

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

TRACING DESIRES, FINDING UTOPIA: EXAMINING 2SLGBTQIA+ STUDENTS'  
QUEER WORLDMAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ART-  
BASED RESEARCH

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By  
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Norman, Oklahoma  
2024

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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## **DEDICATION**

To those who paved the path,  
those standing with us now,  
those yet to come,  
and those whose dreams of higher education remain distant dream

This dissertation is dedicated to us and our community.  
May we find the utopia we all deserve.

And to myself 12 years ago  
who first step foot onto OU campus,  
you found a place where you are seen, loved, and wanted for who you are.  
You get to exhale now.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thiên liêng hai tiếng gia đình  
Nơi mọi người sống hết mình vì ta  
Nguyễn Đình Huân

How sacred is the word “family,”  
where everyone lives wholeheartedly for one another.  
Huan D. Nguyen

"Family" holds profound significance for me, both as a queer individual and as someone of Vietnamese heritage. My family of origin instills in me the sanctity of unconditional love within kinship, while my OU family reveals that family extends far beyond blood ties. Even when I'm not physically at home, I am always surrounded by family; for this, words fail to fully capture my gratitude, but nonetheless, I will try.

Đến gia đình mình, thành tựu này không chỉ là nỗ lực của bản thân, mà còn là giấc mơ và hy vọng của cả nhà dành cho con. Dù cùng nhau hay chia cách, cả nhà vẫn luôn gần gũi bên con hàng ngày. Ba mẹ, cảm ơn cho sự hy sinh của ba mẹ dành cho con. Ngày tháng trôi qua, dù con có trưởng thành xa nhà, con luôn tìm thấy bản thân gần gũi với gia đình. Con hy vọng thành tựu này khiến ba mẹ và cả nhà tự hào. Sự ủng hộ và động viên của cả nhà là nền móng vững chắc, nơi con nương tựa qua những khó khăn cuộc sống và nơi con xây dựng cuộc sống của mình. Con chân thành cảm ơn.

I have grown alongside you for over 10 years, and I am profoundly grateful for the sense of home and belonging you have provided me with while I've been away from home. Here, with you, I have truly come into my own, and I am thankful for the endless possibilities you've shown me. To all those who have supported me on this journey and, more importantly, allowed me to be my true self, I am beyond grateful for your unwavering support. To the countless mentors who have guided me throughout my academic journey, thank you for molding me into the person I am today. To my OU Student Affairs family, I am indebted to you for nurturing me into the

professional I have become. Your dedication to students and the support we extend to one another fills me with immense hope for the future of our field, and I am proud to stand among you all. To the staff of the Gender + Equality Center, your kindness, patience, and grace throughout the completion of my dissertation have been invaluable. Not only do you create a utopia for students, but I have also found my own utopia in our community.

To my students, you are also my family. Thank you for transforming my role from merely a job to a purpose. I am deeply grateful and proud to witness many of you growing into yourself. I appreciate that so many of you have chosen to remain as a part of my life beyond your time at OU. To my co-researchers, this project would be nothing without your contributions. Your vulnerability, leadership, and unwavering hope and love for this university is the foundation of this dissertation. Thank you for entrusting me with your truths and allowing me to share our collective story. Specifically, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Chaani, Ezra, and Eileah for accompanying me throughout my entire journey with LGBTQ+ Programs. Your leadership and commitment inspire me daily, and I am so excited to graduate alongside each of you.

My dissertation committee: Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Starr Minthorn, I am grateful for your insights, guidance, and assistance in helping me cross the finish line. Dr. Benjamin Heddy, thank you for your mentorship and guidance throughout my doctoral journey. Dr. David Surratt, I cannot express enough appreciation for your care and leadership, both as a committee member and as a stalwart figure in Student Affairs. Dr. Z Nicolazzo, your introduction to queer worldmaking has opened doors to a new world of scholarship that I had not previously explored. Thank you for reminding me to center my experience as a practitioner and community in my work as a scholar. Lastly, to Dr. Jenny Sperling, to reflect back on my academic journey when I

first met you to now, what a journey we have gone through together. To think that I ended up conducting not only identity research but also delving into queer theories and community-oriented research — my first-year doctoral self would not have believed it. Thank you for taking me on as your mentee, for continue to push me and my thinking, and for teaching me not only how to conduct research but also the ethics of being a scholar/researcher. I also extend my gratitude to Dr. Kirsten Edwards, Dr. Heather Shotton, and Dr. Kirsten Hextrum for your guidance throughout my doctoral career.

I will inevitably leave out folks who meaningfully contributed to this dissertation, but I especially want to thank those who have helped me untangling my ideas and continue to support my work in so many ways: Dr. Kayleigh Mrowka, Dr. Dan Tillapaugh, my colleagues and mentors at the ACPA's Institute of Curricular Approach (ICA), Dr. Johnnie-Margaret McConnell, Dr. Melinda Chen, Dr. Megan Sibbett, and Dr. Moira Ozais. To my colleague and friend, Ann Schafer: thank you for being my PhrienD, for our late-night dinners, and for mental-health days with Crumbl cookies. To my dear friend Ian, thank you for being my soundboard over our weekly dinners over Thai food. Lastly, to Dr. Erin Simpson, thank you not only for being an exceptional supervisor and supporting me throughout my dissertation journey but also for being my thinking partner, a mentor in the higher education practitioner world, and friend.

While I wrote this dissertation, it is not solely my creation. It stands as the culmination of the contributions from numerous individuals, both named and unnamed, whose insights and support have enabled me to formulate and refine these ideas. You all are my chosen family, my cherished utopia. Your influence and presence have profoundly shaped this work, and for that, I am immensely grateful.

*Unlimited.  
Together we're unlimited...*

## ABSTRACT

Higher education holds the potential to positively impact 2SLGBTQIA+ students, yet they often face discrimination and violence. Drawing upon Tuck's (2009) desire-based approach and Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer utopia, this study focuses on the lived experiences and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. It aims to explore how they navigate, resist, and reimagine higher education through queer and trans ways of knowing. Utilizing queer methodologies, specifically participatory action research and visual methods, the study investigates how queer and trans students envision thriving within institutions. Findings reveal dynamic and subjective experiences of queer thriving, shaped by their desires and challenges. Despite encountering violence, students engage in worldmaking and freedom dreaming for a queer utopia, both individually and collectively. This study illuminates the gap in research on queer thriving and worldmaking in higher education, calling for further examination of these dynamic processes and the nuanced experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. It underscores the need for ethical leadership and a shift towards a thriving-centered approach in higher education, supporting and challenging queer and trans students in their identity and personal development.

Keywords: 2SLGBTQIA+ students, queer worldmaking, desire, participatory action research, art-based research, higher education, thriving



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Higher education has been an important space to discover oneself and explore identity, especially for 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-spirits, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) students. For many queer and trans<sup>1</sup> students, the college environment is the first time they are away from their home community and it provides a sense of growing independence from their parental figures to safely and privately further explore themselves and their sexuality and gender identities (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; Renn, 2017; Lange, 2022). Their identity development is often affirmed by the increase in visibility of queer representation on campus (Renn, 2010; Stevens, 2004) as well as being in community with students, faculty, or staff who share similar identities (Renn, 2010, 2017). In addition, 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations on college campuses have served as an important mechanism for queer and trans students' sense of belonging and safety (Pitcher et al., 2018). Furthermore, institutional support such as affirming policies and services can contribute to a positive climate and college experience for 2SLGBTQIA+ students' identity development, retention and graduation, involvement and engagement, as well as reducing negative discriminatory factors (Garvey et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2018; Pitcher et al., 2018). 2SLGBTQIA+ resource centers on college campuses not only serve as a symbol for institutional commitment to 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, but also serve as a crucial affirming space for queer and trans students (Pitcher et al., 2018). In her work on 2SLGBTQIA+ college student experience in higher education, Renn (2010, 2017) discussed how

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, I use the term 'queer and trans' interchangeably with the '2SLGBTQIA+' label. The term 'queer' has been reclaimed by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and changed from a slur to an umbrella cultural signifier for individuals with minoritized gender and sexual identity (Jagose, 1996; Choudhuri & Curley, 2020). However, I include 'trans' in addition to 'queer,' not to separate them from the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community discourse, but to highlight the socio-political violence and systemic failure for members of the trans community compared to their non-trans peers and counterparts.

higher education could offer inclusive curriculums exploring concepts such as queer theory, 2SLGBTQIA+ history, culture, and people that students can further engage with academically. In all, higher education has the potential to create positive impacts on 2SLGBTQIA+ students' success and development academically, socially, and personally through queer-affirming policies, inclusive pedagogy and curriculum, as well as its services and critical interventions.

However, despite such potential, the narratives often heard about 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences in higher education are ones of pain, exclusion, invisibility, and hostility. Queer and trans students continue to be subjected to discrimination as higher education institutions uphold and invest in cis-heteronormativity. Throughout past decades, much research has shown that higher education is hostile toward 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Renn, 2010; Rankin et al., 2019; Furrow, 2012; Garvey & Rankin, 2015). The negative perception of campus climate may result in students feeling unsafe (Blumenfeld et al., 2016), disengaging, less likely to disclose their identity and offer their perspectives (Garvey & Rankin, 2015), and experiencing adverse academic and social outcomes (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Garvey et al., 2017).

Furthermore, queer and trans students are targeted by state-sanctioned violence through discriminatory legislation, many without formal protection of anti-discrimination laws (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). While 2SLGBTQIA+ students are hyper-visible as targets of homophobic and transphobic violence, recurring themes of invisibility and erasure continue to show up in the literature regarding queer and trans students' experiences in post-secondary educational environments: 2SLGBTQIA+ students feel invisibilized by the lack of representation in community, policy, or research and curriculum (Renn, 2010; Kilgo, 2020). In particular, trans and non-binary students often do not have their basic needs met as the institutional structures (both physical spaces such as gender-neutral bathrooms or housing, and gender-affirming

policies) were built and organized around an essentialist and binary view of sex and gender (Beemyn et al., 2005; Goldberg, 2018; Kilgo, 2020). 2SLGBTQIA+ students who exist at the intersections of queerness and other marginalized identities, such as students of color or students with disabilities, face even more erasure due to the lack of nuance in understandings of 2SLGBTQIA+ people and their lived experiences (Lange et al., 2019; Pryor et al., 2023). For all, higher education was built on the foundation of cis-heteronormativity and queer and trans existence continues to be threatened within the walls of the institutions (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Nicolazzo, 2017).

Despite said challenges that queer and trans students face in higher education environments, they continue to persist and thrive in the face of hostility and violence. 2SLGBTQIA+ students continue to foster kinship and build community with other queer and trans students, faculty, and staff. Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) discussed various ways that trans students engage in community-making to support each other as well as for their own identity development. Such relationships, or more specifically ‘kinship<sup>2</sup>,’ challenged the cis-heteronormative assumptions and ideas about family and support networks; and they contributed to trans students' resilience and persistence in higher education environments (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). Similarly, Duran (2019) explored how 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color navigated multiple systems of oppression, such as racism and cis-heteronormativity. In the study, participants described how they seek belongingness in smaller networks that validate their racial, sexual, and gender identities as well as their interests instead of the larger campus community.

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<sup>2</sup> Cis-heteronormativity often places an importance on biological “blood” kinship in familial connection and relationship (Patterson, 1995). However, queer and trans people have queered the notion of family and kinship beyond the biological restrictions and emphasis on the traditional nuclear family (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). Instead, queer kinship is the support networks and structures comprised of chosen family and friends (Nicolazzo, 2017).

## **Queer Worldmaking**

Trans students and queer students of color have found ways to build affirming queer relationships and spaces in spite of the pervasiveness of cis-heteronormativity and racism; they engage in *queer worldmaking*. Queer worldmaking asks what might be possible outside of the restrictive constraints of cis-heteronormativity, presenting itself as the singular, unchanging, and natural way of organizing the world. However, queer theorists have challenged the compulsive nature of cis-heteronormativity, recognizing there are other ways to organize our social world and envision our future. As Zaino (2021) described, queer worldmaking is “a productive refusal of cis-heteronormativity” (p. 578) through social practices, cultural productions, and political activities. Queer worldmaking does not only help 2SLGBTQIA+ students successfully navigate the current reality of violence within higher education institutions, but also provides an opportunity to transform the field by centering queer and trans students’ desire for thrival, as well as the collective imagination of a utopian environment and future that supports said thrival. Yep (2003) describes:

“Queer [worldmaking] is the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership” (p. 35).

The queer worldmaking project not only shifts away from cis-heteronormativity, but also focuses on queer and trans joy, hope, desire, freedom, agency, and futurity at its center.

Although queer worldmaking happens throughout higher education institutions and is manifested in various and nuanced ways, little research explores queer worldmaking in college and university settings. Briggs (2019) explored the worldmaking potential within the

undergraduate classroom space, utilizing queer students' narratives to understand how structures within higher education may shape students' discourse and positionality in the classroom. She found that students can sometimes resist queer worldmaking as they have been conditioned to envision a world through a cis-heteronormative lens with normative power structures in place. The author argued that the structures of neoliberal higher education conditioned students to assimilate into homonormativity<sup>3</sup> and therefore struggle with queer worldmaking (Briggs, 2019). However, she recognized that her students' stories were complex in the way that they identified, understood, and performed queerness within the classroom. She urged educators to engage with students in reflection processes around identity and fostering community through facilitating dialogues and building relations. While using critical and queer theories to identify the ways in which hegemonic power structures limit our thinking and envisioning, Briggs (2019) utilized queer worldmaking as a lens to see the potentiality of the classroom space.

Another example of queer worldmaking is Blockett's (2017) interest in how queer Black college men fostered counterspaces on campus as a response to multiple systems of oppression (such as racism, homophobia, and transphobia) that are perpetuated in predominantly white institutions of higher education. He illustrated how extant literature describes the kinship that queer Black men often have with each other, as they are often shunned from their families and discriminated against by different social groups. By deconstructing understandings of familial kinship through the lens of queer worldmaking, readers understand how queer Black men

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<sup>3</sup> Homonormativity refers to an idealized performance of queerness that aligns with cis-heteronormative privilege while simultaneously failing to disrupt dominant sociocultural narratives (Duggan, 2002; Archer, 2022). Homonormativity has received criticism for perpetuating inequities and marginalizing individuals whose queer identities do not conform to this idealized performance. Furthermore, the concept has been employed to scrutinize the ways in which cis-heterosexual imaginings of queer lives are disseminated through capitalist modes or through policies aimed solely at cisgender gay and lesbian individuals, thereby reinforcing the heteronormative status quo (Archer, 2022).



engaged in interpersonal relationship-building to better navigate predominantly white institutions. He found that peer-support groups are not only a way for Black queer male students to better navigate campus but also “reconfigure their queer world experiences” (p. 812) in several ways. For example, as queer Black students build a community of support composed of people with similar identities, experiences, and politics, they highlighted the existing “status quo” condition that favors white gay students. Moreover, since the queer community is often viewed through the lens of whiteness, Blockett (2017) argues that this effort centers their racial identity and racialized experience and addresses how marginalized racial identities are often viewed through a cis-heteronormative lens.

These two studies utilized queer worldmaking as a lens to analyze the experiences of queer and trans students and the structures of higher education institutions. They both centered the identities and lived experiences of queer people and engaged in queer worldmaking by envisioning a new way to function in this world. These studies also challenged normative concepts, such as our perception of academic spaces rooted in colonial and controlling practices and our conceptualization of stereotypical Black and/or queer embodiment. Although little research discusses queer worldmaking explicitly in higher education settings, different scholars have also engaged in queer worldmaking by challenging normative and hegemonic structures. In 2020, Patton, Blockett, and McGowan further explored the experiences of Black queer students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The authors recognized how queer and trans students are often marginalized at HBCUs due to Black respectability politics. They argued that even in these spaces where the students’ racial identities are affirmed, they are organized in ways that are palatable to the white gaze. Respectability politics not only harms queer and trans students, but also prevents the Black community at HBCUs from exercising Black worldmaking

(Patton et al., 2020). Although queer worldmaking is not explicitly stated, the authors still imply that the safety and joy of 2SLGBTQIA+ Black people are an essential part of this worldmaking project. While the explicit landscape of queer worldmaking in education systems, specifically higher education is small, it still provides additional insights into the lived experience of queer and trans students and how 2SLGBTQIA+ students resist the dominant hegemonic narrative of cis-heteronormativity.

### **Shifting the Narrative: Moving from Deficit to Desires**

Queer worldmaking centers queer agency and creativity (Zaino, 2022) which is essential to combat the deficit and damaged narratives for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Time and time again, researchers have documented the negative experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in the collegial context. While discussing queer and trans students' persistence despite the systemic challenges they face, scholarly work often discusses the idea of 2SLGBTQIA+ student persistence and retention at an individual level that paints their experience as either deficient or resilient (Pitcher et al., 2018). For example, Micah (2010) examined how queer and trans students are represented as victims who need to be saved by external agents, and this victim trope undermines their agency. However, Robinson and Schmitz (2021) pushed scholars to move away from viewing 2SLGBTQIA+ students through an "at-risk" framework and beyond the resilience framework, since resilience often means successfully assimilating to the dominant social order. The resilient framework glorifies individual success and does little to examine the cis-heteronormative structure within higher education institutions that 2SLGBTQIA+ students must combat. Other research takes a more critical look into higher education and 2SLGBTQIA+ centers from an organizational perspective to examine inclusivity and institutional responsibility for queer and trans students (Pitcher et al., 2018; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Documenting the impact of

institutional harm is vital for holding educational institutions accountable, thereby fostering more systemic and structural changes. However, Tuck (2009) raised concerns about "damage-centered research," which focuses exclusively on the harms inflicted by institutional violence on marginalized students, specifically 2SLGBTQIA+ students in this context. During times when anti-2SLGBTQIA+ efforts intensify, both from institutions and the state, recognizing and naming the extent of these damages to the queer and trans community becomes crucial. While it is important to highlight the structural inequalities that inflicts damages and harm upon the marginalized community to advocate for structural changes and reparation, Tuck (2009) feared that said framework could be "a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (p. 413) as those requests are rarely met. Instead, Tuck (2009) proposed that we should focus on *desire*, as "an antidote to damage-centered research" (p. 416). The historical contexts that have contributed to the community's suffering, loss, and trauma are not disregarded in the desire-based approach. Additionally, it captures marginalized communities' wisdom, visions, and hopes to counter the frequently applied one-dimensional narrative of brokenness.

It is important to consider the perspective of queer and trans students regarding their wisdom, visions, and hopes in order to fully understand their notions and desires to "thrive" on college campuses. Greteman's (2016) conceptualization of queer thrival is defined as ways in which queer and trans people "develop and grow vigorously" (p. 310). Greteman (2016, 2018) emphasized how queer thrival is not produced through assimilation to the dominant culture and further homonormativity; it is an active refusal of cis-heteronormativity, racism, and colonization. Queer thrival, similar to queer worldmaking and desire-based approaches to research, is contextualized in history and acknowledges the material, social, and political

challenges that 2SLGBTQIA+ people face (Greteman, 2011, 2018). Greteman (2016) noted the battle against the sanctioned violence and pathologization of various queer and trans subcultures, writing that “To thrive is not easy” (p. 315). He (2011, 2016) discussed the importance of creating spaces where queerness and transness can thrive; in other words, engaging in a queer worldmaking project, one that is built upon collective imagination and hope.

### **The Purpose of Study**

The problems this study addressed are complex, nuanced, and interwoven. Given the historical marginalization, violence, and pathologization experienced by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, understanding and fostering queer worldmaking has become increasingly imperative. However, despite its significance, there is a dearth of research on queer worldmaking in higher education, both within and beyond the classroom. Prior literature highlights how institutional inequities continue to disadvantage queer and trans students, perpetuating their exclusion and marginalization. While it is crucial to document and examine the institutional harm inflicted on marginalized student populations, including those within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, focusing exclusively on the negative impacts can inadvertently sustain damage-centered narratives that could perpetuate stereotypes and further stigmatize the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Therefore, I argue that alongside documenting the institutional harm, it is essential to concurrently explore and develop frameworks that envision how queer and trans students can thrive in order to provide a more holistic view of their experiences in higher education. Additionally, there is limited scholarship on queer thrival in higher education (Hill et al., 2021), and a lack of common consensus on its definition or conceptualization (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). As such, the current study seeks to contribute to the scholarship on queer worldmaking, queer thrival, and institutional support for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in higher education.

In particular, this study intends to explore how current 2SLGBTQIA+ students engage in worldmaking and theorize queer utopia<sup>4</sup> (Muñoz, 2009) through a future-oriented and desire-based lens. I approach this inquiry qualitatively, as qualitative research captures complex social issues and enables participants to express their lived experiences situated within their particular positionality and identity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Specifically, I utilize queer methodology, defined as "a praxis aimed at undoing prevailing assumptions about epistemic authority, legitimate knowledge, and the very meaning of research" (Ward, 2016, p. 71). Queer methodology strives to be reflexively aware of the positionality of the researcher(s), account for 2SLGBTQIA+ people's lived experiences, center queer and trans pleasures and desires, and bring emancipatory change (Warner, 2004). As the queer worldmaking project is transformative and generative, this project focused on queer and trans creativity to collectively construct the possibilities of liberatory and affirming worlds. To achieve said aims, queer methods, such as participatory-action research and art-based research guide my work (Manning, 2017). While art-based research raises awareness, fosters empathy, and creates spaces for queer expression through its unconventional data collection and dissemination methods, action research focuses on utilizing research as a way to facilitate critical interventions from the community to address their unique needs (Manning, 2017).

The theories that inform this research are Eve Tuck's (2009) desire-based framework and Jose Estaban Muñoz's (2009) queer utopia. These theories both center lived experiences of marginalized populations and the desire to create radical and liberatory futures. As Tuck's desire-

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<sup>4</sup> Muñoz (2009) introduced queer utopia as a way to reimagine a reality that does not center on cis-heterosexual identities and to inspire hope in marginalized populations. Dreaming of the ideality of utopia - a good place that does not exist, Muñoz (2009) argues that queer utopia is not simply an idealized or perfected version of the present nor a version that moves queerness closer to homonormativity, but rather a radically different and transformative world. In Muñoz's (2009) view, queer utopia is an imaginative space that enables 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to resist the limitations of the present and envision new possibilities for the future.

based framework speaks to Indigenous experiences and decolonization while queer utopia has its roots in queer-of-color critique, these frameworks highlight how intersecting systems of oppression affect the current experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and keep racial justice and decolonization as an integral part in my analysis of students' desires and queer worldmaking process. Because queer oppression is intimately tied to racism and colonization, and power is omnipresent, I ask: How can systems of oppression be disrupted through the use of the imagination? How do 2SLGBTQIA+ students imagine themselves and their future through a critical anti-racist and decolonized lens within the hegemonic discourse of higher education in the United States? Both these frameworks encourage the intersectional analysis of various social injustices and empower the exploration of the possibilities and imagined futures where oppression no longer exists.

This study explored the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and envisions what queer worldmaking can be on college campuses. The following research question guided this qualitative study:

How do 2SLGBTQIA+ college students imagine themselves thriving in higher education institutions?

This research question, and the aforementioned guiding questions, are not interested in what the institutions define as success or thrival for students since those metrics of achievement often only benefit those institutions. Student success is often pre-defined for students in higher education, whether through positive academic achievement or institutional retainment (Tinto, 2017). This work looked beyond resiliency and persistence, beyond the hostile conditions that 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and instead at what queer and trans students desired for *themselves* to thrive and the transformative potential that higher education can deliver for students. Since many

colleges and universities continue to implement policies and programs that affirm the cis-heteronormative paradigm while upholding white supremacy and colonialism at the foundations of the institutional agenda, I, along with my participants, seek to imagine a future outside of the dominant systems to produce a radical impact beyond the walls of the institution.

### **Significance of Study**

In this collaborative art-based research with 2SLGBTQIA+ students, students conceptualized thriving as well as the collective imagination of a more equitable and just higher education institution. I hope to paint better pictures of new directions for higher education that are rooted in queer and trans students' desire to thrive rather than their desire to simply survive. While the literature on queer thrival in higher education is limited, the existing research provided important implications on how colleges and universities can continue to support 2SLGBTQIA+ students and create more affirming conditions in which they can thrive (Hill et al., 2021). I expand on the foundations and address the lack of research on this subject. Considering the limited research available on queer worldmaking in higher education, my study does not only aim to highlight the ways in which 2SLGBTQIA+ subjects navigated, resisted, and disidentified with the hegemonic cis-heteronormative structures, but also engaged in reimagining and queering a higher education system through queer and trans ways of knowing and being. This work is in conversation with Duran and colleagues (2020) who encouraged researchers to look at queerness and trans-ness beyond embodied identity, and extend them towards other “nodes through which higher education operates” (p.118), such as epistemology, research methodology, pedagogy, organization, and leadership. In addition, Renn (2010) highlighted that while higher education is the source of queer theories, the system itself “remained substantially untouched by the queer agenda” (p. 132) as colleges and universities refuse to queer the system itself. Duran,

Blockett, and Nicolazzo (2020) challenged scholars and practitioners to utilize queerness and transness as concepts and paradigms to facilitate organizational and cultural changes in higher education. This study addressed 2SLGBTQIA+ people while utilizing queer and trans ways of being to craft a queer utopia within higher education and further the “queer agenda” per Renn (2010) and others suggestions.

In addition to contributing to knowledge and research, this study offers implications for praxis. Lange and colleagues (2019) suggested that student affairs practitioners (not limited to 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Centers but across all functional areas) can benefit from utilizing queer and trans epistemologies. By adopting a more fluid understanding of concepts in student identity and development, both scholars and practitioners can contextualize student success, or specifically thrival in this study, in students’ positionality as well as the local socio-political context (Lange et al., 2019). Through the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ participants and the collective reimagining of queer utopia centering their desire for thrival, this research centers the ways of knowing and being of queer and trans individuals and contextualizes their vision of a better higher education experience for all 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in the hostile anti-queer and anti-trans political climate. While the dream of constructing an absolutely affirming collegial setting may belong to what Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) names the “there-then”, it can still provide insights into 2SLGBTQIA+ student experiences and help build critical interventions that support their development and success for the “here-now” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

In keeping with Collins' (1998) claim that language has power, I intend to define key concepts and provide reasoning as to why specific terms were chosen over others in order to specify the aim and scope of this study. To capture the nuance and complexity that shapes this



research, I employ vocabulary and concepts that help me better understand queer and trans epistemology and queer worldmaking in higher education. Following the expansive nature of queer and trans epistemology, my goal is to establish these concepts as key components for the research rather than constrict their meanings with stable and fixed definitions. The following terms were used operationally in this study:

**Cis-heteronormativity:** Cis-heteronormativity is defined as the “systemic normalization and material privileging of bodies, identities, and subjectivities that most closely align with white cisgender and heterosexual cultural expectancies” (LeMaster et al., 2019, p. 367). It positions cisgender and heterosexuality as the default “natural” state of existence and compulsory option with moral significance; therefore, it can go undetected and unquestioned (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Warner, 2002.). Cis-heteronormativity permeates throughout the higher education system, from physical structure to policies, as it positions (white) cis-heterosexual students at the center.

**Desire:** Tuck (2009) defined desire as “Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and future” (p. 417). Her work, drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), deviates from traditional psychoanalytic views of ‘desire’ as a lack or a need. They posit ‘desire’ as a constantly active force that generates and connects diverse entities beyond human existence, operating within social and cultural contexts shaped by historical, political, and economic factors (Świątkowski, 2015). The idea of "becoming" is central to their philosophy, referring to the ongoing transformations of individuals and things, facilitated by their interconnections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Tuck (2009) and Deleuze & Guattari (1987) looked at desire as an epistemological shift that emphasizes its productive and constructive potentials,

challenging normative hegemonic structures, and “is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore” (Tuck, 2009, p. 417).

**Queer Futurity:** Helmsing (2021) defined queer futurity as “a condition that allows queer youth to open up new ways of imagining possible lives their future selves can live” (p. 519). Muñoz (2009) argued that 2SLGBTQIA+ people, specifically queer and trans people of color, have historically been excluded from mainstream narratives of progress and futurity, yet, “the future is queerness’ domain” (p.1). By imagining alternative futures that are based on queer and trans experiences and desires, individuals can resist the oppressive structures of the present and open up new possibilities for radical change (Muñoz, 2009).

**Queer Utopia:** Muñoz (2009) introduced queer utopia as a way to reimagine a reality that does not center on cis-heterosexual identities and to inspire hope in marginalized populations. Dreaming of the ideality of utopia - a good place that does not exist, Muñoz (2009) argues that queer utopia is not simply an idealized or perfected version of the present nor a version that moves queerness closer to homonormativity, but rather a radically different and transformative world. He argued that queerness in itself is also an ideality, one that we may never reach, “but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). In Muñoz's (2009) view, queer utopia is an imaginative space that enables 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to resist the limitations of the present and envision new possibilities for the future. I, along with the participants, uncover the (untapped) potentiality of higher education to construct a queer utopia that supports student thrival.

**Queer Worldmaking:** Berlant and Warner (1998) introduced the term in *Sex in Public* to describe a vision of a livable social world for queer and trans people and a commitment to disrupt and subvert the pervasive power of cis-heteronormativity. Many queer theorists have adopted this framework to promote other forms of viewing, imagining, and constructing social realities without cis-heteronormativity as a reference (Otis & Dunn, 2021; Zaino, 2022). Specifically, queer worldmaking is viewed as liberatory praxis to build an affirming and subversive space for queer and trans people of color (Alexander, 2018; Blockett & Renn, 2021)

**Queer Thrival:** Greteman's (2016) conceptualization of queer thrival as the conditions in which 2SLGBTQIA+ people “develop and grow vigorously” (p. 310). This notion rejects assimilation to dominant culture and homonormativity, and instead involves a refusal of cis-heteronormativity, racism, and colonization while situated in history and recognizes the unique challenges faced by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (Greteman, 2016, 2018). Greteman (2011, 2016) emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where queerness and transness can thrive through collective imagination and hope. In this study, I look beyond 2SLGBTQIA+ students’ persistence and focus on thrival, as “to thrive means that one has survived” (Greteman, 2016, p. 316).

## **Assumptions**

One of the lynchpin assumptions in this research study is that our experiences are shaped by cis-heteronormativity. The current societal structure is based on reproductivity, “the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity” (Warner, 1993, p. 9). It encompasses not only the biological aspect of reproduction but also generational succession and transmission. Warner (1993) emphasized that sex primarily

exists for the purpose of reproduction. The concern for future generations is often coupled with worries about the future workforce, particularly when individuals choose to not partake in coupling, marriage, and childbearing. Those personal choices become a significant financial burden in terms of producing a labor force. The author linked economic development to childbearing and reproduction, placing cis-heteronormativity within the moral hierarchy and highlighting how the state exerts control over its citizens' bodies with regards to both capital production and reproduction.

The assumptions of reproductivity and producing labor/workforce permeate throughout the higher education structure. As participants engage in reflection, their experiences must be placed in the context of cis-heteronormativity to further understand how colleges and universities continue to invest in cis-heteronormativity and how it shapes the meaning-making process of participants. Furthermore, other forces of oppression (such as racism and colonialism) must be accounted for as the matrix of domination shapes the experiences of all people (Collins, 2000), specifically queer and trans students of color (Blockett & Renn, 2021). The assumption that power is omnipresent and inextricably linked with identity (Linder, 2018) is essential not only in analyzing participants' data, but also in our collective construction and conceptualization of queer utopia.

Although cis-heteronormativity pushes the normative logic and presents itself as the only way to organize social reality, a queer worldmaking project presents alternative paths and possibilities for a more just and affirming society for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. A key assumption for this research is the sense of hope, or as Muñoz (2009) described: “educated hope.” However, engaging in queer worldmaking does not mean that one can ignore the oppressive reality or the past, but “queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that

allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz, 2009, p.1). It is informed by the historical context in order to construct the future, or as Muñoz (2009) described his approach to hope as “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (p. 4). It requires an epistemological shift in seeing the world differently, or “utopically” as described by Otis and Dunn (2021), by focusing on the potentiality instead of the current reality. Muñoz (2009) labeled hope “as a critical affect and a methodology” (p. 4) to combat the political pessimism and the pragmatism that contribute to neoliberal homonormativity. The desire to reach queerness - which always lives on the aspirational horizon, undergirds this study as it challenges the participants and me to co-construct a transformative vision for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community without being held back by the straight logic of the current reality.

### **Chapter Summary & Dissertation Outline**

Higher education institutions can have transformative potential for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, offering resources and spaces for students to engage in personal and identity development. However, the narratives of pain and exclusion are often all too common for queer and trans students, as they are subjected to violence due to a lack of visibility as well as a hostile climate within institutional walls. Furthermore, the topic of queer thrival is not often discussed in higher education literature, which limits the discussion to institutional metrics of success and fails to fully recognize or cultivate the unique voices and agency of queer and trans individuals. This dissertation is calling for a reimagination from queer and trans people in creating a future of colleges and universities where thrival is supported. This study looks at the ways in which colleges and universities can divest from cis-heteronormative power to create inclusive and equitable learning environments based on 2SLGBTQIA+ students’ lived experiences and desires.

By prioritizing the needs of queer and trans students, we reimagine higher education, facilitate queer thrival, and promote social change.

In Chapter 2, I explore the experiences of marginalization and violence endured by 2SLGBTQIA+ students in college and university settings. This discussion is followed by an examination of critical interventions and institutional resources that have the potential to transform higher education. I delve into the conceptualization of queer thrival in the context of higher education and explore various frameworks of queer worldmaking, including the queer utopia model. This critique challenges traditional intervention methods that aim to establish queer safe spaces within a homophobic and transphobic system. In chapter 3, I describe how queer methodology and queer methods is best suited to capture the lived experiences of queer and trans students while being critical of the current reality and flexible to create room for creativity and imagination in the worldmaking process. Specifically, I dive into how participatory action research and visual method offer a unique lens in capturing students' imagination of a liberatory vision for queer utopia. In this dissertation's findings, I delve into the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students across three key areas: how they envision thriving, how they navigate these desires amid encounters with institutional violence, and how their desires shape the collective dream of a queer utopia among co-researchers. In Chapter 4, I delve into 2SLGBTQIA+ students' visions of thriving within the higher education landscape, using this framework to examine their desires. Chapter 5 investigates how these desires are navigated as students encounter institutional violence, both within the broader campus environment and within institutionalized queer spaces. Chapter 6 explores how the desires of queer and trans students shape their conception of a queer utopia, despite the challenges faced within the university context. These following findings chapters offer a comprehensive view on the desires

of queer and trans students, encompassing their conceptualization of thriving, their interactions within the higher education landscape, and, most significantly, the transformative impact of queer desires in shaping a visionary trajectory for the future. These findings chapters provide a comprehensive understanding of the desires as well as the queer worldmaking process of queer and trans students. Lastly, Chapter 7 reconnects with larger theoretical frameworks of queer utopia and queer thrival, discussing the implications of this dissertation on research and practice.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This study takes a desire-based, future-oriented approach to examine how 2SLGBTQIA+ students create and theorize a queer utopia. I achieve these goals by critically examining how 2SLGBTQIA+ students define queer thrival, as well as how they imagine themselves as thriving individuals. Additionally, this work explores the processes by which queer and trans students engage in worldmaking, collaboratively constructing a queer utopia that fosters their thriving. It delves into their visions of utopia and thrival, examining how these visions challenge and disrupt the prevailing cis-heteronormative structures within higher education. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on the experiences of queer and trans students in college and university settings. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on the experiences of queer and trans students in college and university settings. I discuss not only 2SLGBTQIA+ students' encounters with marginalization and the prevalent violence against 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, but also the critical interventions and institutional resources available within higher education, outlining how post-secondary institutions can be potential sites for transformation. Additionally, the chapter investigates existing conceptualizations of queer thrival within the context of higher education and various interpretations of queer worldmaking found in the literature. Specifically, I explore how José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) queer utopia framework provides a lens for engaging in queer worldmaking, enabling me to question and critique traditional methods of creating 'safe' spaces within a homophobic and transphobic system.

#### **2SLGBTQIA+ Students' Experience in Higher Education**

There is a growing amount of research focusing on the queer and trans student experience in collegial contexts and the structural inequities existing in higher education. Several scholars



have looked at the state of 2SLGBTQIA+ research through their own unique epistemological and theoretical lenses (Renn, 2010; Lange et al., 2019; Kilgo, 2020; Pryor et al., 2022). Renn (2010) approached 2SLGBTQIA+ in higher education research from the 1980s to the 2000s through the lens of campus climate and issues that contributed to the queer student experience. She categorized the bulk of scholarship into three main categories: visibility for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, campus climate for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and 2SLGBTQIA+ student identities and experiences. Her work was later expanded by Kilgo (2020) with two additional categories: outcomes for queer and trans students and 2SLGBTQIA+ educational programs. Lange and colleagues (2019) utilized ball culture as a conceptual framework to understand recent 2SLGBTQIA+ scholarship in higher education. They divided the last 10 years of research into four houses: House of Perceptibility, House of Endurance, House of Normalcy, and House of Flourishing. Each house used different analytic tools to focus on and analyze queer issues and assess institutional support structures and barriers that affected queer students. Lastly, Pryor and colleagues (2022) summarized 20 years of 2SLGBTQIA+ practitioner scholarship to better understand the scholars and practitioners' shift of focus from individual intervention strategies to systemic change: from research "through a cis-heteronormative gaze" (p. 12) about queer subjects to scholarship that centers queer and trans experience. Although the approaches and analytical tools may differ, these authors brought up common themes of queer student persistence and factors supporting their success. However, it is also important to dissect how institutions of higher education were built on and further invest in the larger cis-heteronormative oppressive structure (Lange et al., 2019). In this section, I discuss the current reality of violence focusing on how 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience marginalization within the settings of higher education and the ways in which higher education as an institution is organized around

cis-heteronormativity. Further, I explore the potentiality of higher education institutions to be sites for transformation for queer and trans students.

### ***Higher Education Institutions as Current Reality of Violence***

#### **(In)Visibility**

As Renn (2010) reviewed the existing 2SLGBTQIA+ literature on queer and trans students' experience in higher education, the first emergent theme was 'visibility.' She discussed how 'visibility' had changed throughout time. The 1990s saw the rise of a variety of edited narratives written by and about 2SLGBTQIA+ college students and teenagers that served as a foundation for making their experiences apparent. These autobiographical stories were supplemented by a few empirical investigations that were typically qualitative and single-campus in nature. Renn (2010) attributed the importance of these studies as they provided a foundation for educators to begin making decisions about policies and programs to support queer and trans students. In her overview, Renn (2010) also mentioned the growing literature about lesbian and gay faculty, highlighting the unique struggles as well as the institutional barriers that they faced. These challenges include the pressure of separating professional and personal lives due to a hostile climate, and widespread homophobia due to a lack of institutional, state, and federal protection (Renn, 2010). Kilgo (2020) further expanded the conceptualization of 'visibility' of queer and trans students and developed three subcategories: institutional presence, institutional type, and presence in policy, data, and national associations. Kilgo (2020) highlighted the areas in which 2SLGBTQIA+ students are made invisible through institutional practices. She argued that the lack of targeted effort for 2SLGBTQIA+ people (especially the trans community) in recruitment, retention, demographic data collection, and alumni relations resulted in a lack of representation of queer and trans identities. Furthermore, Kilgo (2020) stressed the lack of

literature on 2SLGBTQIA+ students in different institutional contexts, such as historically Black colleges and universities, community colleges, religious-affiliated institutions, and women's colleges. Even though visibility as a goal can be discounted as "regressive," according to Renn (2010), these studies serve as a reminder of a time when being out was a risky political and personal act, even at progressive institutions, which is still the case at many institutions. Renn's (2010) and Kilgo's (2020) overviews of 2SLGBTQIA+ literature urged us to resist this because the visibility and recognition of queer and trans identities continue to be politicized.

Students with multiple marginalized identities can further feel invisible and erased. Pryor and colleagues (2022) called attention to the lack of research on sexual diversity, queer disability, or experiences of queer students of color. "The current literature continues to perpetuate binaristic representations of identity, where sexuality remains predominantly focused on monosexual experiences, and the intersections of race are most dominantly monoracial" (Pryor et al., 2022, p. 13). This shines a spotlight on how institutions of higher education and academia as a field conceptualize queer bodies as monolithic and exclude other marginalized identities. Lange and colleagues (2019) echo the sentiment of how queer and trans visibility is often viewed through white cis-heteronormative able-bodiedness, so they are deliberately focused on perceptibility to highlight the multiple standpoints of understanding queer and trans identities. The authors situated queer and trans identities in relation to other social identities such as race, spirituality, and disability (Lange et al., 2019). This article shifted the focus from identity development as ahistorical and acontextual to the ways in which institutional structures support or limit said development. Furthermore, they also examine how those structures further perpetuate our cis-heteronormative understanding of identities and the social world (Lange et al., 2019).

