming, gender expression has no fixed expectation and therefore necessarily falls outside the traditional notions of what gender should be, particularly in a region such as the South with such rigidly defined gender roles; this leaves these individuals with no choice but to be viewed as "other" by those around them if they are to exist as their true selves.

Other Important Social Group Identities. Several white participants shared that they experienced white privilege and therefore were afforded more freedoms than Trans people of color. They shared that often being a white Trans person has allowed them to find community more easily on campus and navigate their STEM fields without their presence being questioned. White participants also shared that their transition or gender expression may have been more accepted than their Trans peers of color. This aligns with the experiences that Ro shared, in that white Queer people tend to find more acceptance in the Queer community and wider campus community (Pryor, 2018). Nidell also shared that being perceived as a white, cisgender man has often deterred them from participating in LGBTQ+ programs on campus due to the fear they might be mistaken as such—acknowledging that cisgenderism is pervasive even in LGBTQ+ spaces. Finally, several participants discussed being neurodivergent and how that influenced their academic experiences and intersected with their gender identity. Some participants expressed that being neurodivergent increased their social anxiety around transitioning or contributed to feeling alien in a room full of people. Observation of the LGBTQ+ students I work with has highlighted a prominent intersection of neurodivergence/disability and Queer

identity; Rom contextualized this by saying that many emotional or cognitive issues that Queer people face are connected to their overall negative treatment by society and subsequent feelings of exclusion and isolation.

Category 5: Location: Urban vs. Rural

Definitively, participants expressed that living in an urban location made a meaningful positive difference in how they were treated as Trans people in the South. Urban environments provide more resources and usually have a more liberal population that is more open-minded (Weber, 2015). Alabama City specifically was talked about as an exceptional place to live in the South as a Trans person, with participants stating that Alabama City is 'different' from the rest of the South, providing a safer place for participants to live and go to school. Both participants from the two other schools shared that the cities where they lived also were welcoming to Trans people but did not use the same language to differentiate them from the rest of the South. In making this distinction, it is important to note that several participants shared that issues of transphobia and homophobia are not unique to the South yet also said that Alabama City felt more accepting even though it was in the South—implying that the South is different from other regions—highlighting a complicated relationship with how participants interpret and perceive the Southeast.

Implications

The Southern climate, both political and cultural, can have a negative effect on Trans students in higher education. Adherence to rigid gender norms, religious conservatism, and closed-mindedness are stereotypical hallmarks of Southern culture that stop Trans students from expressing themselves and coming out to others and can also lower the expectations they have for what their peers and their institution will do to serve them. Despite this, some participants did have positive associations with and connections to the South, with several having optimism or hope for the region to continue to grow into a more accepting place.

Approximately one third of the LGBTQ+ population in the U.S. is in the South (Khan, 2014), proving that even if this location presents some challenges for LGBTQ+ people, they do still live, persist, and even thrive here. This is despite a sometimes unsafe or hostile environment, strengthened by the anti-trans legislation cropping up across the country (ACLU, 2021). Legislation that attacks the medical needs of Trans youth, forces Trans people to use the incorrect bathrooms, and condemns Trans people for participating in high school sports is the architecture of cisgenderism and transphobia, and the foundation for a society that paints Trans people as undeserving of the rights and resources we all need. Participants described this legislation as feeling like just another part of Southern culture they had come to expect, and yet these bills have been introduced in states outsides of the Southeast: Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Indiana, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wisconsin (ACLU, 2021). This legislation has not passed in all of these locations, but its introduction and support from political parties and citizens pave

the way for a national climate and culture that is harmful and debilitating for Trans people.

Trans students look to their campuses as a "haven" from the surrounding region: urban campuses in particular provide an oasis from the more closed-minded atmosphere in the surrounding rural Southern areas. Because their campus locations felt safer than the surrounding areas, participants were reluctant to articulate many negative sentiments about the institutions they attend. Overall, these Southern urban campuses do provide a positive atmosphere for students where they can find community while exploring or embracing their gender. Having the ability to access HRT easily and conveniently is very meaningful to Trans students looking to do some sort of medical transition. University supported student groups that are specifically geared towards LGBTQ+ students are one of the main ways Trans students build community and make friends on campus.