This invisibility of queer and trans students' identities can be seen in both physical structures and policies on college campuses, as they were built on the foundation of cis-heteronormativity. Beemyn and other researchers (2005) talked about how trans individuals experience harm through the architecture of universities or lack of affirming policies and accommodations. In *Transgender Students in Higher Education*, Goldberg (2018) discussed how physical spaces on campus, such as single-sex restrooms and housing, can serve as barriers for queer, trans, and non-binary students. These spaces often assume that students' identities fit neatly with the binary understanding of sex and gender. Goldberg (2018) recognized that forms and documentation can further alienate trans and non-binary students as they often display students' deadnames (names that trans and non-binary students no longer use), and that name change processes can be complicated, confusing, and costly. Blumenfeld and colleagues (2016) discussed how queer people on campus might experience unequal benefits or deal with more red tape to receive the services such as health plans or housing accommodations. Due to the lack of consistency in platform usage and practices to collect institutional information, Kilgo (2020) pointed out that less than 3% of post-secondary institutions allowed students to self-report sexual orientation or gender identity (including options outside of the binary understanding of sex) during the admission and enrollment process. For many institutions, this means queer and trans students are not represented in the institutional demographics and statistics because these administrative processes render them invisible while using said invisibility as the reason to investigate the cis-heteronormative foundations of higher education practices.

## **Climate**

There is a large amount of scholarship that seeks to describe the hostile nature, as well as the homophobic/transphobic harassment and discrimination, that queer students experience in

college environments (D'Augelli, 1989; Brown et al., 2004; Beemyn, 2005; Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017; Goldberg, 2018; Whitfield et al., 2019). Renn (2010) described that campus climate studies often examined three areas: the perceptions and experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, perceptions about 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and the status of policies and programs aimed at improving the academic, living, and work experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals on campus. Renn (2010) highlighted while national studies of K-12 school climate and experiences of queer and trans youth have been available, higher education institutions have lagged behind. However, efforts to standardize data on 2SLGBTQIA+ campus climate represent a significant step forward towards creating a comprehensive national overview. Kilgo (2020) categorized the literature on climate studies to better understand the experiences of queer people in various contexts, such as academic spaces, co-curricular spaces, or overall environmental factors. Overall, Kilgo (2020) found that 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience more hostility in the classroom than their peers, and specifically, trans and gender non-conforming students have more negative experiences compared to their gender-conforming students. They continued to look at studies addressing the climate for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in various institutional contexts, such as community colleges, single-gendered institutions, and religious institutions (Kilgo, 2020). Kilgo (2020) described the climate for queer and trans students as “bleak” (p. 16) across institutional types.

Despite some criticisms of climate studies as outdated for essentializing queer and trans experiences, Renn (2010) argued that they remain important in creating accountability and promoting change in institutions to better serve the needs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In addition, Lange and colleagues (2019) further stressed the importance of climate studies. Although often situated within a single campus and therefore individual studies, together they

illustrate a larger picture of 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences in higher education (Lange et al., 2019; Pryor et al., 2022). Furthermore, climate studies can be used as tools to bring meaningful changes to campuses and hold institutions accountable for such progress (Lange et al., 2019). In their overview, the authors utilized an organizational and critical lens to understand the structures that create hostile conditions for queer and trans students. The authors shifted the paradigm of viewing queer and trans students' experiences from survival to resistance and persistence to showcase further how the systems require students with marginalized identities to spend more effort to persist (Lange et al., 2019). Pryor and colleagues (2022) pointed out how earlier scholarship focused on allyship development, such as Safe Zone training, and other programmatic interventions as an aid for climate issues. However, more recent literature has shifted to encouraging campus entities to address inequities within higher education. The authors highlighted the trend in climate studies of shifting the perceptions about 2SLGBTQIA+ students from cis-heterosexual students in earlier research to the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the institutions, which elevates a more nuanced understanding of queer and trans people within the collegiate environment as well as emphasizes changes or potential for growth (Pryor et al., 2022).

### ***Higher Education Institutions as Potential Sites for Transformation***

#### **Identity Development**

Colleges and universities continue to be spaces where queer and trans students explore and learn more about their sexual and gender identity due to exposure to other 2SLGBTQIA+ people and freedom from parental figures (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; Renn, 2010, 2017; Lange, 2022). Renn (2010) discussed how the literature continues to address different aspects of queer and trans students' identities, such as religion and spirituality, leadership, career development,

and student development. This sentiment continued to be expanded in the literature in the last decades, as students learned to make meaning as trans and gender non-conforming individuals, 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, queer and trans students with disabilities, and queer women (Kilgo, 2020). The literature on 2SLGBTQIA+ students in higher education becomes more complex by not only focusing on their sexual and gender identity but also on different dimensions of students' identity and development. Duran (2019) observed that research tends to focus on how queer students of color navigate their identities within singular identity spaces. However, his study highlighted the "complex individuality" (Duran, 2019, p. 393) of these students and challenged the essentializing narrative of uniformity. He also critiqued the multiple systems of oppression that impact the development of various subgroups of 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color. By examining the experiences and meaning-making process of students at the intersection of marginalized sexuality/gender and racial/ethnicity, these studies contextualized the development of sexual and gender identity in conjunction with racial identity development, and vice versa. In this way, they explored the holistic development of queer and trans students of color.

Renn (2010) highlighted how the earlier literature on 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences was informed by the linear models of gender and identity development. With the progression of research endeavors aimed at comprehending the lived experiences of queer and trans students, such studies have influenced the construction of theories regarding sexual and gender identity development, thereby challenging the notion of a linear, stage-based approach and instead emphasizing the complex and context-dependent nature of this process (Renn, 2010). As trans studies become more present in the literature in higher education, many researchers recognize the distinction that studies on sexual orientation and gender identity investigate fundamentally

different concepts (Renn, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2020). Nevertheless, political, social, and intellectual associations among 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals have resulted in a conflated understanding of these unique groups in campus settings, where they are frequently perceived as a monolithic community for the sake of providing programs and services (Renn, 2010). In addition, Renn (2010) highlighted that contemporary research utilizes queer theory as a framework for study design, analysis, and interpretation. Queer theories allow for a more contextual, less categorical examination of development that considers the reciprocal influences of several fluid identity domains, such as race, social class, ability, religion, and nationality (Renn, 2010; Denton, 2019). Denton (2019) discussed how the emphasis of student development usually centers on individual psychological processes, whereas queer theories offer a more adaptable understanding of identities by concentrating on how institutions, society, and culture influence one's identities, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. By employing queer theories in understanding 2SLGBTQIA+ students' identities and their development, researchers can have a holistic and nuanced conceptualization of gender and sexuality, instead of them being rigid and stagnant (Kilgo, 2020).

### **Community Network**

Despite the hostility of campus climate, 2SLGBTQIA+ students still develop their own community and network. Lange and colleagues (2019) stressed the importance of establishing a sense of belonging for queer and trans students in higher education contexts. To enhance the retention of queer and trans college students, Pitcher and Simmon (2020) suggested that the strategies employed should follow the survival and thriving strategies observed within the queer and trans communities at large. To better support the retention of queer and trans students, efforts should focus on fostering and strengthening connections, community, and kinship among these



students while acknowledging the diversity of their identities (Pitcher & Simmon, 2020). The extant body of literature has revealed multifaceted approaches by which 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience a sense of acceptance or build their own support network at the institution (Lange et al., 2019). Nicolazzo and others (2017) discussed how kinship plays an important role in trans students' success during their time in college. Queer kinship is defined as “not simply a substitute for blood relatives, it is as blood relatives, deeply and profoundly felt as ‘real’ family” (Weston, 1997, p. 117). While queer and trans students of color may find it more challenging to find community and support that affirm their racial, gender, or sexual identity, they still seek community with other 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, white queer and trans peers, people of color, women, and their chosen family (Duran, 2019). 2SLGBTQIA+ students also find support in cocurricular spaces through their involvement with student groups, specifically those that are organized around identity (Duran, 2019; Kilgo, 2020). Through his research, Duran (2019) described various ways queer and trans collegians of color connect and build community in different student organizations, from identity-specific groups to activism-based or interest-based groups like marching bands. These scholarly inquiries emphasize the pivotal role of peer networks that validate students' queer and trans identities, as well as other identities (Lange et al., 2020).

### **Institutional Support**

Although many institutional practices are still rooted in cis-heteronormativity, there are mechanisms in higher education that have affirmed and supported 2SLGBTQIA+ students and their retention in higher education. In their book *Supporting Success for 2SLGBTQIA+ Students: Tools for Inclusive Campus Practice*, Kilgo (2020) structured the content based on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students throughout their journey in higher education. This

includes their recruitment, orientation, and transition into college, as well as their experiences inside and outside of the classroom, and as they prepare to leave the collegiate environment. This demonstrated the scale and scope that higher education institutions can make an impact on the experience and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Kilgo (2020) gathered different high impact practices from different institutions to not only provide the recommended practices for practitioners - from the recruitment and admission process to alumni engagement - but also to capture the unfortunate reality of how uncommon these practices are implemented across institutions of higher education.

While many institutional resources can contribute positively to queer and trans students' success in higher education, 2SLGBTQIA+ resources centers are often mentioned across the literature. Pitcher and colleagues (2018) examined the significance of 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Centers as they offer physical spaces for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, provide community and professional support to those who seek it, and serve as symbols of inclusion for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. These physical spaces, along with the individuals who occupy them, such as peers and professionals, play an integral role in facilitating the support processes necessary for the success of 2SLGBTQIA+ college students (Pitcher et al., 2018). Lange and colleagues (2019) urged practitioners, both within 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center and throughout student affairs, to utilize queer and trans epistemology to further expand conceptualizations of student success and meet the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in their identity development.

Institutional policies also had a significant impact on the success of queer and trans students. Policies reflect the institutional values and organizational climate and serve to shape the norms and values that higher education institutions aspire to preserve and embrace, as

exemplified by anti-discrimination policies (Pitcher et al., 2018). The organizational climate of higher education institutions mirrors their historical background and their endeavors to create an inclusive environment. Each institution has its distinctive cultural and normative climate, and policies are a communication tool for conveying these norms and values (Pitcher et al., 2018). However, policies do not just serve as an inclusion symbol for institutions. As Renn (2010) highlighted, policies have a large influence on the climate towards 2SLGBTQIA+ populations on campus and can impact their sense of belonging. Lange and others (2020) noted that policies can have an impact on queer and trans visibility on campus. For instance, Goldberg (2018) explored the potential impact of policies such as gender-inclusive housing, name change procedures, and protections against discrimination on the psychosocial and academic well-being of trans students. Their research suggests that implementing such policies can lead to increased feelings of belonging and more positive perceptions of campus climate among the trans student population. Kilgo (2020) echoed this sentiment and discussed the importance of intentionality of language usage in queer and trans affirming policies.

### **Student Success & Queer Thrival**

There is minimal research on queer and trans thrival (Hill et al., 2021). At the current time of this study, Hill and colleagues (2021) conducted the only research study about queer thrival in higher education. The authors' used Schreiner's (2010) thriving definition as "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience" (p.4) across their academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions (Hill et al., 2021). While Hill and colleagues (2021) looked at the college experience of queer and trans students, many scholars have looked at queer thrival through the lens of 2SLGBTQIA+ students' success. As Mobley and Hall (2020) pointed out, the terms student "success," "retention," and "persistence," are loaded

and used interchangeably in the field of higher education research. Despite the fact that student success literature is vast and growing, there is no unified definition or metrics for what scholars constitute “student success.” Conventional indicators of student success can be characterized through academic achievements such as grade-point average, results on standardized college entrance examinations, and students' progress towards graduation and degree completion through students' number of credit hours accrued over consecutive terms (Kuh et al., 2006). The performance on field-specific exams, enrollment, and completion rate of graduate and professional schools, as well as other post-graduation achievements, are also considered measures of student success in higher education (Kuh et al., 2006). With the effort of quantifying student success, metrics such as enrollment, grades, student persistence and retention after the first year, and amount of time to graduation, have become indicators of students' achievement and "success" in higher education environments (Venezi et al., 2005).

However, these indicators or measures do not take into account the complexity of each student's individual lived experiences or the unique barriers and challenges that they face, especially for marginalized student populations such as 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Garvey and Dolan (2021) argued that student success literature “heteronormatively and cisnormatively flattens students without attending to the unique and identity-specific conditions for [queer and trans] student success” (para. 3). They asserted that the negligence of looking at 2SLGBTQIA+ success in the larger student success literature continues to reinforce the hegemonic structure and dominance of cis-heteronormativity and identity-neutral politics (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). Because of that, many scholars have begun to take students' gender and sexuality into consideration when discussing the topic of student success.

Garvey and Dolan (2021) examined 2SLGBTQIA+ student success through multiple theoretical lenses to examine the impacts of identity development, finances, relationships and spaces, institutions, and society on queer and trans success. They highlight the lack of inclusion of queer and trans students in the larger conversation of student success, due to the lack of data on students' gender and sexuality demographic data (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). Through various lenses, the authors examined different factors that contribute to 2SLGBTQIA+ student success as well as the barriers that negatively impact students' experiences and educational outcomes (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). Similarly, Pitcher and others (2016) framed student success as college completion for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Through an organizational perspective, the researchers looked at the subsystems, such as 2SLGBTQIA+ resources centers and 2SLGBTQIA+ student organizations, as well as policies in order to support queer and trans students through the barriers and challenges in higher education institutions. Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) explore the impacts of queer kinship on student success. They conceptualize student success as the retention and graduation of trans students as well as how they navigate genderism on campus (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). Mobley and Hall (2020) created a model to examine queer and trans student success and retention at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) by considering both their racial identity and gender/sexuality into considerations and how they inform the students' engagement with the institution. They look at the student experience from the admission and enrollment process to the college experience (both inside and outside of the classroom), and beyond their time within the institution as alumni engagement (Mobley & Hall, 2020). The research highlighted the complexity of 2SLGBTQIA+ student experiences in various contexts, providing us with different considerations to examine the success and thrival of the queer and trans student populations.

The previous literature addressed the lack of existing research on 2SLGBTQIA+ student success and laid out the unique foundations and conditions for students to be retained and persist in higher education environments. In addition to highlighting strategies that 2SLGBTQIA+ students use to navigate hostile, homophobic, and transphobic environments, scholars also outline the institutional conditions that colleges and universities should cultivate to support queer and trans student success. They help frame the conversation of the success not as individual issues and on the students, but as the responsibilities of higher education institutions to further support marginalized student populations (Pitcher et al., 2016; Garvey & Dolan, 2021). While the aforementioned research held higher education accountable to 2SLGBTQIA+ student success, I seek to problematize their conceptualization of ‘success’ as based on the institutional capitalist metrics - ones that are rooted in cis-heteronormativity as well as other oppressive structures such as racism and colonization (Denton, 2020). Denton (2020) challenged the way retention/persistence/success have been conceptualized through queer theory lens. They framed persistence as “cruel optimism,” arguing that the normative conceptualization of student success only reinforces the hegemonic order of the institution and society (Denton, 2020). He asked, “Is the pain of persistence (e.g., debt, microaggressions, harassment, erasure) worth persisting, especially for queers who do not want to replicate the homonormative order?” (Denton, 2020, p. 560). Denton’s (2020) work challenged how scholars should expand our conception of student success or queer thrival in the context of higher education outside the bound of traditional success measures.

Institutional metrics and conceptualizations of student success often adopt a survival-focused and damage approach, which centers on how queer and trans students cope with a hostile environment and persevere until graduation, or the circumstances that higher education

institutions must establish to make it tolerable or survivable for 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Greteman, 2018). In order to better support queer and trans students in higher education, there needs to be a shift away from a survival-focused approach, instead centering on their desires and thrival. Such a shift requires the creation of a space that actively fosters growth, community, and well-being, going beyond just meeting of basic needs. By prioritizing the needs and desires of queer and trans students, higher education institutions can retain 2SLGBTQIA+ students and provide them with the necessary tools and resources to thrive academically, socially, and personally (Hill et al., 2022). Importantly, it must be recognized that 2SLGBTQIA+ students deserve more than just a tolerable or survivable environment and that it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to work towards creating a space that supports their full potential.

The lens of queer thrival offers a new perspective to examine the lived experiences and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. The concept of queer thrival provides a new lens for examining the experiences and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Greteman (2016) introduced this concept, which entails investigating ways for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to thrive while surviving. The author described, “to engage queer thrival is to ask that we investigate, uncover, and invent ways of thriving upon and amid our surviving” (Greteman, 2016, p. 310). It is important to note that thrival and survival are not linear stages, and the focus on thrival does not negate the need to focus on survival. Queer thrival calls for us to examine and create means of thriving upon aiding queer survival. The focus on thrival does not negate the need to focus on survival. However, it calls for the re-imagination of social change and “forcefully [promoting] agendas and contributions to open up space and time outside of the changing social norms” (Greteman, 2016, p. 310). Greteman (2016) critiqued homonormative assimilation strategies to cis-heteronormative structures and the deficit-damaged narrative for the 2SLGBTQIA+

community. Instead, he argued that a critical intersectional look at social movement and progress is essential for queer thrival: “To queerly thrive promotes, recruits, and inevitably educates people to the causes of queerness that intersect with the causes of feminism, anti-racism, class, and transgender politics” (p. 188). In order to do so, Greteman - among other queer scholars - urged us to attend to the historical context, while shaping a social conditions of the here/now to promote queer thrival in the there/after (Greteman, 2018).

### **Queer Worldmaking**

By asking the questions of what might be possible outside of the constraints of cis-heteronormativity, we are engaging in queer worldmaking. Queer worldmaking, a the term was created by Berlant and Warner (1998) in *Sex in Public*, described a vision of a livable social world for queer people and a commitment to disrupt and subvert the pervasive power of cis-heteronormativity. They defined queer worldmaking as:

The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. Worldmaking, as much in the mode of dirty talk as of print-mediated representation, is dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition *unrealizable* as community or identity. Every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture, indexes a virtual social world, in ways that range from a repertoire of styles and speech genres to referential metaculture. (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p.558; emphasis original)

In their essay, Berlant & Warner (1998) promoted a radical aspiration to create a world where cis-heterosexuality is no longer the frame of reference, a collective imagination that expands our understanding of culture and identity as constantly changing and unrestrictive. They argued that



queer worldmaking is not an assimilation of queer culture to heteronormative rules and standards, but rather counterpublic, “an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relations” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p.558). In said counterpublic spaces, intimate relations outside the bounds of cis-heteronormativity may exist, be created, embraced, and highlighted. More importantly, those relations may not hide behind the veil of privatized and sexualized forms of personal choices, they are subversive and disruptive to the oppressive system.

Many scholars have engaged in the topic of queer worldmaking in various disciplines and fields of study, bringing in different understanding and perspectives to conceptualize queer worldmaking. Coming from a performance art background, José Esteban Muñoz highlighted the potentiality of queer-of-color performance through the concept of ‘disidentification’. Utilizing the lens of queer of color critique, Muñoz (1999) highlighted the experience of queer-of-color people and how they are rendered invisible by multiple systems of oppression such as racism, colonialism, cis-heteronormativity, etc. Disidentification is defined as “a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components in the ways in which they affect the social” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 8). While calling attention to the pervasiveness of whiteness within queer culture, Muñoz also offers disidentification as a tool of resistance. He challenged the dichotomy of identification (assimilating to the dominant culture) or counter-identification (escape from an “inescapable sphere” of the dominant culture), and pointed out that disidentification can be “a strategy that tries to transform cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change or at the same time valuing the importance of local or every day struggles of resistance” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11-12). Disidentification, the process of “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” of oppressive systems, exposes the universalization of dominant narrative and

empower marginalized people, specifically queer people of color (p. 31). Instead of the complete rejection of cultural forms, disidentification works within, but against, the hegemonic power system and utilizes tools from the “real world” - the one that has been denied to queer people of color - to rebuild a new one - a utopia as a possible future for marginalized folks (Muñoz, 1999).

## **Queer Utopia**

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz (2009) provided an excellent lens to look at queer futurity, arguing that queerness is an ideality that we may never touch but is a place that is filled with potential. He wrote:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. (Muñoz, 2009, 1)

He urged us to look at the potential and imagine a future that moves past the prison of reality. However, Muñoz did not want to envision a future where queer assimilation into the current cis-heteronormative social order was the goal. Instead, he sought to build a new world that is predicated on hope and dreams of liberation for queer people. Through the lens of queer utopia and queer futurity, Muñoz challenged us to envision what queer space and queer worldmaking could look like. In the context of higher education, said imagination can serve as a critical intervention to challenge cis-heteronormative structure and foster an environment that supports queer thriving for 2SLGBTQIA+ students on college campuses.

Many queer scholars urge us to envision queer utopias as the means for survival and resistance to the hegemonic culture to escape the said oppressive present. It is crucial to understand the queer lived experience in the context of systemic oppression; however, we should

not just view them through the lens of struggle and accept that as an inherently natural order of the social world. Muñoz (2009) introduced queer utopia as a way to reimagine a reality that does not center cis-heterosexual identities and to inspire hope in marginalized populations. This next section discuss the roots of Muñoz's queer utopia in Bloch's (1954, 1955, 1959) works explaining how queer utopia connects to queer futurity, as well as how 2SLGBTQIA+ students' conceptualize and understand of queer space and time.

### ***Concrete & Abstract Utopia***

Sir Thomas More introduced the concept of utopia in 1516 to describe an island in which its people have free access to material goods, food, healthcare, and the freedom of ideologies and religions. ([British Library, n.d.](#)). In itself, the word utopia was a combination of two Greek words: 'eutopia,' meaning 'good place,' and 'outopia,' meaning 'no place.' In this sense, utopia means 'a good place that does not exist,' an ideal state of the social world that might be considered unachievable. Despite this, there is value in focusing on utopianism as a means of expressing desires for a better future, rather than viewing the world through the lens of pragmatism. Ernst Bloch, a Marxist scholar whose works were influential to Muñoz's conception of queer utopia, may argue that utopianism can function as escapism and disruption through the expression of desire for a better future (Levitas, 1990). In his three-volume *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch (1954, 1955, 1959) argued that not all modalities of utopianism were created equal; and he differentiated abstract and concrete utopia. To Bloch, abstract utopias are "wishful thinking," "fantastic and compensatory" (Levitas, 1990, p. 14-15) since "they are untethered from any historical consciousness" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3). Abstract utopias are ungrounded in the practical and realistic envisioning future exercises. In contrast, Bloch considered concrete utopias as "anticipatory rather than compensatory" (Levitas, 1990, p. 15) for they are "relational

to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3). Concrete utopias are grounded in context and reality; they have transformative power over the future. As Muñoz (2009) described it, “concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope” (p. 3). The main distinction between the two concepts is the utility and practicality of creating said vision. “While abstract utopia may express desire, only concrete utopia carries hope” (Levitas, 1990, p. 15)

Muñoz's concept of queerness was grounded in the idea of concrete utopias, which he contrasted with abstract utopias as being "akin to banal optimism" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3) that can lead to disengagement from queer politics. On the other hand, concrete utopias reflect the hopes and desires of the larger collective (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz (2009) argued for the importance of connecting queer cultural production to practical political movements and "[helping] us to see the not-yet-conscious" part of ourselves. He also recognized the significance of grounding collective imagining of utopia in historical struggles, as "queerness exists as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Muñoz (2009) analyzed cultural production during the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 through the lens of Blochian aesthetic practices, using various forms of artistic expression such as painting, poetry, dance, photography, and performances to engage in queer worldmaking, as "the aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

### ***Connection to Queer futurity***

Muñoz (2009) argued that queerness in itself belongs in the future. He opened the book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* with the following: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch

queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Muñoz (2009) emphasized the importance of collectively reimagining a queer utopia as a way to reject the present and create concrete possibilities for another world. The rejection of the present is a central aspect of queerness, which is focused on the potentiality of a future that is not limited by cis-heteronormativity. Muñoz (2009) argues that the present is "poisonous and insolvent" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 30) and that this limits our ability to imagine a different way of being. The author urged us to adopt the anti-assimilation viewpoint - the queerness that is rooted in cis-heteronormativity and the normalcy of queer identities. Muñoz (2009) said: “We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). However, this does not mean that queer futurity is completely detached from the present, simply because it is impossible. Instead, “the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 27).

In order to make a world that centers queer futurity, Muñoz argued that we must reconceptualize queer temporality: our positionality within the then, the now, and the potentiality of our future. Muñoz (2009) challenged us to rethink the traditional way we think about temporal order, or “straight time,” as linear, self-naturalizing, and one that produces reproductivity. In contrast, “queerness’s time” asks us to tap into the no-longer-conscious past and look beyond the present of here and now, to envision the not-yet-here future (Muñoz, 2009). Moreover, Muñoz asked us to not only reconceptualize time, but also change how we experience it. He suggests that the present can be seen as a constraining force, limiting our ability to envision a future that is different from the present. Muñoz encourages us to think and feel beyond the present, to consider a future that is not limited by the constraints of the present. This process of imagining and

desiring a different future, engaging in queer worldmaking, is central to his understanding of the role of queer cultural production in shaping a better future. Throughout *Cruising Utopia*, the author discussed the affective aspect of queer utopia. Muñoz (2009) argued that utopian feelings are “disappointed” but also “indispensable to the act of imaging transformation” (p. 9). Utopia can bring in the sense of hope, which can bring disappointment considering the oppressive historical and current context. However, Muñoz (2009) said that disappointment is not a valid reason to engage in queer worldmaking and building queer utopia, and the hope for queer futurity is a critical and essential process. As we live in a reality that “naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity,” hope and utopia are tools to critique and resist the “romance of negativity” (p. 12).

### *Conceptualizing Queer Space*

A critical aspect of queer worldmaking and constructing a queer utopia is the conceptualization of space and spatiality. Queer spaces often manifest as an alternative or subversive spatiality, one that challenges heteronormative binaries and conventional understanding of spaces and places. In order to foster queer utopia, we must also look at environmental factors that contribute to queer thrival within the institution of higher education. As previously mentioned, the higher education environment can be a hostile and violent site for queer and trans students, especially those who also carry other marginalized identities, such as queer students of color (Pryor, 2018; Duran, 2019; Pryor et al., 2022). Because of that, many scholars have explored the ways in which institutions can create dedicated affirming spaces for queer and trans students as resources to support 2SLGBTQIA+ student success (Renn, 2010; Pitcher et al., 2018, Lange et al., 2019; Kilgo, 2020). The creation of safe spaces for affinity groups, especially for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, on college campuses is a prevalent

discussion point. However, there is much debate about the notion of safety and the functions of safe space within the academy. The critical questions about whose safety higher education institutions are interested in protecting and who has access to said institutional “safe spaces” can be problematic (Quinan, 2016).

Pascar and colleagues (2018) urged us to reconceptualize safety as two areas in relation to queer spaces: room for error and room for difference. Safe space as “room for error” becomes a space that supports learning free of vulnerability, and allows space for social mistakes without harsh social consequences. Safe space as “room for difference” allows participants to be themselves; said spaces are free of violence and serve as escapes for folks with non-dominant identities in the hegemonic environment (Pascar et al., 2018). The authors acknowledged that these two concepts can sometimes contradict each other: room for error can allow participants to learn from their mistakes at the expense of others, especially those with marginalized identities. This challenge was echoed by Quinan (2016). It is a delicate balance between “[creating] such safety and security for students to engage with personally and academically challenging, triggering, and eye-opening material” and creating a safe space where “marginalized subjects may turn to be heard and witnessed, to express defiance, or to be their authentic selves free from the strictures of traditional learning environments” (Quinan, 2016, p. 352). Different expectations between learners can result in challenging and unsafe experiences for either party (Pascar et al., 2018).

However, other queer and feminist theorists argued that safe spaces prioritize comfort, often for students with dominant identities. Stengels and Weems (2010) pointed out how safety is often framed in terms of civility - which often favors normative subjects and dominant identity. Quinan (2016) discussed how safe space is often used as an escape for difficult

dialogues, and this silence can contribute to the erasure and deniability of oppressive structures such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. The safe spaces that prioritize comfort are often assumed as ahistorical, and where power relations are absent. Moreover, this approach does not contribute to students' learning. As an example, conceptual change - a process in which students adjust their conceptual understanding or restructure their conceptual framework to a better and more accurate understanding of the world, is reliant on cognitive discomfort (Jonassen, 2006). Feminist educators have criticized "safety" as a concept and pedagogical tool:

"There is nothing 'safe' about engaging students in rigorous and critical ways. It seems to me that to be able to speak of safety in the 'belly of the beast' reveals class and race privilege. Only a certain elite has the privilege of cultivating a safe space in mainstream institutions that perpetuate the very inequities which we fight against as feminist educators" (Henry, 1994, p. 2).

In this conceptualization, a safe space is unhelpful for the (un)learning process for students and can be used as a tool to control subjects in the classroom and maintain the oppressive structure.

On the other hand, the radical conceptions of "safe spaces" that situated our power consciousness function as the escape space from the violent world. These spaces attempt to center the identity, experience, and needs of marginalized subjects as a response to the larger hegemonic environment. Instead of prioritizing comfort, these spaces often focus on acceptance and psychological safety (Quinan, 2016). For example, the Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) often serves as a safe space for queer students from K-12 environments to higher education settings. GSAs emerged from various modern 2SLGBTQIA+ movements in the '70s; they now serve as an affirming space and support network for queer and trans students across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Woolley, 2022). As



Stengel and Weems (2010) discussed, many scholars “[argued] that safe spaces are “contentious” and “risky,” yet “playful,” “pleasurable” and ripe with pedagogical possibilities” (p. 506).

However, even in designated affirming spaces for queer and trans students such as 2SLGBTQIA+ student organizations or 2SLGBTQIA+ resources centers, students still struggle to find spaces to be themselves despite the fact that those spaces are intended to provide a sense of belonging. There is a dialectical tension between group belonging versus personal authenticity, as approval-seeking effort does not equal true belonging. For historically marginalized students, this sentiment is particularly true. Since higher education institutions are not built with the needs of marginalized student populations or a level of cultural awareness in mind, students have to find ways to navigate through and survive the oppressive systems within the collegiate context. For students who exist at the intersections of multiple oppressive systems, it is even more challenging to find affirming spaces on campus. Pryor (2018) challenged scholars and practitioners to not only take students’ comfort when conceptualizing and designing campus spaces but students’ ability to be their authentic selves. Specifically, the author urged institutions and student affairs practitioners to take a holistic approach to ensure that 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience belonging and are able to be themselves in various campus spaces, as 2SLGBTQIA+ resources centers do not abdicate the responsibility of dismantling cis-heteronormative system of the larger campus community (Pryor, 2018). Moreover, creating affirming spaces for queer and trans students without addressing the core issue of cis-heteronormativity risks alienating and othering 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Pryor, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016).

As I engage in queer worldmaking and constructing queer utopia, it is essential to understand not only how (queer) spaces in higher education are conceptualized and

2SLGBTQIA+ students' perception and experiences with those spaces. The notions of safety, belonging, and counterspaces to challenge cis-heteronormative structure of higher education and prioritize the lived experience of queer and trans people are highly present and debated in the literature. Engaging in crafting utopic spaces for queer and trans students does not only mean creating spaces that address the unique needs and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, but also deconstructs and challenges other systems of oppression, including cis-heteronormativity, homonormativity, racism, genderism, and colonization. Muñoz's framework of queer utopia offers alternative ways to rethink the structures and practices within higher education outside the constraint of the present, as "queerness exists for us as an ideality [... it is] the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (p. 1). It is an opportunity for us to reject the current understanding of the confined safe spaces within higher education, but rather a place that foster holistic development and sense of belonging for queer and trans students. With the understanding of the importance of environmental factors for student development and utilizing the framework of queer worldmaking and Muñoz's queer utopia, educators must (re)consider how to foster affirming and psychologically safe spaces that are rooted in the needs and identity of the community as well as combatting the violent structure that currently exists.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

This study further explores the worldmaking process of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the bounds of higher education institutions (Blockett, 2017; Briggs, 2019). In particular, I examined the meaning-making process of queer and trans people of their lived experiences, how the institution shapes their desires, and their envisioning process of a queer-utopian future (Muñoz, 2009). For many 2SLGBTQIA+ people, it is difficult to see ourselves in the future because of the current violent reality, as well as the lack of representation of queer and trans in different aspects of life. Queer expression is often silenced within academia and the workforce (Mizzi, 2016; Anderson, 2020; Smith, 2021). Queer and trans people are often socialized to act in a way that is more palatable to the hegemonic world, assimilate to the dominant culture, and act more homonormatively. Moreover, queer and trans individuals are continuously subjected to violence and erasure through homophobic and transphobic legislatures or governmental negligence (Lange et al., 2019). Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills not only create legal barriers and restrict queer and trans people's access to affirming resources or civil rights, but also negatively impact 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals' mental health (Horne et al., 2022) as well as an increased sense of hopelessness toward meaningful social change (Russell et al., 2011; McGivern & Miller, 2018). Specifically in this political climate, the act of envisioning ourselves existing fully as queer and trans people in the future, is an act of resistance, and dreaming of a queer-and-trans-affirming society is within the realm of "educated hope" (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz (2009) rejected the future as solely a heteronormative resexual project and reclaimed futurity as an essential part of theorizing queer worldmaking. He argued that the future is often denied to queer and trans people of color, and it is crucial to practice envisioning futures and hopes for queer people

of color who are at the intersection of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Through these visions, I explore the desires of queer and trans people of the current time and present the limitations and possibilities of higher education institutions through the nuanced lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. In addition to the seminal research question — how do 2SLGBTQIA+ students imagine themselves thriving in higher education — this work also is guided by the following following questions:

- How do 2SLGBTQIA+ students express their desires through their conceptualization of thriving?
- How do 2SLGBTQIA+ students construct and re-construct their desires through their experiences within the institution?
- How do 2SLGBTQIA+ college students' desires produce queer utopia?

### **Queer Futurity and Worldmaking through Queer Methods**

To capture the complexities of how queer and trans people think of desires, I approach this inquiry qualitatively. Qualitative research is conducted to capture a complex issue and empower participants to share their lived experiences with their unique positionalities and identities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Lee and LaDousa (2015), qualitative research enables researchers to delve deeper into interactions and social patterns, capturing the subtleties of participants' interpretations of reality. With this qualitative approach, I center queer and trans voices, experiences, and desires, situating them in their identities and the contexts they are in to further trouble and develop the theoretical frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is a response to the call for alternative research methodologies that center queer and trans epistemologies and give them agency (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017; Duran et al., 2020). Jourian and Nicolazzo (2017) discussed the liberatory potential when research is conducted not 'on,'

‘to,’ or ‘for,’ but *with* 2SLGBTQIA+ people. They pointed out the potential of “imagining new democratic and liberatory realities together” (p. 1) by collaborating with queer and trans subjects.

It is necessary to lay a systematic emphasis on both the complexity of routine social interactions and the meanings that participants ascribe to these interactions in order to respond to the proposed research topics (Marshal & Rossman, 2011). While qualitative constructivist approaches help researchers to interpret the participants’ meaning construction process, queer theories challenge researchers to think about the fluidity of identities (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Watson, 2005; Plummer, 2011). Thus, understanding how queer people experience higher education and how they make meaning of those experiences helps inform how they understand their desires and conceptualizations of a queer utopia, and requires an inquiry that captures the potentialities. As Tachine and Nicolazzo (2022) wrote:

“[Qualitative research methods] encourage unsettling un/realities through which we can question that which we (think we) have come to know. They remind us of the power of dreaming, of weaving the worlds we need, of demanding for that which the state codifies as excessive, as if excess was a pejorative mode of being.” (p. 3)

The authors captured the importance of qualitative research methods in not only critically examining social reality and questioning normative structures, but also as a tool to construct different realities rooted in the collective dream and desires.

More specifically, I choose to utilize queer methods to further explore queer worldmaking as this inquiry is informed by queer theories. This work aims to not only capture the current lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, but also examine their affective state(s) and desire to thrive in order to progress toward a queer utopian condition within higher education. Capturing what Muñoz (2009) described as the “then and there” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

of queer utopia requires methodology to be flexible beyond the reality of what is, while also exploring the potentiality of space to be queer-affirming and to support queer thrival. Queer methodologies can be used “to outline the conditions of queer worldmaking and to clarify, but not overdetermine, the conditions that ‘make life livable’” (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Muñoz (2009) envisioned queer utopia by examining cultural production through various art forms, identifying the gap between queer desires and what exists in the “here and now” (p. 1). By adopting queer theory as a lens and employing queer methods to look at the cultural production of queerness, Muñoz (2009) was able to capture the queer lived experiences and the dissonance between the desires of queer people and the cis-heteronormative present. While power and structures remain visible in his analysis, Muñoz (2009) challenged the normative assumptions and power structures by centering queer voices and ways of knowing.

The terms queer methods and queer methodologies are often conflated in literature. Browne and Nash (2010) differentiate those terms; methods are the techniques of data collection, or “what is ‘done’” (p. 10) while, methodologies are “those sets of rules and procedures that guide the design of research to investigate phenomenon or situations; part of which is a decision about what methods will be used and why” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 10). In other words, methodologies describe the process of research that is carried out in accordance with the project’s assumptions on epistemology and ontology through the selection and use of its data collection techniques (Browne & Nash, 2010). As this project is informed by queer theories, the epistemological and ontological assumptions require this project to make visible the power relations that are produced and reproduced through the cultural production of different normative ideas, and contextualize them in historical contexts (Browne & Nash, 2010). By making the systems of power affecting the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ students explicit, researchers have

highlighted the systemic oppression as well as higher education's investment in and perpetuation of said system (Duran et al., 2020).

Ward (2016) described queer methods as "a praxis aimed at undoing prevailing assumptions about epistemic authority, legitimate knowledge, and the very meaning of research" (p. 71). This highlights the limitation of "traditional" research methods and prioritizes lived experiences from marginalized communities as legitimate and valued forms of knowledge. Queer methods allow researchers to critique cis-heteronormative practices, highlight queer lives, and examine alternative ways of functioning in the world by deconstructing different social constructs (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). To examine the ways in which queer and trans students engage in futurity and worldmaking, the research participants engage in not only reflection but also imagination in envisioning their future self (or selves). Moreover, engaging in the queer worldmaking process with research requires a paradigm shift: to be future-forming instead of reflective of the current reality, to ask the question of "what could be" instead of "what is" (Montuori, 2011; Gergen, 2015). At the core of this research project, I center the creativity and imagination of both myself and the participants in my methods and inquiry. Therefore, in order to construct knowledge rooted in queer and trans epistemologies with participants while remain reflexive, two queer methods I choose to employ are participatory action research and visual methods from art-based research traditions.

### ***Participatory Action Research***

Participatory action research (PAR) views participants as not subjects of study but rather "co-researchers" -- people with lived experiences relating to the research topic (Lenette, 2022). The approach takes a critical look at the imbalance of power dynamics between academic researchers and people and asks researchers to surrender control (Bain & Payne, 2016; Lanette,

2022). This is reinforced by Tuck's (2009) desire-based approach, as she emphasized the importance of acknowledging the intellectual gap that exists between academia and the communities outside of higher education, as well as challenging scholars to immerse and understand the complexity of the lived experiences of the communities they study. Instead of viewing the research process as exploitative and producing knowledge at the expense of already marginalized communities, it becomes an active collaboration "through a cyclical process of exploration, knowledge construction, and action" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1) that combines the research skills and expertise of academic researchers and the local lived experiences from the community (Lenette, 2022). The term "co-researchers" emphasizes the integral value of people who participate in the research, as well as recognizes and legitimizes the different ways of knowing since they are the experts of and in their own community (Lenette et al., 2019; Bain & Payne, 2016). Because of this reason, in this study design, I addressed participants as co-researchers.

Unlike other traditional qualitative research approaches, participatory action research method goes beyond documenting social reality through the lens of the participants. Participatory action research prioritizes co-researchers' active involvement throughout the research process as a means to (re)produce new knowledge and act or respond to issues present in the community (Lenette, 2022). As a branch of action research, participatory action research focuses on contributing to social change. Reason and Bradbury (2008) describe the role of action research in the social change process as it "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (p. 4). It emphasizes the active engagement of community members as co-researchers and utilizes their



commitment to progress and expertise of local context in order to enact change. Participatory action research is also significant because it challenges the binary and separation between theory and practice, honoring the multiple ways of knowing and illuminating how theory and practice inform each other (Baine & Payne, 2016)

There is a plethora of research utilizing participatory action research as a method to enact change alongside the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, especially with queer and trans youths (Wagaman, 2015; Bain & Payne, 2016; Asakura et al., 2020; Felner et al., 2022). Jourian and Nicolazzo (2017) emphasized the liberatory potential of research that utilizes collaborative and participatory frameworks, like PAR. As they challenge traditional research paradigms and assumptions, these methodologies “serve not only as a way to create new knowledge, but also are themselves strategies of resistance against hegemony” (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 5). PAR pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally considered legitimized knowledge, highlighting marginalized communities' lived experiences (Lenette, 2022). The democratic and participatory nature of participatory action research can center queer and trans epistemologies to combat the erasure and pathologization of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Moreover, academic researchers may prioritize an ethics of care and compassion as they work closely with the community as co-researchers (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017).

As emphasized in this section, a key to PAR is active collaborations with co-researchers and community members. Banks and colleagues (2013) have expounded upon the notion that PAR may entail varying levels of community participation; these levels are differentiated by the amount of control afforded to the community in the research process. Specifically, the authors outlined five levels of participation PAR, ranging from (1) fully community-controlled, to (2) community-controlled with professional researchers, (3) co-production with equal partnership,

(4) researcher-led initiatives with some community partnership, and (5) processes controlled by researchers with some community input (Banks et al., 2013). In this research, I engaged in (4) researcher-led initiatives with some community partnerships. Lenette (2022) discussed the political nature of participation in action research and required that, at times, being fully community-controlled may not be feasible in many contexts. The research study design of a dissertation is often systematic and structured, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that community collaborations are inherently unpredictable and may deviate from the prescribed protocol due to the dynamic and messy nature of co-researcher inputs. In this participatory action research study, as the lead investigator, I took the initiative in setting the research agenda and defining the overarching objectives. However, as co-researchers, students were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis and encouraged to actively contribute to the project by sharing their data, participating in analytical processes, and playing an active role in the creation of the visual outputs. As a researcher, recognizing the fluidity and complexity of community collaborations can lead to more inclusive and nuanced research outcomes. Therefore, embracing the potential messiness of community collaborations can enhance the authenticity and validity of research findings. This collaborative approach ensures that co-researchers are empowered to take ownership of the research process and are given agency to shape the project outcomes.

The model of participatory action research gave queer and trans students opportunities to speak authoritatively about their personal experiences within the institution of higher education, as they navigate different systems and structures of oppression while also highlighting their experiences of desire, joy, and hope. Participatory action research requires an insider participation that sheds light on the topic of interest rather than relying on the objective

interpretation of an outsider. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) discussed how political debate and discussion among participants could help promote change. Using a collaborative approach with dialogue and reflection (both as individuals and as a collective) throughout the whole research process make participatory action research a chosen method for this study.

### ***Visual Methods***

By centering creativity and imagination in research, researchers challenge a universalized assumption of positivistic knowledge production processes and recenter the local knowledge from different marginalized communities (Camargo-Borges, 2018). To accomplish said goal, I utilize visual methods as another method to the work; visual methods have been utilized across many areas of social sciences, including but not limited to sociology, psychology, anthropology, and education (Buckingham, 2009). The primary ways to implement visual methods include researchers' visual content analysis, participant analysis of existing visuals, researcher-generated visuals, and participant-generated visuals (Denton et al., 2018) In conjunction with participatory action research, I utilized visual art-based participatory methods as a form of data collection, where co-researchers created art, both as data to be analyzed and as visual representations of data (Leavy, 2015). The visual art product can be powerful in conveying emotions and embodied meanings. However, Leavy (2015) pointed out that "the issue of *aesthetics*<sup>5</sup> becomes salient" (p. 232, emphasis original) as co-researchers may not be experts in the art-making process. Therefore, I encouraged and supported co-researchers to engage in reflection and visual art-based methods to express their perspectives and experiences without the pressure of the quality of the artwork.

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<sup>5</sup> Aesthetic refers to the engagement of the senses and emotions, as well as the intellectual processes, which leads to "collation of semiotics and significances that are embedded in cultural awareness" (Greenwood, 2019, p. 4). An aesthetic response is characterized by a combination of rational and visceral reactions, according to Greenwood (2019), and is utilized by both artists and viewers as a response to a work of art.

Queer research and visual culture have long been intertwined. Queer theorists (such as Muñoz) often draw on the visuals as well as other forms of cultural production to document the existence and experience of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, critique the hegemonic structure of cis-heteronormativity, and capture the imagination of alternative ways to organize our world. Visual media can be instrumental in creating social change, as they allow us to bypass the language barriers that restrict access or participation in community spaces and evoke emotions from the observers (Reddy, 2021; Vance & Protash, 2022). Because of that, graphics and visual arts were utilized as intervention tools for public education, signaling institutional values, and mobilizing student activism for social causes (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018). Moreover, visual arts also aid the facilitation of deep learning and conceptual change, as well as students' interests and engagement (Danielson et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2017)

However, visual methods are not common in higher education research, especially queer and sexuality research, as they often privilege numerical data or language-based methods to make meaning of students' experiences (Allen, 2016; Kelly & Kortegast, 2018). Allen (2016) discussed how "schools are risk-averse spaces, and the use of visual methods in sexualities research can be viewed suspiciously" (p.463). In the context of queer studies and research, as gender and sexuality are deemed private (Hawkes, 2004) compounding with minoritized gender and sexualities considered deviant (Rubin, 2007), the education environment and its researchers have been hesitant to approach the collection of such potentially sensitive and "risky" data (Allen, 2016). However, many scholars have pushed for visual methods to be utilized in educational research settings (Metcalf, 2012; Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Denton et al., 2018). Denton and colleagues (2018) discussed how visual methods have the ability to generate new understanding and knowledge about the institutional structures, its culture, and the members

within the walls of higher education institutions. Allen (2016) suggested that by introducing visual methods into research on sexuality within education settings, we are queering the field as we continue to disrupt the normative assumptions of language-based privilege and its research practices.

The use of visual methods in this study is significant because it allows me to circumvent the limits of language and open avenues to explore students' lived experiences and their understanding of selves beyond the linguistic forms of their narratives that have often been privileged within the field of higher education research and scholarship. Visual methods within arts-based research challenge the modality in which we use to research and conceptualize 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences and desires. This includes how I engaged them in the process of participants-generate visuals and interviews, as well as how I utilized participant-produced visual arts as another form of collective knowledge creation.

Visual arts served as a critical intervention for social campaigns and public education to raise the visibility and normalize public discussion of issues that the 2SLGBTQIA+ community was facing; specifically, the experiences of those living with HIV and AIDS in the United States and around the world. Moreover, the usage of visual arts to communicate the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students for a queer utopia, and their thrival in this research, has stemmed from the traditions of artivism<sup>6</sup> (using arts in activism) in 2SLGBTQIA+ history. Arts, in many of its forms, has served as a critical intervention in different social movements, including progress for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (Lewin & Jenzen, 2023). As gender and sexuality are largely

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<sup>6</sup> According to Rhoades (2012), artivism is “a convergence, a hybrid of artistic production and activism that embraces their symbiotic relationship for transformational purposes” (p. 319). Artivism is considered as critical civic praxis, as it taps into the liberatory and educational potential of artmaking while centering the voice of marginalized populations, and channeled through activists' strategies to make change (Rhoades, 2012)

considered invisible identities, a key component of 2SLGBTQIA+ activism is “epistemologically linked to the notion of visibility and the visual” (Lewin & Jenzen, 2023). As cis-heteronormative discourse continues to facilitate queer erasure and suppression, queer activism, especially in the West, has been about the “politics of visibility” (Rosiek, 2016). By reinforcing essentialist notions of the embodiment of gender and compulsory heterosexuality, queer and trans desires are made invisible by cis-heteronormativity (Rich, 1980; Rosiek, 2016, López Medina, 2022). As being queer or trans and engaging in homosexual acts were considered illegal with repercussions, 2SLGBTQIA+ artists found ways to develop a hidden language to code their desire, a way to code ‘queerness’ and ‘transness’ into their arts (Summers, 2004). Not only did they raise the visibility of the queer and trans community in violent environments, but queer arts also served as political and cultural symbols to critique the hegemonic social structure and paint a path forward toward queer liberation.

Furthermore, visual arts capture queer and trans people's desires. As Lewin and Jenzen (2023) said, “This form of activism is driven by a desire to create spaces of belonging for individuals who may not be able find this in mainstream culture” (p. 288). The duality of joy and defiance in queer activism shows up in many art spaces, not only in visual art forms but also in pride parades, ballroom culture, and performance spaces (Muñoz, 2009; Lewin & Jenzen, 2023). In addition to challenging the dominant way of thinking and social stigma, the arts have the power to create conditions that move beyond the negative of the present, foster joy, and construct a utopian vision that centers queer and trans people. By utilizing visual art-based participatory methods, I highlighted 2SLGBTQIA+ students’ desires for thrival and make the abstractness of their vision for queer utopia in the future more concrete and actualized. Visual arts continued to serve as a vessel for queer desires when homosexuality was criminalized and 2SLGBTQIA+

people were invisibilized. They have been critical interventions for self-expression, public education, worldmaking, and social engagement. Therefore, I argue that visual art provides the liberatory power for queer and trans students to reimagine a future in the hostile present, while capturing their lived experiences and desire to disrupt the cis-heteronormative structure of higher education.

## **Study Settings**

### ***Institutional Context***

The University of Oklahoma (OU) is a public research (R1) university located in Norman, Oklahoma. There are also three different satellite campuses including the Schusterman Center located in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, as well as the OU in Arezzo located in Arezzo, Italy. However, for the purpose of this research, I am only considering the main Norman campus as the study site. According to the *Enrollment Summary Report* in Spring 2023, there are 26,695 students enrolled on the main Norman campus, and 19,774 of which are undergraduate students (University of Oklahoma, 2023a). The University of Oklahoma is a Predominantly White Institution, with 56.2% of the total student population being white (University of Oklahoma, 2023b). According to the *Enrollment Analysis Report* in Spring 2023, 3.7% of students are American Indian/Alaska Native, 6.2% are Asian, 5.3% are Black/African American, 12.3% are Hispanic, 0.1% are Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 9.0% are Two or More Races, and 1.4% are unreported (University of Oklahoma, 2023b). In the said report, they also indicated that 5.9% are International; however, I want to acknowledge that there is a difference between nationality and racial/ethnic identity, as nationality indicates citizenship status, while race and ethnicity often refer to cultural identification or heritage identification and expression.

According to the University's *Land Acknowledgement Statement* (n.d.), the University of Oklahoma is located on land that has deep historical and cultural significance, originally inhabited by the "Hasinai" Caddo Nation and the "Kirikirʔi:s" Wichita & Affiliated Tribes, along with being a crucial area for hunting, trade, and migration for the Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, and Osage. The presence of OU and the broader landscape of higher education in this region are directly tied to settler colonial policies that facilitated the dispossession and forced relocation of Indigenous peoples, leading to the current residence of 39 tribal nations in Oklahoma. This history underscores the university's role within a larger settler colonial framework, where educational institutions are built upon stolen lands from Indigenous peoples. In recognizing and respecting the sovereignty of these tribal nations, it is important for higher education institutions such as OU to confront its historical and ongoing complicity in settler colonialism. Furthermore, as systems of oppression are inextricably linked, the interconnections of settler colonialism with the oppression of queer and trans communities, particularly those who are Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ students, highlight a crucial need for addressing systemic injustices. It is important to acknowledge this fact as the backdrop of this dissertation, as the vision for queer utopia must also advance the decolonial effort and justice.

The acknowledgment that the University of Oklahoma is predominantly a Predominantly White Institution goes beyond the demographic data of the student body. I aim to emphasize the systemic structures and institutional culture that persistently uphold white supremacy and colonial power. Although this research does not specifically explore the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, contextualizing our experiences at the University of Oklahoma and in the state of Oklahoma necessitates examining how queer and trans oppression is intricately connected to systemic racism and colonial efforts. This examination not only informs



our process of envisioning a queer utopia but also recognizes the current ways in which whiteness and colonial power endure in spaces that purportedly serve 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Lange et al., 2022; Velázquez et al., 2024). On the other hand, it also sheds light on how homo- and trans-phobia become embedded within multicultural spaces (Misawa, 2010; Blockett, 2017). While the intention of highlighting systemic racism involves discussing the university's status as “predominantly white,” I acknowledge that using such a label can perpetuate the erasure of students of color and Indigenous students, designating them as perpetual minorities within the confines of higher education. To address this issue, beside analyzing the data through an intersectional lens, the focus on racial justice and decolonization as well as the desires of queer and trans students of color are centered in the processes of collection, analysis, and recommendations.

While the *Enrollment Summary Report* also indicated gender identity, currently at the University of Oklahoma, students are asked to report sex-assigned at birth or legal sex identification and are only presented with the male/female binary option (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 21, 2023). This is the result and continues to perpetuate the conflation of sex and gender identity as well as the erasure of trans or gender non-conforming students (Kilgo, 2020). Similarly, the institution does not collect or present sexual identity as a demographic marker (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 21, 2023). As previously mentioned, this practice is not unique to the University of Oklahoma. Kilgo (2020) approximated 3.0% of all U.S. postsecondary institutions allow students to self-report their sexual orientation or sexual identity as a demographic marker. This continues to facilitate the compulsory heteronormativity and position cis-heterosexuality as the normative frame of reference.

To evaluate a campus inclusive climate towards 2SLGBTQIA+ student population, a common tool that is often utilized is the Campus Pride Index of LGBTQ-friendly Colleges and Universities. Although it has many limitations, including its lack of objectivity and exhaustivity in its reported data, Campus Pride Index serves as a tool to gauge an institution's commitment to 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion and examine in which ways the institution is succeeding (or failing) to support queer and trans students (Kilgo, 2020). According to the data in Campus Pride Index (n.d.), the Norman campus of the University of Oklahoma received a four-star rating out of a possible five stars, indicating a relatively favorable environment for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community on campus. The university fulfills most of the criteria in providing 2SLGBTQIA+ students with access to a range of resources including educational opportunities, social programming, counseling and health, recruiting 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and having structural support (in terms of having a Gender Center with dedicated staff) to further meet student's needs. Additionally, the University has policies in place to safeguard against discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. However, areas requiring further improvement exist, such as the provision of gender-inclusive housing options and opportunities for students to easily self-identify their gender or sexual identity to the University. While the University of Oklahoma has made significant progress towards fostering a climate that welcomes and respects 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, 2SLGBTQIA+ people are still facing the hostility as we still live in an anti-2SLGBTQIA+ conservative state.

### ***State Settings***

In addition to the institutional context, it is also essential to consider the state of Oklahoma's sociopolitical climate for this study, as the climate at the university is influenced by the larger political landscape. The Williams Institute's *Discrimination against LGBT People in*

*Oklahoma* revealed that 78% of Oklahoma residents believe that members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are subjected to discrimination within the state (Mallory & Sears, 2019). Queer and trans people in Oklahoma are at risk of harassment and discrimination because there is no statewide law that expressly forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. With 26% of transgender people in Oklahoma reporting being fired, denied a promotion, or turned down for employment because of their gender identity or expression, this exemplifies how structural oppression continues to marginalize queer and trans people by policing their gender expression (Mallory & Sears, 2019). In addition, 18% of respondents said they had experienced verbal harassment at work, and 1% said they had been physically assaulted for their gender-expression at the workplace within the last year (Mallory & Sears, 2019). According to the report, 15% of trans respondents had faced housing discrimination, such as being kicked out of their home or being denied housing in the previous year (Mallory & Sears, 2019). Furthermore, 25% of respondents in Oklahoma reported mistreatment when visiting places of public accommodation where employees knew or assumed they were transgender, including being denied equal treatment or service, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted (Mallory & Sears, 2019). The report calls attention to the state-sanctioned violence against 2SLGBTQIA+ people and its effects on queer and trans peoples access to basic needs such as housing, safety at work, or public accommodations. Furthermore, the report also highlights how queer and trans people in Oklahoma expect discriminations based on their gender or sexual identity.

In the current context of this study, there were 510 anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills introduced in 2023 and 479 in 2024 across the United States introduced into the legislation, attacking queer and trans people's rights to gender-affirming healthcare, education, free speech and expression,

civil rights, and more (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d). In 2024, Oklahoma was the leading state in the number of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills. Specifically, in 2 years combined, over 89 total anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills were proposed and advanced through the political system, approximately 10% of the nation's entirety of bills targeting queer and trans people (Fife, 2023; American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). Examples of these bills included House Bill 2177 and Senate Bill 613, which created legal and financial barriers for trans people to access healthcare and block public funds for providers who offer gender-affirming healthcare (HB 2177, 2023; SB 613, 2023). Senate Bill 408 and House Bill 1449 were intended to discriminate against trans women and girls by establishing the trans-exclusionary definition of women (SB 408, 2023; HB 1449, 2023). While House Bill 2186 targeted drag performers, the language of the bills was utilized to weaponize trans people's rights to exist as well as to police other forms of queer expressions (HB 2186, 2023). In the midst of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislations, Oklahoma Governor Stitt also issued an Executive Order 203-31 that prevents state agencies and public universities from utilizing state funds, property, and resources to support initiatives that are relating to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). These legislative measures and executive order not only pose direct challenges to the rights and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within Oklahoma's university system but also reflect broader societal attitudes and policies that marginalize and discriminate against queer and trans communities. Therefore, I argue that it is important to frame this study not only within the geographical but also temporal context as political climate also fluctuate through different time.

### **Co-Researchers**

I utilized the purposive sampling method, an “intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon” (Robinson, 2014, p.

5244). As this intends to explore how current 2SLGBTQIA+ students engage in worldmaking and theorize queer utopia through a future-oriented and desire-based lens, criterion sampling helped me find co-researchers for this work. The criteria were that students needed to:

- be considered a legal adult (older than 18 years old)
- self-identify as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community
- be an undergraduate student, who had completed at least 12 credit hours, are currently enrolled with active status and was enrolled in the Fall 2023 semester

The reason for enrollment in courses for Fall 2023 semester was due to the length of the focus groups throughout the semester. I specifically aimed for undergraduate students because the literature that I engaged with are primarily focusing on the undergraduate student population.

The co-researchers were recruited through the institutional mass mail system (see Appendix A). The Qualtrics form listed in the email collected the contact information of potentially interested participants, detailing the time commitment of the study, as well as participants' consent. The recruitment materials (including both text and graphics) were distributed to other areas of campus that frequently work with 2SLGBTQIA+ students, including but not limited to the Gender + Equality Center and different 2SLGBTQIA+ student organizations. Because the recruitment process started in the summer, no academic units were contacted to disseminate the study's information.

Of the 16 students who indicated interest in participating only 9 students responded to follow-up emails and followed through with all phases of the study.

**Table 1. Co-Researcher Pseudonyms and Demographics**

Co-researchers	Pronouns	Years in school	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/ Ethnicity
Talia	she/they	4	Woman/ Nonbinary	Bisexual/Queer	Pacific Islander
Aiden	he/him	6	Trans Man	Queer	Asian American
Karen	she/her	2	Woman	Bisexual/Demisexual	Vietnamese
Zara	she/her	Senior	Woman	Bisexual	White
Leo	they/he*	Junior	Genderflux	Aromantic Bisexual	White
Matthew	he/they	Senior	Trans Man	Queer	White/Native
CJ	she/her	Senior	(Trans)* Woman	Lesbian	White/Native
Ariana	she/her	3	Woman	Biromantic Asexual	Chinese American
Micah	he/they	Junior	Nonbinary	Bisexual	Black American

All info provided reflects the language used by co-researchers

\* Asterisks indicated changes that have been agreed on by co-researchers or given by co-researchers after the fact

Of the 9 co-researchers, 2 participants identify as white and 7 participants identify as people of color. For the 7 students of color, the group was comprised as follows: 4 Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi Americans (APIDA), 2 Native, and 1 Black student. It is important to note that the Native students indicated that they are white-presenting and were raised culturally white. There are also (6) students who identify as trans and gender non-conforming, and 3 cis-female students.

As stated in Table 1, all information provided reflects the language used by co-researchers, and the asterisks indicate changes that were given by the co-researcher after the fact or agreed upon by the co-researchers. For example, [Pseudonym for participant 5] changed their pronouns in between the individual interview portion and the focus group. Additionally, CJ indicated “female” in the Interests form; however, in a conversation with the researcher, they agreed and gave the permission to include the “trans” label in their gender identity for the sake of clarity for the readers of this research. This indication does not intend to erase or qualify her womanhood, but to explore how transness is important to her experience navigating higher education. However, it is also important to address the normative presumption of compulsory “cisgender” in the way we look at the gender marker in the demographic information.

### **Data Collection**

This research project is comprised of two different phases. In the first phase, I explored the co-researchers’ imagination of “thriving” as well as the visualization of said conceptualization. The data include nine (9) individual interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, totaling 10 hours and 17 minutes of recording and resulting in 134 transcribed pages. During these interviews, co-researchers were prompted to articulate their personal definitions of thriving and envision how an ideal campus environment would support their understanding of thriving. Furthermore, Phase 1 entailed the creation of nine individual art pieces by co-researchers, illustrating their interpretations of thriving in a college setting. In the second phase, we collectively explored the collective vision of thriving and engaged in the process of constructing queer utopia. The focus groups comprised eight (8) approximately-90-minute sessions throughout the Fall 2023 semester, totaling 11 hours and 41 minutes of recording and resulting in 191 transcribed pages. Within these focus groups, co-researchers introduced their

individual conceptualizations of queer utopia and engaged in dialogues regarding what queer utopia and thriving meant to them as a collective. Phase 2 also included the development of four co-researcher-generated pieces as part of the focus group activities, utilizing photo-elicitation and collage techniques. In total, I have approximately 22 hours of recorded data, 325 transcribed pages, and 13 art pieces as data for this project. Figure 1 outlines the timeline of the data collection process.

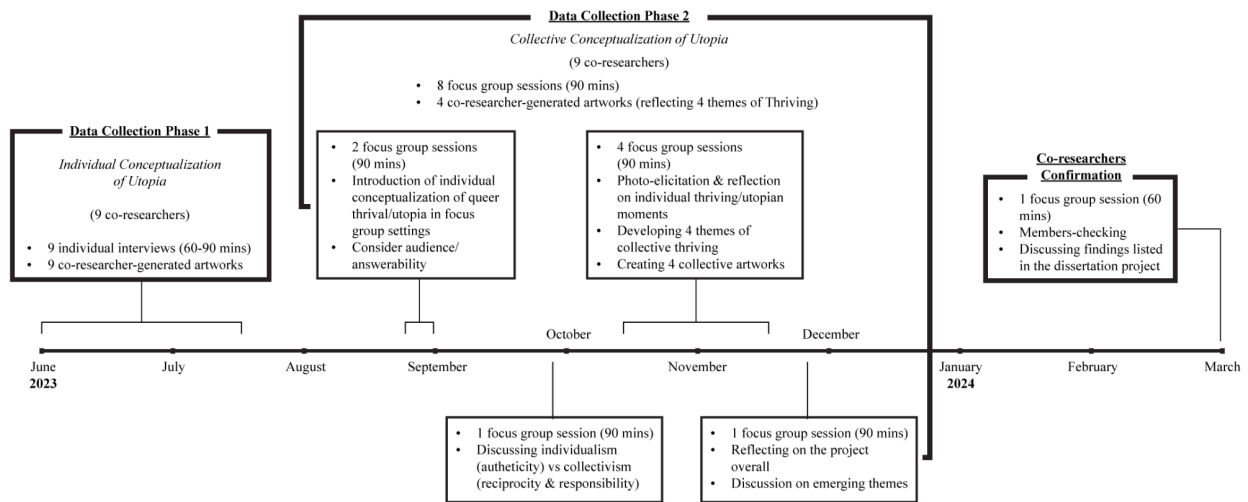


Figure 1. Overall Data Collection Process & Timeline

### ***Individual Interviews***

The data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews to “explore the topic more openly and allow the interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted via Zoom by me and the respective co-researcher. The individual interview process did not only capture co-researchers’ experiences and perspectives but also served as an opportunity for collaborative knowledge construction between me as the lead researcher and the co-researchers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). During the interview, co-researchers were asked to



reflect on their current experience as 2SLGBTQIA+ students in higher education, as well as envision what thriving would look like in said context (See Appendix B). To encourage active participation from my co-researchers in this creative exercise, I drew inspiration from the insightful inquiries posed by Tourmaline (2020), a Black transgender filmmaker and activist, using them as a guide for our exploration into envisioning liberation. These inquiries: "What does the dominant culture have that we want? What does the dominant culture have that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep?" (n.p.), formed the basis of our discussions, enabling my co-researchers to contemplate their desires and their personal experiences with existing institutional systems. The individual interviews facilitated a rich exploration of queer and trans students' individual experiences, which serve as the foundation for queer utopia constructions in the focus group sessions in the second phase of the study.

### ***Participants/Co-researchers-Generated Arts***

In addition, co-researchers were also asked to create a visual art piece (collage, drawing, painting, word cloud, etc.) that reflects their vision of thriving in college and what that means to them. The co-researchers utilized whichever medium or approach best represented their thoughts and imagination. Out of nine (9) artworks, four (4) were traditional paintings, two (2) digital paintings, one (1) mixed-medium piece (collage & painting,) one (1) pencil sketch, and one (1) collage. While some co-researchers engaging in this study may self-identify as artists, they were explicitly informed in prior communications that their ideas, rather than any specific level of artistic ability, are paramount. While the majority of co-researchers were comfortable with their artistic skills, some expressed a desire for their abilities to align more closely with their vision. For instance, Ariana initially turned to artificial intelligence (AI) to visualize her ideas due to perceived shortcomings in her own artistic abilities. However, she found that AI failed to capture

her vision and could perpetuate systemic issues such as the pervasiveness of whiteness in the community, as she found AI only depicted queer and trans people as white. Consequently, she turned to pencil sketches to develop her ideas. The reassurance of ideas over execution helped some co-researcher to more confidently share their ideas or explained their thought process in conceptualizing their artwork regardless of their skill levels.

To complement their artworks, co-researchers engaged in reflective discussions during semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided an opportunity for co-researchers to expound on their artistic choices, delve into their process of conceptualization, and articulate how their artwork contributed to their understanding of thriving. Following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) notion of the interview process as a collaborative meaning-making effort, I shared my personal interpretations of the artwork and asked questions about various imageries and symbolism that I observed. However, recognizing the inherent power imbalance between the researcher and co-researchers in the data collection process (Crewell & Poth, 2018), regular member checks were conducted to ensure co-researchers' voices were accurately represented. Throughout the study, I consistently summarized co-researchers' perspectives into my own words and encouraged them to validate, refine, or disagree with my interpretations. Upon concluding the research, I encouraged co-researchers to present preliminary findings based on the content shared within this dissertation and solicited their feedback. As I acknowledge my position of authority as the primary researcher in the space, I emphasized the collaborative process of the knowledge constructions happening throughout the study, in both individual interviews or through focus groups. This approach enabled co-researchers to validate or contest interpretations, recognizing the convergence or divergence between their artistic intentions and

how their work was perceived, thereby enhancing the depth and genuineness of their contributions.

### ***Focus Groups Interview***

All co-researchers of the study were invited to attend focus groups throughout the Fall 2023 semester. During the focus groups, co-researchers engaged in conversations on how they conceptualized thriving and utopia as well as shared and connected with each other over the commonality of their personal experiences. Leveraging the “group effects,” focus groups facilitated interactions among co-researchers with similar identities or experiences, where stories were “validated, extended, and supported by similar others” (Tracy, 2020, p. 190). More importantly, the focus groups allowed the co-researchers to examine the frictions and tensions arising from their sometimes contrasting experiences on campus. According to Tracy (2020), the group dynamic not only raised co-researchers' awareness of different issues but also facilitated learning new perspectives and ways of discussing various situations. Focus group allowed researchers to further explore the emotional experience and how co-researchers engaged with others' (dis)agreements and lived experiences (Tracy, 2020). This exploration, in turn, fostered a nuanced and occasionally paradoxical understanding of queer thrival within the utopia collectively envisioned by the group. Blockett and colleagues (2022) characterized the process of “share and convene [their] existing worlds” (p. 47) as (Black) queer *world-merging*, how they “consider each other’s existing worlds, to share with them and each other, to learn and respect them, and to be held and affirmed by them” (p. 47). Through dialogues in the focus group, co-researchers actively participated in the collective process of worldmaking through world-merging, integrating each other's lived experiences, ideas, and imaginings to broaden their individual conceptions of utopia. This collaborative process within the focus group also

prompted both individuals and the collective to critically examine the racialized, gendered, and queer dimensions of their institutional experiences. By prioritizing reciprocity and responsibility in this worldmaking endeavor, we centered the world-merging process as a cornerstone of our collective worldmaking effort.

During the focus group, I asked co-researchers to further share their experiences based on emerging themes from their individual interviews. The group dynamic allowed for input and challenges to these ideas, ensuring accuracy and resonance with co-researchers' thoughts. They were prompted to reflect on and respond to the experiences, thoughts, and imaginings shared by others. This collective effort aimed to construct interpretations of queer and trans experiences on campus and contribute to the ongoing development of a queer utopia. Co-researchers were encouraged to expand their imagination to prioritize racial justice and decolonization in their world-making process, while also emphasizing desire and hope as advocated for by the theoretical frameworks. Throughout the focus groups sessions, various themes emerged, collectively capturing the experience of queer thriving. Co-researchers collaboratively identified, labeled, and categorized these themes into four overarching categories: (1) Visibility & Representation, (2) Safety, Support, & Solidarity, (3) Self-Growth, Agency, & Freedom, and (4) Authenticity, Belonging, and Simple Queer Moments. These four themes served as the foundation for the collective art-making process, further visualizing and communicating the nuanced experiences, emotions, and imaginings of thriving within the queer community. It is crucial to recognize that these themes, although delineated distinctly, do not exist in isolation; in fact, they are intricately interconnected and significantly overlap, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of the co-researchers' collective vision of thriving.

## ***Collective Art-Making***

In Phase 2, co-researchers had an opportunity to visualize their ideas into art pieces as a group. To embrace participatory action research, the group collectively determined the purposes of the visual art pieces. While the identified purposes encompassed a broad spectrum, including education, visibility, advocacy, and calls to action, the research group collectively decided that their work should capture joyous moments of thriving and spaces they experienced on campus, despite the ongoing challenges they endured. To achieve this objective, the group selected the methods of photo-elicitation and collaging.

### **Photo Elicitation**

Photo-elicitation is a widely-used data collection method in qualitative research due to its versatility: photographs can be employed to evoke memories of past events, explore various types of information, and prompt critical reflections (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2020). In this research, co-researchers engaged in all these forms during the focus group sessions. Co-researchers were tasked with bringing photos in response to the following prompts: (1) moments when they were thriving, (2) spaces where they felt a sense of thriving, and (3) moments and spaces they wished to deconstruct. They reflected on and shared their understanding of these moments as instances of thriving, identified factors contributing to their sense of thriving in different campus spaces, and examined the limitations in spaces they wished to deconstruct. This involved co-researchers contributing photographs that may reveal their identity. Prior to the initiation of the project, detailed discussions were held with co-researchers regarding the confidentiality and intended use of the photographs. It was clarified that the images might serve as materials for creating collages, and this usage was subject to ongoing consent, especially for potential expansions beyond the scope of this dissertation. Co-researchers exercised discretion in

their photo submissions: some opted for images of objects that masked personal identity, others provided photos solely for discussion without their use in collages, while a few chose to include their own images, faces visible, as integral parts of the project. Additionally, after the collage was created, an option was presented to anonymize faces in the photographs to further protect privacy. Throughout the process, the agency of each co-researcher was prioritized to avoid further erasure of their identity and representation within the study.

The photographs served as a catalyst for conversations and discussions on the topic (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2020). Co-researchers engaged in reflection and shared their experiences on campus as well as their interpretations of thriving. Photo elicitation not only provided opportunities for co-researchers to engage in self-reflection but also enabled researchers to discuss more sensitive subjects with marginalized and vulnerable populations (Lapum, 2018). Co-researchers were tasked not only with reflecting on what thriving meant to them personally but also with visually capturing the abstract concept of thriving in their photos and providing contexts and narratives for each image they brought. Moreover, photo elicitation provided a glimpse of the utopia that queer and trans students experienced within a hostile and violent campus. This process captured the act of worldmaking and how marginalized students construct counterspaces. Additionally, it showed how 2SLGBTQIA+ students find and assert joy or their desires onto a cis-heteronormative campus, highlighting both thriving and survivance. Through the photos and narratives shared by co-researchers, I examine the connections and relationships between co-researchers with identities, community, spaces, and systems of power present in higher education.

## **Collage**

Collage is a fine art technique involving the arrangement and gluing of existing printed materials, such as scrap paper, magazines, or photographs, onto a surface to create a new art piece (Scotti & Chilton, 2018). In this research, co-researchers utilized images provided during the photo elicitation phase as materials for a collage project. To effectively convey the contrast between their experiences of thriving and the challenges posed by the institution, the first layer of the collage incorporated various images of spaces, structures, and moments they wished to deconstruct. Additionally, newspaper headlines highlighting state and institutional violence towards the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were included in black and white to starkly contrast with the vibrant, colorful representations of their thriving moments overlaid on top. While the thriving layer covered most of the background, subtle glimpses of the challenges beneath symbolized the omnipresence of oppression within their experience of queer thriving. As co-researchers conceptualized thriving into four categories, each was represented on a separate panel. However, as previously mentioned, these pieces are interconnected, reflecting the understanding that queer and trans students do not experience thriving in a rigid or compartmentalized manner.

Collage has evolved into a research method and a tool for meaning-making in qualitative research (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2020). Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) defined collage as "a reflective process, as a form of elicitation, and as a way of conceptualizing" (p. 3). In this research, co-researchers were encouraged to engage in all three aspects: using photo-elicitation and collage as prompts, reflecting on their personal experiences, and conceptualizing thriving collectively. While Phase 1 focused on co-researchers articulating what thriving meant to them individually, Phase 2 explored how queer and trans students collectively envisioned thriving and participating in worldmaking as a community. Collage is a collaborative process in which allows

co-researchers to transcend individual perspectives and create a shared narrative that speaks to the nuances and paradoxes of their experiences. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described collage as the act of “[putting] slices of reality together (to create) psychological and emotional unity” (p. 5). As a result, the art pieces not only visually depict different facets of thriving but also symbolize the interconnectedness of their experiences and stories. In this research, collage serves as both a process and a product, offering a unique lens through which to examine thriving and envision queer utopia. The act of collaging becomes a metaphorical stitching together of their collective reality, fostering psychological and emotional unity as they collectively navigate and construct a visual narrative that reflects the multifaceted nature of their thriving experiences within the university setting.

### **Data Analysis**

The project generated different types of data from interviews, co-researchers-produced art (as individuals and as a collective), and focus groups. For textual data generated from interviews, focus group sessions, and written artists’ statements, I utilized thematic analysis - “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57), to analyze my data sets. Thematic analysis allows researchers to make meaning of the shared experiences across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The themes in this study were derived inductively from the data's content (Ezzy, 2002). The inductive thematic analysis process assumes “a knowable world” (p. 59) and constructs meaning from the experiences as reflected in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Due to its flexibility and accessibility for new and inexperienced researchers, Braun and Clarke (2012) expressed its potential in participatory action research. As participatory action research calls for co-researchers’ collaboration in all aspects of the research process - including data analysis



(Liebenberg et al., 2020), thematic analysis can serve as a bridge between the researcher and co-researchers. To honor the co-researchers' voices and agency, the data was organized and analyzed through the four (4) sub-themes of thriving that the group collectively decided on in Phase 2 of the data collection process. This approach allowed me to center queer and trans desires as the focal point of my analysis, as called for by my theoretical frameworks of queer utopia (Muñoz, 2009) and a desire-based approach (Tuck, 2009). Moreover, through the lens of desires and thriving, 2SLGBTQIA+ students' experiences of violence on campus were not viewed as damages, but rather understood as queer and trans desires, shifted and shaped by the connection, misconnection, and disconnection with institutional desires.

When analyzing visual data such as co-researchers-produced art from both Phase 1 individual interviews and Phase 2 focus groups, I prioritized understanding the intent behind the co-researchers' creations. As previously emphasized, any interpretation of symbolism and imagery within the artwork were thoroughly discussed, either through individual interviews or as a group during focus group sessions. This approach aimed to honor the co-researchers' conceptualizations of thriving and utopia. Throughout the data analysis process, I employed guiding analytic questions to discern overarching themes across all artworks and to illuminate the variations in interpretation and conceptualization of thriving among the co-researchers. Examples of these guiding questions included: (1) How is thriving visually represented? (2) How is queerness visually depicted? (3) What are the prevalent imageries and symbolisms within the artwork? (4) How effectively does their art convey their understanding of thriving? Codes derived from visual analysis were integrated into the development of overarching themes, complementing the insights obtained from textual data. This methodological approach ensured a

comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the desires of queer and trans students, providing a deeper understanding of their collective process in envisioning utopia.

At each phase of the research and upon concluding the data collection process, I engaged in comprehensive immersion by listening to the recordings and reading transcripts of individual interviews and focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2020). For the line-by-line coding process, I utilized printed physical copies of the transcripts. This process can be called open coding, where the researcher systematically compares and assigns summative labels to the data (Ezzy, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1990) described the purpose of open coding as “naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data” (p. 62) In the initial coding phase, I employed in-vivo coding to preserve the language used by co-researchers. Besides prioritizing and honoring co-researchers’ voices in the data analysis process (Saldaña, 2009), in-vivo coding is helpful in providing insights into a particular culture or group with a particular context for its specificity (Manning, 2017). In this research, by prioritizing the actual language of co-researchers, I examined the relational interactions and cultural understanding of queer and trans students at the University of Oklahoma.

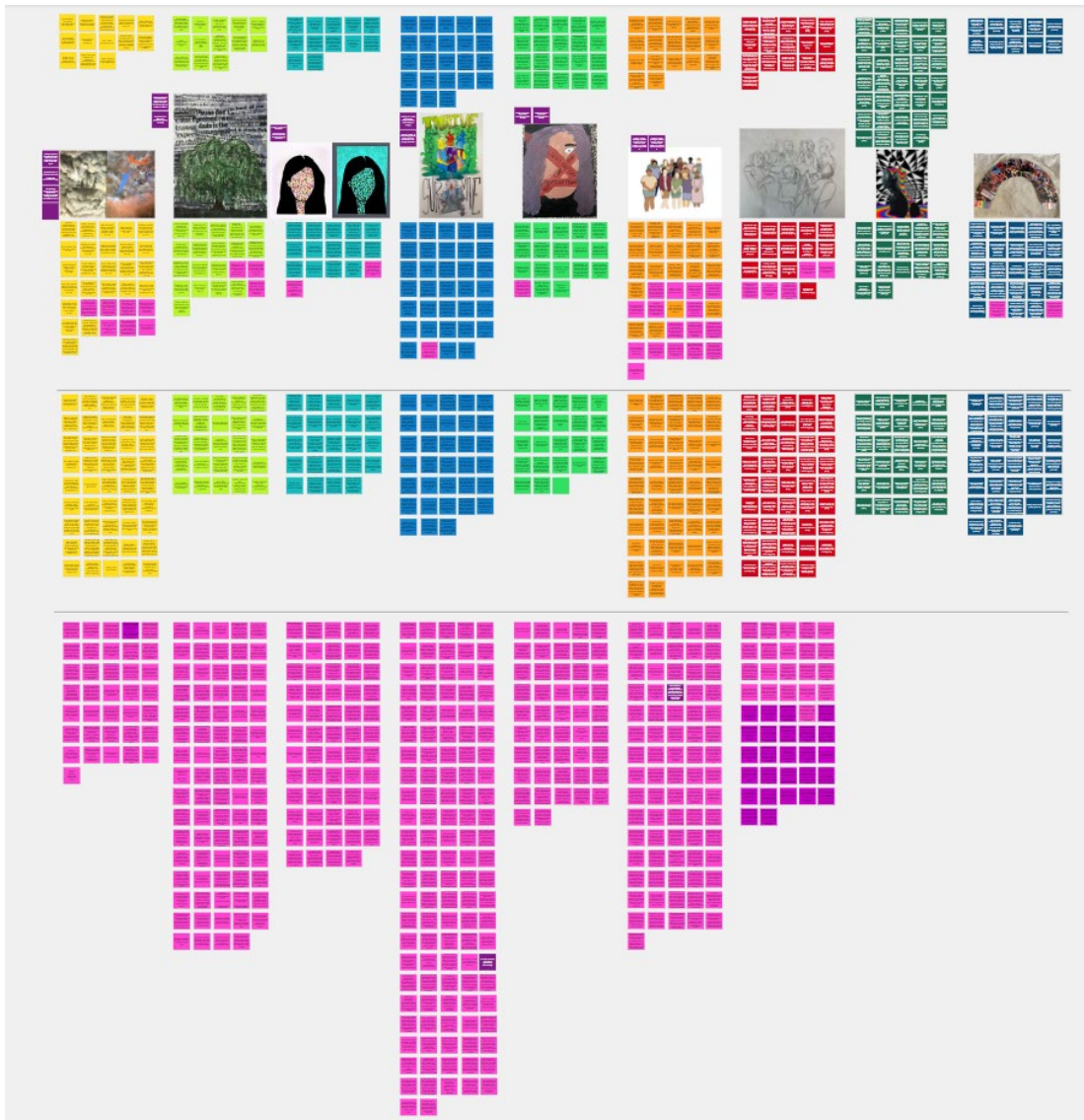


Figure 2. Examples of in-vivo codes in Conceptboard application.

To visualize the codes, I used the online program Concept Board. Each excerpt was placed on a separate "Sticky Note," with each co-researcher assigned a specific color (as shown in Figure 2). The data was initially sorted by co-researchers and by types of data, including individual interviews, co-researchers-produced arts, and focus groups (sorted by dates and sessions). Utilizing Concept Board allowed me to digitally manipulate and arrange the data in various ways without the risk of losing information. The data was categorized into different sub-

categories based on content and subjects, such as the “conceptualization of thriving”, “experiences with the institution”, and “experiences with institutionalized queer space”. Furthermore, the codes were broken down into different categories like “institutional promises”, “current reality”, and “utopia for a queer future.” Organizing the data in multiple ways and situating them in different overarching categories during the initial stages helped make the data more manageable and less overwhelming for analysis.