Although campuses can help provide a supportive atmosphere, there are also many barriers that Trans students run into, sometimes daily, on campus. These barriers exist without justification and continue to create negative experiences for them. These barriers persist due to a predominantly cisgender administration that may not have ever considered how these policies affect Trans students (Bilodeau, 2007; Pryor, 2018; Spade, 2015). This administrative violence is often unintentional on the part of the institution. The goal of the institution is not to make the lives of Trans students more difficult. However, Spade helps us to understand that many of the societal expectations and processes that use gender to gatekeep resources or physical space permeate all institutions, including universities. Due to the ubiquitousness of gatekeeping based on gender, this discrimination is dubbed as neutral or normal because society has accepted it

as commonplace (Fairclough, 2009). However, the unnecessary gendering of policies, procedures, and physical space negatively contributes to the experiences of Trans people, specifically Trans students on campus. These unnecessary barriers harm students on their journey towards graduation: some wanted to drop courses, transfer schools, or quit altogether.

Equally, when systems—either purposefully or accidentally—promote Trans inclusion, this can make navigating campus and classrooms much easier and more enjoyable. In the Spring of 2021, UAU changed their policy so that any student graduating could have their preferred name on their diploma instead of a legal name. This was a victory for Trans students on campus and had a positive impact on participants, though it also benefits all students who go by a different name, would prefer their middle name to be on their diploma, or students who have two names from two different cultures and can now choose which they would like—reifying that when the most marginalized of us receives the accommodation, resource, or benefit they need, it often serves to benefit all (Spade, 2015). I speculate that the registrar at UAU had previously required that students put their legal name on diplomas because the university was treating them as legal documents or simply defaulting to a policy and procedure that is widely accepted by college campuses as normal and neutral when in fact it is not. So often, institutions gatekeep important documents, ID cards, logins and passwords unnecessarily, or in this case, require a legal name where it is not needed. The rigidity around making changes to emails, passwords, and so on is arbitrary security theater that only serves to distance Trans students from feeling connected to the commencement process (Spade, 2015). Universities should assume that the policies and practices they have will in some way

have a negative effect on Trans students—institutions are built from a binary gender mindset that reinforces cisgenderism (Bilodeau, 2007). Challenging this mindset should be a best practice: policies can and should be reassessed and rewritten in a way that is intentionally inclusive of all genders.

Faculty can wield a powerful influence over the experiences that Trans students have in the classroom, either for better or for worse (Garvey & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2012; Linley et al., 2016). The way faculty interface with Trans students in their classroom, present curriculum, and maintain learning environments all have a large impact on Trans student experiences. Faculty who uses deadnames, incorrect pronouns, and are not willing to apologize, move forward, or do better in the future can leave students disheartened and uninvested in a class. Curricula that happen to include information about family structure, gender, sexuality, or anything related to society, language, and culture that do not try to include pertinent information about Queer and Trans identities can leave students questioning the thoroughness of the course and feeling left out or unseen (Linley et al., 2016). If the content of the course does not pertain to the inclusion of gender or sexuality, adding it into the overall structure may not work well. However, when the course is focused on the psychology of the family, for example, including LGBTQ+ family structures in the course could be beneficial not just for the LGBTQ+ students in the class, but for all students.

Differences in experiences between how participants' binary or nonbinary gender identity and expression was received on campus and how that affected them provided some new insight into the experiences of Trans students in the South. More information about the growing nonbinary population is slowly appearing in research: "About 11% of

the LGBTQ adults (age 18-60 years) identify as nonbinary in terms of their gender" (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). Nonbinary students have said that when they try to express their authentic gender identity, they encounter "resistance, misrecognition, and invisibility" (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018, p. 14). This research adds a layer of understanding with consideration for region. Participants commented that they too encountered resistance and misrecognition; however, the invisibility also made them feel a layer of "protection" because those around them often perceived them as cisgender. The invisibility of nonbinary people is a double-edged sword: it allows students to avoid encountering potential harassment but simultaneously promotes the erasure of an entire array of genders.