Once the codes were organized within larger contexts, I further structured the data by visually linking codes, ideas, and theories to develop emerging themes within each category (Tracy, 2020). Throughout the data analysis process, I honored the co-researchers’ collective construction of thriving by utilizing the four sub-categories as analytical lenses to help me organize and derive meanings from the data. Under each sub-category, I searched for themes by “thinking about the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). Ezzy (2002) suggested utilizing axial coding to identify interrelated themes among the codes and categories. As Strauss and Corbin described (1990), axial coding involves “specifying a category (phenomenon) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interaction strategies by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the consequences of those strategies” (p. 97).

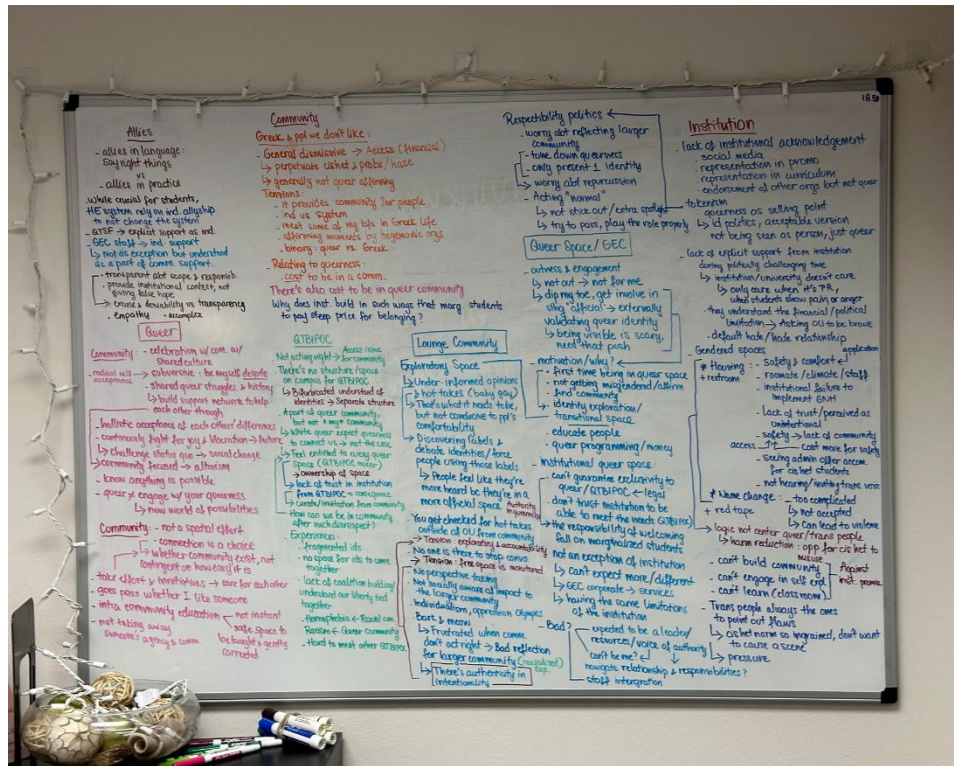


Figure 3. Example of mapping codes and themes on whiteboard

During the development of second-level hierarchical codes and themes, I closely examined the relationships between each code and the overarching category (Tracy, 2020; Saldaña, 2016). At this stage, I created different maps and networks of codes by writing on my whiteboards and drawing connections between codes and themes. This method, along with analytical memos, served as “sites of conversation with ourselves about our data” (Clarke, 2005, p. 202), aiding me in synthesizing data and thematic refinement where I compared the data at the level of categories to help “identify the central story in the analysis” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 93). Through this process, I do not only provide descriptive thematic analysis to illustrate the data but rather to capture latent embedded meaning through conceptual and interpretative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Throughout the duration of data analysis, co-researchers played a vital role by providing valuable feedback and contributing additional perspectives that enriched the emerging themes derived from the data. After receiving additional feedback and recommendations from co-researchers, I refined my findings and developed a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. While the structured categories offered a framework for organizing and conceptualizing the data, it is crucial to acknowledge the dynamic and fluid nature of these students' internal identity development, spatial experiences within the institution, and their community-building processes. Therefore, it is essential to note that the collectively developed categories are deeply intertwined and inseparable from each other. This acknowledgment adds depth to our understanding of the multifaceted dimensions shaping the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and emphasizes the importance of embracing complexity in our analysis. However, for the scope of this presentation, only two out of four categories will be presented in later chapters. I discussed this in-depth with my advisor and co-researchers to formulate findings that prioritize both the needs of the co-researchers and the completion of the project.

Utilizing thematic analysis within the conceptual framework of queer theories necessitated a dynamic approach to data analysis, reflective of the fluid and unstable nature of queerness. Constant re-theorizing and re-conceptualizing were integral to the interpretation process, mirroring the flexible and perpetually becoming state of queerness itself. Drawing on participatory action research and visual methods, the approach not only reflected the queerness inherent in prioritizing relationality during data collection but also acknowledged diverse modes of knowledge production, which is called for a nuanced analysis. The process of constant re-theorizing involved iterative cycles of data immersion, coding, and interpretation. This iterative approach allowed for the continual refinement of themes and concepts, acknowledging the

multiplicity of 2SLGBTQIA+ students' experiences and perspectives present within higher education. In addition to critiquing institutional gaps, the research created space for co-researchers to engage in freedom dreaming both individually and collectively. Drawing on Muñoz's conceptualization of queerness as a horizon—an aspirational ideality situated in the future—the analysis adopted a utopian lens. This approach encouraged a forward-looking interpretation of the data, inviting consideration not only of present experiences but also of the potentialities embedded within queer desires. The visual artworks generated by co-researchers provided a means to render queerness visible, counteracting its historical invisibility and ongoing suppression within dominant cultural narratives. Through the examination of these visual materials – whether individual artworks or collective collages, the analysis delved into how co-researchers navigated oppressive institutional structures while envisioning and striving towards utopian conditions conducive to thriving. Analysis of these visual materials, including individual artworks and collective collages, provided insight into how co-researchers navigated oppressive institutional structures while envisioning and actualizing utopian conditions conducive to thriving. In this context, queerness extends beyond merely describing the identities of the co-researchers; it also signifies their collective endeavor to resist the dominance and oppression of cis-heteronormative structures, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. By examining the process through which these artworks were generated and interpreted, the study illuminated the transformative potential of artistic expression within queer-informed research methodologies.

### **Delimitations**

To honor the transparency, I highlight the delimitations in this project. Delimitation helps “define the parameters of the research study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 119) In other words, the delimitations of a project explains the justification for the researcher's choices

regarding the variables under their control. The first delimitation I want to address is my choice in using 2SLGBTQIA+ students (or queer and trans students) as the unit of analysis. Although Muñoz's (2009) theoretical framework of queer utopia calls attention to the futurity of queer people of color and Tuck's (2009) desire-based framework was created to reframe the experiences of Indigenous people, my research is not only focusing on the queer and trans students of color, but rather the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ student population as the whole. Some studies have focused on the experiences of queer students of color or its sub-demographic groups (such as queer Black men) and how they participate in queer worldmaking (Duran, 2019; Blockett, 2017; Patton et al., 2020). However, my research is interested in exploring how 2SLGBTQIA+ students (including both white and students of color) define queer thrival and construct a queer utopia across racial lines. While this study does not specifically look into queer students of color or its sub-demographic groups, the theoretical frameworks still center racial justice and decolonization within our collective vision of queer thrival and the worldmaking process of a queer utopia. This also means that while students' experiences are analyzed through a queer and trans lens, it is still racialized, and I recognize the power dynamic of homonormative white supremacy in the analysis.

My second delimitation is the tension between the constructivist nature of thematic analysis and queer theoretical frameworks. Thematic analysis is often viewed as a constructivist approach to research, where meaning is constructed through the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). However, the use of queer theories as a theoretical framework can introduce tension to this constructivist nature of the thematic analysis. The concepts surrounding queer worldmaking, such as desire, affect, or utopia, can be expansive and pose challenges to the rigid codes and themes from the thematic analysis approach. Queer theories challenge fixed and



binary categories, and instead, “queer theorists posit identity flux and fluidity, thereby questioning the very proposition of identity as something one can ‘have’ in any coherent form” (Nicolazzo, 2016, p. 6). Das (2020) discussed how the rigidity of standard data analysis techniques including generating themes and codes, may not be suitable with queer methodology, as they continue to “[participate] in the reification of sexual categories” (p.110). In such cases, the constructivist nature of thematic analysis may be challenged by the fluidity and intersectionality of queer identities. Therefore, I needed to navigate this tension and consider how to integrate both the constructivist nature of thematic analysis to make meaning of co-researchers’ stories, imagination, and desire, as well as the fluidity of queer identities or other expansive concepts throughout the analysis.

Lastly, I choose to specify the state and the institution where this research is done. Participatory action research is highly context-dependent as it seeks to understand the socio-political and cultural factors affecting the community and its capacity to enact change (Gaffney, 2008; Lenette, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to situate queer and trans students’ experiences within the institutional and state political context. Moreover, I argue that anonymity for the institution and the state may only benefit the institutionalized hegemonic power instead of the 2SLGBTQIA+ student population on campus. By addressing the institution by name as well as the state, instead of creating pseudonyms, I hope to hold this system accountable for the violence they enact in my research. Similar to other case study research, while it is imperative to contextualize the study within the bounded systems of the institution and the state’s geosociopolitical context, we must acknowledge the potential limitations regarding the generalizability of findings due to the naming of the specific institution and state. While this research centered the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the University of Oklahoma,

it does not claim to represent the entirety of the 2SLGBTQIA+ student population nor does it intend to generalize findings beyond the confines of this specific case study. However, the findings can still offer valuable insights and implications for institutions operating in different socio-political contexts or facing similar challenges. By delving into the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within a specific institution, this dissertation provides an examination of the various factors influencing their ability to thrive or how they navigate within the higher education system.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the extensive research design, which demanded a substantial time commitment from all parties involved in the research process. Each co-researcher was required to contribute sixty (60) to ninety (90) minutes for individual interviews and attend focus group sessions lasting from ninety minutes to two hours for each theme throughout the semester. This did not account for the time co-researchers may have wanted to invest in data analysis or art-making outside of focus group sessions. As the researcher, I aimed to minimize the time required from co-researchers without compromising the quality and engagement of their contributions. Moreover, I remained flexible in adapting the research design to meet the co-researchers' needs and honor their agency in the research process, facilitating meaningful participation (Lenette, 2022). However, there is an acknowledgment that the frequency and quality of engagement may have declined over time as participants' interests or commitments diminished. I am aware that the study could have been severely limited by uneven participation due to time constraints and the personal lives of all parties involved in the research process. As noted by Lenette (2022), a strict emphasis on equal involvement can potentially harm co-researchers and lead to exploitation, as not all co-researchers and the community may

have desired equal participation with the researcher. To address this concern, I discussed various levels of collaboration with the co-researchers, provided opportunities for participation without pressure, and maintained transparency through member-checking when co-researchers were absent throughout the research process. Despite this concern, we consistently had at least six out of nine co-researchers present at different research focus groups during the data collection process and reflection sessions during the data analysis for member checking.

### **Positionality & Reflexivity**

First and foremost, I engage in this research to further inform my practice as a student affairs practitioner in an 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center. As a researcher, my interest in queer utopia stems from my functional position within Student Affairs. Through my work, I have witnessed the challenges and barriers that queer and trans students face in navigating institutional processes as well as state legislative violence that are often hostile and oppressive. This has fueled my desire to engage in research that explores the potential for utopian visions that challenge and disrupt dominant societal norms. In acknowledging my positionality, I recognize that my experiences as a practitioner inform and shape my approach to research. Through my work, I have developed an understanding of the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences and the importance of centering marginalized voices. As a reflexive and critical researcher, I am aware of my own biases and privileges and actively seek to challenge them in my work. My positionality as a researcher-practitioner provides a unique perspective that enriches my research and its impact. The findings of my research not only contribute to academic discourse but also inform and shape the work that I do as a practitioner. Through engaging in this research, I seek to contribute to the development of utopian visions that center the experiences and perspectives of

marginalized communities, and to push for more inclusive and affirming spaces for queer individuals.

As an international cisgender gay man from Vietnam, my research is deeply informed by my own personal experiences and the cultural context in which I grew up. The positionality I bring to my research is shaped by the pervasive stigmatization and marginalization of queer identity in Vietnam. Throughout my upbringing, I lacked the language necessary to express my own queer desires, as the terms used to label them were often used as slurs by children on the playground. The absence of positive representations of queer individuals in historical and contemporary contexts further compounded the difficulty of reconciling my own identity. Until early 2022, 2SLGBTQIA+ identity was considered a mental illness in Vietnam, perpetuating negative attitudes toward queer individuals. I recall a time when I told myself not to give into these desires, as they were something that I thought would simply pass. Despite this, I yearned for a world in which I could be fully seen and loved as my authentic self. The internalized homophobia that I experienced further reinforced the model minority myth, which considers queer identity as a deviation from traditional cultural values. My unique positionality as a Vietnamese queer individual has deeply informed the way I approach research, the questions I ask, and the methodologies I employ.

However, my exposure to 2SLGBTQIA+ identity and culture in higher education has helped me challenge these internalized beliefs and better understand the nuances of personal agency, identity, and queer kinships. I have come to see myself and my personal identity in a more nuanced way, one that takes into account all facets of who I am. I came across labels and terms that reflect my desires as a person, ones that made me feel seen and not “sick.” This realization was life-changing and has profoundly impacted the way I engage with the world

around me. As a researcher, my positionality as someone who has experienced the transformative power of higher education in relation to 2SLGBTQIA+ identity and culture informs my approach to engaging with students. The longing for a utopian version of higher education is not only from my positionality as a researcher or practitioner but simply because it has changed my life. I strive to engage with students in a way that acknowledges the complex and intersectional experiences of queer and trans individuals from different cultural backgrounds. My positionality also informs my approach to worldmaking, where I aim to create spaces that allow for the expression of diverse queer experiences and perspectives.

I also approach this research inquiry as a visual artist. My lifelong engagement with art has been integral to my personal and intellectual expression. As previously mentioned, I bring this perspective to the present research inquiry, recognizing that the value of art lies not only in its aesthetic quality but in its capacity to facilitate self-expression and the creation of meaning. In the context of this project, my primary goal is to support the co-researchers in their own creative processes, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are accurately represented in the final products. Drawing on my artistic abilities, I aim to contribute to the project by creating visual representations of the co-researchers' ideas and experiences. This requires a deep understanding of their perspectives and a willingness to engage in a collaborative process of meaning-making and envisioning. By utilizing my skills as a visual artist, I hope to enrich the research process and provide a platform for the co-researchers to share their unique insights with a wider audience.

### **Reciprocity Statement**

Indigenous research methodologies emphasize reciprocity, aiming not only to create a culturally safe environment for co-researchers to collaborate (Drawson et al., 2017) but also to establish a reciprocal relationship and address power imbalances between researchers and

communities (Paksi & Kivinen, 2021). The Western research process is often criticized for its imperialistic and extractive nature, benefiting academia at the expense of marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous people (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Indigenous research methodologies challenge this approach by integrating reciprocity as an essential aspect of the research process, rather than just an add-on: “There is also an implicit assumption that the research is reciprocal—that knowledge and power are shared equitably between the researchers and the community, and that the community can be enriched by the process” (Le & Gobert, 2015, p. 20). These methodologies require researchers to consider their responsibilities in interpreting and representing community stories.

This challenge became more profound as I wrote the findings chapters, especially upon hearing about the death of Nex Benedict—a non-binary Choctaw student in an Owasso high school, due to the anti-trans rhetoric and policies prevalent in Oklahoma. This tragic event compelled me to further contemplate and even question the purpose of my project. As I shared the news of Nex’s death, I posted on my social media: “It is strange to write about a dissertation about queer utopia on a college campus and not think about this...” At that moment, I questioned the significance and purpose of my work, giving into the pessimism of the violent reality. However, amidst the sadness, I found a renewed commitment to my project, recognizing its importance more than ever before. Framed within Tuck’s conceptualization of the desire-based approach, this project highlights the increasing importance of Indigenous research methodologies. Given the intrinsic link between queer and trans oppression and anti-Indigenous and colonial efforts, as a non-Indigenous person, I acknowledge the need to engage in decolonial methods and integrate Indigenous knowledge, history, and experiences into the research process (Drawson et al., 2017). While I incorporated Indigenous methods as considerations when

discussing and presenting co-researchers' stories, I am mindful not to conflate 2SLGBTQIA+ identities with Indigeneity and be conscious about my application of Indigenous methods to non-Indigenous populations. Furthermore, I aim to initiate further conversations about the issue of decolonial queer worldmaking, particularly with other Indigenous researchers.

At the center of this project, I emphasize the importance of queer and trans desires. In higher education, queer and trans desires are often unexplored and uncentered, further marginalizing these experiences. In the context of trans life, Nicolazzo and colleagues (2023) discussed the "impossible conditions of material life" and the violence inflicted upon the community, where the existence of trans individuals - particularly Black trans women, tragically gains visibility only through their deaths. Amidst this backdrop of cis-heteronormative illogics and systemic violence, the authors underscore the significance of exploring trans wants and desires. As I navigate the dissonance between interpreting co-researchers' narratives through a utopian lens and confronting the grim reality of trans (and queer) deaths before even reaching college, I must remind myself that this is not an attempt to find a silver lining in tragedy. Rather, as Nicolazzo and others (2023) articulate, it represents "an intervention in beginning to trace a theory of trans want that envisions our livability and the myriad ways we seek and desire life" (Nicolazzo et al., 2023, p.29). In just two years, Nex could have been a first-year student at the University of Oklahoma. Nex's opportunity to attend college and thrive in this envisioned dream of higher education was robbed. This illogical violence is a shared experience for many of our queer and trans students, entering and leaving higher education institutions. This underscores the importance of centering the agency and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, even amidst the challenges and injustices they face, as a means of affirming their humanity and advocating for

their right to lead fulfilling lives. It emphasizes that their experiences are not solely defined by their trauma or marked by death, but also encompass their wants, desires, joys, and hopes.

While the prevailing systems tend to neglect the significance of desires in shaping our experiences and imaginations, it is crucial to acknowledge that desires can lead us to envision a world beyond the pervasive violence of queer and trans-phobia, racism, neoliberalism, fetishization, and liberal humanist ideologies that contribute to our oppression (Nicolazzo et al., 2023). By tracing queer desires, the co-researchers and I can begin to imagine a future that prioritizes our livability and well-being. Through these desires, we strive to construct a utopian life that defies the oppressive structures currently constraining us. More importantly, it is essential to acknowledge that queer and trans desires matter now—the act of wanting and desiring matters now. It is through centering these desires that we can work towards a more inclusive and affirming higher education environment for queer and trans individuals.

Desires are dynamic and persistent forces, shaping not only individuals but also the reality they inhabit and its future iterations. Yet, as Tuck (2009) summarized the work of Deleuze, desire is not “natural” or “spontaneous;” it is intricately entwined with the social reality in which it exists. Queer and trans desires do not exist within a vacuum, outside of the influence of the social reality in which it exists within. They are influenced by the competing interests and desires of the state and institutions. Building on the frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari, I seek to understand “not on the question of what is there, but on what is being produced” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). While I examined the co-researchers’ desires through their conceptualization of thriving, Tuck (2009), and by extension - Deleuze and Guattari, asked me to further investigate how the competing desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and the institution or the state can further produce reality. In other words, I seek to unravel how queer and trans students assert, negotiate,



or even suppress their desires amidst state or institutional violence. This inquiry aligns with the central assumption of the project outlined in Chapter 1, asserting that cis-heteronormativity pervades our society and its structures, including higher education institutions. Therefore, the institution desires to uphold cis-heteronormativity. The following chapters endeavor to contextualize co-researchers' experiences and desires within the current landscape of cis-heteronormativity, offering insights into how colleges and universities actively perpetuate these norms and influence co-researchers' meaning-making processes.

However, the intention of this project is not to document the harms that queer and trans students experience within the walls of higher education. Tuck and Yang (2014) criticized the commodification of pain in social science research by collecting stories of pain and humiliation of the research subjects. Adopting a damage-focused approach not only fails to fulfill promises of reparation (Tuck, 2009) but also perpetuates a flawed theory of change that leaves communities with nothing but pain. (Tuck, 2009). “In settler colonial logic, pain is more compelling than privilege, scars more enthralling than the body unmarked by experience, [...] pain is evidence of authenticity, of the verifiability of a lived life” (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The queer experiences are intertwined with the narratives of the struggles and the trans experiences are marked with impossibility and death (Nicolazzo et al., 2023), we know and recognize that as a research group. However, as I acknowledge the harm that 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience as it is essential in their understanding and imagining their desire for a utopia, I refuse to contribute to the narrative of inescapable hardship as a queer and trans students as well as to show co-researchers' wounds to satisfy the curiosity and pleasure of the academia.

Aligned with Indigenous scholars' decolonial practices, particularly Tuck and Yang (2014) and Simpson (2007), our approach centers on learning from and respecting the wisdom

and desires embedded in the stories we often encounter. It involves a conscious effort to avoid portraying or betraying these stories to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze. Instead, I seek to center their agency, wisdom, and survivance through their interactions, connection, and disconnections with institutional desires. I do so by examining institutional (mal)practices through the lens of desires from the co-researchers. Furthermore, Tuck (2009) called to observe and point out the insynchronicity, exposing the gaps between institutional-espoused practices and their actual implementation. In this dissertation, I highlight said inconsistency by contrasting the co-researchers' reality with what I term the *institutional mirage* – a mirage is an optical illusion that appears to like a small body of water in the midst of the desert heat. Under the harsh condition of a conservative state, the neoliberal practices of the university may seem like a promising future for many queer and trans students. While the institution projects a utopian space for queer and trans students, the reality often falls short, leading to disappointment for many 2SLGBTQIA+ students. The mirage of higher education is not solely created through institutional advertisement but also stems from the socialization of co-researchers regarding the supposed role and needs that higher education is expected to fulfill. In my theorizing, the mirage serves as a deliberate practice of maintaining institutional power and constructing false narratives about university life, while a utopia holds the potentiality of a better future and combats pervasive pessimism within the community. By contrasting co-researchers' expectations of what higher education was supposed to be (mirage), what it is (reality), and what they aspire it to become (utopia), I aim to highlight the misconnections and disconnections between queer and trans desires and institutional objectives.

As Tuck articulates, "Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future; it is integral to our humanness. It is not only the painful elements of social

and psychic realities, but also the textured acumen and hope" (p. 644). Desire connects our past experiences, the conditions of the now, and our dreams for the future. In this way, desire becomes a deeply rooted force that propels us toward futurity. In this exploration, I delve into the realm of queer desires through students' conceptualization of queer thriving. While recognizing the painful experiences that students endure within the institution that are encompassing various forms of violence, my intention in examining queer desire is to uncover what exists on the other side – to understand the ways in which resistance takes shape. Muñoz (2009) urges us to feel hope and utopia by “[detecting] an opening and indeterminacy” (p. 9), allowing us to see the potentiality that is imbued in the mundane experience of queer and trans lives. By revealing the “not-yet-conscious” desires derived from 2SLGBTQIA+ co-researchers’ experience and understanding of thriving, I aim to uncover the potential of the “not-yet-here.” Utopian readings of students' experiences hold transformative potential, altering the meaning and empowering them in the face of adversity. Once again, it is important to clarify that interpreting co-researchers' thoughts utopically doesn't imply a dismissal of the harms inflicted by the institution on queer students. Instead, it involves a deep dive into the animating factors of desire, aiming to better comprehend how 2SLGBTQIA+ students navigate and persist within the inherently violent system of higher education.

In the midst of political violence towards 2SLGBTQIA+ people, my research provided an opportunity for queer and trans students to conceptualize thriving, envision the world and institution they deserve, as well as assess their connection with both the institution and the community. Moreover, this project actively engaged in queer-worldmaking by fostering reciprocal genuine relationships with all parties. Through diverse perspectives and narratives within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community at the University of Oklahoma, we engaged in sharing our

experiences and learning from the collective. The focus group served not only as a sanctuary of respite but also as a counterpublic space, challenging everyone to participate in freedom dreaming and reject the notion that violence against queer and trans people is natural or acceptable. Furthermore, Indigenous methodologies prompted us to consider our answerability, defined as "the onto-epistemological foundations of why and how research is realized and lived out" (Nelson & Shotton, 2022). While the research group identified future generations of 2SLGBTQIA+ students at OU as the audience to whom they are accountable in this participatory action research, I also reflect on my role and experience as a Student Affairs practitioner-scholar. This led me to challenge conventional approaches to support students within higher education, a topic further explored in the implications section.

## **Conclusion**

This study explores the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students at the University of Oklahoma and their potential to construct a queer utopia in the face of state and institutional violence. In this chapter, I outlined the application of queer methodology and methods, particularly participatory action research and art-based research, to delve into the experiences and desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within higher education. By involving co-researchers in both individual interviews and focus group sessions, through interviews about the art-making process, I unravel the dynamic forces of queer and trans desires in shaping the realities of individuals within the context of higher education. The examination of the interplay between institutional expectations and co-researchers' desires reveal the embedded cis-heteronormativity in higher education structures. However, this research emphasizes the necessity of centering marginalized voices, steering away from the commodification of pain. Instead, I made a case for focusing on the desires and dreams of a queer utopia. In the midst of political violence and institutional

challenges, this research acts as a platform for 2SLGBTQIA+ students to engage in freedom dreaming and queer worldmaking. Ultimately, this project holds promise not only for academic discourse but also as a catalyst for transformative action and the envisioning of a more equitable future.

Three overarching processes guide this exploration: the expression of desires through thriving, the transformations these desires undergo while encountering institutional violence, and the production of queer utopia as an outcome. As illustrated in Figure 4, the expansive findings of this study are examined by utilizing each sub-category of thriving as an analytical lens. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of co-researchers' expressed (or perhaps even repressed) desires throughout multiple contexts within the intricate framework of higher education. Although co-researchers and I have identified four sub-categories as thriving, this dissertation focuses on Self-Growth, Agency, and Freedom and examines co-researchers' desires within this category.

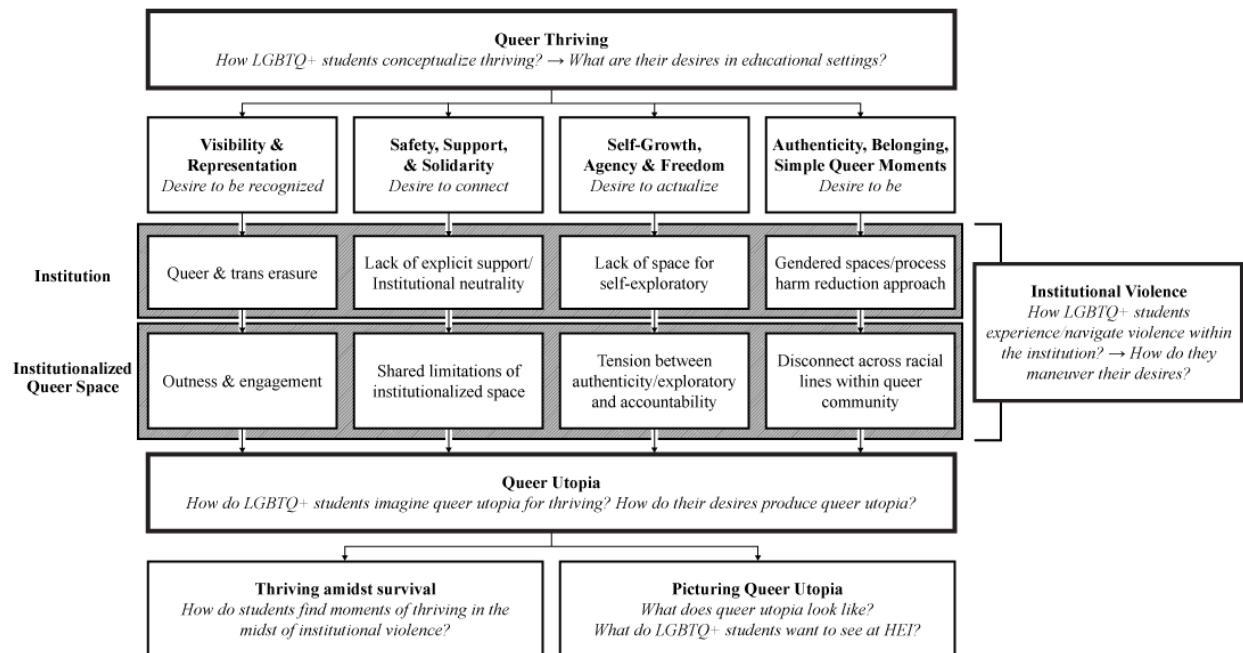


Figure 4. A comprehensive look at the findings of this project

In Chapter 4, I delve into the exploration of how 2SLGBTQIA+ students envision thriving, utilizing this as a framework to examine their desires within the realm of higher education. Next, chapter 5 delves into the examination of how these desires are navigated as students encounter institutional violence, both within the broader campus environment and within institutionalized queer spaces. Finally, Chapter 6 is an exploration of how the desires of queer and trans students shape and manifest their conception of a queer utopia, notwithstanding the myriad challenges faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the university context. Through this storytelling endeavor, my aim is to shed light on the intricate interplay between their desires, lived experiences, and the structural dimensions inherent within the educational institution. Identifying the threads of desires woven throughout the co-researchers' narratives reveals not only the self-determining power of desires but also their potential to engage with queer worldmaking and contribute to the emergence of a queer utopia. These findings chapters that follow offer a comprehensive perspective on the desires of queer and trans students, encompassing their conceptualization of thriving, their interactions within the higher education landscape, and, most significantly, the transformative impact of queer desires in shaping a visionary trajectory for the future.

## Chapter 4

### Tracing Desires through Queer Thrival

Rather than compartmentalizing the data into discrete categories—such as interviews, focus groups, and co-researchers-produced artwork—I interweave the different strands of data to construct a holistic narrative that sheds light on the experiences and conceptualizations of the co-researchers. By unpacking the construction and visualization of thriving by these individuals, I aim to glean valuable insights into their current realities and the dynamic interplay between queerness and desires within the framework of queer thrival. At the heart of this exploration lies the deconstruction of the concept of thriving as perceived and depicted by the co-researchers. This process unveils layers of significance, offering profound insights into their lived experiences, desires, and the intricate interplay between their queer identities and the pursuit of fulfillment. To delve deeper into the desires of queer students, I proceed to examine how 2SLGBTQIA+ students conceptualize thriving in broad strokes, followed by an analysis of their desires within higher education institutions through the lens of Self-Development, Agency, and Freedom.

#### Conceptualizing Queer Thriving

Much research has explored various dimensions and components of thriving in the field of social and behavioral science, specifically around work (Brown et al., 2017; Kleine et al., 2018; Porath et al., 2011) and education (Breen, 2019; Coe-Nesbitt et al., 2021) However, in this section, my goal is to examine not *what* but *how* queer and trans students understand and construct thriving through their artworks and narratives shared in both individual interviews and focus group sessions. 2SLGBTQIA+ co-researchers provided valuable insights into the nature of queer thriving. Thriving is an abstract concept that many co-researchers felt was subjective and

personal. Throughout the interview process, several co-researchers emphasized that their conceptualization of thriving is rooted in personal desires, identities, and experiences with the world, resisting the notion of universal prescription and essentialism.

When co-researchers articulated their individual perspectives on what thriving meant to them or sought to highlight the nuanced and unique nature of their experiences, they frequently employed the phrasing “version of thriving.” For instance, Leo, a white genderflux student, and CJ, a white/Native trans-female student, conceptualized thriving through the lens of autonomy on campus. In addition, Talia, a Pacific Islander non-binary student, understood thriving as being seen in the fullness of their intersecting identities, while Micah, a Black nonbinary student, viewed thriving through the lens of support and community. This terminology, “version of thriving,” highlighted the diverse and subjective ways in which they perceived and navigated the concept or idea, emphasizing that their understanding of thriving might not have been universally shared or aligned with the experiences of others within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This not only underscored the significance of context and individual understanding of thriving but also emphasized the multiplicity of meanings attached or associated with thriving, capturing its potentiality and futurity. However, this individualized understanding of thriving posed several challenges, particularly in focus group settings where co-researchers engaged in the collective imagining of a queer utopia. The tension between thriving as individuals and as part of a larger communal collective is further explored in the later chapters.

Many co-researchers understood thriving as a construct that went beyond a certain threshold. This threshold might have encompassed conventional markers of success, such as stable employment and financial stability, and thriving extended beyond fulfilling this marker. For others, thriving involved aspects that elevated their experience beyond mere survival, such as



finding joy and authenticity in their lives. Additionally, many emphasized the importance of environments conducive to growth and development, as they saw happiness as the baseline of existence, with thriving representing a higher level of fulfillment. Because of the deeply subjective and abstract nature of thriving, co-researchers often expressed difficulty in pinpointing a specific definition. First identifying what they considered as a baseline experience of living, co-researchers began to navigate and measure the nuances and dimensions of thriving. As an example, when asked about what thriving meant to him, Aiden - a South Asian American trans male student, shared:

Because everybody has their own definition of success, but the general acceptable [understanding that] this person is successful, at least in my life, has been this is somebody who has a stable job, who makes money, who got a degree, or found another means to support themselves. That's kind of the baseline for a successful person. This isn't somebody who's struggling to manage their life. This is somebody who has opportunities to be comfortable.

In this quote, Aiden identified the common narratives of societal norms that define an “acceptable” person based on the conventional understanding of success. This success is communicated through a lens of productivity and independence of societal support, emphasizing stability, financial security, and educational attainment. “But comfortable isn't thriving,” Aiden stated. For him, thriving meant actively seeking new experiences, enjoying activities and social connections, making time for passions, and expressing oneself freely without facing judgment or criticism. By conceptualizing what is deemed as “normal,” Aiden also rejected this traditional understanding of success and asserted that thriving requires more than meeting those traditional markers. Similarly, when asked to define thriving, Micah described thriving as:

less about starting with a baseline of happiness, but having the tools to be supported and an environment where it's easy for you to grow and develop as a person.

This perspective challenges the simplistic association of thriving with mere happiness, emphasizing the significance of self-development and a supportive environment for holistic growth. Between the testimonials from Aiden and Micah, the baselines in which they conceptualized thriving were also subjective. For Aiden, his perspective is future-oriented and focused on the capacity to become and grow beyond the traditional markers of success. On the other hand, Micah's understanding of their baseline revolved around happiness as the foundation and highlighted the significance of present needs and the immediate environment in facilitating holistic development. Both offered valuable insights into the complexity, multifacetedness, and subjectivity of what it means to thrive.

In a similar form, co-researchers framed "thriving" in stark contrast to "surviving." CJ, a white/Native trans-female student, articulated this distinction by stating:

If you can't be yourself and you can have a little bit of joy, you are just surviving.  
Thriving to me is adding that necessity for joy.

CJ emphasized the integral role of authenticity and joy in her definition of thriving, asserting that being authentically herself and experiencing joy are crucial elements. This highlights the emotional and psychological dimensions of thriving, going beyond mere survival to emphasize the importance of joy, authenticity, and self-expression for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in the higher education context. This contrast is reflected not only in the co-researchers' verbal expression but also in their artwork depicting thriving. Despite diverse interpretations of thriving, four out of nine participants visually represented it as a direct counterpoint to surviving.



Figure 5. Aiden's artwork

Aiden's artwork (seen in Figure 5) vividly illustrated the opposing dynamics of thriving and surviving through deliberate choices in text, font, color, and imagery. The survival segment featured a minimalist design, symbolizing the focus on bare essentials to meet basic needs. In contrast, thriving was depicted as a realm of growth, flourishing, learning, and prosperity. Vibrant colors and a green background symbolized growth, while three figures represented as burning flames showcased the ability to be authentic and find comfort in community, embracing differences. In the survival segment, a solitary smoky figure conveyed burnout, illustrating the toll of constant self-curation, hiding and suppressing different aspects of one's identity for safety concerns.

At the initial stage of the focus group, co-researchers introduced themselves and shared their artwork as a means of getting to know each other. During this session, co-researchers actively engaged, offering interpretations of each other's artwork and collectively constructing layers of meaning. For Aiden's artwork, Matthew, a white-presenting Native trans male student, noticed how the figure in survival lacked arms, symbolizing the depletion of energy to care for oneself amid the chilly climate of queer and trans-phobia:

I noticed on the survive, there are no arms. There's also really no like aspect of a head essentially, which whenever you're thinking about surviving specifically cold climates, all of your like heat resources go to your vital organs to just keep you alive. So arms, or everything else that really isn't vital to you living kind of go to the wayside. So that was something I noticed in the surviving piece, it's literally just like keeping yourself afloat at that point and making sure you either get out of the situation alive or just again survive.

This depletion, similar to freezing, directs heat to vital organs and neglects the limbs, which signifies that in survival mode, individuals may lose parts of themselves while navigating the violence and hostility as they were solely focused on making it out alive. It is noteworthy that the reflection of survival is foundational with the conceptualization of thriving for co-researchers. While the concept of thriving remains abstract, the experience of surviving is intimately familiar to many marginalized populations, including 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Surviving is a constant reality for queer and trans students, and their resilience in the face of adversity becomes a significant frame of reference and foundation upon which their imagination and conceptualization of thriving can be built. Through making meaning of personal experiences or observations within their community, queer and trans co-researchers delved deeper into their desires, utilizing the pain they've endured to inform their imaginative vision of what thriving could potentially look like.

Queer theorists often challenge normative expectations and question the idea that survival alone should be considered the end goal (Greteman, 2016, 2018; Nizolazzo, 2017). However, in

higher education, narratives of survival and resilience are frequently treated as success. For many co-researchers, thriving is not in opposition to surviving; they are closely intertwined.



Figure 6. Matthew's artwork

To illustrate his idea of thriving, Matthew's painting (figure 6) depicted a person with lavender hair, symbolizing their queerness. Their face is covered in red tape, bearing the phrases "Don't Say Gay" and "Don't Say Trans.": phrases reflecting the harmful rhetoric present in the political sphere, such as anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills in Oklahoma and Florida, as well as the hostile climate that queer and trans students face in conservative-leaning states. The red tape, while serving as tools to silence queer and trans people and perpetuate active erasure, also represents the restrictions imposed by institutions through administrative policies that hinder 2SLGBTQIA+ students from thriving. In this restriction, Matthew identifies thriving as the ability to navigate the "red tape" of institutional processes. Furthermore, the piece of tape on their face begins to

fade, revealing the eye. This image, as Matthew expressed, symbolized that "not all hope is lost," and even though their face is still covered, they can still see, navigate, and find a way forward. For Matthew, along with many queer and trans students, the possibility of surviving is considered as thriving.

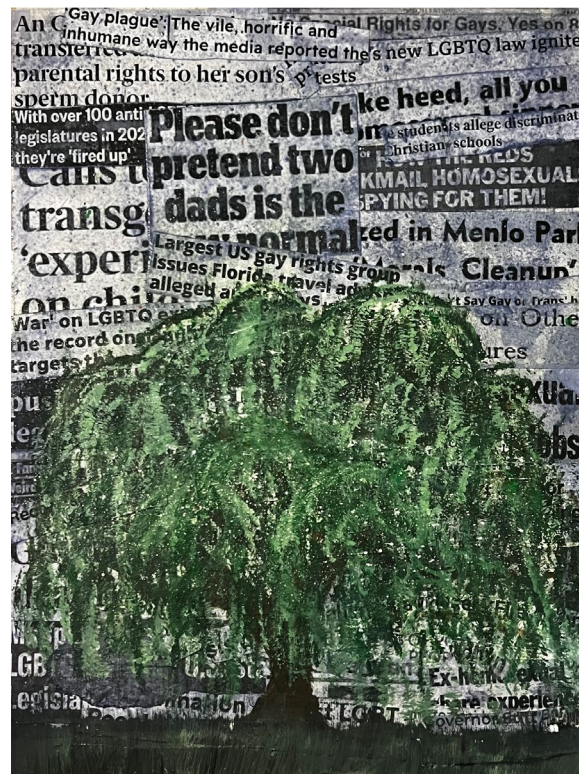


Figure 7. Zara's artwork

Some co-researchers imagine that thriving is not an absence of queer struggles, but the ability to overcome it. For instance, Zara, a white female bisexual student, depicted thriving as a willow tree painted on a collage of newspaper headlines spanning the past 50 years (Figure 7), addressing anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric. The vibrant green willow tree symbolized community perseverance and immortality in the face of adversity throughout history. This contrast was not only conveyed through the medium of paint and collage but also through the play of color – the tree's vibrancy set against the black and white backdrop of the newsprint. As Zara shared this

image in an earlier focus group session, CJ noted that the painting visually conveys the willow tree, representing thriving, growing on top of the background made from paper, a metaphor for a dead tree symbolizing hate. In Zara's artwork, thriving is growing on top of/from the hardship and trauma that they face. In summary, through co-researchers visual depictions of thriving, I examined their relationship between themselves and thriving, and also between thriving and surviving.

Many co-researchers conceptualized thriving as an absence of oppression or as autonomy, framing their understanding in terms of environmental factors, where external forces controlled their ability to act authentically: a sentiment echoed by many 2SLGBTQIA+ students across the individual interviews and focus group sessions. For example, Matthew defined thriving as "existing without marginalization," Aiden discussed it as "without there being limits" to pursue his interests, and Talia shared her frustration with not being able to express herself fully as a queer person of color on campus. Talia defined thriving as:

Find those spaces where I'm not tokenized, I don't have to hide parts of my identity, and I can just simply be whatever part or express whatever identities that I have is a really big part of it.

While defining thriving in terms of the absence of different forms of negativity, such as marginalization, limitations, or tokenism, is valid and reflective of historical context, it is essential to consider the challenges of framing thriving in a negative context. Solely focusing on what thriving is not may inadvertently limit the vision of thriving, perpetuate a deficit-based narrative, and overlook the multifaceted nature of thriving. Furthermore, this framing places an emphasis on dependency on external factors for their ability to thrive, shifting the locus of control outside of the self and into the environment. This reflects a broader trend where



2SLGBTQIA+ students often feel a lack of control over their ability to thrive and face challenges that may seem insurmountable within existing societal conditions.

On the other hand, some co-researchers reclaimed their agency, positioning thriving as a choice, or action that they take despite the material or social conditions they faced. This perspective is most evident in CJ's narratives. As a trans woman on campus, she acknowledges that she is not always in a situation that allows her to be openly trans for safety reasons. However, she emphasizes that authenticity is a core component for her to thrive, so she actively seeks out ways to be herself within the given restrictions. Her proactive approach to finding alternative ways to express herself even in less-than-ideal circumstances highlights the ingenuity and determination 2SLGBTQIA+ students often exhibit in the face of adversity. CJ shared,

When I'm in spaces where I can't be openly trans or queer for me, that's when I have to be able to find some other way to be myself in that circumstance, and it still allows me to thrive.

This highlights the constant negotiation that queer and trans students must engage in to survive on campus. CJ's strategic adaptation demonstrates not only a pragmatic survival mechanism but also a conscious effort to preserve one's well-being and sense of self. It sheds light on the survival strategies that 2SLGBTQIA+ students employ to navigate the challenges posed by unsupportive or hostile environments. It also acknowledges that if 2SLGBTQIA+ students passively wait for perfect conditions to thrive, that opportunity may never come. She shared,

I'm a very tenacious person. I feel like it's been one of my life mottos: to find joy in every situation I can, even if it's bad.

This commitment to finding joy amid adversity reflects queer and trans students' refusal to be defined and limited solely by challenging circumstances. CJr later defined thriving as "being able to see the light within the darkness," reflecting the radical hope called for in utopian thinking.



CJ's conceptualization of queer thriving reflected that thriving is not an arrival destination, but rather a constant and active choice that 2SLGBTQIA+ students must make in higher education specifically, and in this cis-heteronormative society at large.

By exploring *how* queer and trans students conceptualize thriving, I gained profound insights into their lived experiences and their perceptions of their capacity to thrive. The narratives of 2SLGBTQIA+ students revealed a nuanced understanding that thriving was not a universally applicable concept; instead, it was highly subjective and intricately linked to their individual identities and unique lived experiences. This examination became particularly poignant in light of the pervasive violence they often encountered. The relationship between thriving and surviving emerged as a complex interplay within the narratives of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. While some co-researchers, like Aiden, perceived thriving and surviving as diametrically opposing forces depicted in his artwork, others, like Zara and Matthew, illustrated a more intertwined perspective in their artworks, viewing their ability to overcome challenging circumstances and survive as not opposite but integral to their definition of thriving. This challenged the binary understanding of surviving versus thriving and offered a deeper understanding of the resilience of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the walls of higher education. Furthermore, the investigation extended to the locus of control for queer and trans students, exploring their sense of autonomy and agency. Some co-researchers, such as Matthew, Aiden, or Talia, perceived thriving as contingent solely on environmental factors in their interviews, emphasizing the external conditions that shaped their ability to thrive. In contrast, others, like CJ, asserted their agency despite challenging conditions, viewing thriving as an active, internal process. This exploration delved into the intricate relationship between external constraints and personal agency in the construction of thriving experiences. As I unraveled the ways in which

2SLGBTQIA+ students conceptualized thriving, it became clear that thriving is a dynamic and multifaceted concept. These understandings of the intricacies of thriving helped us identify and better understand the desires that were imbued and communicated through their understanding of thriving. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, I utilized sub-themes of thriving that co-researchers collectively chose to delve into, aiming to better understand their desires as queer and trans students. The identified sub-themes included (1) Visibility & Representation, (2) Safety, Support, & Solidarity, (3) Self-Growth, Agency, & Freedom, and (4) Authenticity, Belonging, and Simple Queer Moments. While these sub-themes provided distinct lenses to enhance our understanding of co-researchers' desires and experiences, they were intricately interconnected and significantly overlapped, emphasizing the complex and multifaceted nature of the co-researchers' collective vision of thriving. In the scope of this dissertation, I traced the desires within their framing of Self-Growth, Agency, & Freedom.

### **Desires in Self-Growth, Agency, & Freedom**

The theme of personal growth and self-development surfaced among co-researchers in various ways. Given society's tendency to link one's productivity or capacity to their worth and thriving status, co-researchers also acknowledged the significance of the conventional understanding of thriving. Zara said thriving is:

being the best possible version of yourself and mostly just being able to give your full 100% in everything you do, whether it's on campus or off campus.

She later elaborates that her thriving can manifest through her different modes of engagement with the institution, such as academic performance or involvement in co-curricular activities.

In her quote, she suggests a striving for greatness and self-improvement, indicating a desire to achieve one's fullest potential and a commitment to wholehearted effort and dedication.

Additionally, by expanding her conceptualization of thriving to both on and off campus, Zara broadens the scope of this desire to pursue excellence and the best version of herself in all areas of life, across various contexts. Scholarship highlights how student engagement in the higher education context has been correlated with positive outcomes like cognitive development, psychosocial development, self-esteem, and moral and ethical development (Kuh, 2009). However, the perpetuation of cis-heteronormative culture in higher education environments has resulted in various barriers faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students in academic and co-curricular spaces, as extensively documented in research (Lange et al., 2019 + more). While these challenges are further discussed in chapter 5, it is crucial to frame co-researcher' traditional conceptualization of thriving as the desire to cultivate oneself and persist.

The desire to develop oneself can also be viewed through the lens of self-authorship. The process of self-authorship, defined as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 269), has served as a foundational theory for many educators, especially in the field of student affairs. Although there are critiques regarding the constructivist linear nature of the theory and its perceived limitations in capturing the lived experiences of students with marginalized racial and sexual/gender identities (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Orozco & Felkner, 2017), self-authorship still offers a useful framework to explore students' desire to strive towards authenticity (Kupo & Oxendine, 2019).

When envisioning herself thriving in the future, Ariana expressed:

Generally, I feel like that sense of self-assurance and self-motivation can help me be a lot more productive. I think that that's a huge aspect of thriving as well, just being able to advocate for myself and be more effective in everything I do. That energy is what I want to have in my career path.

In her statement, Ariana's emphasis on "self-assurance," "self-motivation," and self-advocacy reflects her internal desire to cultivate an internal voice and ability to embody their values or

beliefs, albeit for the purpose of productivity. Zara and Ariana's conceptualization of thriving reflects the deep roots of the traditional understanding of success as productivity and continues to perpetuate capitalism, a point Ariana herself acknowledged later in the interview. She recognized that her cultural upbringing as an Asian person shapes her understanding of thriving, linking her self-worth to productivity and efficiency. However, she also expressed frustration with the abstract nature of thriving, finding it daunting and seemingly unattainable. For Ariana, tying thriving to productivity served to concretize and materialize the concept, providing her with a sense of security and agency, even though she acknowledged that thriving can be a constantly shifting goal.

Co-researchers' aspiration to work towards self-authorship, to define one's own path and to determine their individual action, indicated a strong sense of agency and freedom. Zara's definition of thriving as "being the best possible version of yourself" and "being able to give your full 100% in everything you do," coupled with Ariana's call for self-assurance and self-advocacy, could be interpreted as an endeavor to reclaim agency over their choices and actions, indicating a strong internal locus of control. This desire for agency and autonomy was present not only in conversation, but throughout individual artworks as they reflected on their understanding of thriving. For example, Leo painted two panels (Figure 8) to contrast their understanding of thriving and not thriving. The not thriving panel was painted in black and white, presenting the dullness of the conventional ways to achieve traditional success as thriving. Leo shared their process in conceptualizing this piece:

It's like you crawled up, you got to college, you started to walk off, and then it's like a drop. Because if I followed exactly what society says is success—normally directed towards money—I feel like it would feel like falling. It wouldn't feel very happy. That first one is like the angel is meant to represent college itself. It's supposed to be like a saving grace. You're finally getting independence, you're finally getting choice. However,

like most people follow this, ‘I need money to survive.’ And so it feels like falling after you're done with college.



Figure 8. Leo's artwork

Leo's quote encapsulated a poignant reflection on the experience of thriving as success and material gains versus personal fulfillment. For Leo, following the conventional path to achieve material gain dictated by society did not equate to personal fulfillment or actual freedom and agency. Leo challenged the conventional definition of success, suggesting that strict adherence to societal norms might lead to a sense of falling or discontent after completing college. The emphasis on the need for money to survive underscored societal pressure to conform to established norms, even at the expense of personal happiness.

As Leo mentioned, the angelic figure represented higher education and the freedom it offered 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Specifically for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, college served as an environment for self-exploration and learning more about their queerness. Leo's portrayal of

college as a "saving grace" highlighted the transformative potential of higher education, providing opportunities for growth and self-discovery. However, Leo pointed out that this freedom was a false choice, dictated by societal conventions and geared towards a capitalistic society. This perspective was influenced by their complicated relationship with religion:

I was raised Mormon, and I was always told that angels were like the good guys, kind of like when you're describing to a kid why something is good and why something is bad, you use a figure to describe it. However, the more I went through my religion, I noticed that what they were describing as angels was just their cookie-cutter version of what they wanted you to be. So, like, the angel represents the expectation.

Leo's portrayal of higher education as the angel, initially perceived as a mirage of liberation and opportunity, took a critical turn as they unveiled the underlying constraints and expectations inherent within the educational system. Their Mormon faith provided a backdrop to their conceptualizing and art-making process, where angels, and by extension higher education, represented symbols of morality, goodness, and righteousness. Leo's disillusionment with the religious portrayal of angels paralleled their disillusionment with the educational system. They came to realize that the angelic representation of college was merely a façade, a false promise put on by the institution to conceal the institutional norms and societal expectations that conditioned individuals into conformity rather than true liberation. In that sense, the freedom imbued with social and cultural restraint was not truly free to Leo.

On the other panel, Leo illustrated thriving as being caught from falling off societal expectations by someone who could make that choice and experience freedom. The blue figure was able to fly despite not having wings like the angel in the previous panel. Leo said:

The blue person doesn't have wings because, even though they don't have devil symbols or anything like that, they're just themselves, they are just a person. But they're just as free as what the good expectation looks like.

Interestingly, Leo chose an image to contrast with the angelic representation of the higher education institution as not the devil but as someone who is free and able to embrace their authenticity without conforming to societal norms. The act of flying, despite the absence of wings, metaphorically represented breaking away from societal expectations. It suggested that thriving involved transcending the limitations imposed by societal norms and forging one's unique path. The decision to fly, unburdened by the constraints of conventional symbols, signified the pursuit of self-determination and personal development. Unlike Ariana who emphasized agency within existing structures, Leo's thriving involved a decisive break from societal norms, a journey marked by autonomy and self-discovery.

The conceptualization of thriving extending beyond traditional markers of success resonated with many co-researchers. For examples, Aiden described his thinking relating to thriving:

For me, thriving is equated with success, learning, growth, and stuff like that, which is what you come into college seeking out. But the defined success of college is you get good grades and you get your degree, that's really the bare minimum, that's what you're here to do. But you should be able to do things beyond that, and you should be able to grow as a person, explore your personality, find things you like, and meet new people. Thriving is excelling beyond just success or just the function of a situation or place. It's getting to develop yourself personally, develop likes and interests, meet people, and do more than what you set out to do.

While framing thriving as a concrete objective centered around productivity and efficiency might be motivating for some, Aiden acknowledged that the traditional means of success is a function of higher education. His perspective on thriving challenges the conventional understanding of success and expands it to include personal growth in identity exploration through connection with others. Aiden broadened the concept of thriving on a college campus beyond the scope of academic accomplishments, advocating for holistic development among students. Similar to Leo, Aiden's statement was the rejection of society's predefined measures of success. This broader

interpretation of thriving once again empowered 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, emphasizing that success is not confined to external validation or predetermined benchmarks, transcending the expected outcomes and functionality of the situation.

Aiden's call for further self-exploration highlights a desire to get to know oneself. He described this growth by emphasizing the importance of personal growth, self-discovery, and establishing meaningful connection with others. For many 2SLGBTQIA+ students, the desire to understand oneself is closely tied to their relationship with queerness. Numerous co-researchers revealed the complexity of their connection to their queer identity. For instance, Zara discussed her encounters with bisexuality and the challenges of bi-erasure<sup>7</sup>, both externally and within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community:

I feel like I'm very privileged in the fact that I'm not someone who is gay or identifies as a lesbian and I'm not non-binary. So I do definitely acknowledge that I'm a very privileged person inside the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, but I've definitely experienced kind of hate from people in the past not acknowledging the fact that I am a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. And it's just like something that's really important to my identity and it hurts to have people just like disacknowledging my sexuality and trying to tear it away from who I am.

Zara shed light on the pervasive issue of bi-erasure that exists within society at large, and within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. As she acknowledged her privilege in her bisexuality and cisgender identity, there was evidence of internalized bi-erasure as her narratives and struggles were outside of the experiences of the larger community. As I re-assured her that bi-erasure was real and her voice in this study mattered, she shared:

Honestly, when I signed up to do this study, I was like, well, I don't know if they're actually going to select me because I'm bisexual, I'm very privileged. So I just didn't think I was like important enough to be a part of this study.

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<sup>7</sup> Bi-erasure or bisexuality erasure involves overlooking or denying the legitimacy of bisexuality due to factors like the misconception that bisexual individuals can pass as heterosexual or unfounded stereotypes, bisexuality being seen as a transitional phase, or bisexual people being labeled as promiscuous for their attraction to more than one gender.



There was a tension within Zara that sought to validate her bisexuality while also acknowledging her privilege and downplaying her painful experiences as a bisexual student. This also highlighted the perceived hierarchy of sexuality within and outside of the community. As Zara internalized the message that bisexuality is more closely aligned with heterosexuality and the passing nature of bisexuality is deemed desirable by both the dominant culture and queer people, she saw her struggles as less significant than those of other people within the community, such as gays, lesbians, trans, or non-binary individuals. Zara's experience of bi-erasure resulted in her feelings of invalidation, exclusion, and invisibility within the queer community. Furthermore, Zara highlighted the integral nature of her sexuality to her identity and the painful experience of having to separate them from her holistic view of self. She later shared her anger towards the lack of understanding and education people have regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ people's identities and experiences:

No one decides one day that this is my sexuality and this is how I'm going to express my gender. It's not a choice. I wish it was something that more people understood and actively chose to educate themselves on.

While some argue for queer and trans identities through an essentialist "born this way" mentality or view them as an act and performance, as articulated by feminist and queer theorists like Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990), Zara expressed frustration with the perceived fungibility and dismissal of her queer identity. It seemed as if society expected queer and trans individuals to have the option to choose to ignore or suppress their gender or sexuality and should do so, which added to her frustration.

Other co-researchers also shared their complex relationships with queerness, particularly those with identities on the periphery within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Ariana recounted her experiences with making sense of her ace identities:

So one thing is obviously my identities because like, you've probably heard about like how ace and bi or pan, they're both like zero equals zero sort of idea. So I don't know what that means, and who knows what my actual identity is.

When asked to elaborate on her ace experience and its impact on her queer identity exploration within the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community, she remarked:

I feel like it's not totally my place to really get involved because I don't have the same experiences, because I've just been like passing, you know, as completely like nothing out of the ordinary.

The concept of “passing privilege” and the narrow understanding of queerness, further marginalized individuals who didn't share common experiences with the majority of the community. Ariana and Zara both highlighted the dominant narratives within the queer and trans community, emphasizing how its relationships are defined in the common experience of trauma. Perceiving that they could pass as straight, both co-researchers feared that their experiences might be invalidated by the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community or that they didn't deserve inclusion because they hadn't experienced the same severity of trauma from homo- and trans-phobia as other members of the community. While impacting the identity development of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, this dynamic further exacerbated disconnections within the community, a topic explored in later pages.

Abby later shared how her socialization as a "good Asian girl" led her to internalize others' expectations, particularly from her parents, shaping her conduct and restricting her exploration of identities. Unable to openly explore her sexuality due to parental restrictions, Ariana found it convenient to hide her asexuality and "pass" in alignment with her parents'

cultural expectations, providing an illusion of comfort and safety in secret. “But it’s a double-edged sword,” Ariana said, “Do I actually not want anyone or do I think that I’m not supposed to want anyone or do I keep myself from not wanting anyone?” The layers of racialization, cultural socialization and sexual identity development became intertwined, prompting Ariana to re-examine her desires—balancing the desire for authenticity against the pressures of conformity rooted in her cultural upbringing. As she engaged in self-authorship to develop confidence in her work and productivity, Ariana expressed the desire to examine her identity as a queer and Asian person, cultivating an internal voice that authentically reflected her. In addition to understanding thriving through traditional markers of success, Ariana also defined thriving as achieving a comprehensive understanding of her identity, encompassing both her racial and sexual identity:

I’m an Asian person who doesn’t speak my mother language. Being able to reconcile that American versus Chinese side of me would be, I think, an aspect of really thriving for sure in the future. Likewise, being able to reconcile what exactly my label should be [...] would also be cool. I don’t know necessarily if that’s thriving, but I think that, at least having a better understanding, not necessarily the exact definition of every single thing would be closer to thriving.

By conceptualizing thriving as identity development, Ariana shed light on the importance of internal recognition and meaningful exploration of intersecting identities. Her desire to reconcile her American and Chinese identity as well as her exploration of sexuality illustrated the need for holistic development across intersecting identities as well as the empowerment that came from having the language and label to articulate herself. The process of self-discovery emerged as a crucial element of thriving and underscored the importance of understanding oneself and connecting one’s desires to their identity and cultural context. While queer theorists would challenge the idea of reaching a definitive endpoint in identity construction and development (Watson, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Nicolazzo et al., 2023), Ariana’s sentiment highlighted the importance of ongoing introspection and self-discovery. Rather than viewing thriving as a

fixed outcome, she highlights the significance of continually making meaning and seeking deeper understanding, but not absolute clarity. This perspective reframed thriving as a dynamic process, characterized by continuous exploration and growth, rather than a finite achievement.

The desire to holistically explore multiple intersecting identities resonated with many queer and trans co-researchers of color. For Talia, thriving meant being able to embody the fullness of their identities authentically. Their experiences as a student leader on campus led them to feel constrained, compelled to showcase only one aspect of their identity at a time, whether it was their racial identity or gender and sexuality. When asked about what thriving felt like, especially when their entire identity and humanity are acknowledged, Talia described:

The best word I could use is tranquility and peace, I'm not fighting on one side or the other, I'm not fighting internally on what I should say or what I should do or the different parts of my identity I have.

Talia's quote sheds light on the desire to be free from the internal struggle of navigating their various intersecting identities. Instead of experiencing internal peace coming from the holistic acceptance of their identities, Talia perceived different aspects of their identities as distinct "sides," ones they had to selectively embody to conform to societal expectations. This fragmentation of identities is a common experience among 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color. They often found themselves needing to downplay their racial and ethnic identities to align with prevailing whiteness within the queer and trans community; on the other hand, they may feel compelled to tone down their queerness or transness to be accepted within their racial/ethnic community (Velázquez et al., 2024). Over the past decades, the literature on the experiences of queer and trans students of color on college campuses has expanded, providing more documentation of the compounding effects of racism, homophobia, and transphobia on individuals existing at the intersection of these marginalized identities (Blockett, 2017; Blockett

& Renn, 2021; Duran et al., 2022). Moreover, the absence of an intersectional approach to college students' identity development, which frequently focuses on a single identity, may put queer and trans students of color under pressure to choose one identity over another (Javier & Johnson, 2017). This single identity development approach in higher education, compounding with the pervasiveness of racism and homo/transphobia within different communities, underscores the challenges faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color in navigating their complex identities and in their self-development journey.

The pressure Talia felt to curate their self-image and the experience of being pulled in different directions by society's expectations based on race, gender, and sexuality were overwhelming and exhausting. However, these experiences are all too common and resonate deeply within queer communities of color. Karen, a Vietnamese female bisexual/demisexual student, explained:

Thriving on campus is having the ability to feel safe and happy expressing all of my intersecting identities.

While Talia described thriving as "tranquility and peace" for the possibility of existing authentically without the burden of internal struggles of a fragmented self, Karen described thriving as the feeling of "safety" and happiness. She continued,

And the safeness would be like more than just tolerance from the rest of the community, but understanding and also celebration of who I am.

The phrase "just tolerance" implied a minimal level of acknowledgment of differences, suggesting that being tolerated falls short of the support and affirmation that Karen envisioned for thriving. The desire to express themselves as multifaceted individuals, rather than fragmented parts of their identity, transcended the requirement for mere tolerance and demanded a deeper level of understanding and celebration from the community. While Talia's account brought

attention to the pressures that forced 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color to compartmentalize their racial, gender, and sexual identities, Karen's statement called for celebration and affirmation of the complexities inherent in their identities. Moreover, Karen called for acknowledgment of the oppression and marginalization faced by queer and trans students of color. The intricate interplay of race, sexuality, and gender for individuals like Talia and Karen underscores the urgent need for holistic identity development and celebration within the campus community.

The exploration of personal growth and self-development within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community on college campuses revealed a multifaceted and complex journey characterized by intersecting identities, societal pressures, and the quest for authenticity. Through the narratives and experiences of co-researchers, I gained valuable insights into the challenges experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students as well as their desires while navigating their identities within higher education environments. Central to this exploration is the theme of thriving, which extends beyond traditional markers of success to encompass holistic identity development, self-discovery, and authenticity. For some co-researchers, their conceptualizations of thriving are deeply rooted in both traditional and expansive understandings of success. Some co-researchers' adherence to the conventional view of thriving, equating it with productivity and efficiency, reflected societal norms that tied one's worth to their capacity for accomplishment and productivity. These traditional notions, while providing a sense of security and achievability, are challenged by other co-researchers who envision thriving as extending beyond academic success and advocates for personal growth and exploration of identity. This rejection of the limitations and predetermined measures of success empowers queer and trans students to define their thriving in aspirational terms. For some co-researchers, the desire for self-development reflected a desire for holistic identity development and self-actualization. Throughout this discussion, it

becomes evident that traditional frameworks of identity development often overlook the intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality (Abes et al., 2019), leading to fragmentation and internal conflict for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Especially for 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, there is a desire for a comprehensive understanding of intersecting identities, highlighting the importance of culture and identity in self-recognition and meaning-making. The narratives of continuous introspection and self-discovery emphasized that thriving is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing process. This highlighted the dynamic nature of desire while signifying the importance of agency and freedom in the efficacy of actualizing their aspiration.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored how 2SLGBTQIA+ students conceptualize queer thriving. Co-researchers understand thriving in different ways: some conceptualize thriving as beyond a certain threshold, highlighting that there is a certain baseline experience that is considered as survival and if it goes beyond those markers, they would be considered as thriving, some understood thriving as an absence of oppression or as autonomy and framing their understanding in terms of environmental factors. On the other hand, some co-researchers reclaimed their agency, positioning thriving as a choice, or action that they take despite the material or social conditions they faced. Furthermore, co-researchers have different and dynamic understanding of the relationship between thriving and surviving: most pose as directly opposite, while some think that surviving is the foundations in which thriving can be built upon, or that surviving and thriving are intertwining concepts. Co-researchers provided valuable insights into the complexity, multifacetedness, and subjectivity of what it means to thrive.

Through the lens of Self-Development, Agency, and Freedom as thriving, I delved into the desires expressed by 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the higher education context. This

exploration uncovered a multifaceted journey shaped by intersecting identities, societal pressures, and the pursuit of authenticity within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Through co-researchers' narratives, I gained valuable insights into the challenges 2SLGBTQIA+ students face while navigating their identities in higher education. At its core, this exploration revolves around the concept of thriving, extending beyond conventional success measures to encompass holistic identity development, self-discovery, and authenticity.

In this next chapter, I delve into how queer and trans students navigate their desires amidst encounters with institutional violence across various contexts. Specifically, I examine their interactions with larger institutional systems, structures, and climates, as well as their experiences within institutional queer spaces. By exploring co-researchers' desires, I illuminate institutional inconsistencies, revealing disparities between professed values and their practical application. Additionally, I explore how 2SLGBTQIA+ students navigate the higher education system by asserting, negotiating, and at times, suppressing their desires as survival strategies within a system characterized by violence.



## Chapter 5

### Encountering Institutional Violence

Many co-researchers echoed a shared narrative about the envisioned role of higher education in their lives. For many 2SLGBTQIA+ students, including co-researchers, higher education symbolized freedom and the prospect for personal growth and exploration. As mentioned, Leo depicted college as an angelic figure, a saving grace for queer individuals. However, akin to Leo's disillusionment with higher education and its neoliberal practices that conditioned students toward conventional definitions of success, other co-researchers also expressed distrust with the larger institutional structure. The romanticized idea of college as a sanctuary for queer exploration transformed into what I term an *institutional mirage* - a false promise that often left queer and trans students disappointed. Talia articulated this disillusionment, stating:

College is about figuring out who you are, but there are certain limits and boundaries and a lot of places at OU that make it hard for you to figure out who you are.

In this section, I delved deeper into the boundaries and limitations imposed by higher education on the self-development process of students, particularly focusing on how institutional constraints hindered the exploration and understanding of one's identity. While co-researchers have engaged with various areas on campus, I specifically focused on two broader domains: the larger institution as a whole, and their experiences within institutionalized queer spaces. It is important to note that while this chapter is structured in these sub-sections, students do not experience campus in such separate entities but as a whole. In my attempt to distinguish and clearly illustrate my points, it is important to note that their experiences overlap and connect with one another due to the fluid nature of the queer experience.

## **Institutional Violence Across Campus**

### ***(In)visibility***

Many co-researchers highlighted the lack of institutional acknowledgment in various forms, such as through institutional social media. Zara shared her observation:

And I noticed, like on the OU social media pages, [...] there wasn't anything about Pride Month, there wasn't an email from the President. And I don't know, there's other things that they promote, but just not Pride month and I think that's not cool and not a good way to show that we care for these students.

This absence of institutional acknowledgment through social media and official communication channels sent a disheartening message to queer and trans students at the university. It created an environment where their identities and experiences were not celebrated or recognized. While many might critique this action as performative, this lack of recognition resulted in 2SLGBTQIA+ students' inability to see themselves reflected as a part of the university community, both in the present and in the future. The absence of visible support did not convey institutional neutrality on the matter; rather, it contributed to a sense of disconnect and erasure for marginalized student populations. It highlighted a systemic neglect of the needs and desires of queer and trans students, which could have detrimental impacts on their overall well-being and impede their process of self-development and identity exploration within the campus community.

The lack of institutional acknowledgment of Pride Month, among other significant events for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, sent a powerful message reflecting the institution's stance on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the level of commitment and support it was willing to offer to queer and trans students. Zara's quote reflected a feeling of neglect from the university, and CJ echoed this sentiment, saying:

They didn't post anything about Pride at all. [...] But them not acknowledging the queer community speaks like levels about the way that they care about us. Institutional symbolic acceptance held significant weight in shaping the experiences and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, creating an environment where they felt seen, heard, and valued. Both quotes from Zara and CJ highlighted their disappointment, emphasizing the emotional and psychological toll of the absence of recognition and care, which reflected their (lack of) sense of belonging on campus.

Another point of tension that Zara mentioned was the inconsistency in institutional acknowledgment of highlighting different holidays and celebrations. During the month of June, the University posted content to celebrate National Best Friends Day, Flag Day, National Mascot Day, Father's Day, Juneteenth, and various aspects of summer, but not Pride. Co-researchers found this omission troubling, perceiving it not only as a deliberate act of institutional negligence but also as a potential reflection of the university feeling shame or discomfort regarding their students' queer and trans identities. Aiden expressed his frustration as a trans student of color in this regard:

Certain communities and populations just get more, I guess, advertising screen time. They're presented more often or more favorably than others like OU. [...] You see diversity for almost every other identity somebody can have, usually like cultural or race-based identities. You see very little outward towards like, 'Hey, we have a campus LGBTQ community, and here's how you connect with them.'

He shared that throughout the recruitment process, he received information about opportunities to be involved with the South Asian community, his academic interests in Engineering, and even opportunities in E-Sports related to his gaming hobbies. However, he could not recall ever hearing about resources for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. This imbalance in representation contributed to the perception of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities being marginalized or overlooked within the institutional narrative, hindering the identity development of queer and trans students.

Moreover, Aiden's quote shed light on the institutional perception of the marginality of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community compared to other racial/ethnic communities. While I am not interested in conflating gender and sexuality with race and ethnicity, it is evident that this erasure went beyond mere oversight. It spoke to what can be deemed as a part of the OU story—an institutional narrative that may have prioritized certain identities while relegating others to the periphery.

Gender or sexual identities are not visible and are not included as a part of federally protected identities. Furthermore, queer expressions are continuously politicized and pathologized. Because of that, co-researchers perceived that highlighting support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community was a risky political move that the university might have hesitated to embrace. This left queer and trans students unaware of the available resources due to institutional suppression and erasure, creating a significant barrier to their identity development and exploration process. Along with multiple co-researchers, Aiden shared his frustration about not learning about 2SLGBTQIA+ resources on campus:

It would've taken me a lot longer if I hadn't quite literally on accident found out about [the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center] myself.

This underlined the impact of institutional neglect on students' access to vital support structures and highlighted the importance of proactive measures for increased visibility and awareness in fostering queer and trans students' identity development.

The institution's failure to prioritize and acknowledge 2SLGBTQIA+ identities perpetuated a sense of erasure and directly contradicted the students' desire for holistic development. This disconnect between the institution's narrative and the authentic experiences of queer and trans students underscored the pressing need for institutional change to align with the

diverse desires and needs of its student body. Many co-researchers emphasized the importance of 2SLGBTQIA+ representation across various areas of campus. Reflecting on her four years of college, Zara highlighted the significance of discussing 2SLGBTQIA+ history and contemporary issues in classes. She emphasized that incorporating 2SLGBTQIA+ content not only helped queer and trans students understand their history but also facilitated awareness within the larger community. She shared:

There was a lack of representation because it felt like many of these students could go through their entire school four years and not see anything related to 2SLGBTQIA+ culture or identity.

Representation not only fostered a sense of support and belonging for queer and trans students on campus but also demonstrated the possibility of their existence and thriving within the university environment. Zara further expressed her disappointment in the lack of meaningful queer and trans representations throughout her college journey:

It was not only hurtful, but there was also a sadness there of students going through college and not knowing themselves; I think that's very sad. College is like where you're supposed to figure out who you are.

This highlighted unfulfilled promises of the higher education institution for student development due to a lack of representation. Adequate representation is not merely a matter of visibility; it is intrinsically linked to the process of identity exploration and self-development. Furthermore, co-researchers expressed that the inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ representation within the curriculum could also benefit students who were not part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community by raising awareness and understanding of the challenges the community currently faced. Additionally, this inclusion was seen as a means to foster allyship among students on campus, contributing to a safer climate in which queer and trans students could further explore their identities.

## *Hostile Climate & Safety*

As the 2SLGBTQIA+ community continues to seek visibility and increase in representation on campus, the concern of safety that comes with hyper-visibility for marginalized communities, specifically the trans community, must be addressed. Fear of physical violence was a present concern across all co-researchers. For instance, Matthew conveyed a vision of thriving as the ability to exist as a queer person without persecution. He wished to be able to pursue his educational endeavors unencumbered by the burdens associated with a marginalized identity, akin to the experiences of their non-2SLGBTQIA+ peers. Matthew further described:

I do have this queer identity, I need to be able to embrace it. And just like, that's not even a thing that, you know, people blink an eye about. So if we have an event going on or if queer people just exist, we're not fearful of being "hate-crimes" or having stuff said to us just for existing.

Matthew's statement revealed a tension in their relationship with queerness; they acknowledge its significance in shaping their identity and college experience, emphasizing the importance of embracing queerness and its expressions. However, there is a fear of rejection and even physical harm because of his identity. This fear is not unjustified. According to the Williams Institute (Dowd, 2020), 2SLGBTQIA+ people are nearly four (4) times more likely to experience violent victimization, compared to non-LGBT people due to homo- and trans-phobic prejudice. Many trans scholars have highlighted the killability of trans life (Nicolazzo, 2021; Hayward & Weinstein, 2015; Hayward, 2017), and Trans Day of Remembrance occurs annually to commemorate the trans lives that were lost due to violent crimes rooted in transphobia. Safety is not a newly discussed topic within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and there is a large amount of scholarship that seeks to describe the hostile nature, as well as the homophobic/transphobic harassment and discrimination, that queer students experience in college environments (D'Augelli, 1989; Brown et al., 2004; Beemyn et al., 2005; Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Taylor et al.,

2018; Goldberg, 2019; Whitfield et al., 2019). Feeling a sense of fear for physical safety and concealing one's identity to avoid intimidation are examples of perceptions that can contribute to a negative sense of climate (Rankin, 2006). For this reason, Matthew, among other co-researchers, deliberately chose to conceal their queer expression and identity for safety reasons. In both the individual interview and focus group sessions Aiden recalled an incident as a trans student in his first year:

There have been multiple times where I've been having a conversation with somebody that does not know I have queer identities and they have said some very homophobic things. This was my freshman year in [Residence Hall]'s basement, this dude was basically, like, "Oh yeah, I beat up a queer kid" and I was like "What?" Entirely unprompted, like we were just having a conversation and like school came up, high school, and dude basically admitted like, "Oh yeah, if I found out someone at high school is gay, I'd beat them up." Safety can be scary. This campus is not always safe. It's very hard because that's what I meant by curate and police your identities because you take a large risk by being outwardly gay in a lot of spaces, you take a great risk and be outwardly trans in a lot of spaces. Because there are people that, unprompted, just don't want you to physically survive. They want you dead, and you know that. It's hard.

To Aiden and other trans students, or the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community at large, violence is a real possibility that they can encounter. The casual disclosure of having physically harmed a queer individual and the admission of a willingness to engage in violence based on someone's sexual orientation created an atmosphere of hostility and danger, underscoring the real and immediate threats faced by queer and trans students. This added to the vulnerability and risks associated with being openly queer or trans, preventing students from expressing their authentic selves or accessing gendered facilities such as bathrooms. As physical safety is often coupled with emotional safety and inclusion in research regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ experience on higher education setting, it is also crucial to specifically highlight the danger of physical harm that queer and trans students must endure as a cost for their authenticity.

In both statements from Aiden and Matthew, there was an expectation of encountering violence on college campus. It is important to highlight Matthew's casual usage of the word "hate-crime," revealing the sad reality that violence is not an abstract concept but an everyday concern. Hate crime is defined by the Department of Justice (2023) as "a crime motivated by bias against race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability (n.p.)." These crimes can encompass "assault, murder, arson, vandalism, or threats to commit such crimes" (Department of Justice, 2023). While co-researchers often used the word "hate crime" as slang to refer to biased incidents, it still highlighted the severity and mental toll on queer and trans students. Violence, both physically and emotionally, is expected as a part of the lived experience of queer and trans people; therefore, its severity and frequency are being normalized through the casual use of the slang hate crime for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. On the other hand, there was a desire for normalization, where queerness is not something that people find surprising or react to with hesitation. Matthew's longing for the simplicity of existing as a queer person without fear and persecution highlights the complex intersection of identity and the fundamental need for safety. While the desire for normalcy might be interpreted as the wish to "fit into existing forms and structures of higher education" (Lange et al., 2019), I choose to perceive the radical potential inherent in accepting queerness as "normal."

The experience that contributed to the negative climate was not only just physical violence but also microaggressions as well. Common experiences among co-researchers were experiences of being dead-named and misgendered on campus. When asked about supportive factors that would support queer thriving, Leo shared:

I think the biggest one is getting gendered properly. I feel like in a lot of the spaces that I'm uncomfortable in, or I didn't quite like, it was only because people didn't use the pronouns that I repeatedly said or even reminded them of. We would get taught about why it's important and this is why you should respect it, and these people aren't like



incapable people. I don't feel like they were trying to do anything wrong, it's just that they still did misgender me. If they didn't, I feel like I would've been a lot more accepted in those areas on campus. And then I probably would've been able to thrive more throughout college because I'd feel like myself instead of what society sees me as.

In Leo's quote, the experience of being misgendered significantly impacted their sense of belonging and comfort on campus. Lieberth (2020) discussed the importance of using affirming names for the sense of belonging and mattering of trans and non-binary students. Nonbinary participants in Arechederra's (2023) research described being misgendered and deadnamed as akin to physical pain, leading them to adjust their gender presentation for greater affirmation. These micro-aggressive interactions took an emotional toll on trans students, shaping how they viewed themselves and influencing their persistence within the university context (Lieberth, 2020). Leo's quote concluded with their desire for authenticity, expressing the wish to "feel like myself", signifying a rejection of conformity to societal perceptions and expectations. Arechederra (2023) highlighted that while some students may alter their gender expression based on external perceptions, others maintained their authentic presentation, prioritizing comfort over affirmation. Despite Leo's acknowledgement that their peers' intent was not harmful or malicious, the quote brought to light the pervasive carelessness and disrespect that Leo, along with other trans and nonbinary students, encountered on campus. Leo noted that there were educational efforts to convey the importance of using correct pronouns, suggesting that awareness existed in both the classroom and the larger campus. However, the quote underscored the persistent issue of misgendering, emphasizing the repeated carelessness from their peers. This consistent misgendering not only had a direct impact on queer and trans students' well-being and sense of belonging but also raised broader concerns about the hegemonic campus culture and the importance placed on diversity, equity, and inclusion among the student body. The experience left Leo feeling as if they didn't matter on campus and raised questions about the

overall climate for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. The reality of a hostile climate towards 2SLGBTQIA+ students also revealed the facade of an inclusive campus the university often portrayed itself as. Talia, reflecting on what she would change on campus to make it more inclusive, shared:

I wish we didn't have such a virtue signaling administration and university, I think that's part of the biggest thing because at least this is what I felt coming to school here, it appeals so much to queer students, right? It's a little blue bubble in Oklahoma, you're safe, the university is accepting because of all this virtue signaling and you get here and that's just not the case.

Talia's expression of frustration and disappointment highlighted the stark contrast between the university's projected image as a safe and accepting space for 2SLGBTQIA+ students and the harsh realities experienced on campus. This indicated not only a misalignment but also a significant negative impact on students' ability for self-development and authenticity. Co-researchers emphasized that the university's recruitment materials often painted a misleadingly diverse picture of campus life, employing deceptive strategies to attract students from marginalized communities. This tactic ultimately led to disillusionment and unmet expectations. The perceived safety for 2SLGBTQIA+ students may be more illusionary and disingenuous on the part of the institution, but the disconnect between that perception and the reality of students' experiences had the possibility to create harm and hinder 2SLGBTQIA+ students' journeys toward self-discovery and authentic identity development.

It was evident that the university's portrayal of inclusivity may have led to a false sense of security for 2SLGBTQIA+ students where surface-level efforts were made to appear as inclusive while not addressing the underlying systemic issues that perpetuate discrimination. This raised doubts about the institution's sincerity in fostering inclusivity and put pressure on marginalized students to navigate an environment that was not as welcoming as advertised. In

addition to hindering students' self-development process, it created pressure for 2SLGBTQIA+ students to conform to be acknowledged by the institution. Talia described that she had to sacrifice her authenticity and cultural significance in order to be seen in such a light that is acceptable to both be queer and to be recognized by the university. Reflecting on the limitations imposed on queer and trans students of color and their needs to "pick and choose" their identities, Talia recalled the expectation of tokenism on campus:

You have to be this acceptable standard, like just fruity enough. The queer students feel safe coming and OU seems diverse. [...] An acceptable level of queer, there's like a threshold... you have to be gay enough to where like gay students know, but not gay enough to where people are going to complain. It's a political game that they play and like it's very smart, I'll give them that. [...] We're given a spot, a tokenized spot, but it has to be a specific set of criteria for somebody to get that spot. I don't want to say so they can satiate us, but 'look, we have a trans person of color. Look, have 2 cis gay white men. We're not homophobic or transphobic'

The requirement to fit into the "acceptable standard," as described by Talia, not only restricted the freedom of queer and trans students to express themselves fully but also perpetuated the idea that there was a social hierarchy of identity expressions. Within said range, homonormativity was a specific, limited way, that deserved recognition and acknowledgment within the university setting. This notion was echoed by other co-researchers, claiming the pressure to down play their queerness or anything that would be considered as outside the traditional gender representation and market yourself in a way that is more aligned with cis-heteronormativity.