Saliency of both marginalized and privileged identities for these participants is an important implication of this research. Being thoughtful of whiteness and privileges around race may be something that white Trans people are more cognizant of than their cis counterparts due to self-reflection around gender. However, Queer spaces at universities tend to be exclusionary to Queer and Trans Students of Color who feel that there are not enough spaces on campus that accommodate the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (Pryor, 2018). Several participants also discussed their connection to neurodivergence and the role that plays in their academic and social lives. It has been estimated that 3-5 million LGBT people have disabilities (*LGBT People with Disabilities*, 2019). Disability Studies and Queer Theory both focus on aspects of how bodies are represented as "normal," and how disabled bodies and Queer bodies tend to fall outside of that range (McRuer, 2006). Some participants felt connected to this part of their identity because of their gender; others did not express that same connection.

There is more transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia in the South as compared to other regions (Rogers, 2018). The South is a region defined by "political conservatism, heightened evangelicalism, high unemployment, and rurality" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 72). Urban locations in the South, however, were described by participants as "like any other place," and the main issues they faced were in places that were more rural with fewer resources and more conservatism. The predominant feeling in the South, regardless of location, is stifling for LGBTQ+ people; however, the ordinary cities where participants lived were described as safe, welcoming, and well resourced. Participant expectations regarding Southern infrastructure (e.g., being safe, welcoming, and well-resourced for Trans people) were very low. Therefore, being in a city that did not feel overtly transphobic was a positive change for many of them. However, these lowered expectations may have left participants feeling appreciative for whatever these cities provided as opposed to being demanding of the full and equal participation they deserve.

Recommendations

Based on what has been learned from this research, there are several recommendations I would make for institutions of higher education, faculty, staff, and student services in general that will hopefully benefit Trans students in their college careers. My findings will also provide the basis for recommendations for future research.

Higher Education

Institutions in the Southeast are uniquely situated to provide spaces for Queer and Trans students that are affirming and flexible. Campuses that embody these

characteristics can support Trans students who are transitioning socially, medically, or legally, as well as those who are just looking to explore their gender identity. Creating spaces that inherently challenge cisgender norms means that both students who are exploring and who are expressing their gender will have a positive college career, free from barriers connected to a negative campus climate.

Challenging cisgender norms means pushing the university to confront the binary gender mindset that influences many of the systems, policies, and practices in place which negatively impact Trans students. Recommendations from previous research include creating more gender inclusive bathrooms and locker rooms, (Beemyn, 2003; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016; Thorpe, 2017), making databases easily editable for preferred name and pronouns and consistent among various platforms (Bilodeau, 2007), creating gender inclusive housing (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015), promoting LGBTQ+ student organizations and spaces (Renn, 2007), and requiring training for faculty and staff around inclusive language and inclusive practices (Dugan et al., 2012). A majority of these have not been implemented to their fullest extent at the universities researched. Beyond this, participants encouraged recruiting and employing LGBTQ+ leadership in administration, specifically Trans and nonbinary individuals. Increasing Trans representation within upper levels of leadership may promote the creation of more inclusive and thoughtful policy and bring the reality of the institution more into alignment with its purported values.