Besides the immense pressure and expectation placed on queer and trans students, particularly those of color, to conform to a certain standard of acceptability set by the institution, Talia's quote also described how the university only recognized queerness for interest-convergence purposes. In Talia's experiences, along with many other co-researchers, 2SLGBTQIA+ students were selected and showcased to create an appearance of diversity and inclusion, often at the expense of their authenticity and true identity. This practice created a

mirage of inclusivity and diversity for prospective students, giving them the illusion that the campus was more diverse and inclusive than it actually was. This reflected a superficial approach to diversity and inclusion, where the visibility of queer and trans students was strategically controlled and curated to maintain a certain image, rather than genuinely embracing their experiences and identities. Furthermore, Talia's account shed light on the strategic maneuvering of the institution to showcase diversity without truly addressing the needs and desires of queer and trans individuals. This tactic not only disregarded the multifaceted nature of queer and trans identities but also placed the burden on marginalized individuals to fulfill predetermined criteria for visibility within the educational space. It emphasized the intricate interplay of power dynamics and performative inclusivity within higher education institutions. Additionally, it underscored co-researchers' recognition that the institution acknowledged their desire to express queerness only when the university could exploit their identity as a tool for virtue signaling or selling points. Unfortunately, this recognition often came at the expense of the genuine acknowledgment that the institution would always prioritize the desires of other constituents, such as prospective students and the potential revenue they bring, over recognizing and valuing the authentic experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within the university community.

It was exhausting for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in an environment where they had to conceal or minimize their identities for physical and emotional safety or to get recognition from the university of the fullness of their intersecting identities. When asked about the conditions in which 2SLGBTQIA+ students could be authentic, co-researchers shared that their ability to be authentic is contingent on the environmental factors and others' actions:

Micah: Authenticity depends on the actions of others for me. Because if I'm in a situation where people are aware of my pronouns or aware of the fact that I go by a different name and they don't use any of those things, then I automatically shut it off because [...] sometimes I don't have the time, or

the emotional capacity to do that. My boss did an exercise where she was like, “Go around the room and everybody explained their name.” and I was like, “Oh, Lord.” Or the professor that misgenders me every time I turn in an assignment and also deadnames me every time I turn in an assignment. And so, like, I'm not going to talk about queer things in her class or in any of the assignments. So I feel like it just depends on what other people are doing, I think it's less on me and more on others, in a university sense.

Aiden: Follow up on that, my one sentence was trust in a space/group of people. Like if I know that I can trust you with this aspect of myself, we're going to. If I know I can't, probably not going to engage in that space or around those people very much. That feeling of safety, acceptance, trust, and knowing that you are valued for those things, not devalued for those things, I guess.

In the highlighted conversation above, both Aiden and Micah emphasized the importance of trust in fostering authentic engagement. Micah derived this sense of trust from the respect of others, demonstrated through their efforts to use affirming names and pronouns. For Aiden, trust rested on the foundational expectation of safety, acceptance, and being valued for his identity as a whole. Their engagement with people and spaces was consciously chosen based on the level of trust they felt.

Micah recounted disengaging academically with a professor who consistently misgendered and deadnamed them in class or withheld their opinions on queer identities and issues. Research has highlighted the struggle of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in deciding when to disclose their identities in classroom discussions or assignments (Furrow, 2012). Faculty microaggressions could lead to academic disengagement or even withdrawal from the class (Pryor, 2015). Additionally, seemingly innocuous icebreakers, such as name games, often used in co-curricular contexts could evoke complicated feelings particularly for trans students. This showed the embedded cis-heteronormativity that students experienced on campus, and these seemingly harmless micro-aggressive interactions can cause psychological distress and lower

self-acceptance for queer and trans students (Woodford et al., 2014). Similarly, Aiden shared that he only engaged with people whom he trusted to feel safe and accepted for his identity. Both co-researchers suggested that environmental factors, such as climate and others' actions, could influence their ability to engage and present themselves authentically. On the other hand, they asserted that authenticity was ultimately a choice exercised by queer and trans individuals to express their agency. 2SLGBTQIA+ students had the opportunity to disclose or share themselves with others and invest their energy in spaces where they perceived trust and affirmation.

While asserting their existence through visibility and authenticity was crucial, it is essential to recognize the immediate safety needs—both physical and psychological—that 2SLGBTQIA+ students had to constantly reevaluate and negotiate within the higher education context. Threats to physical safety or microaggressions from deadnaming or misgendering could further alienate 2SLGBTQIA+ students, damaging their sense of belonging, and hindering their engagement in, or sense of curiosity about, their identity exploration. Moreover, dominant narratives and fabricated structures around identity development within higher education practices could compel queer and trans students, especially 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, to suppress parts of their identity to conform to the acceptable mold of queerness and gain recognition from the institution. This highlighted the dynamic process of queer and trans students' authenticity and the campus climate to move beyond recognition of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, while also cultivating an affirming environment where they can thrive, explore their identities, and develop self.

### ***Lack of Institutional Explicit Support***

Many co-researchers recognized that their ability to engage in self-development and ability to exercise their agency has been and will continue to be affected by not only institutional

climate but also the climate shaped by current state legislations and external factors outside of the institution. This experience does not come as a surprise, as the 2SLGBTQIA+ students continue to experience the severe impact of anti-queer and trans, and anti-DEI efforts from the state legislation in the past years. For instance, in the fall of 2022, Oklahoma Republican lawmakers proposed House Bill 1007, which mandated the OU Health system to cease providing gender-affirming treatments for trans youths. This requirement was tied to accessing \$39.4 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to enhance medical records, establish improved mental health resources for minors, and support the Stephenson Cancer Center in Tulsa (HB 1007, 2022). The Roy G. Biv Program at Oklahoma Children's Hospital, operating within OU Health, was one of the key clinics offering care to gender-diverse youths by providing gender-affirming medical care to trans adolescents in Oklahoma. Adding to these challenges, the Executive Order 2023-31 issued by Governor Stitt in December 2023 was the backdrop of this research. The executive order bars state agencies, including public universities, from utilizing state funds, property, or resources to support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. These instances are just two among the numerous anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-DEI efforts; these efforts often masquerade as attempts to reform universities but, in reality, involve cutting access to essential services and critical curriculum under the guise of cultural wars.

During times of political hardship, community members, particularly those with marginalized identities, often look to the institution for leadership, support, and protection. However, queer and trans students, along with members of other marginalized communities, find themselves disappointed in the institutional response. In reaction to House Bill 1007, despite denouncements from medical organizations such as the Oklahoma State Medical Association ([Weber, 2022](#)) and advocacy groups such as Freedom Oklahoma and the American Civil

Liberties Union (ACLU) of Oklahoma, which called for leaving medical care decisions between families and physicians (Leonard, 2022), OU Health “*proactively* [planned] the ceasing of certain gender medicine services” across its facilities ([Leonard, 2022](#), n.p, emphasis added). Shortly after the issuance of Executive Order 2023-31, OU President Joseph Harroz announced the shutdown of DEI offices to the campus, despite the fact that the order only required state universities to initiate a review. Meanwhile, the Oklahoma State University system declared that “an initial review indicates that no significant changes to our processes or practices are needed [in regards to DEI]” ([Charles, 2024, n.p](#)). This eagerness to be overly compliant with the executive order from OU was criticized by the ACLU in Oklahoma. In a statement, they said: “That harm is why the University of Oklahoma’s apparent leap to eliminate all DEI offices is startling. [...] OU has apparently skipped to the worst possible outcome and decided to eliminate all its DEI programs” (ACLU, 2023, n.p). The statement later urged universities across Oklahoma not to jump to conclusions but to understand the scope of the order. These incidents reveal the university's proactive over-compliance and its choice to yield under political pressure, rather than navigating the new political landscape to ensure the continued existence of inclusive measures such as DEI practices and gender-affirming care within the institution.

Many co-researchers voiced their frustration at institutional neutrality in the face of political violence. Aiden expressed his disappointment, stating that

Whenever legislature is bought up, the university does not attempt to defend us. Individuals and individual offices at the university do, but the university as a whole does nothing to ensure the well-being or safety of that community on campus and doesn't show any sort of outward support. [...] But it's pretty obvious, at least to me from a student perspective, that they really don't care. The majority of the university does not care at all. [...] ‘I don't care that you're hurting. I don't care that you're in trouble. I don't care that there [are] problems beyond what we've caused for you that are going on. That's your issue and I will do nothing to help you.’ That's the energy that a lot of campus puts off.



His statement expressed the disillusionment felt by many queer and trans students at higher education institutions that prioritize political compliance over the well-being and safety of marginalized communities. By not actively defending or advocating for students when legislative matters concerning a specific community got brought up, it further highlighted the lack of commitment from the university to its community members. The quote illustrated a sense of abandonment and neglect, with the university being perceived as indifferent and apathetic to the challenges and concerns faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students on campus. While the university portrayed itself as a neutral agent, this effort is perceived as institutional indifference and lack of commitment to support marginalized students. Accompanied with a hostile institutional climate, the inaction from university administration conveyed the sense of apathy – this further contributed to the sense of disillusionment from the romanticized image of the university campus as a caring community and the OU family narrative.

The contrasting desires between queer and trans students seeking support and the institution's desire to remain neutral led to a disconnect between the student body and university administration. In the context of how the university administration expressed support for students, Leo illustrated this disconnection by describing it as a "glass wall." On one side of this metaphorical glass wall, university administrators made themselves visible, allowing students to hear their affirmation and support. However, the symbolism of the glass wall suggested that despite these verbal assurances, the administration remained reluctant to step over to the students' side, creating a tangible divide between the expressed intent and their actual practices. This behavior aligned with findings in the literature, which indicated that institutions often resorted to various tactics, such as "waiting out" student activists, implementing administrative processes like task forces without genuine intent, and gaslighting tactics, which were strategies

aimed at managing student activists and their demands. These tactics often prioritized institutional needs over the genuine concerns of students, painting activists as troublemakers or simply ignoring their issues altogether (Linder et al., 2020). Leo's metaphors underscored the perceived barrier set up by the university administration, which aimed to demonstrate performative care without truly understanding and aligning with the needs and desires of queer and trans students, thereby emphasizing the palpable distance between the two entities.

The lack of institutional commitment to students further harmed students' sense of belonging and perpetuated their invisibility and feeling unheard. In the context of discussing the collaborative art project's audience, several co-researchers proposed the university administration as the target audience of the project, intending to utilize the project as a means to demonstrate the existence of queer and trans individuals on campus and to communicate the needs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to the administration. CJ shared with the group: "I want to be as loud as possible, I want people to be able to see that queer people exist." The sentiment encapsulated in the phrase "We're here; We're Queer" has long characterized queer liberation movements, advocating for the recognition of the community's existence by the larger cis-heteronormative society and asserting the enduring nature of this existence. Given the absence of representation, current practices lead queer and trans students to question whether their presence on campus matters or is acknowledged by institutional leadership and the broader community at large. However, some co-researchers suggested shifting the focus in a different direction, as articulated by Matthew:

I feel like that might be more worth our while than trying to say something to administration because they're well aware we exist. It's just ... they don't care.

This perspective speaks to the support aspects of the institution and underscores the significant impact of the lack of acknowledgment and institutional erasure on how queer and trans students feel as though their existence is dismissed, unseen, and deemed unworthy of institutional care.

To accentuate this disconnection, Leo likened the feeling of being unheard as a queer student to screaming into a deep void without getting anything back. While this sentiment also echoed Aiden's sense of neglect and lack of acknowledgment on behalf of the institution, it also shows the frustration of the institution's inaction. While this sentiment also echoed Aiden's sense of neglect and lack of acknowledgment on behalf of the institution, it also reflected the frustration with the institution's inaction. When asked about what they would have liked to change from the current reality to a model in which queer thriving could exist, Leo stated:

I think the best way I could have seen something different for queer students is seeing a change. What I would have changed is just to be listened to and to see some physical representation of the fact that you're trying.

This quote illustrates the desire for tangible action and genuine support from the university. To feel supported by the institution, Leo and other co-researchers asked for transparency in the progress within the university's policies, practices, and support systems. The emphasis on "physical representation" highlighted the need for accountability for the university's espoused commitment and dedication to change. This also underscored the distrust from students towards the university's ability to create change and address the actual needs of students from marginalized backgrounds. Leo further explained:

At what point does someone say, 'I don't care that I'm not supposed to, but I want to help my students' because the job is for your students. You were doing this because you were passionate about something. That passion matters and it needs to be reflected in your job. I understand you can't do illegal things for us, I'm not saying become a criminal. But it would be nice to see effort, even if it's just a statement. We get mass emails all the time about how this is a legal thing we have to do, but it's never 'we don't want this and we're

trying to change it.' It's not illegal to be against something, pretty sure freedom of speech allows you to be that way.

Leo described the importance of this physical representation, emphasizing that it could serve as a powerful statement with explicit support and assurance. While some might criticize such efforts as mere tactics to placate activists and student leaders, Leo argued that even a statement of support and verbal assurance would be preferable to the current lack of transparency for change and institutional neutrality. This highlighted a notable disconnect between the students' demands and the institutional response. In times of challenge, marginalized students looked to the institution for leadership and urged university administration to make ethical decisions that would protect students and community members from state violence. However, the response they received seemed to prioritize legal protection over genuine support, manifesting in mass statements aimed at avoiding liability. While 2SLGBTQIA+ students recognized the legal constraints associated with the university's public institution status, they called for a more proactive stance. They argued that within the boundaries of legality, the university should demonstrate visible support or opposition to certain issues through statements, public acknowledgments, or other tangible efforts. Leo suggested that, in contrast to the frequent mass emails about legal obligations, there should be similar communication regarding the university's stance on these issues. This would explicitly express institutional support for queer and trans students and opposition to harmful state legislation. By posing the rhetorical question of when someone might prioritize students' safety over proactive compliance with legal constraints, Leo urged university administration and practitioners to critically examine their passion and sense of purpose, encouraging them to maintain a student-centric approach in practice and decision-making.

The experiences shared by co-researchers underscore a significant gap between the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ students or the marginalized community at large and the institutional response. Alongside the harmful climate and violence experienced on campus, they also faced state violence through legislations that not only perpetuated queer and trans erasure but also cut access to critical institutional resources. During this time, 2SLGBTQIA+ students continued to seek ethical leadership from university administration to protect them from state violence or challenge anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric from the state. However, the university had become a legal entity bound by legislative constraints; this risk-averse approach of neutrality only conveyed institutional apathy toward marginalized populations. Hence, co-researchers called on higher education institutions to explicitly espouse their commitment to the well-being and safety of their students, along with the institutional values of DEI, not only as a tool for virtue-signaling but also during politically challenging times. While the call for a demonstration of visible support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community through explicit statements and tangible efforts could be critiqued as visibility politics and a low bar, it further emphasizes the lack of transparency and support that queer and trans students currently experience from university leadership and the institution at large.

### ***Gendered Spaces, Processes, and Practices***

While higher education was promised as a space for discovery and self-exploration, co-researchers, as well as many other 2SLGBTQIA+ students, found the gendered structure embedded in both physical structures and policies on campus restrictive and hindered their development, specifically gender and sexual identity development. Beemyn and other researchers (2005) explored how trans individuals experience harm through the architecture of universities or lack of affirming policies and accommodations. In *Transgender Students in*

*Higher Education*, Goldberg (2019) discussed how physical spaces on campus, such as single-sex restrooms and housing, can serve as barriers for queer, trans, and non-binary students. These spaces often assume that students' identities fit neatly with the binary understanding of sex and gender. The physical structure, policies, and systems within university settings are built upon and reinforce our conceptualization of cis-heteronormativity. An example heavily discussed within individual interviews and focus groups among co-researchers was student housing. In the context of the OU, residence halls are currently still a gendered space, where it is still required for students to share living facilities with someone of the same sex assigned at birth. With co-ed community living implemented in 2015 as the result of student activists on campus, students can live with people of different sex-assigned-at-birth within the same hall, however their rooms and suites are still assigned based on their sex assigned at birth. Many trans co-researchers shared their struggles navigating the housing process. Matthew discussed the feeling of being unsafe in housing:

Most students are required to live on campus their first year and you really want to make housing like a home, that's the whole thing with residence life, you know, this is like students' home for a lot of them. If someone does not feel safe in their home, it's not really a home. It is a room with a bed, and that's pretty much it. It's not a home for them.

In this quote, Matthew pointed out the tension of the live-on requirement for first-year students and the lack of comfort and safety for 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the binary-gendered space. Because of the benefits of living on campus such as student academic engagement and institutional involvement (Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1974; Pascarella et al., 1994), many institutions have adopted the requirement of living-on, especially for first year students. However, this assumed positive effect is not experienced equally by all students. In the case of Matthew, like many other trans and non-binary students, the cis-heteronormative structure of facilities such as residence halls has a negative impact on their sense of safety and belonging.

Matthew used the word "home " to communicate the spatial experience and the desire to feel safe and comfortable on campus living space. The excerpt highlighted the mirage of comfort that the university often promised for students within their facilities. As violence against 2SLGBTQIA+ populations continues to escalate, both at the campus and state levels, existing research tends to prioritize students' safety over their comfort, leading to a lack of research in this area. Feminist and queer theorists, however, often perceive significant potential in the sensation of discomfort, critiquing and resisting the stability associated with comfort (Purvis, 2012). Discussions around comfort frequently delve into the campus climate and students' overall sense of belonging within higher education, considering their interactions with various systems and spaces. For instance, Pryor (2018) explored how students identified certain campus spaces as (dis)comfort, shedding light on how these spaces either contribute to or hinder the sense of belonging for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. In this instance, Matthew expressed the desire of extending their residence hall beyond their physical living space, but also encompassing their needs for emotional and psychological safety. The struggle to find a place where their gender identity is acknowledged and respected creates a barrier to the self-exploration and development that higher education promises.

Furthermore, co-researchers criticized the process around housing accommodations for queer and trans students. During the focus groups discussing deconstructing spaces on campus, Aiden, a trans student who went through the accommodations process and then later on worked as a Resident Adviser in housing. recalled his time in the residence halls during his first-year:

I was out as trans, I have been since high school, and so the experience of starting OU as a freshman and navigating housing was a shit show. Even before you get to OU, when you are applying for housing as a freshman, there's this whole survey type thing that you have to fill out, and there is exactly one pop up box that appears briefly stating, 'If you have any concern on the grounds of discrimination on sex or gender, in your housing placement, please email at the time.' It's one single contact point for every queer students. Additionally, most people at that age are not filling out this survey alone, so the accessibility of that information to someone that's closeted with parents that are not

supportive, very unlikely that they'd come across that their first pass in the housing application process. Again, I got lucky, my parents were very supportive, and so we got in touch, we went through the proper procedures on that end to get me into the best option at the time, which was an entirely solo room, no roommate, didn't share a bathroom, on a coed floor, which I understand from an administrative point as someone who worked in housing later that that is really the best they could have done, but also, it was incredibly isolating. I never had a roommate, never had the roommate experience of college, I lived on a floor that was mostly Greek life so I had absolutely nothing in common with anybody that I lived with. Because I was trans, I didn't have access to like the honors communities, the quiet floors, the space is where I probably would have been more comfortable if you separated those two things about me. And there were people that were homophobic, I knew this for a fact, on my floor, so I just didn't engage with anybody there. So even though my individual room was a very safe space for me, I had very little to no community my freshman year in the housing spaces.

The process of housing, as highlighted by Aiden's experiences, encompassed several layers.

Primarily, while the housing application process offered accommodations for queer and trans students, it failed to consider the safety and lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

Many incoming students, as Aiden noted, completed their applications with the assistance of their parents or guardians. According to the *2023 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth Report from the Human Rights Campaign*, only four (4) in ten (10) 2SLGBTQIA+ youth were out to their parents and legal guardians. A report also revealed that fewer than one (1) in three (3) trans and non-binary youths found their home to be gender-affirming, and over half did not support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth gender expressions or use affirming names or pronouns (Trevor Project, n.d.).

Additionally, more than one (1) in ten (10) trans respondents in the *2022 U.S. Transgender Survey* disclosed that their parents and guardians were violent towards them because of their gender identity ([James et al., 2024](#)). Due to the potential lack of parental support, closeted students were less likely to come across information about accommodations for their housing.

This was further exacerbated by the lack of visibility and emphasis on accommodation options, briefly mentioned and providing only one contact point.



In a follow-up interview, Aiden highlighted that while the survey inquired about his living habits, it only allowed disclosure of his sex-assigned-at-birth information, omitting details about his gender identity and sexual orientation. Kilgo (2020) pointed out that less than 3% of post-secondary institutions allowed students to self-report sexual orientation or gender identity (including options outside of the binary understanding of sex) during the admission and enrollment process. For many institutions, this means queer and trans students are not represented in the institutional demographics and statistics because these administrative processes render them invisible while using said invisibility as the reason to investigate the cis-heteronormative foundations of higher education practices. Moreover, scholars have critiqued the accommodation process, where trans students must disclose their identity to the university to receive appropriate accommodations or housing assignments (Garvey et al., 2018). Blumenfeld and colleagues (2016) discussed how queer people on campus might experience unequal benefits or deal with more red tape to receive the services such as health plans or housing accommodations. This process placed the burden on queer and trans students and could be potentially stressful, not only due to potential safety issues with parents but also potential non-affirming responses from administrators, as 2SLGBTQIA+ youth disclosed being unable to receive help or assistance from school administrators according to the Human Rights Campaign (2023). This practice has become more dangerous as nationwide legislations and policies compel school administrators to disclose the gender identities or sexual orientations of their closeted students to parents. For instance, House Bill 3120 in Oklahoma, introduced in 2024, has the potential to forcibly reveal the identities of queer and trans students under the pretext of "parental rights."

Aiden acknowledged his fortunate situation with supportive parents who facilitated the accommodation process, securing a single room without a roommate on a co-ed floor and a private bathroom. Given his background in housing and residence life, he recognized that within the existing gendered housing structure, this arrangement was considered the safest option, where students still had to share facilities based on their sex assigned at birth. Despite being deemed the “best” from an administrative standpoint, this living arrangement resulted in isolation. Aiden pointed out that physical safety, instead of being viewed as a baseline experience for all students, was being prioritized over trans students’ comfort and ability to build connections or to foster a community. The absence of a roommate experience on a floor predominantly occupied by Greek life created a significant gap in shared experiences and commonality. Coupled with his awareness of the queer and trans-phobic attitudes on his floor, Aiden was forced to deliberately avoid engaging with others for his survival. This experience from queer and trans students of microaggression and violence within the hostile climate of residence halls was reflected in the literature (Evans & Broido, 1999; Fanucce & Taub, 2010; Bourassa & Shipton, 1991; Kortegast, 2017; Mollet et al., 2021). Moreover, because of the limited nature of co-ed floors available in the residence halls within his first year, this living arrangement limited Aiden's access to specific housing communities such as honors or quiet floors where he might have felt more comfortable. However, the institution’s harm reduction approach in prioritizing queer and trans students physical safety as an end goal was preventing him and other 2SLGBTQIA+ students to thrive by not allowing them access to other communities that fit their personality, interests, and unique needs. Ultimately, this process created barriers for queer and trans students to access appropriate communities that foster their growth.

On the other hand, it is essential to revisit Aiden's acknowledgment that his living arrangement was the best decision from the "administrative standpoint." This living accommodation practice positioned the university as the savior in ensuring the needs and safety of queer and trans students. However, this harm reduction approach did little to change the problematic structure of residence halls and campus at large, deeply rooted in cis-heteronormativity. Nicolazzo (2018) critiqued the administrative policies as a facade of inclusion while simultaneously not transforming the basic cultural assumptions that perpetuate trans oppression. She argued that these practices were insufficient in addressing systemic oppression and further highlighted institutional attitudes towards 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Based on these trans-inclusion practices, the institution viewed the trans population on campus as a perpetual minority to accommodate without significantly re-examining institutional structures, and trans students were tolerated within a gendered campus (Nicolazzo, 2017). Lastly, in line with Aiden's assertion that ensuring the physical safety of queer and trans individuals should only be the beginning, Nicolazzo (2017) emphasized that trans inclusion practices, including those in housing, should not be seen as a singular point of liberation but rather as an ongoing process aimed at dismantling cis-heteronormativity within the higher education context.

As Aiden acknowledged his position of being able to enter college as a trans person and start his college journey with accommodations, he recognized that this is a significant issue for those who came into their identities later in college. In conversation with other co-researchers, he said: "I can't imagine navigating the administrative side of that after you started as Matthew had, because I know that's probably far worse than a phone call and a couple of emails to someone." Many co-researchers shared that gendered institutions like housing prevented them from

exploring their identity. CJ recalled how she delayed her transition or coming out as trans because of housing. She said:

It's also been weird in college because when you haven't come out as trans before, they will put you in a dorm with people of your assigned sex. So I had a really strange dorm experience and I kind of leaned into being non-binary my freshman year, so I didn't... nothing happened. But as soon as I got out of the dorms, it was like, 'I'm trans, we're getting this on the road.'

CJ's quote further illustrated the importance of environment and institutional policies on students' identity development. She recounted the challenges and limitations she faced as a trans individual who may not have come into her identity or come out before entering college.

Describing her experience in the residence hall as "weird" and "strange," she conveyed a sense of discomfort with her assigned living arrangements based on her sex assigned at birth. In response to the challenging living environment, CJ leaned into a non-binary identity during her first year, possibly as a coping mechanism to navigate the incongruence between her gender identity and the assigned living conditions. The delay in her coming out as trans was influenced by the perceived difficulty it would pose to her living situation, highlighting the impact of institutional policies on the timing of self-disclosure. This narrative further emphasized the unfulfilled promise of identity exploration and self-development within higher education, particularly when rigid gendered structures made it challenging for students to be accommodated after fully embracing their identities.

In addition to the physical spaces, the policies and systems within universities also contribute to an environment that upholds cis-heteronormativity. This pervasive framework marginalizes and erases the experiences of queer, trans, and non-binary individuals, making it difficult for them to fully engage in the educational and social facets of university life. An

example that co-researchers repeatedly highlighted was the name change process. When asked about what he would like to change at the university, Matthew responded:

I think about the name change process here at the university, where you have to jump through many different hoops, have to contact so many different people in order to just get your name changed on your email, your Canvas, and all these different things. Instead of just having like one cohesive thing where it's like, 'Oh, filling out this form will change your name on all of these different platforms that are associated with the university.'

Matthew's quote highlighted the unnecessary complication of the name change process specifically, as well as other “red tapes” of policies and procedures. As described by Matthew, the name change process at the University of Oklahoma was not streamlined at the time, requiring students to manually update their names on various platforms, from housing to academic systems and student accounts. Some processes even mandated students to undergo the legal name change procedure, involving legal processes, documentation, and incurring a minimum cost of \$150.00. Goldberg (2018) found that forms and documentation can further alienate trans and non-binary students as they often display students' deadnames (names that trans and non-binary students no longer use), and the name change process can be complicated, confusing, and costly.

For various reasons, including financial and legal constraints, queer and trans students often chose a non-official name change within the institution, meaning their affirming name would be changed within institutional platform such as academic platforms or student-facing online account, while official documents such as a housing contract, employment name, or transcript would still have their legal (dead) name. However, due to complications in different systems, students' affirming names might not always appear on various documents, such as class attendance rosters, for example. When imagining OU as a queer utopian space in the focus group, CJ shared:

Matthew and I were just talking about the use of dead names. If you changed names in the system, it shouldn't be anywhere, like at all, not even like, I don't know... any circumstance that it needs to be used, it just doesn't need to be there. I feel like where utopia would be, where your dead name would not show up on any list at OU.

This could have created moments of embarrassment for 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Rivera et al., 2022) or potentially outed students as queer or trans in public settings, which could be dangerous. As mentioned earlier, misgendering and deadnaming students could have resulted in feelings of neglect and unacceptance for their identities. However, CJ, along with other co-researchers, expressed disappointment and confusion regarding the complications of this process, indicating that the failure of the simple act of using and displaying affirming names for 2SLGBTQIA+ students could have made students feel like they were not a priority or seen and accepted as their authentic selves. These issues could have been avoided if the systems were more streamlined, centralized, and barriers were removed.

The narratives shared by co-researchers illuminate the pervasive impact of institutional policies and systems on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and their desire for self-development and identity exploration within the higher education setting. Despite the illusion of freedom to engage in self-development and identity exploration, many institutional spaces (e.g. housing) and administrative processes (e.g. name change process) were gendered and rooted in cis-heteronormativity, hindering that commitment. The distressing accounts of navigating accommodation requests for trans students, restrictive living arrangements, and a complicated name change process underscore the urgent need for higher education institutions to address and rectify these structural barriers. Furthermore, co-researchers highlighted the current practices of harm reduction masquerading as accommodations, treating 2SLGBTQIA+ students' physical safety as the end goal instead of the basic necessity that all students deserve. These harm-reduction tactics, such as housing accommodations or the name change process, only served the

institution as the ability to deny liability for homo- and trans-phobia, failed to provide a conducive space for identity exploration, placed the burden back on students, and actively contributed to the marginalization and erasure of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within the higher education context. Moreover, the unnecessary bureaucratic red tape and policy constraints further hindered students' ability to explore their identities and thrive in the community, as the system did not allow nor account for the fluidity of their identities. It is essential for institutions to engage in ongoing dialogue with 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to identify and address the systemic barriers that hinder their full participation in university life. Shifting the harm-reduction approach and prioritizing not only safety but also building systems and infrastructures that center on queer and trans students' desires holds potential for creating environments where they can thrive.

### **Institutional Queer Spaces**

Amid state violence, queer and trans erasure, a hostile climate, and experiences with gendered systems within the institution, 2SLGBTQIA+ students frequently sought solace and refuge in various areas of campus. Examples of these spaces, as noted by co-researchers, included the Community Lounge and the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, both designed to serve as safe spaces for queer and trans students. The first 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center was established at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor in 1971 (Velázquez et al., 2024). Over the past five decades, their number has multiplied to over 200 nationwide (Consortium of Higher Education Resource Professionals, n.d.), with dedicated student affairs professionals directing resources and services to cater to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community's needs (Catalano & Jourian, 2018). Research on 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Centers and their practices (Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Marine, 2011) as well as the experiences of queer and trans students within these spaces

(Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Velázquez et al., 2024) has grown significantly in the past decades. In this section, I share the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students with self-development within the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center separately. This decision does not imply that the center operates independently from the institution or that it is immune to institutional violence and investment in cis-heteronormativity. Rather, it aims to illuminate the nuanced lived experiences of queer and trans individuals within a designated safe space on campus and their complex relationships with the community within said space.

### ***Tension 1: Identity Exploration and Outness***

2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Centers played a pivotal role in facilitating students' exploration of their gender identities. By offering a supportive environment where students could freely explore and question their identities, the center helped individuals become more comfortable in their own skin and reconcile with aspects of their sexual orientation or gender identity that may have previously felt inaccessible to them (Damschroder, 2015). This support was particularly meaningful for many co-researchers, who found validation and encouragement to delve into their identity exploration through their involvement with the center. In the focus groups, co-researchers discussed their initial engagement with the center:

- Abby: My starting with the study was my excuse for myself to allow me to attend these other events because I felt like it made it more official, for some reason for me to do it, like through something with the school, so that I could allow myself to do more things on my own.. I don't really know why I felt the need to have it become externally still, but it did bring me more comfort to be able to say like, 'Oh, I have some sort of connection to it, so I can justify my being here.' Because there are obviously the events, especially like the big ones are open to everyone, like the Queer Homecoming Dance. I mentioned that I was going to some straight friends and then they tagged along, and I didn't know that was a thing you were allowed to do but it was still nice to have them there. You know?
- Researcher: (jokingly) We do check your ID but not your gay card. (*everyone laughs*)



- Abby: I guess I felt some sort of level of there needs to be some sort of external validity or validation to allowing yourself to get more involved in the official like school affiliated things. And so that gave me a false sense of like a stamp of approval to get more involved.
- Micah: I think I'd agreed with that [...] I don't know, being visible and queer on campus is so scary. (*everyone agrees*) Like, I think being visible and queer anywhere, forget campus, we live in Oklahoma.
- Abby: Yeah
- Micah: I think it's just a scary process. So sometimes, you just need that like push to go and do something.

Both co-researchers also expressed that the choice to be visible on campus was a daunting one. This uneasiness among queer and trans students was unsurprising, given that cis-heteronormativity continued to "enforce an invisibility on same-sex desire and the performance of transgender identity" (Rosiek, 2016, p. 453). Serving as the backdrop of this research, Oklahoma House Bill 2186, proposed in 2023, joined 13 other states in criminalizing drag performance (HB 2186, 2023), and Oklahoma House Bill 3217, known as the "Patriotism Not Pride" Act, aimed to ban state agencies from promoting 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride Month in 2024 (HB 3217, 2024). Both legislations justified their actions by deeming the expression and visibility of queerness and transness as threats to the "preservation of public peace, health, or safety" (HB 2186, 2023; HB 3217, 2024). Furthermore, increased visibility could expose queer individuals, particularly trans women of color, to the risk of hostility and violence (Nicolazzo, 2019). In the current socio-political climate, where the presence of queer and trans individuals was continually subjected to politicization, and expressions of queerness were often stigmatized, pathologized, or even criminalized, the prospect of being visibly queer appeared akin to thriving for these students.

Abby mentioned having "an excuse" or "reason" to participate in 2SLGBTQIA+ programs or be present in queer and trans spaces on campus highlighted a real disconnect and

issues of access for institutional resources and students who may not be out. Because of the hypervisibility that came with existing in the queer spaces and the implications of who is “allowed” to be in said space, it could be intimidating for students to further engage with institutional support structures that are dedicated for a specific community.

Ariana highlighted this concern in their individual interview, discussing the factors and barriers when 2SLGBTQIA+ students experience thriving on campus:

The idea here is obviously what support we want to have and what resources we want available. I know there are a lot of things on campus. I always hear you can go to the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and get all these free things and have a nice safe space. But I think that because I'm not out to a lot of people, I don't feel like I should go taking advantage of these resources, I always feel like it's not my place because it's like not fully, it's a different level of being “hate-crimed” on campus. But for me, I just haven't felt comfortable taking advantage of the support and resources on campus because I don't feel like they're for me.

This quote highlighted multiple tensions existing in 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and other institutional queer spaces on campus. Despite the availability of these resources, Ariana revealed a sense of hesitation to utilize them because she was not out as asexual. This highlighted the internal conflict faced by individuals who may not feel fully comfortable in their identity or chose to not disclose their identities for a variety of reasons, leading them to question their entitlement and access to support resources. Furthermore, Ariana underscored a perception that the resources should only be used by community members who faced the most violence on campus. As mentioned before, as Ariana considered her asexuality to be more closely aligned with heterosexuality, she felt undeserving of being in this space or utilizing the resources, as she compared her own experiences as an asexual individual to those who may face more overt forms of discrimination. This further perpetuated the narrative that the 2SLGBTQIA+ experience is defined by pain and trauma, as well as causing individuals with identities that are on the periphery of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to continue to be marginalized.

Despite said concern, both Ariana and Micah discussed how their involvement with the center helped them further explore different aspects of their queer and trans identities. They described how participating in the center's programs and activities provided them with not only validation but also a sense of legitimacy in their identity development journey. This highlighted the pivotal role of the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center as a trusted and authoritative space where individuals could seek affirmation and support for their identities and choices. Furthermore, the center provided space for individuals to redefine their identities and come out within their own spheres of influence through engagement with the collective identity of the community. Through meaningful interactions and connections with fellow members, Ariana and Micah found comfort and motivation to further self-explore, further reinforcing their sense of self-acceptance and autonomy. Additionally, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center created an in-between space where students could feel supported and affirmed individually, yet also blend into the collective or participate as allies due to the open nature of events organized by the university department.

The 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and other institutionalized spaces for marginalized groups provided students with a sense of community among individuals who shared their identities. For many queer and trans students, especially those from small towns or rural areas in Oklahoma, designated queer spaces like the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center represented their first experience in environments that affirmed their queer and trans identities. Leo vividly recalled their initial visit to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community lounge and the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center:

I first came to this space, it was the first time I'd ever been in a space only meant for queer people. It was the first time I was in a space where I wasn't getting misgendered like constantly. And it was just the first time I met other people my age who were queer.

Leo described this encounter with the university's designated queer spaces as a pivotal moment in their journey. This sense of belonging was reinforced as Leo emphasized how this space was the only one on campus where they were not constantly being misgendered, highlighting the role of these designated queer spaces as a safe haven where they could authentically be themselves without the fear of microaggressions such as being deadnamed or misgendered. Additionally, Leo expressed the profound impact of meeting other queer individuals their age for the first time, noting the camaraderie, respect, and mutual understanding that arose from connecting with peers who shared similar experiences and identities. This highlighted the crucial role of community and peer support in affirming one's identity and navigating the challenges of being queer and trans on campus.

### ***Tension 2: Individual Exploration vs. Communal Accountability***

Despite the potential for self-growth and development in said institutional queer spaces, they are not without problems and flaws. There were many intra-community issues that co-researchers highlighted through their negative experiences and witnessed behaviors within the Community Lounge. While the recounting of these experiences is lengthy and detailed, as both the researcher and a member of the community, I decided to keep the specifics for intra-community conversations and not disclose them in this dissertation. Similar to Audra Simpson (2007), who questioned herself when conducting research on her Nation: “What am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?” (p. 78), I also asked myself these questions. Tuck and Yang (2014) pointed out that as co-researchers shared community “(deep) secrets” with the hope that something helpful would come of it and the “voracious hunger for the secrets” from the academy (p. 233), they urged social researchers to consider that “there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve; and

research may not be the intervention that is needed” (p. 224). With that said, I considered that certain details of behaviors may be best suited for intra-community conversations, and research is not an appropriate venue for accountability or community healing. However, I shared the impacts of these behaviors on co-researchers to shed light on the tension within the community and certain pervasive issues within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and its spaces.

The first concern that co-researchers highlighted was the tendency to overshare the personal trauma as a point of connection between 2SLGBTQIA+ students. In contrast to Leo’s experiences, Aiden recalled the unpleasant experiences he had his first time coming to the community lounge his first year:

Unlike a lot of people that come here, I have an had a lot of queer friends in high school so that wasn't a like, "Oh, my God, I need a queer community right now because I've never had it." I was like, "Okay, if I find it, great. If I don't, well, okay." I was lucky enough to have surpassed the initial kind of a lot of college kids have, community-wise. So when I came to the lounge, and it was nice to see like, "Oh, cool, there are queer people on campus." That's a thing and having shared experience is cool, but it's not necessarily the best basis for like a long enduring friendship when all you do is complain. And there were just so many conversations and actions in that space that were excused by "Oh, it's because we're queer. And we're going to talk about this thing" that is, like, very traumatic or very just not something you shouldn't talk about in public, or not something you should be telling a stranger a lot of the times. So I was very quick to leave that space.

While Aiden acknowledged the significance of having a safe and designated space for 2SLGBTQIA+ students on campus during his first year, he also expressed concerns and discomfort with the conversations and actions that occurred within the community lounge. While discussing shared experiences of homo- and trans-phobia can foster mutual understanding and provide comfort for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to commiserate, Aiden cautioned against relying solely on trauma bonding as a basis for building healthy community relationships. The oversharing of trauma and discussion around inappropriate topics suggested the lack of boundaries or sensitivity within the community space. Talia emphasized that the issue lies not in the disclosure of trauma itself, but rather in the tendency for individuals to compete with each

other rather than genuinely comprehend one another's experiences and connect with the broader collective: "Because we're so focused individually, and even in a community space, I think it's so centered on me, me, me. It's literally Oppression Olympics in there." Their use of the metaphor "Oppression Olympics" described the competitive nature of trauma disclosures within the community space, highlighting the tendency for individuals to compare their experiences of oppression in a way that can be counterproductive and diminish the ability to empathize and connect. Talia critiqued the centering of individuals in community spaces and called for a shift towards collective understanding and solidarity in order to address systemic issues of oppression.

As college is often the first time where queer and trans students often find labels to properly articulate their identities and desires through the exposure of queer cultures and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, students may find empowerment and get overly attached to their gender or sexuality labels. However, with a lack of nuanced understanding and proper education, such over-attachment can lead to rigid understanding of gender and sexuality. Aiden stated:

There are a lot of people that love the "Oh my God, I'm queer. I'm discovering all these labels. And that means that everybody has to stick exactly to these labels that you must have them and use them." And it's like, that is inherently opposed to what I view queerness as and what I've seen, historically, in our community. [...] Labels have like a define a definition, but most people don't use a label to define themselves in that way. Most queer people use labels either very loosely, or very creatively, or very personally, rather than by a textbook definition. I feel like young queer spaces, because like I had those takes as a high schooler, when I was doing my little self discovery, initial like, "Oh, am I free"? And I reel it back real quick, because I had three brain cells and had other queer people around me, but I think that's what it takes is like, "Okay, I'm open enough to think critically, I am being exposed to queer people that are not in my exact same age range situation and stage of queer existence." And a lot of times, it will give you some perspective and have you start thinking about those things. [...] But this is not the space that that happens, because this is a space of everyone in that little soup of "I'm a new queer and this is how things are."