Often, policies that create barriers for Trans students are easily fixed once consideration is given to the needs of gender diverse people and subsequent adjustments made to policy, procedure, and technology. Diplomas on UAU's campus, for example,

never really needed to have legal names printed on them. When the administration was pushed by staff and students for the change, it was made. Due to a mindset affected by cisgenderism, these changes only came after urging from students and staff. However, with some consideration for Trans students' needs, these policies can simply be Trans inclusive without the need for confrontation. For unknown reasons, students at UAU cannot have their preferred names listed on their email addresses—this is not due to a technological issue, as staff have been allowed to make this change. Instead of waiting for complaints and requests for change, institutions can consult LGBTQ+ research or professionals and make these kinds of changes before they become barriers for students.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine created the need for participants to attend school remotely (with some exceptions for in person classes), which allowed a few of them to take a step back from campus life to reflect on their gender transition and what they wanted that to look like for themselves. After this time away, some returned to classes using a different name and pronouns. Having time away like this is not something all Trans students want or are looking for; however, giving students an opportunity to continue their studies remotely and take a step away from being physically present on campus could be beneficial for some. This might not also be necessary if campus climate and culture were fully accepting of Trans students, with everyone making consistent use of their correct names and pronouns regardless of where they are in their transition (if any), gender expression, or presentation.

Future Research

Participants were asked to share about their time spent in online courses versus in person courses and if that affected their experience on campus. Students shared an array of responses ranging from liking online classes more because they provide more anonymity to liking them less because they felt too invasive. Some students shared that having ADHD made online courses very hard while others shared that it made the course load easier. These outcomes were undoubtedly also affected by the compulsory remote classwork brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic: some first-year students had not yet had a class in person at the time of interviews. Further research on this could be beneficial in understanding if gender identity, transition, or expression plays a part in preference for online versus in person courses.

Overall, more research needs to be done that focuses on the experiences of Trans students in the South specifically. Participants shared experiences and language related to the intersection of their gender and location; however, their experiences were diverse and challenged many expectations that I had about what their experiences might have been. Although the climate of the South may not be as accommodating as that in other places, one third of the LGBTQ+ population still lives here. The theory of metronormativity, the idea that LGBTQ+ people only exist in bicoastal and northern areas of the U.S. and that Queer and Trans people emigrate from the South because of the unaccepting climate, may explain why larger LGBTQ+ organizations spend almost ten times more per LGBTQ+ person in the Northeast than the South (Khan, 2014). More narratives need to be collected and more representation in research is necessary to combat the incorrect yet widespread assumption that LGBTQ+ people do not live in the South. Some of the issues

that Trans students face in higher education in the South are either amplified by or due to the more inhospitable climate of the region and addressing the campus-specific problems will not solve this alone. For that, a broader cultural shift will be necessary. Bringing attention and awareness to the current experiences of Trans students can act as a catalyst for this needed change.

Limitations

Study limitations included a lack of geographic diversity, minimal comparison to Trans students in other locations outside of the Southeast, and COVID-19 restricting students from being on campus this past year. Locations included in this research were limited to Texas and Alabama due to a lack of response from students in other areas. Future research on the experiences of Trans students in the South should include other Southern states to further our understanding of the diversity of experiences within the region. This will also allow for more universities to be included and will help expand knowledge of the experiences of students at different size schools in varying locations.

This research might also be more generalizable if there were a larger base of students included in the research from different geographic locations. This research simply looked at the experiences of Trans students in the South without comparison to the experiences of students in other parts of the country. Further, interviews could have included information about the resources for Trans students at other universities to increase participants' ability to assess their university's supports.

Finally, due to COVID-19 restrictions, some of the students interviewed were first-year students on campus in their second semester at school who had not had the

normal experience of attending classes and programs like they would have pre-pandemic. While these students were able to participate in classes and university programs virtually and still had to navigate systems within the school, the "traditional" student experience was not something they could speak to as other participants could. Further, some students came out and transitioned during the pandemic—i.e., they spent one or two years on campus and then changed their name and pronouns while attending school remotely—meaning they had never interacted in person with faculty or students post transition. This may or may not have changed the responses to interview questions for some of the students; future research could reveal different outcomes.