Aiden criticized the tendency among some individuals to rigidly adhere to labels and expect others to also conform strictly to specific labels. This underscored the second issue highlighted

by co-researchers, which was the idea of policing labels and identity expressions of others. Gender policing was defined as “the social process of enforcing cultural expectations for “normal” masculine and feminine expression” (Payne & Smith, 2016, p. 129). While Payne and Smith (2016) framed gender policing as bullying tactics targeting the gender expression of 2SLGBTQIA+ students to produce hegemonic gender norms and force them to conform, I expanded it to intra-community interactions pressuring others to conform to a certain understanding and definition of gender and/or sexual expression. While labels could be affirming for one to understand and express themselves, the practice of forcing others to conform to their understanding of said labels needed to be challenged. Aiden emphasized the historical fluidity and resistance to rigid categorization of queerness, arguing that most queer people used labels in a loose, creative, or personal manner, rather than adhering strictly to textbook definitions. It challenged the false notion of essentialism that there is only one way to correctly express an identity.

In Aiden’s quote, a sense of perceived authority emerges, wherein some queer and trans students felt they could exert influence over others. Leo also recalled instances where conversations in the community lounge evolved into debates about identities and labels. They remembered an argument with peers regarding bisexuality, feeling that their peers’ voices held more weight because “they’re in a more official place”. When asked to elaborate, Leo explained their reluctance to “push their knowledge on other people” due to still being on their journey of self-discovery. Leo shared that these individuals had occupied the lounge for several years, suggesting a power dynamic where certain individuals assert their interpretations of identity and label definitions over their peers based on the perceived validity of their experiences. They could speak for the shared community rather than their own personal experience authoritatively. Both

Leo and Aiden highlighted the lack of humility in identity development and a willingness to learn from others. Aiden continued to illuminate his identity development journey through critical self-reflection and dialogue with others within the community.

As people become older and read more and meet especially community beyond [the university], you get checked fast, because you get told, "Wow, that's really ignorant of you actually." And eventually, those people meet someone that will say that to their face that has far more authority than they do in some ways or number, whether it's social credit or literal authority in an academic way. I think those specific people will find that the second they exit that big dog mentality of I've been here for three years, and this is my space, and enter actual real world queer communities with actual real world queer people who've lived the experience for more than four or five years, they're going to, hopefully, realize that they are in a pretty small minority of people who have those very rigid opinions of what being queer is.

In addition to critical thinking, Aiden emphasized the pivotal role of exposure to diverse and intergenerational perspectives in facilitating self-discovery and identity formation. He underscored the significance of engaging with individuals at varying stages of their queer journey. These interactions allowed 2SLGBTQIA+ students to transcend the confines of insular university spaces, where some individuals may assert authority or entitlement based on their time within the community, and immerse themselves in the diversity of real-world queer communities. These encounters served as a powerful reality check, where students may be confronted with the realization that their beliefs or attitudes are considered ignorant or outdated by those with greater experience or social credibility. This transition was crucial for the personal development for 2SLGBTQIA+ students where individuals come to acknowledge the limitations of their perspectives and dismantle rigid, essentialist notions about queerness. Furthermore, it rooted individual self-development into the collective intergenerational knowledge and identity of the larger community.

Despite recognizing the potential benefits of intergenerational dialogues within the Community Lounge, Aiden's experience highlights a sense of disconnection as an upperclass



student. He articulated feeling out of sync with the community. While he was frustrated at their way of making connections with others based on shared trauma, Aiden recognized that they needed different things from the community in the space:

My input is not what they're looking for. They're looking to commiserate, they're looking to complain, they're looking for validation. I'm not the person to ride those things.

Upperclass co-researchers acknowledged the importance of the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center in their developmental journey through their college career. However, as they gotten older, they viewed it as a transitional space that they have “outgrown.” CJ reflected on her relationship with the community space and the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center as she has progressed through her college career:

I spent a lot of time in here, when I needed this space. And now that I, like, have gotten my new space like, it doesn't feel like it's for me anymore.

This underscored a tension between different stages of life and developmental needs within the lounge community. Similarly, CJ reflected on her evolving relationship with the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, noting a shift in perception as she has found her own new space. These experiences pointed to the transitional nature of the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center for queer and trans students who may have different and growing needs throughout their time in college. It highlighted the importance of recognizing the developmental trajectories and different needs within 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and the need for spaces that could accommodate these shifts over time. However, queer and trans co-researchers grieved the lost of the intimacy with queer spaces on campus. Aiden shared: “It's nice to have a space to outgrow like that, but it does suck that happens.” These reflections prompt inquiries into the function of 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Centers as transitional environments for students, and underscore the necessity for such spaces to facilitate continuous development that addresses the evolving needs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ student demographic throughout their academic trajectories.

### ***Tension 3: Queer-of-color Belonging vs. (White) Queer Space***

Another concern of which co-researchers of color also raised was the feeling of isolation and being unwelcomed in institutional queer spaces on campus. Aiden disclosed his experience as a South Asian trans masculine person in the community lounge during a focus group interview:

My secondary tea ... is it has never been inclusive to people of color [snaps from Micah and Talia] It has never been inclusive to non-white queer people. Hilariously, it was more inclusive to my identity as a trans masculine person than it ever would, was, or will be as my identity as a person of color. And those two things were never able to reconcile. So I was very quickly like, "Okay, cool, I can be here if I'm only a queer person, I cannot be here as a queer person of color," so I prefer just not to be here at all. I'd rather find my community and spaces where those can coexist.

He asserted that historically, the Community Lounge has failed to be inclusive to people of color within the queer and trans community, underscoring the exclusion and marginalization faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color in predominantly white designated queer spaces. The pervasiveness of white supremacy in higher education at large, and in institutional designated queer spaces such as the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, has been documented in recent literature (Velázquez et al., 2024; Lange et al., 2022; Self & Hudson, 2015). While it is important to note that 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and other designated queer spaces on campus might not be exclusively for white queer students, the hostile racial climate and overrepresentation of white students may cause marginalization and isolation for 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color. Marine (2011), as well as Velázquez and colleagues (2024), pointed out that while 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center serves predominantly white 2SLGBTQIA+ students and reaches out to racially marginalized communities as an additional effort, they center the emotions, needs, and behaviors of white queer people in their practices (Lange et al., 2022). This further contributes to the aforementioned marginalization and fragmentation of identities that queer and trans students of color experience on campus as a whole. This was highlighted in

Aiden's quote, sharing the frustration at the inability to reconcile their intersecting trans masculine and South Asian identities within the lounge.

This frustration was also echoed by many other co-researchers of color. Micah discussed the disillusionment of institutional queer spaces as progressive utopian environments within a hostile campus:

Coming into a space like the [2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center] and you're like, "Oh, like this could be this diverse place where everybody's gonna get together," but like, it's not. This space is a good place, and I'm not sure if there's anything that people personally could do to remedy it. But sometimes, I think, the nature of queers space is that we expect our queerness to connect us, but sometimes it doesn't. [...] Whenever people come into a space like this with that expectation of like, "Oh, everybody's connected to me in the space, because we share community," that's not how I view it, and that's definitely not how a lot of other queer people of color view it.

In the context of a predominantly white institution, Micah, along with other 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, perceived designated queer spaces as predominantly white. This was further highlighted by the lack of diversity existing in those spaces, underscoring the disconnection between the expectation of diversity and the reality of white dominance within these spaces. Micah suggested that there may not be easy solutions to address this issue, emphasizing the understanding that the perpetuation of whiteness in these spaces was inherent and seemingly unchangeable. This acknowledgment recognizes the systemic nature of the issue of white supremacy, where designated queer spaces such as the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center or Community Lounge were not exceptions but rather evidence of this claim.

Furthermore, Micah highlighted the disconnect between their experience of community building and that of other white queer students, challenging the notion that queerness alone is sufficient to bridge the gaps in experiences and perspectives within the community. This underscores the centering of whiteness, white experiences, and white norms within designated queer spaces. Micah emphasized that white queers often expect queerness to automatically create

a sense of unity for all queer individuals, fostering comfort for white people and minimizing the acknowledgment of racial differences. This colorblind approach, coupled with a refusal to recognize the racial disparities in lived experiences and the expression of queerness, reflects the majoritarian perspective of dominant identity (Williams, 1991). Velázquez and colleagues (2024) discussed the frustration of 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor with their white peers, framing their queer and trans identities as "baby's first marginalized identities" (p. 253) since homo- and trans-phobia were their initial encounters with systemic oppression. Furthermore, white queer students often fail to examine how their 2SLGBTQIA+ peers of color navigate structural racism within and outside of designated queer spaces on campus, as well as their own complicity with white supremacy (Velázquez et al., 2024). Because whiteness shields them from experiencing racism and their tendency to overshare trauma or engage in competition around trauma disclosure, it is unsurprising that white queer students primarily focus on their marginalized identities and connect over shared experiences of queer and trans oppression. However, this approach fails to build coalitions across racial lines between white and queer students of color as it erases the acknowledgment of racial differences.

Due to the pervasive overrepresentation of white queer students in institutionally designated queer spaces, co-researchers of color expressed experiencing difficulty in connecting with other 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, given the absence of specific designated spaces for them. Emphasizing the lack of a structured environment conducive to fostering connections among 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, Micah remarked: "It's hard to find queer people of color. I feel like you have to stumble upon them." The absence of such spaces compounds feelings of isolation, as articulated by Micah:

There's not a way for us to cultivate a space for that, right? I feel like it makes it a little more isolating.

Co-researchers noted that encountering other 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color often seemed reliant on chance encounters. As previously noted, visibility and representation are crucial for student affirmation on campus. Consequently, queer and trans students of color expressed heightened feelings of isolation due to the lack of representation. Velázquez and others (2024) underscored how white queer students may inadvertently overlook the significance of representation and community. This underscores the imperative to establish dedicated spaces and initiatives tailored to 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, or to develop affinity groups within the broader queer and trans community.

However, Micah expressed frustration over the inability to cultivate a specific space for 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, highlighting:

I feel like anytime you insert the word ‘queer’ or ‘2SLGBTQIA+’ into a space, a lot of people assume that that's for the whole community, but it's really *not*.

In the focus group, co-researchers recounted their experiences with the a Queer Trans Black Indigenous People of Color (QTBIPOC) Mixer event, co-hosted on campus. Despite the invitations being exclusively sent, white students still attended the event. Co-researchers expressed their frustration stemming from the emotional toll of feeling consistently disrespected and excluded within a community they are supposed to belong to.

- Micah: It's getting to a point where it's like, how do you expect me to find community in this space when you go to such lengths?
- Aiden: How can I live, laugh, love in this condition?
- Micah: Exactly! When go to such lengths to *disrespect* queer people of color in the community? I just like can't understand it. With the QTBIPOC mixer thing, you went to such lengths to disrespect the community and come to an event where you were not invited. As a Black person, I could not fathom entering a space that I know was not made for me. Why are we searching so far and wide for a crumb of community that we don't have reading comprehension? [everyone laughs] And then now, you expect us to be in community with you, and trust you, and get resources from you, and lean on you when we are struggling, especially now with heightened

transphobia and all these other things... You expect us to see you as a rock or a pillar of our community, but how, when you're going to do that? I don't know... You can't be micro-ly bad to me on a personal level, and then expect me to view you as like this beacon of queer morality on a macro scale, it doesn't work like that.

The dialogue delved deeply into the dynamics present within 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces, with a particular focus on power dynamics, trust, and solidarity. Micah brought attention to the disillusionment and lack of trust toward the white queer and trans community, especially in their treatment of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals of color. When white queer individuals failed to acknowledge and respect the racial differences and unique experiences of marginalized identities, Micah questioned the possibility of fostering connections and solidarity in the face of such disregard. This underscored Micah's observation regarding the sense of entitlement and dominance among white queer students on campus. Given that queer and trans students of color navigate the intersection of marginalized racial and gender/sexual identities, Micah expressed that they may not perceive the campus as a conducive environment for their thriving. The presence of white queer students at community-of-color-specific events was perceived as a breach of trust and a violation of boundaries by 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color. This incident resonated with broader historical and systemic patterns of discrimination and marginalization faced by queer people of color. Historically, despite the fact that 2SLGBTQIA+ communities of color have been at the forefront of liberation movements, Black and Brown queer and trans individuals have been frequently marginalized within the modern gay rights movement, which has often prioritized white normativity and homonormativity. This event served as a microcosm of larger issues such as racism, transphobia, and exclusion within 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for racial justice within designated queer spaces within the institution and the broader queer community at large. This further highlighted the needs for

individual affinity spaces within the queer and trans community as well as other educational efforts to address the pervasive racism issue within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Aiden echoed the frustration with the institution's inability to create spaces exclusive to particular communities:

I know that this one is not necessarily fair, because one of the institution's tenets, regardless of how effective it is, is to give access to spaces and resources to anyone and everyone. But how religious organizations on campus are able to maintain exclusivity in their spaces on the grounds of religion, that is something that a group can claim. Queer spaces can't claim that! And I don't know if all multicultural spaces can claim that.

This quote reveals the frustration of the co-researchers with institutional neutrality. While fairness and liability concerns drive the university's policy to ensure equal access to resources and facilities, the unequal power dynamics between privileged and marginalized groups render blanket solutions ineffective. This practice is continued to be reinforced through state legislations such as Executive Order 2023-31 prohibiting the use of state funds for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives that would support historically marginalized populations, claiming “preferential treatment” and unequal access to all. Since the power dynamic is asymmetrical, solutions that equally apply to both privileged and marginalized groups, as legal as they may sound, only perpetuate existing inequities. Aiden further expressed disappointment in how dominant groups, such as religious organizations, can host exclusive events, while marginalized student groups, whether 2SLGBTQIA+ or multicultural, are unable to claim similar rights.

Co-researchers discussed the challenge of enforcing exclusivity within 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces, particularly considering that 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are not always visibly apparent. This lack of visibility not only makes enforcing exclusivity logistically difficult but also risks perpetuating essentialist notions of queer expression and aesthetics, which may not be possible or available to queer and trans students of color (Velázquez et al., 2024). Additionally, it could

deter individuals like Ariana, who are still exploring their identities, from participating fully and further cultivate aspects of themselves. There exists a tension between the desire to maintain events as open spaces where 2SLGBTQIA+ students, including those who are not out, can explore their identities without reinforcing a monolithic narrative, and the need for exclusivity to provide safety, comfort, and meet specific needs. Talia echoed that need for community specific space:

It's not necessarily that we want it to be exclusive, but there are also those times for where we want spaces to where it is geared towards the specific community and oftentimes when it's put on it by an institution, there is no guarantee that that will actually happen.

This tension underscores the complexity of creating inclusive yet affirming spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within educational institutions. Talia's quote sheds light on the lack of trust in the institution's ability to cultivate a space that would genuinely meet the needs of the community. She acknowledged the importance of spaces tailored to specific communities, recognizing the times when individuals within marginalized groups seek environments where they can feel understood, supported, and validated by others who share similar experiences and identities. However, institutional involvement can compromise the autonomy and integrity of the space, potentially resulting in a loss of its effectiveness in meeting the specific needs of the community it serves, or even if such efforts were made. This skepticism further reflects the lack of transparency on behalf of the institution and the absence of trust marginalized students have in the administration. Co-researchers discussed that exclusivity in designated spaces is crucial not only for physical safety but also emotional well-being. Aiden stated:

We always have to share the space, we always have to be *welcoming to others*, or in some way, friendly, inclusive, accommodating, etc of people who may be just want to take up space without reasons to be.



He pointed out the emotional burden that was put on marginalized students, indicating a sense of obligation to be cordial and exhibit hospitality for people who are not in the community. The ask for exclusivity expresses the desire to maintain authority and agency within the space, where individuals can be authentic and comfortable while catering to the specific needs of the community without having to worry about accommodating those who do not identify as queer or trans.

The appropriate actions and community lounge in the community lounge also presented as a challenge for 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color to access the space. Micah shared their opinion on the matter:

White queer people *sometimes don't understand* what it's like to be intentional with your experiences and your words. Because as a Black person, sometimes I realize that my words and my actions and my choices have more impact than when a white person says it, right? And so I just feel like, as queer people, we do have responsibilities. Like it's sad and maybe we want to ignore that part, but like, we do have responsibilities to... act right.

As a person of color, Micah and other co-researchers of color understood that their words and actions could be a larger reflection on their larger community and may reinforce negative stereotypes about their racial group. This fear, while highlighting the psychological stress that students of color must endure and the pressure on curating their self image to best reflect their community, sheds light on the communal-oriented mindset from 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color. However, this may not impact on white queer students because they get to be seen as individuals and not as a reflection of the larger racial community because of stereotype threat. This could result in the individualistic mindset in which white queer individuals may not always fully understand the nuances of their experiences and the implications of their behavior, particularly in relation to marginalized communities. By highlighting the differential impact of words and actions based on race, Micah highlighted the power dynamics within the

2SLGBTQIA+ community and how their racial identity continues to shape their experiences in queer spaces. Furthermore, they call for increased self-awareness and consciousness for people occupying institutional designated queer spaces, especially white queer students.

There is a tension between authenticity and belonging that Micah highlighted here. While individuals may pursue a sense of autonomy and agency, it is not absolute freedom. Although Okello and White (2019) described agency as "the manifestation of desire" (p. 146), they acknowledged that the concept of agency can be rooted in white Western colonial thinking, perpetuating hyper-individualism. In this case, Micah emphasized a sense of responsibility towards communal development, shifting from relentless individual pursuit of personal freedom at the cost of the community, an approach which I further explore in Chapter 6. They mentioned the responsibility to "act right," not as a form of homonormative behaviors that center the comfort and feelings of cis-heterosexual people, but as a careful consideration of others and how their actions can be weaponized against the community. There is a carelessness and lack of intentionality that Micah pointed out from white queer students when it comes to the self-exploration process, which students of color cannot afford to have.

Furthermore, Aiden shared his frustration on how white queer students continue to engage in actions and conversations that are not suited to be in public, while continue to use their "queer" label to justify or as an excuse

I think some people cross the streams of being queer in an advocacy standpoint of, 'I'm going to challenge a structure or system for the purpose of advancement'" versus 'I'm going to be inflammatory because I think it's funny or be a meme.'

He acknowledged that there are different ways to think of queer as beyond the identity and label, but also as a political stance against oppressive structure, challenging cis-heteronormativity in society, and strive for liberation (Muñoz, 2009; Alexander, 2018). However, he expressed

concern over individuals who exploit this rich historical perspective of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, using it not as a tool for social justice but as a means to provoke or seek attention. By likening this behavior to a "living meme," Aiden highlighted the superficiality and performative nature of such actions. In the world of internet culture, memes are often humorous cultural artifacts that spread rapidly, evolving and changing as they are shared. Similarly, individuals who adopt an exaggerated image of queer identity for attention can be seen as perpetuating a shallow and reductive portrayal of 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences. In this case, Aiden critiqued their priority in conforming to social stereotypes and performing a certain exaggerated image of the queer identity over authentic representation of themselves. Both Aiden and Micah criticized this phenomenon, noting that while such individuals may use their queer identities to disregard boundaries or common courtesy in shared spaces, their behaviors do not speak to who they authentically were and can cast the community in a negative light. Instead of challenging societal norms and advocating for genuine social change, they inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes, undermine the progress made by the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and make those who share their spaces uncomfortable.

These issues underscore a tension between individual self-exploration and communal accountability. As Micah and Aiden emphasized, individuals can pursue authenticity while still respecting the boundaries and well-being of others within shared spaces and the broader community. Additionally, the phenomenon of peer-to-peer identity and gender policing perpetuates narrow conceptions of queerness and reinforces essentialist notions of a singular queer experience. Given these challenges, co-researchers stressed the importance of intervention and accountability. In Leo's discussion about navigating an uncomfortable debate on bisexuality

with peers in the Community Lounge, they expressed frustration at the lack of intervention in such situations:

There's no one reprimanding... not reprimanding, you don't need to get on and say, "Hey, you're wrong!" You could just say, "Hey, this is an uncomfortable topic," there's no one to say that. Me saying it is not working anymore because I've said it so many times. It's a little hard for another student to be like, "Hey, this isn't very accepting in this space," and I feel like that's been like a really big issue.

Leo highlighted the discomfort of feeling compelled to regulate the space themselves. They perceive their own voice as lacking authority, making it uncomfortable for them to hold their peers accountable. Leo's sentiment conveyed a sense of helplessness in the face of persistent ignorance from their peers. They advocate for a more authoritative presence, such as staff within the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, to intervene when discussions become uncomfortable.

While institutional designated queer spaces such as the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and community lounge continue to serve as a haven from the broader institutional hostile environment, it simultaneously encounters tensions arising from varying perceptions of its purpose and function. These designated queer spaces within the institution are considered as safe spaces that provide refuge and respite where 2SLGBTQIA+ students seek support. However, the notion of a "safe space" is not without its complexities, as this idealized perception clashes with the reality of diverse needs and expectations within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community itself. While some advocate for the space to be open to increase accessibility for students still exploring their identities, others emphasize the need for exclusivity to address the specific needs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This tension between inclusivity and exclusivity gives rise to debates over the extent to which these spaces should be open to all students versus reserved for those who share the lived experiences of the community. Because queer identities are often invisible, the call for limited access to resources and spaces dedicated to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community

stemming from scarcity mindset, could further marginalize queer and trans students. However, the safety and intracommunity spaces are real concerns that 2SLGBTQIA+ students continue to navigate and evaluate on a regular basis, which can prevent them from utilizing these resources or experiencing this space. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish the difference between safe and private space. As described by co-researchers, these spaces are sometimes viewed and treated as private domains by certain individuals, leading to a disregard for the presence and experiences of others who share the space. This dynamic can create an atmosphere of exclusion and alienation, particularly for marginalized members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community such as queer and trans students of color. While it is within the institutional responsibilities to provide safe spaces for students from historically marginalized communities, those spaces are still considered as public. Leo's request for supervision from 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center's staff underscores the divergent expectations surrounding the management of these spaces. While some advocate for increased oversight to ensure a welcoming and respectful environment and providing support in terms of accountability, others may resist perceived institutional intrusion and surveillance of 2SLGBTQIA+ population. These tensions highlight the intricate interplay between power dynamics, community needs, and the complex intersections of identity and belonging.

#### ***Tension 4: Institutionalization vs. Queer Potential***

Can institutional spaces designated for queer and trans students such as 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center ever be a *queer space*? Many queer theorists have explored how space, both in physical and relational senses, is imbued with power and contributes to the social production of dominant cultures, particularly cis-heteronormativity (Massey, 2005; Warner, 2002). Halberstam (2005) described 'queer space' as "the place-making practices within postmodernism in which

queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (p. 5). Counterpublics emerge as the reaction to the exclusions of mainstream public spaces, providing discursive spaces for marginalized individuals to create new knowledge that question and challenge prevailing cultural norms (Fraser, 1990; Warner 2002 ). These counterpublic spaces also center on the needs and desires of marginalized community, or queer and trans people in this context. However, institutional queer spaces such as 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Centers exist as liminal spaces, navigating the tension between the institution's objectives and the needs of its constituents. Consequently, designated queer spaces on college campuses inherit the institutional constraints. Co-researchers further elaborated that they did not perceive 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Centers as exceptions within the campus environment. Micah articulated:

As a person of color, I think that there's never exceptions in my mind. I think that if you're a part of an institution, you're a part of it, and that's just how it has to be... I think that if I were to view the [2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center] as this safe haven place of acceptance where I could find my people... I don't know, I just think I'd be disappointed. But, yeah, there aren't that many exceptions to this university, I think I would probably argue that there's none. I think the more that I get involved, the more than I realized that we're always at the mercy of whatever is bringing in money or whatever is like more like socially in line with where we live. So I think that even if people do hold inclusive viewpoints or other things like that, they're at the mercy of the Regents and the University and the state legislature, and that's not conducive with the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center. So if I were to be like, "Oh, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center is an exception" is like, oh well, it's not because we sought to abide by the same thing as everybody else does, being a designated space for queer students doesn't change that.

Micah highlighted the pervasiveness of white supremacy and cis-heteronormativity across campus including designated queer spaces, leading them to approach the notion of exceptions within institutional settings with skepticism. They recognized that affiliation with an institution inherently involves adherence to its norms and constraints. Consequently, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center is not immune to institutional dynamics and power structures, but rather subject

to the directives of higher institutional authorities such as the Board of Regents and state legislature. This realization was informed by the firsthand experiences of co-researchers who have interacted with the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center both in the capacity of this research project and as student leaders. Aiden, who served as a student leader within the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center for four years, echoed this sentiment, stating, “I feel like there's an amount of acceptance of those facts that comes with sticking around. We fully realized that the [2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center] is not a free agent, and it never will be in the way that we had hoped.” This acknowledgment underscores the complex interplay between institutional structures and the desires of marginalized communities with designated spaces and services within higher education institutions.

However, co-researchers highlighted that even though institutional designated spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ students may not inherently be queer and counterpublic spaces, their relationship with the staff member within 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center was the reason in which queer and trans students continue to visit this space. Aiden shared his thought process of delineation between the people that made up the space and the entity of the space within the institutional context:

In my head, there are two 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Centers. There is the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and the people in this office that are doing the fucking most and doing their fucking best with what they have. And there's the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center “corporate entity” that I don't care about. I would not be here, if not for the people, that's the most important part to me. And 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center “corporate entity” is part of the university index, that's just how it is. It has always been part of the university since it's a university service and it's going to continue to be part of the university. And my only hope for the corporate entity 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center is that it is the best service for queer students that can possibly be, the best service for advocacy and for its intended function. But on people side of things, I think we have some of the best people on campus in terms of like, "let's be fucking for real for five goddamn seconds about what's possible, what's not, and how we can navigate those things," caring about students, trying their best to work with what we have. So that's how I kind of recognize and acknowledge the institutional aspects of the 2SLGBTQIA+

Resources Center is 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center “the people” and 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center “corporate.”

Aiden offered a nuanced perspective on the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center, distinguishing between its institutional structure as a "corporate entity" and the individuals within it as "the people," representing two distinct conceptualizations of the center. He understood the "corporate entity" as a bureaucratic entity embedded within the university system, while the individuals within it were viewed as dedicated supporters of queer students' well-being. Although the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center operates within the framework of the university, the people working within it represent a human element that transcends bureaucratic structures. This highlights the crucial role of relationships and empathy in creating a supportive environment for queer and trans students, not only shaping the center's function and efficacy but also fostering a sense of belonging for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Aiden, along with other co-researchers, emphasized that discursive power does not solely reside within the intended function of the center or its institutional designated spaces. Instead, it is the individuals occupying those spaces and roles who continue to shape and reshape them, thereby creating a queer space that facilitates connections, space of embodiment, and where queer and trans mattering happens.



## Chapter 6

### Finding Utopia and Collective Queer Thriving

In the previous chapters, I explored the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, examining how they conceptualize thriving and navigate their desires amidst the violence within higher education. As Tuck (2009) suggests, desire is a productive force shaping social realities. Building on this notion, this chapter poses the question: How do the desires of queer and trans individuals shape and produce their vision of a queer utopia? Despite the current challenges that 2SLGBTQIA+ students face in the context of the university, they still exhibit remarkable resilience, carving out niches on campus where they can flourish in the present moment. For co-researchers, thriving and surviving are not merely oppositional concepts, but intertwined and existing in parallel with each other. Similarly, the essence of queer utopia transcends the confines of a distant future and exists in the myriad of everyday simple queer experiences and moments. Within the forthcoming sections, I explore the methods through which 2SLGBTQIA+ students establish spaces/moments on campus conducive to their thriving despite the prevailing and shared oppressive conditions. Subsequently, the chapter delves into how co-researchers articulate their visions of a queer utopia, both on an individual and collective level, elucidating the intricacies of their desires and the pathways toward realizing them.

To deepen our understanding of collective queer thriving, co-researchers were invited to share photos capturing moments of personal thriving and spaces where they could thrive in. Through reflection and discussion, they explored the nuances of these moments, discerning the elements that contributed to their experiences of thriving across various campus settings. These shared images and reflections not only fostered a collective understanding of thriving but also served as the foundation in envisioning a collective queer utopia within the campus environment.



Figure 9. Co-researchers' Collective Artworks on Queer Thriving by themes (Top left - bottom right) (1) Visibility & Representation, (2) Safety, Support, & Solidarity, (3) Self-Growth, Agency, & Freedom, and (4) Authenticity, Belonging, and Simple Queer Moments.

## Utopia in the Present: Thriving Amidst Surviving

In spite of the systemic violence that queer and trans students face on campus, they manage to discover pockets of joy and affirmation within the simplicity of their queer moments. As Muñoz (2009) described, utopia resides in “the quotidian” - the mundaneness of every day life. Co-researchers, reflecting on their college experiences, emphasized that their narratives are not solely defined by trauma; rather, they are imbued with instances of joy and connection. These small yet significant moments offer glimpses into utopia, underscoring the importance of celebrating simplicity alongside the monumental. Micah stated:

“None of these moments are like, “I was so happy” or like “this person really helped me get through this,” but these were just like an amalgamation of like my silliest moments with queer people that I enjoy, and I think that sometimes that's important to celebrate because not everything that I do with them like has to do with queerness, but we're so rich in community with each other and being able to support each other in that fashion.”

Their reflection encapsulated the appreciation for the seemingly mundane yet profoundly enriching interactions within the queer community on campus. Micah's quote illustrated the significance of these ordinary moments, highlighting the richness of community and the support found within those queer moments. Drawing on Muñoz's (2009) notion of utopia existing in the quotidian, these simple acts of queer relationality in the present offer glimpses of utopian potentiality. Just as Muñoz finds hope for a queer future in O'Hara's poem “Having a Coke with You,” co-researchers recognized that these moments of joy signify a sense of safety and affirmation in the present moment, free from the fear of potential harm due to their existence in a hostile environment. During the focus group discussion, co-researchers underscored the importance of embracing these small yet meaningful moments:

CJ: It seems like a lot of this is like things that happened in the moment and like Snapchat pictures probably ... and, but the thing that's so beautiful about that though, is I feel like just living as a queer person and being authentically yourself and expressing their joy in the little moments is

authenticity, and I don't think that you can have queer joy without being authentically yourself.

Micah: Because I think like at the end of the day, I would probably consider all of these moments to be life changing moments. Even if it wasn't something significant where I'm like, "wow, this is something that really changed my life." And I think about it often, but when I really go and look back at those pictures, all of those moments changed my life because it was a moment where, like, I could be in community with someone. [...]

Matthew: I think like that really kind of also just speaks to like the experience of college in general is like, it's kind of like a collage of all of these like cute, little memories, even though they may not be super significant like in the long run, but they like do have an impact on you in some way, especially like living on campus. I remember those days, especially being surrounded by queer people that can really make or break your college experience.

CJ highlighted the ease with which individuals can now capture and share meaningful moments through social media platforms. Applications like Snapchat or BeReal have become ubiquitous among college students, not only serving as tools for communication but also as spaces for communal authenticity, allowing individuals to share glimpses of their lives in real time.

Nicolazzo and colleagues (2023) elaborated on how digital spaces offer opportunities for trans individuals to connect, assert their agency through *de*representation, and document their transition journeys. In this context, co-researchers discussed their use of social media to archive the everyday experiences of queer and trans lives, along with the relational dynamics that accompany them. While these moments may appear insignificant in isolation, co-researchers found that cumulatively, those simple moments have shaped their college experiences profoundly. By documenting and celebrating these moments, co-researchers underscored the depth and resilience of queer kinship, where shared experiences foster a profound sense of belonging and solidarity that transcends mere queerness.

Tuck (2009) described how desire is "an assemblage [...] the components of desire are fragments, bits, and pieces accumulated over a lifetime" (p.640). These desires, while

fragmented, undergo a continual transformation as they encounter institutional violence. The initiation of our collective visual project aimed to prompt co-researchers to document and assemble their moments of thriving amidst this complex landscape. Through the creation of this collage, co-researchers were prompted to delve into their college experiences, selecting photos that encapsulated their encounters with thriving on campus. This excerpt of conversations among the co-researchers highlighted the ways in which they visualize queer thriving and queer utopia in the context of their current experiences:

- Micah: If we were to like display these in a way I feel like... if we juxtaposed queer thriving and like deconstruction, in some way artfully... I don't even know if that's a word. If we did that, then I think maybe that would be good, like maybe creating like a, like getting another one of these panels and putting the deconstruction on it, and then displaying it in some way. I feel like that would be good because I feel like these pictures are like really happy. You can obviously tell that these are happy pictures. But the deconstruction pictures, it's like gray skies, demolition sites [laughing] So like, there's not like a good vibe to the photo. So I feel like if we could find a way to juxtapose them, somehow it would be fun.
- Leo: If we're trying to make an artistic way of doing it, we can maybe keep these ones whole. And then the one that we're doing deconstruction on, we could like break it up in some way as if it is crumbling.
- Aiden: Could also fill the white space on all of these printouts or deconstruction pictures, like in half transparency, grayscale, use them as the background for everything, and just stick all our shit over it as a "fuck you" (*Collective group: I like it*), I can thrive in these spaces (*Collective group agreeing*)

The foundation of the collage comprised layers of photos depicting gendered spaces and structures on campus, such as housing, alongside news articles documenting institutional failures and harms against 2SLGBTQIA+ students over time. These materials were all printed in black and white to underscore the grim reality of homo- and trans-phobia on campus. On top of this backdrop, co-researchers layered on top with their photos of thriving, printed in vibrant colors. As Aiden articulated, this juxtaposition not only highlighted the stark contrast between queer thrival and the ongoing barriers and challenges within the institution but also conveyed the



resilience of the collective community—demonstrating that 2SLGBTQIA+ students can still thrive despite formidable odds. Co-researchers noted the effectiveness of the black and white photos of negativity subtly peeking through in the background, symbolizing the progress we still has to be made, and that these harmful structures on campus need to continue to be examined and deconstructed. This approach diverges from the problematic resilience framework, which often focuses solely on individual success without critiquing the systemic structures perpetuating harm (Nicolazzo & Carter, 2019). Moreover, it acknowledges that higher education institutions are inherently built on exclusionary foundations rooted in systems of racism, sexism, colonization, queer, and trans-phobia. While the images of thriving students may temporarily obscure these systemic issues, they do not alter the problematic foundation beneath, and these individual moments, while indicative of progress, rest upon shaky ground. This raises questions about the potential for institutional reform, which shaped co-researchers ability to construct a queer utopia for the future, a topic explored further in later sections of this chapter.

While co-researchers created four (4) distinct panels corresponding to different themes, this dissertation focuses specifically on the moments used to construct the Self-Growth, Agency, and Freedom panel. Additionally, while these moments could be interpreted through various lenses and themes of thriving, I respect the co-researchers' decision to display them within this category. In this subsequent section, I analyze some of those moments within the framework of Self-Growth, Agency, and Freedom to gain deeper insights into how 2SLGBTQIA+ students identify utopian moments conducive to their personal development, both in the present and future. Similar to their conceptualization of thriving, some co-researchers framed thriving within their self-development as their ability to be resilient. For example, Karen depicted her effort in

being resilient through a screenshot of her online chemistry assignment, stating “You solved it in 12 attempts.” She described:

I think this says a lot because I struggle a lot with chemistry. But I kind of view it as a positive thing, “at least, it got done.” That means I figured something out, even though it took 12 times. (*Aiden: Perseverance!*) Yes! So this was thriving because this is something I feel a lot of, like wanting to give up on chemistry, I want to nap in that class. I don't know if I can do chemistry, but it was a thriving moment when I could figure this out and have it done, and I've honestly done double the attempts before. (*laughs*)

This perspective reframed thriving not merely as a result of environmental factors but as an active engagement and choice made by 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. It shifts the locus of control back to marginalized individuals, empowering them to shape their own experiences. For instance, Karen shared her journey of persistence in overcoming her fears and resistance toward chemistry, demonstrating her willingness to step out of her comfort zone in pursuit of her goals. Similarly, Ariana's photos of a crochet bee, a Dungeon and Dragons character card, and her involvement in organizing a blood drive on campus symbolized the student organizations that brought her joy and a sense of discovery throughout college. By witnessing her peers' comfort with their own identities and their efforts in creating inclusive spaces, Ariana and other students felt encouraged to delve deeper into their own identities. They found safety in these environments, allowing them to question previously unquestioned aspects of their lives and explore dimensions of their identities that they may have overlooked or dismissed. While these examples may not directly relate to queerness, Ariana and Karen highlighted moments and spaces where they felt empowered to exercise their agency. These instances illustrate not only the freedom to exercise agency but also the willingness to push beyond their comfort zones and delve deeper into their identities. Through their narratives, Ariana and Karen exemplify the transformative power of self-discovery and personal growth, demonstrating the resilience of the

2SLGBTQIA+ community on campus, and how these experiences further push them to engage and explore different parts of their identities.

Echoing the concept of thriving and utopia through proactive engagement, Matthew shared two (2) photos capturing their initial involvement in two (2) of the largest 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations on campus, both of which they later led as president during their college tenure. The first image depicts their introduction to the oldest 2SLGBTQIA+ student group on campus during their freshman year, while the second shows their early days on the executive board of a departmental student group within the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center. For Matthew, these organizations provided not only a space to connect with other 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals but also a platform to cultivate their identity, both as a trans person and as a leader within both the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and the broader campus community. The autonomy and agency afforded to students in their identity development, particularly queer and trans students, are crucial (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Torres et al., 2009). While trans narratives have historically been framed around dysphoria and medicalization, trans and non-binary students are asserting their agency in shaping the narratives surrounding their gender development and bodies. Another example is Micah's inclusion of a photo capturing their first testosterone injection in their dorm room, illustrating this assertion of control over personal and identity development. Sharing the same sentiment, Matthew described the moment in which they experienced gender euphoria:

The [photo] is one of me feeling myself in the mirror with that top. It's actually one of my favorites. That was like one of the first times that I felt at home in my body, like in the way of, I kind of realized I was some “flavor” of trans. I didn’t know what it was, and it was where I kind of realized “Oh, I'm in charge of that identity and I can take control of that identity.”

While narratives of moments of queer realization can feel essentializing and exhausting, they mark crucial milestones in Matthew's developmental journey. He described a profound moment



of connection with his body, feeling "at home" within himself. This highlighted a significant shift in his relationship with his body, transitioning from discomfort to a sense of comfort and internal belonging. He characterized this realization as discovering he was "some 'flavor' of trans," revealing an initial uncertainty about his identity. While this ambiguity might have been daunting, it also encapsulated a moment of potential and the expansiveness inherent in queerness. Additionally, Matthew expressed a newfound understanding that he was "in charge" of his trans identity, recognizing his power to shape and control it. This assertion of agency challenged narratives portraying trans individuals as passive victims of their circumstances and emphasized the importance of self-determination in identity formation. Both Micah and Matthew highlighted the personal and transformative nature of self-discovery within the context of gender identity, emphasizing the significance of moments of self-recognition and empowerment in shaping one's understanding and acceptance of their trans identity.

Self-affirmation of identities did not exist internally for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, but within the support and help from others. As stated previously, Ariana and Matthew highlighted the sense of belonging through their involvement on campus. Reflecting on the photo of the first time Matthew was on the executive board of an 2SLGBTQIA+ student group and at a retreat, he recalled:

That was the first time I hung out with people since quarantine. That's in a sense was like thriving that we had that moment to connect with people amidst the chaos of the world in 2020."

Most of the co-researchers in this study had their college journey marked with the isolation that came from the COVID-19 pandemic in their semester of 2020. Said pandemic had not only negative physical outcomes but also mental wellbeing of 2SLGBTQIA+ people (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Parchem et al., 2024), and Matthew was excited to connect with others and continue to be

in community with queer and trans peers while navigating the world. However, that gender-affirmation did not only come from peers' support but also faculty and staff on campus. In the same picture, Matthew recalled how that was the first time they had changed their name from their deadname to their current name. He remembered that he was nervous asking staff for a different name tag while he was on the leadership board:

- Matthew: Growing as a trans person for so long, for me specifically, it seemed like an inconvenience to people. [...] Because whenever I was first outed, it was such an inconvenience to people because they had invested a lot of time and energy into me, specifically the church I went to at the time before I got kicked out. Not that I would think that y'all would kick me out because I was trans, let me make that very, very clear [laugh]
- Researcher: *(jokingly)* Yeah, we'll kick you out the 2SLGBTQIA+ student leadership because you're trans...
- Matthew: No, but it was one of the first times where my growth into my queer identity didn't feel like an inconvenience or traumatizing? Because there have been so many times where I would come out to people... like coming out to the church but even my family was traumatizing. It was again a sense of thriving, of like "Oh, I'm not going to get kicked out of places. I finally feel like I have a stable role in some form of society."

This shed light on how interactions with staff and faculty could alter students' perception of their identity. Matthew expressed his concern about inconveniencing others by changing his name, reflecting on past experiences where his trans identity had been seen as burdensome. His perception of identity development had been shaped by traumatizing interactions where coming out was met with resistance and hostility, particularly within religious and familial contexts. However, this small interaction served as a significant moment of validation for Matthew, demonstrating that his growth and transition had not only been permitted but also accepted and respected within the community, providing him with a sense of emotional safety and stability to further explore his identity.

For many co-researchers, the sense of peace comes from being connected to the experiences of living and the appreciation for the simplicity of life. Zara, for instance, shares landscape photos capturing the expansive sky, finding serenity and peace in its beauty. Similarly, CJ reflects on the sunset she captured on campus, noting its significance in her life:

I'm able to take really great pictures of the sunset at campus but like nowhere else. And the sunset to me, I grew up religious, so it was always like, "this is representing what God has made for you." And now, there's not really that connection for me, but it's still like, I look at the sunset and I'm like, "It's really good to be alive right now." And so yeah, I think of just the space, campus as a general space when the sky is really pretty where the trees are brown and green and orange and stuff. Every little minute detail of the beauty of everything that's not the people happening is a symbol of queer thriving to me.