Conclusion

From the beginning of this process, my goal was to make space for Trans students in the South to voice their experiences on college campuses. How Trans students talked about their time as students on Southern urban campuses in ordinary cities provides insight into the positive and negative experiences they have had and how practitioners and institutions can endeavor to make campus climate more affirming of all genders. Many issues that were revealed through participant discourses aligned with previous research about Trans student experiences on campus and the tenets of Critical Trans Politics (Spade, 2015). Some outcomes from this research were as I expected: Trans students may have a more difficult time on Southern campuses due to an unaccepting regional culture and inhospitable political climate. However, through this analysis some findings challenged those preconceived notions: a majority of Trans students on these

campuses felt connected to and protected by the more affirming and inclusive staff, faculty, policies, and student organizations. Most importantly, these outcomes challenge the dominant narrative that LGBTQ+ people do not live in the South and the thought that those who do must hate it; the Trans community is far more complex than what this single story tells and what my research could capture. This research is ultimately a snapshot of experiences that provides some insight into the important narrative of Trans students in higher education in the South; more insight is needed, and more actions need to be taken to create college experiences that only present academic challenges to students, not existential ones that invalidate the very existence of people because the system is too rigid to change. Challenging binary gender systems that are supported by institutions will benefit everyone in the end—but Trans students need and deserve these changes now.

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APPENDIX A

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

Follow-up Questionnaire 2: Open-ended Questions

1. On the email that provided you the link to this questionnaire there was a participant number provided in the subject line. What was that number?

   Participant ID Number: _____

2. What are some positive experiences that you have had as a Trans student at a southern university?

3. What are some negative experiences that you have had as a Trans student at a southern university?

4. Looking at this definition, do you feel you experience any aspects of cisgenderism on campus?

   a. Cisgenderism, "to label behaviors, goals, norms, and valued of higher education institutions that reflect an underlying assumption or belief that cisgender identities are more 'normal', 'healthy', and 'real' and therefore are treated as 'superior' to transgender and gender non-conforming identities. Such institutional patterns result in systemic privileging of cisgender individuals and identities and marginalization of transgender and gender non-conforming individual and identities" (Seelman, 2014, p. 619-620)

5. Do you believe your experience as a Transgender student differs from that of other Transgender students in other regions of the country? If yes, how so? If not, why not?

6. What is the overall climate for Transgender people in the city you are living?

7. Are there aspects of southern culture that you think particularly influence your experience as a Trans student?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant ID:

Interviewer:

Interview Questions: *Trans Experiences on Southern College Campuses*

Interviewer:
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I greatly appreciate the responses that you have already provided through the first two questionnaires.

[Should you have follow-up questions from previous questionnaire] Today, I am going to go back through some of the responses that you have already provided, as well as some additional questions.

As we have noted earlier in the informed consent acknowledgement statement, participation in this research study is voluntary. At any point within the research process if you would like to discontinue participation, you are welcome to do so. There are no expected risks to this study.

In addition, I want to remind you that your participation in the research study will be confidential. In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only I will have access to the records.

Do you have any questions for me, before we begin?

[Should you have follow-up questions from previous questionnaire]
Group 1 Questions: Trans Student Inclusion on Campus

I have a copy of your responses to the second questionnaire; I have a few follow-up questions I would like to ask you about your responses to provide some clarification.
[Insert notes and questions that need clarification]

Group 2 Questions: Southern Identity and Other Identities

For the next few questions, I wanted to provide some clarity of what I mean when I say the word "South" and "Southerner." For the sake of this research I am defining the "South" as meaning any of the following states: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Also, I am going to ask you a few questions about other identities you hold. When I say "identities" I mean, for example, race, ability, nationality, sexuality, religion, class status, and if you can think of another identity that is meaningful to you, you can talk about that as well. To begin, I will be asking you a few questions about being in the South.

Theme	Overarching Question	Sub questions

Southern Identity	What has been your experience in the South overall?	1. Are you from the South or did you move here? a. How long have you lived in the South? b. [If needed] Where are you originally from? 2. Can you define what Southerner means to you? a. Do you feel like you are a Southerner? 3. Where did you spend your k-12 education? a. What was that experience like? b. Were you out as trans at any point in elementary, middle, or high school years? If so, when?
Other intersecting identities on campus	Are there any other ways in which you identify that you believe have had an impact on your experiences in higher education?	1. Have any of these identities affected your experience on campus? a. Race, ability status, class status 2. Has your [insert identity] affected your classroom experience? How so? 3. Has your [insert identity] affected your experiences with co-curricular activities? How so? 4. How has this identity affected your experience as a Trans person on campus and in the classroom?
Other intersecting identities and region	What do you believe are the biggest obstacles for people who are a part of the aforementioned identity group in this region of the country?	1. How is it to be [insert identity] in the South? a. Are there enough supports for this identity group where you are located? Any examples of these supports? b. Do you feel welcomed as [insert identity] where you are located? 2. How is it to be both [insert identity] and Trans in the South?

Theme	Overarching Question	Sub questions
Overall impression	What is campus like for Trans students?	1. Why did you want to come to this school? a. What factors helped you decide to attend? b. Were any of those factors connected to feelings of LGBTQ inclusion? 2. What has been your experience building friendships or networks on campus? 3. What has been your experience building connections with faculty and staff on campus? a. Is there a difference between building connections with faculty vs. staff? 4. Do you feel welcome in your classrooms? If yes, how so, if not, why not? Can you share any examples? a. Does taking classes online or in person make a difference to that comfortability?
Institution	Are there any institutional structures, processes that have helped you on your journey towards graduation?	1. As a Trans student, do you feel welcome at… a. Student Health services? Please explain. b. Counseling services? Please explain. c. The campus recreation facility? Please explain. 2. Have you ever lived on campus? a. [If no] Why not? b. [If yes] Do you feel like your needs were accommodated related to your gender? 3. Do you feel like sorority and fraternity life is welcoming to Trans students? 4. Have any of the following policies had an effect on your experience on campus? a. Having your correct name on your ID card? Student email? Correct name on your diploma? b. Are there any other policies or processes that affect you as a Trans student at your campus?
Region	What do you believe are the greatest institutional obstacles for Trans students working towards graduation?	1. Do you perceive any of these as specific to or more pronounced in the South? 2. Do you perceive that you face more or different obstacles from Trans students in other parts of the country? If yes, how so? If no, why not? 3. Have any of these obstacles affected your journey towards graduation?

Region	What do you perceive the overall climate to be for Transgender people in this region of the country?	1. Do you feel like your city and campus are reflective of this climate? a. Are there any instances in your own experience that support your thoughts? 2. Is there anything you would like to change about this region to be more Trans inclusive? a. How would you change the city to be more inclusive? b. How would change the Community to be more Trans inclusive? c. How would you change your Campus to be more Trans inclusive?

Group 3 Questions: Cisgenderism as Connected to Region

For the next few questions, I will be asking you about your experience as being a Trans student in higher education connected to location.

- After all of the interviews are completed and analyzed, I would like to share my findings with participants to ensure I capture your voice accurately. I would like to reach back out to you and get feedback on the accuracy of my findings, is that something you would be interested in participating in?
- Thank you for your time today. Your experience as a Trans student in higher education is valuable and I greatly appreciate what you have shared with me. If there is anything that we did not ask, but you feel is relevant, please feel free to share that with me now.

APPENDIX C

APPROVAL LETTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
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Federalwide Assurance # FWA00005960
IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)
IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)
IORG Registration # IRB00012550 (IRB 03)

02-Mar-2021

IRB-300006610
IRB-300006610-003
Transgender Student Experiences at Southern Urban Institutions

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The IRB reviewed and approved the Initial Application submitted on 26-Feb-2021 for the above referenced project. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

	Expedited
	7
Determination:	Approved
	01-Mar-2021
	Expedited Status Update (ESU)
Expiration Date:	29-Feb-2024

Although annual continuing review is not required for this project, the principal investigator is still responsible for (1) obtaining IRB approval for any modifications before implementing those changes except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject, and (2) submitting reportable problems to the IRB. Please see the IRB Guidebook for more information on these topics.

- IRB EPORTFOLIO
- IRB PERSONNEL EFORM