CJ's quote reflected the idea of thriving as finding peace and solace in the simple moments of life, especially within nature. She described how she found joy and a sense of being alive when witnessing the beauty of the sunset on campus. Initially connected to religious symbolism in her upbringing, she now viewed the sunset as a source of personal affirmation and appreciation for life. Despite the lack of religious connotations, she still found profound meaning in the natural world around her. For CJ, the campus environment, with its colorful trees and picturesque scenery, served as a symbol of queer thriving. This suggested that thriving and utopia for her were not solely about grand achievements or milestones but rather about finding tranquility and solace in the present moment, especially amidst the challenges faced as a trans person. As she uttered the phrase, "It's really good to be alive right now," it showed her appreciation for life and the connection she had to non-living beings. However, this appreciation was juxtaposed with the backdrop of the harsh reality of trans killability and the pervasive narratives of 2SLGBTQIA+ struggles, including high rates of suicide among queer youth. This juxtaposition deepened CJ's appreciation for the experience of living, highlighting the resilience and radical acceptance required to find inner peace amidst a hostile environment. Matthew echoed that sentiment:

For so many of us, we did not see ourselves getting to where we are now, whether that is coming to OU, whether that's coming to college, whether that's... actually in a very dark and twisted way, being alive.

With the expectation of their lives potentially coming to an end soon because of their queerness and transness, as they continued to fight and advocate for the campus to be more inclusive in the future, they also practiced a sense of radical acceptance and enjoyed every moment of being alive and being on this campus. This highlighted the importance of finding inner peace despite the hostile environment and embracing the beauty of one's surroundings as essential elements of thriving.

In conclusion, the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students on campus are multifaceted and challenge deficit and damaged narratives of trauma and victimhood (Marshall, 2010). Despite the systemic violence they encounter, these students find resilience and moments of joy amidst the challenges they face. By using Muñoz's (2009) lens of seeing utopian glimpses through the mundaneness of everyday life, it becomes evident that queer utopia is not solely a distant future aspiration but is present in the mundane moments of queer lives. Queer utopia, in its present form, is evident in the everyday actions and choices of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals who refuse to be defined by the violence they face. It is found in the courage to persist despite obstacles, the determination to take initiative and create change, and the willingness to step outside comfort zones in pursuit of growth and self-expression. Queer utopia is reflected in the peace and contentment that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals find within themselves as they embrace their identities and connect with the beauty of life. It is in the persistent pursuit of growth, agency, and self-discovery, as well as in the appreciation of the simplicity of queer lives, that queer utopia begins to take shape. Importantly, this underscores the dynamic and intertwined nature of thriving and surviving, challenging the notion that they are diametrically opposed. Instead, they

coexist and shape the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals on campus, offering glimpses of utopia even within the constraints of present reality. Addressing the core question of this chapter—how the desires of queer and trans individuals shape their vision of a queer utopia, I found that these desires create moments of reprieve, providing glimpses into a potential future. These moments serve as motivational and retention factors for students, encouraging further engagement in self-development and the ongoing confrontation of systemic challenges within the institution. As the complexities of 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences in higher education continue to be further explored, it is essential to recognize and celebrate these moments of thriving in the here-now as integral to the ongoing pursuit of queer utopia for queer and trans futures.

### **Envisioning Future Queer Utopia**

While the quotidian present can show a glimpse of utopia, this study is concerned with envisioning a queer utopia that is not-yet-here. As 2SLGBTQIA+ students navigate the complexities of higher education, they not only strive for survival and thrive amidst adversity, but also imagine a future where queer utopia is fully realized. To explore the envisioning process of queer utopia in the future and further examine how queer desires shape the imagination both at the individual and collective levels, I delve into the concepts of freedom dreams and imagination. The concept of utopia introduces us to not only imaginative depictions of potential futures but directional ones toward betterment (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018). Additionally, queerness asks us to look beyond the assumptions that situate cis-heteronormativity as the default option of futurity and reject the limitations and violence that come along with them (Muñoz, 2009). Therefore, queer utopia is “an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 189), striving for a radical future defined by freedom and liberation. This radical imagination is akin to freedom dreaming - a strategy that urges us to imagine a

better future capable of replacing oppressive systems (Kelley, 2002, Love, 2019). This requires a vision(s) of what queer utopia could look like. Kelley (2002) discussed that the process of envisioning utopia is both difficult but also necessary:

Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.  
(p. xii)

Kelley (2002) emphasizes the necessity of envisioning new possibilities, as without them, we're left only with what to tear down. As I examined the violence encountered by 2SLGBTQIA+ students through their everyday interactions with and within higher education institutions in the previous chapter, it is easy to succumb to the state of “confused, rudderless, and cynical” that Kelley discussed. However, it is crucial for us - researchers, students, and the broader campus community, to not only recognize and document the harm but also actively imagine what we deserve in this space. Kelley (2002) asked: “We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?” (p. 8). This question requires deep individual reflection and collective visioning. By exploring both the individual and collective visions of queer utopias, I map out the future terrains for an affirming future of higher education institutions.

Moreover, in this chapter, I uncover not only *what* 2SLGBTQIA+ students envision for utopia, but also *how* they engage in the process of envisioning. While it is crucial to examine the content of these utopian visions, the analysis of co-researchers' conceptualization of utopia also seeks to uncover the multifaceted process of envisioning a queer utopia among our co-researchers. This exploration unfolds on both individual and collective levels, with co-researchers engaging in imagining a queer utopia in the higher education context both

independently during the interview phase and collectively within the focus groups setting. Within these collective spaces, co-researchers not only articulate their personal visions of utopia but also engage in a communal dialogue that enriches and expands upon these individual narratives. On the other hand, their construction of collective utopia also reveals points of friction as they engage in world-merging, expanding their conceptualization of individual utopia by taking others' perspectives into account and understanding their sense of responsibility to the larger collective. This shift from individualistic to collective visions of utopia provides a nuanced understanding of the processes involved in envisioning and realizing a collective queer future as well as adding the dimension of responsibility and reciprocity to the larger collective.

This exploration offers insights into the relational dynamics between students and the institution across temporal and spatial boundaries. Through the exploration of desires and envisioning acquired utopia among 2SLGBTQIA+ students in education contexts, this chapter ultimately highlights the transformative power of desire. In the following sections, I delve into the co-researchers' individual approaches to envisioning queer utopia and the pragmatic recommendations they offer for campuses to be more inclusive to 2SLGBTQIA+ populations. Then, I explore the co-researchers' collective imagining process of queer utopia, where they transition from individualism to collectivism. They engage in the world-merging process, navigate their collective queer and trans relationship with the institution, and discover that queer utopia transcends space and exists within the collective.

### ***Individual Approach to Dreaming of Utopia***

During the individual interviews, co-researchers and I delved into discussions regarding the envisioning of spaces on campus where queer thriving could flourish. To prompt co-researchers' participation in this imaginative exercise, I drew inspiration from the thought-

provoking questions posed by Tourmaline (2020), a Black trans filmmaker and activist, as a roadmap for our journey into freedom dreaming. These questions: "What does the dominant culture have that we want? What does the dominant culture have that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep?" (n.p.), served as the foundations for our discussions, allowing co-researchers to reflect on their desires and their personal experiences with the current structures in order to examine the purpose in which their vision of queer desires would serve. As the conversations unfolded, it became evident that co-researchers' imaginations were deeply intertwined with their lived experiences, personal identities, and their personal conceptualizations of what it means to thrive as queer and trans students within a university setting. Many co-researchers reflected on their encounters with gendered spaces and bureaucratic processes that often marginalized 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and upheld cis-heteronormativity, using these negative interactions as a starting point for reimagining their own ideal queer utopian spaces.

For most co-researchers, the ideal queer space was not divorced from the current campus context but rather represented an expansion of the existing structures to better accommodate the specific needs and preferences they deemed pertinent to their personal experiences. Co-researchers' individual conceptualizations of utopia speak directly to their critiques of the institution. For example, as co-researchers critiqued the active erasure enacted by the institution on 2SLGBTQIA+ populations and separating them from the larger institutional narrative, co-researchers imagined a queer utopia where queerness is celebrated and embraced. As Zara reflected on her positive experiences with her 2SLGBTQIA+ friend group, when asked if she could reimagine the university to bring that positive energy to campus, she said:

So I guess if I had a magic wand and I could change everything, I would really like to see, I guess, more diversity and just more positivity especially in regards of celebrating



people like marginalized communities, whether it's 2SLGBTQIA+ or any other marginalized community. I think that would be really... overwhelmingly positive. I feel the majority of the students that go here, you know, if they don't care about these issues, they're not going to see them. I think it's just something that deserves to be seen by everyone that goes to school here. But there are so many people that identify as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community that maybe don't feel safe to like express themselves for who they are. And also, if there was just more positivity and more representation, I feel like they would feel more comfortable like being themselves on campus. I also think that more representation in the social media would be really great because, I mean, everyone's on social media nowadays, it's like a huge important part of everyone's life.

In Zara's vision of utopia, the university is characterized by diversity, positivity, representation and celebration of marginalized populations. Reflecting on her desire for acknowledgment within the campus community, Zara proposed an increase in visibility and positive representation of queer and trans communities across all aspects of campus life, including social media and the curriculum. She advocated for proactive educational initiatives, expressing a need for a mandatory diversity class covering topics related to gender and sexuality. Zara believed such efforts would not only allow queer and trans students to explore their identities within an academic setting but also raise awareness and foster understanding among the broader campus community. Aiden echoed this sentiment, advocating for increased educational initiatives on campus that transcend mere tolerance of differences and instead harness the transformative potential to foster genuine understanding and connection among individuals across diverse backgrounds. Through these efforts towards education and visibility, co-researchers aimed to cultivate an affirming environment where 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, like Zara, can feel secure and empowered in expressing their identities.

This sentiment was also echoed by other co-researchers who feel or felt unsafe to come out in their current condition. Ariana shared:

I think that having these like opportunities for a personal and like social engagements to be able to build that support, having those be cultivated intentionally would be great. And then also being able to have the vibe of the inclusivity and all that in the more academic

and like formal stuff. [...] I guess I had the idea of comfort and I guess the idea of feeling normal came in there. I recognize that there are people who are comfortable in their identities already, then there're also going to be people like me who aren't having both avenues to express and enjoy and celebrate your identity as you know it, and then also avenues to better explore and understand it and learn about yourself would also be great. I don't know what that looks like, but I think inclusivity involves addressing and catering to both the people who are confident and also the people who are working on it for sure.

For Ariana, her idealized queer utopia is a campus space that is able to provide opportunities for social engagement, fostering community and support, while also aiding in the further development of students' identities. Specifically, she mentioned that these resources would cater to both students who are comfortable and confident in their identities, as well as those who, like her, are not confident in their identities. This notion of expanding services to facilitate students' self-exploration and community building is echoed throughout multiple co-researchers' discussions, encompassing various strategies. For instance, Matthew expressed a desire for more programming initiatives tailored for and with queer and trans students, while Karen expressed a dream of greater access to learn about queer culture, having faced cultural barriers that hindered her understanding of queer cultures.

Another recurring theme that weaves throughout co-researchers' individual conceptions of queer utopia is the aspiration for gender-neutral facilities on campus. This idea was particularly prominent in Leo's imagination of queer utopia:

I think my dream, I'm always going to go back to gender-neutral housing, that would just fix so much for a lot of students. If you're questioning your gender identity, if you're confident in your gender identity, whatever that looks like for those people, you have a space where you can do that and it's a community. [...] I think gender-neutral housing is just so important because that's what the spaces are for. Spaces are for you to feel comfortable and for you to be living on your own for the first time, but still have a community around you. I feel like dorm life is very centered on you will be able to find friends easily, that's why you have to live on campus. And so I really think gender neutral housing is like the dream I have. But the other one is gender-neutral bathrooms around campus. Like for a lot of the people I know they feel perfectly fine just going to whatever bathroom they want because college students don't care. [...] But having a gender-neutral

option would just solidify being comfortable, that's just a natural body thing everyone has.

Leo's vision of queer utopia was closely tied to fulfilling basic human needs, such as accessing restrooms and housing that aligned with their gender identities, which trans and nonbinary students may not always have had available. Additionally, these gender-neutral facilities would not only have fostered a welcoming environment for 2SLGBTQIA+ students but also would have facilitated an atmosphere where students could explore their gender identities and connect with others on similar journeys to build community. In Leo's utopia, safety was regarded as a fundamental necessity that all students deserved, and the campus would have been a place where queer and trans students could have felt truly "comfortable." Leo viewed gender-neutral facilities as a practical solution that could have addressed many of the current issues and barriers faced by queer and trans students on campus, offering a significant step towards a more inclusive and affirming environment.

Similarly, Micah and Matthew emphasized the significance of establishing Living-Learning Communities specifically tailored for 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the residence halls. A Living-Learning Community is defined as "a distinctive environment in which students benefit from a unified living in learning experience, organized to enrich learning and development" (Inkelas et al., 2023, n.p.). These communities are often structured around similar academic interests, social identities, or other thematic affiliations. Research conducted by Atteberry-Ash and colleagues (2024) revealed that 2SLGBTQIA+-specific Living-Learning Communities have a positive impact on the sense of belonging, connectedness, and engagement of queer and trans students by providing opportunities for them to explore their LGBTQ+ identities and foster community through tailored programming related to their queer and trans identities and fostering an affirming environment that allows students to feel safe and

embrace their authentic selves. Furthermore, co-researchers challenged the gendered nature of institutional structures, not only in terms of physical facilities but also in policies and processes. Matthew advocated for the simplification of unnecessarily complex bureaucratic procedures, such as the name change process and access to gender-affirming care. Currently, these services are often taken for granted by cis-heterosexual students as they already utilized these services without encountering significant barriers compared to queer and trans students. Not only that these services are also currently utilized and taken for granted by cis-heterosexual students without any barriers, centering the needs and experiences of queer and trans students in these administrative processes can facilitate easier access and streamline the experience for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. This approach not only reduces intimidation for 2SLGBTQIA+ students navigating these processes but also fosters an environment where students feel empowered to grow and experiment with their identities.

While co-researchers frequently recounted their negative experiences on campus to inform the construction of their queer utopia and propose solutions addressing these issues, they also considered moments and spaces that provided opportunities for thriving, incorporating them into their vision of utopia. When prompted about what aspects of the dominant culture she wished to retain in her vision of queer utopia, CJ reflected on her experience with the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center:

I definitely would keep the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, like that's a given. The 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center is honestly... I think, without the resources and community and involvement that I've gotten out of this part of OU, I would feel kind of lost. So I think that rebuilding OU to be queer, as safe as possible would be making the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center not only an established room as the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, but like making a whole entire building for the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, making it so that the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center is involved in every single space of campus. And that there is active effort in every single way to make sure that not only just queer people, but like people of color, people who are disabled,

people who are low income, all feel like they are seen and heard and respected, and there are measures in place to where people will be able to thrive.

CJ expressed gratitude for her experiences at the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center and emphasized the importance of this space in providing resources, support, community, and a sense of belonging not only for herself but also for others within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Due to these positive experiences, she formulated her vision of utopia by extending the feelings of inclusivity beyond the geographical boundaries of the center to encompass the entire campus. CJ proposed expanding the current space into a dedicated building and integrating its resources and support services throughout the campus. This aligns with the desire to reclaim the campus, asserting that queer and trans students deserve to exist and thrive not only in designated spaces within the institution, such as the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, but also throughout the entire campus.

Furthermore, in her vision of a queer utopia, CJ emphasized the importance of active efforts to ensure that all members of the campus community have the opportunity to thrive. She envisioned a university where 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, along with people of color, those with disabilities, and individuals from low-income backgrounds, feel seen, heard, and respected. This need was highlighted by queer and trans students who have multiple marginalized identities (such as racial and disability) and called for spaces and processes that take their intersecting identities into consideration. When discussing the creation of queer spaces on campus, Matthew expressed the need to consider not only 2SLGBTQIA+ identities but also to expand them to include other marginalized identities:

So a lot of it just comes from, you know, realizing there isn't a lot of spaces for like those intersecting identities to like come together. Especially for students of color, queer students that has disabilities, realizing that the university is like not built for us and trying to carve out those spaces and trying to keep those identities in mind whenever we're

doing programming or whenever we're doing like orientation or just simply having those conversations in general and knowing how to interact with people.

Matthew pointed out the lack of spaces on campus that allow students with intersecting identities to come together, as the campus often adheres to a bifurcate structure that only focuses on singular identities. Both CJ and Matthew, along with other co-researchers, advocated for an intersectional approach in envisioning queer utopia instead of reproducing dominant homonormative and white-centric views of the modern 2SLGBTQIA+ movement. They emphasized that this lens of intersectionality must inform all aspects of campus life, including programming initiatives, orientation, and conversations with other students, as mentioned by Matthew. This lens is not merely additive considerations, but rather a transformative change that the university must adopt in order to support all members within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

This conceptualization of utopia situated within the university context reflects not a radical reimagination, but rather an evolutionary progression. Co-researchers envisaged a utopia as a plausible prospect that is achievable through an expansion or adaptation of the current prevailing conditions. Co-researchers drew upon their institutional lived experiences, encompassing both negative and positive encounters, to shape their vision of a queer utopia. This conceptualization of queer utopia positions these visions as a solution to address prevailing campus issues and extend positive encounters to broader context. Connecting to their lived experiences can also help assessing the feasibility of prospective changes within the institutional framework. Additionally, the co-researchers, such as CJ, consulted established guidelines and recommendations, such as those found in the Campus Pride Index, to offer pragmatic solutions that the institution can implement and frame as queer utopia. While using a list of recommendations for best practices can be useful, many scholars critiqued how institutions use them instead of initial first steps but as the point of arrival (Nicolazzo, 2017; Kilgo, 2020). As

Nicolazzo (2017) said: “When taking a critical trans politics approach to gender equity, the notion of best practices is increasingly reaching for a singular point of arrival, which, on further investigation, is a utopian myth.” Nicolazzo urged us to critically examine how these “best practices” continue to both advance inclusion and oppression simultaneously, emphasizing the importance of the constant evolving nature of supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ students in the pursuit of freedom and liberation. While these pragmatic recommendations served as practical considerations, they concurrently posed constraints on the scope of radical envisioning.

However, it’s important to recognize the interplay between individual’s dreaming and imagination processes, situated in their current oppressive experiences and conditions of the institution, and not to minimize the radical nature of the work that was done by co-researchers. To return to Tourmaline’s (2020) piece on freedom dreaming, she viewed freedom dreams not always as systemic transformative change but sometimes as small and immediate:

The thing is, freedom dreaming isn’t just about the big things—the huge world changes that we are manifesting in our movements, like police and prison abolition, free universal healthcare, and gender self-determination for all. When I give myself permission to slow down like this—and particularly, when I wonder what we already have that we want to keep—what I always notice are the small things. (Or I should say: What seem like the small things, but really are the big things! The everyday acts of liberatory glamour, care, and openness that keep us alive.) I notice how much I am already surrounded by the world I dream of (n.p.).

Freedom dreaming, according to Tourmaline, encompasses quotidian practices where she allows herself to exist, experience the present uninhibitedly, connecting with queer relations, all while envisioning a more equitable future. This acknowledgment seeks to underscore the significance

of co-researchers' lived experiences as they engage in the formidable task of freedom dreaming. This nuanced approach to envisioning queer utopia highlights a delicate balance between preserving elements of familiarity in their current reality while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what is possible and desirable in terms of inclusivity and affirmation. Nonetheless, the practice of freedom dreaming and radical reimagination remains a potent strategy for both survival and the subversion of oppressive structures (Velázquez et al., 2024). Indeed, personal conceptualizations of queer utopia hold the potential to chart pathways towards institutional reform aimed at enhancing support mechanisms for 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

### ***Collective Approach to Dreaming of Utopia***

In the focus group sessions, co-researchers were tasked with envisioning utopian space but in a collective sense. Jovchelovitch and Hawlina (2018) stated that “utopias represent a potent form of collective imagination that is tightly linked with social change and worldmaking” (p.130). However, collective imagination must transcend the mere aggregation of individual imaginations or imagining alongside others (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018; Szanto, 2017). The collective imagining exercise proved more challenging for many co-researchers to arrive at a shared vision of queer utopia. There was a strong push to shift from individualism to collective community among co-researchers, engaging in communal dialogue that enriched and expanded upon these individual narratives. However, the construction of collective utopia also revealed points of friction as co-researchers engaged in world-merging, expanding their conceptualization of individual utopia by considering others' perspectives and understanding their sense of responsibility to the larger collective. This transition from individualistic to collective visions of utopia offers a nuanced understanding of the processes involved in envisioning and realizing a collective queer future, while also introducing the dimension of responsibility and reciprocity



within the broader community. The process of collectively imagining queer utopia highlighted a shared sense of collective queerness, the dynamics of power within the queer community, and a collective orientation toward relations with each other, rather than solely with the institution, as integral to the pursuit of queer utopia. In this section, I examined three overarching themes that emerged through co-researchers' collective conceptualization process of queer utopia: (1) Shifting from Individualism to Collectivism, (2) Searching for Utopia: Refusal & Disidentification, and (3) Utopia in the Collective.

### **Shifting from Individualism to Collectivism**

As co-researchers transitioned from envisioning a queer utopia individually to doing so collectively, it further underscored the importance of reciprocity and responsibility in the development of such a utopia. As an example, this became particularly apparent during their discussion of authenticity in the focus group sessions. Initially, when co-researchers contemplated the meaning of authenticity, they focused on their individual capacity to exercise agency and freedom, as well as on removing barriers that might hinder this freedom. For instance, Aiden understood thriving as follows:

If you are comfortable sharing your personality or not hiding aspects of it, you are living authentically. Your actions, if they are not censored, are authentic. If your interests are not censored, they are authentic and if you are able to present them and execute them. Your outward presentation and clothing is authentic when you are comfortable in it and when it is something you are able to choose without feeling the need not to do something. And being comfortable being open with people is authentic because it is showing other people what you're about and what is true to you.

Aiden's conceptualization of authenticity revolved around the notion of personal freedom and individual agency. He suggested that living authentically entails being comfortable with sharing one's personality and not feeling the need to hide any aspect of it. In this context, authenticity is linked to the absence of censorship. One's actions, interests, outward presentation, and

interactions with others are considered authentic when they are not constrained or restricted. This understanding emphasized the importance of personal autonomy and the ability to express oneself freely without external pressures or limitations. In his conceptualization of authenticity, it reflected an individualistic approach where personal comfort and choice are paramount in defining a person's authentic self.

Similarly, Micah highlighted that self-exploration is an integral part of their understanding of their sense of authenticity:

I have self exploration on here, which is kind of just like what Aiden said. If your interests are uncensored or if your ways of expressing yourself are uncensored, it just like gives you a lot of leeway to figure yourself out. Because I feel like life in and of itself should be an exploratory experience. For myself, I like try not to get stuck in things, I try to like progress forward, even if it's just like a little bit. That's what I think about what I think of the word like "exploration." I guess just like being able to fluidly move through your life and like realize that there are different stages that like build upon each other. I don't know, just getting to know yourself more in every stage of life, which isn't always possible for queer people. Because if you suppress your queer identity, then what is there for you to explore, really?

Micah emphasized the importance of self-exploration, which they equated with the absence of censorship of their personal interests or ways of being. This notion highlighted the idea that personal growth and progress are essential components of authenticity, and barriers that suppress queer and trans students' identity and expression can further hinder the process of exploration. However, while they underscored the significance of personal agency and unrestricted self-expression, Micah also brought up the individualistic mindset in which white queer individuals may not always fully understand the nuances of their experiences and the implications of their behavior, particularly in relation to marginalized communities as highlighted previously in Chapter 5. Micah revealed the tension between individual freedom through the desire for authenticity and the reciprocity and responsibility that comes with belonging to a collective.

While individuals may pursue a sense of autonomy and agency, it is not absolute freedom, and there are boundaries that must be set by the community.

This tension underscores a fundamental distinction between individual and collective conceptualizations of utopia. While individuals may prioritize their own autonomy and authenticity, there exists a pressing need for reciprocity and accountability within the collective framework. This acknowledgment suggests that freedom, though valued, cannot be pursued at the expense of the larger community's well-being. In the context of collective utopian imagining, co-researchers must grapple with this tension by embracing a more expansive worldview that encompasses diverse perspectives, experiences, and identities. This necessitates a process of de-centering oneself and expanding empathy to include the needs and desires of others. While some co-researchers discussed their orientation towards collectivism in their individual visions of queer utopia, the collective process prompted them to examine the pervasive systems of power that impact different members within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. They came to realize that their conceptualizations of individual utopia might inadvertently perpetuate inequalities or exclude certain voices.

On the other hand, the collective exploration also compelled co-researchers to confront the necessity of establishing collective boundaries for the greater good of the community. They recognized that unchecked freedom could lead to exploitation and harm, highlighting the importance of collective responsibility. This dynamic is exemplified in the shifting perspectives of Aiden and Micah regarding the concept of authenticity. Initially, both emphasized the importance of exploring one's identity without censorship or barriers. However, through collective dialogue and reflection, they came to recognize the need for certain boundaries to safeguard the collective well-being. As queer and trans students of color, Aiden and Micah were

prompted by their interactions with other white queer students to contextualize their identities within the broader framework of systemic oppression, notably the pervasive influence of white supremacy. This aspect may not have been at the forefront of their minds when conceptualizing queer utopia in an individual context.

As the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibilities arose, co-researchers collaboratively worked through their understanding and experiences to establish the boundaries that are deemed suitable for the community at large.

Micah: There is authenticity in intentionality. You can be intentional with your words and actions, and also realize that that's a very real part of yourself. [...] There are ways to find freedom under that system that don't involve making people uncomfortable. And because *we are all that we have* as queer people, like I cannot depend on a cis-het person to give me the community and safety that a queer person will give me, so we are all that we have. You have to realize that like sometimes, you have to do like some self-censorship, no matter how frustrating it may be. There are just some things that you have to do regardless and I think that it would just make the community a better place...

CJ: The biggest point is exactly that. Is being intentional with your authenticity. But also intentionality not just looks like moderating yourself, but also looks like being kind to others and realizing that your good times should never equal somebody else's bad times, so there's that. But then also that adds being kind to other people, because if you are making somebody else's times bad times, that is not being kind and the biggest way to be kind to other people is to be kind to yourself. So if you're being kind to yourself, then you will not do those things to other people, and be kind to yourself results in self-authenticity.

In their dialogue, Micah and CJ developed a more nuanced understanding of authenticity, moving beyond the notion of absolute freedom or the absence of boundaries. Micah underscored the importance of intentionality in one's actions and words, suggesting that authenticity involves considering the impact of one's behavior on others. They acknowledged the necessity of self-censorship at times, recognizing that certain actions can cause discomfort within the community.

CJ expanded on this idea by highlighting the role of kindness and empathy in nurturing a supportive community. They argued that authenticity extends beyond self-expression to encompass consideration for others' experiences and emotions. According to CJ, true authenticity involves not only being true to oneself but also being mindful of how one's actions may affect others. By prioritizing kindness and empathy, individuals can contribute to a positive and inclusive community where everyone feels valued and supported. Micah and CJ advocated for a middle ground where individuals can express themselves authentically while also being mindful of the impact of their actions on others. They established communal boundaries for authenticity, emphasizing intentionality and its effects on others. Furthermore, they introduced the concept of reciprocity between individuals and the larger community, adding layers to the understanding of authenticity. By promoting intentionality, kindness, and empathy, Micah and CJ proposed a framework for establishing boundaries of authenticity that prioritize the well-being of the community as a whole. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals within the community and underscores the importance of fostering a culture of respect and empathy.

Talia also echoed the interconnectivity, not only between queer people but across all identities markers. They stated:

If you look at like a queer student of color, a queer trans student of color, they care more about fighting for all the rights before that and their rights. [...] Being able to comprehend that it's not just about me, that it's about all of us and we're all connected in this. I don't want to demean anybody's identity but a white bisexual girl has to understand that her rights are connected with the trans black student of color, right? And I think that is the community or like the space that I would want to see, it's that true understanding.

Talia's quote emphasizes the inextricably linked system of oppression and how 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color specifically continue to navigate and advocate for their rights. They noted that as queer and trans students of color fought for their rights, individuals with more privileged

identities also reaped the benefits. Consequently, Talia called for collective solidarity and heightened awareness among community members, recognizing that the struggles and victories of one group are intrinsically tied to those of others. Talia's perspective reflects a profound understanding of the importance of collective action and solidarity in advancing the rights and well-being of all 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, transcending racial lines and other identity markers. As a student activist engaged not only in queer and trans spaces but also in movements for racial justice and decolonization, including addressing the ongoing genocide in Palestine during the study period, Talia contextualizes their activism within the framework of thriving. They expressed:

Right, like because I say, the liberation of queer people is incomplete without the liberation of all people, right? We've all come from like different streams and different paths but I think when we finally get to that bridge point, and just shoot for that moment, right, there is a lot of what I see as thriving.

They emphasized the interdependence of various social identity markers and liberation struggles, highlighting the importance of solidarity and allyship across diverse communities. Despite coming from different backgrounds, as depicted through the phrase “different streams and different paths,” Talia envisioned a shared destination, the “bridge point” of convergence where various liberation struggles intersected, signaling a collective effort towards a common goal of social justice and equality.

This shift from individualism to collectivism continues to shape co-researchers’ understanding of self-growth. For queer and trans co-researchers, the desire for growth could not exist outside the context of community. As I shared my findings with co-researchers and disclosed that only the theme of self-development would be displayed in the dissertation, they expressed concern about viewing self-development as an individual journey without community. In the context of identity development, Aiden shared:

Within a queer framework, community connections and the desire to connect maybe not be inherent, but almost a prerequisite to understanding your identity because it is not something you have known or grown up in.

He further elaborated on his experience as a South Asian man, noting that he was born into a community that instilled cultural values as he grew up. Unlike other cultural and ethnic communities, queer and trans people are not born into the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and do not inherit queer and trans cultural values. In fact, they had to actively seek out community, connect with other queer and trans individuals, and learn the cultural values from them. Therefore, to Aiden and many other co-researchers, the notion of self-development is intimately linked to community growth. This shift from individualism to collectivism alters their perception of thriving: from self-development to a connection with the health and wellness of the community. By considering the reciprocity and responsibility towards the community, queer and trans co-researchers perceive it not only as the boundaries they must set for themselves in terms of identity expression and self-exploration but also as an active commitment to community development. Their ability to thrive is not solely contained within them as individuals but is fostered through the queer relationships established within the queer and trans community. In the subsequent part of this section, I delve into how co-researchers conceptualized the criteria for inclusion in this collective community and how they dedicated themselves to community advancement.

### **Searching for Utopia: Refusal & Disidentification**

A significant barrier uncovered in the collective imagining process for queer utopia was the occurrence of refusal and disidentification among co-researchers. While in their individual

interviews, co-researchers seemed to envision queer utopia rooted in queer pragmatism<sup>8</sup>. The practicality and feasibility of implementation emerged as notable challenges hindering their engagement with the dreaming process. This challenge was exemplified during an exercise where they were prompted to imagine queer utopia through the lens of “trickle up high impact practices” (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018) which critiqued the tendency to center singular identities in advocacy for “best practices,” whereby trans affirming best practices often prioritize white trans individuals, relegating trans people of color to the margins. They propose an intersectional approach that prioritizes the needs of the most marginalized individuals within the community, “[focusing] on the lives and experiences of those most on the margins” (p. 133). While co-researchers recognized the potential for systemic reforms through this lens, they encountered challenges in envisioning what implementation might entail, as evidenced in the following excerpt of dialogue:

- Researcher: If we are creating structures and spaces based on the needs of the members of the community who are most marginalized, do you think it is possible for us to imagine those spaces? To build a university or to build a space that is inherently on those needs? Maybe as a thought exercise?
- Aiden: Pragmatic thought exercise or an optimistic?
- Talia: Yes!
- Researchers: You can say both.
- Aiden: Counter question...f it was a true utopia, then the term “most marginalized identity being prioritized,” would not be something we would need to ask of a space or setup. Because in a utopia, there would not be a most marginalized person or community, there wouldn't be a marginalized person. Either everyone would be equally hindered, and therefore unhindered, or just entirely unhindered, so there wouldn't be the need for the accommodation of a most marginalized. That's not realistic! That's the optimistic rebuttal question. But...

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<sup>8</sup> Queer pragmatism is defined as “a participative practicality that we locate here in terms of getting by” (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 4). Huneke (2022) argued that queer pragmatism reconciles the critical impulse of queerness, which inherently challenges societal norms and state legitimacy, with a desire to enact positive political change within existing state frameworks. This approach leverages queer theory to inform and disrupt traditional political processes, aiming to transform institutional structures by strategically engaging with them, despite their normative constraints. Muñoz (2009) critiqued queer pragmatism, viewing it as constraints to the radical nature of queerness.



- Researcher: What's your realistic answer?
- Aiden: The realistic answer is no. (*Group agrees*)
- Talia: No, that's not possible functionally under capitalism, where everything's profit.
- Aiden: Well even beyond that, like, you can only hold so many identities and your experiences can only inform so much of the building of a space, and unless you ask every single person that is ever and will ever use that space about how it can be accommodating to them, which you cannot do, and a space cannot be accommodating to everyone and even playing to the (*air quotes*) "most marginalized identity" *may not* in doing that accommodate everyone.
- Abby: Yeah, I think that's where intersectional intersectionality becomes so complicated because what people want and need would be so different because of that.
- Aiden: And how are we deciding? Who's the most marginalized?
- Abby: What basis are you measuring? Oppression points? (*laughs*)
- Talia: The Oppression Olympics baby! (*laughs*)
- Aiden: What is our what is our points matrix to assign oppression?
- CJ: Has anybody seen the show 'The Good Place'? (*group says yes*) It's like the the point system from that. It's like somebody from like the heaven committee is counting how many marginalization do you have?
- Aiden: Yeah, we'd have to like go down and mine would be like, "Ah, plus two points person of color. Minus one point, male passing. Plus one...", (*everyone laughs*) like, it would just be this funny little tally. And then you'd have to do that for every single person. And then take the lowest score, and then build the space to accommodate that.
- Talia: So ... not the answer you were looking for... (*gestured at researcher*)

In this dialogue, Aiden initially responded with both a pragmatic and optimistic perspective when prompted to collectively imagine spaces and structures that prioritize the needs of the most marginalized members of the community. He questioned whether such spaces are achievable within the context of a true utopia, positing that in an ideal society, there wouldn't be a concept of marginalized individuals because everyone would be equally unhindered. However, he acknowledged the highly improbable nature of this idealistic vision and ultimately provided a realistic answer that many co-researchers agreed with: it is not possible to imagine such spaces. This response highlighted the different ways co-researchers approached the idea of utopia,

viewing it as either a fictional fantastic place of *nowhere* that exists outside of this reality or a future possibility of the *not-there-yet* (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018). Instead of fully engaging with the concept of ‘nowhere’ and building from that vision of a society where oppression does not exist, co-researchers quickly shifted focus towards the feasibility and practicality of their ideas, engaging with institutional logics to evaluate the possibility of implementing change.

Talia also highlighted the impossibility and impracticality of envisioning such spaces given the systemic constraints imposed by capitalism. They suggested that higher education institutions in its current structure operate within a profit-driven system; therefore, creating spaces that prioritize marginalized communities or other transformative change is functionally challenging unless it positively affects the bottom-line and aligns with institutional financial priorities. Aiden and Ariana further elaborated on the complexities of accommodating everyone's needs, emphasizing the limitations of individual experiences in informing the design of such spaces. Rather than fully immersing themselves in the imaginative process, co-researchers found themselves grappling with the task of devising a system for the institution to quantify individuals' marginality and prioritize different forms of oppression. They drew parallel comparisons to the fictional point system in the TV show “The Good Place,” wherein every action of individuals is meticulously recorded throughout their lives and assigned a point value based on its perceived moral worth. Within this system, actions are assessed based on criteria such as resource utilization, underlying intentions, and their impact on others, ultimately determining an individual's eligibility for placement in either the utopian Good Place or the punitive Bad Place after death. Beyond merely ridiculing the impracticality of such a system, co-researchers also cast doubt upon the authority vested in institutions to undertake such judgmental endeavors. Moreover, they shed light on the prevailing culture of competing trauma or

marginalization of identity politics that exists within communities currently occupying institutionalized queer spaces. This examination not only underscored the inherent flaws within systems of quantifying oppression but also served to interrogate the power dynamics and prevailing cultural norms within institutionalized queer contexts. Overall, while there was a shift from individualism to collectivism in thinking, the logistical aspects of change caused co-researchers to engage in a tug-of-war, oscillating between imagining a space for the collective good and prioritizing the experiences of individuals with different identities. This complexity showcased the challenges of collectively imagining a system where everyone benefits equally, instead of the transformative and radical nature from the lenses of equity or queerness.

Co-researchers encountered not only challenges related to the practical implementation of envisioning a queer utopia but also grappled with the daunting prospect of restructuring societal norms that prioritize individual advancement over collective well-being. In conceptualizing a utopian space tailored to the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Matthew questioned whether such a vision could ever truly materialize. This question underscores a broader skepticism among co-researchers regarding the plausibility of effecting systemic change within existing societal frameworks that perpetuate systems of oppression. As they navigated the complexities of envisioning a transformative future, co-researchers confronted the reality of entrenched structures that posed the challenges to the realization of their collective desires. Their focus on the current limitations of the oppressive reality lead to the sense of hopelessness and pessimism. This sense of overwhelming pessimism was exhibited through CJ's question in the focus group:

How can we have a completely different level of compassion and empathy than we are currently right now in this country? How do we change our politics so drastically so that we are able to keep progressing as a society while also still maintaining the ideas of community, embracing each other, and seeing each other's differences and building each other up with altruism. We need to build a society based on altruism and our society right now is not based on that.

In this quote, CJ advocated for a radical overhaul of queer politics to nurture greater compassion, empathy, and community. However, she acknowledged the considerable disparity between the then-current societal landscape and her utopian vision, prompting her to question the feasibility of such a profound shift. Her inquiry probed the formidable challenge of effecting systemic change, recognizing the prevailing dominance of individualistic values in contemporary society. Furthermore, CJ's statement, while articulating a deep desire for social transformation, also underscored a sense of pessimism regarding the entrenched influence of cis-heteronormativity as well as a resignation to the notion that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals may be compelled to participate in a society oriented towards individual pursuits. Ultimately, CJ's expression of frustration, echoed by other queer and trans students, encapsulated the profound sense of hopelessness often felt by marginalized communities confronted with systemic oppression and societal inertia.

As co-researchers grappled with entrenched societal norms and their desire for a transformative queer utopia, their positionality in relation to queer pessimism and queer utopian optimism became increasingly salient in their collective imagination process. In the later discussion section, I delve deeper into the intricate relationship between their experiences and these divergent perspectives. Despite their desire for a better future, co-researchers found themselves trapped within the confines of present reality, where systemic barriers seemed insurmountable. This tension underscored the pervasive influence of cis-heteronormativity and how institutional logics hinder 2SLGBTQIA+ students from practicing radical freedom dreaming. It also became evident that co-researchers navigated these opposing ideologies by choosing a path of refusal. Immediately following CJ's impassioned call for a radical transformation of queer politics and a shift from individual-focused to collectivist societal

models, Talia turned to me, the researcher, and remarked, “And don't ask us how to do that...,” which was met with knowing laughter from other co-researchers. This refusal manifested as a reluctance to entertain discussions about enacting radical societal change within the current oppressive culture of the institution. By deflecting the question and shifting the focus away from practical solutions, co-researchers signaled their disillusionment with the current state of affairs and their reluctance to participate in perpetuating oppressive systems. Furthermore, it symbolized a collective acknowledgment of the daunting challenges inherent in effecting systemic change and the perceived futility of attempting to dismantle entrenched power structures. This refusal not only signifies a rejection of engaging with institutional logics but also a refusal to shoulder the responsibility of devising practical solutions to rectify the inherent oppressive structures within higher education.

The multiple times that co-researchers refused to engage in collective imagining of queer utopia in an institutional context begged the question: what is the relationship between the institution and queer utopia? As co-researchers reflected on the limited spaces within the institution where they felt affirmed and that thriving was possible, they felt as if those spaces were insufficient, and while they were utopia in the present, queerness should not only be contained in only those specific spaces. CJ described:

Sometimes when I think about queer utopia in and the possibility of it existing, I feel like a truly queer utopia on OU campus will just be... I don't know how to word this. It wouldn't be an issue to think about. You shouldn't have to be like "Oh, hey, I'm queer. I need queer spaces on campus." You should be able to be, at all times, like, "I'm a queer person. And I feel really comfortable here in every space I go to." I think that's not only just built within OU confines but it's built within our societal structure.

CJ's quote encapsulates the desire for a world where queerness is not just tolerated or accepted, but integrated into societal norms that it does not require specific spaces for affirmation. Other co-researchers also agreed that queer and trans students would not need safe spaces if every

space was welcoming on campus, expressing a desire for a queer utopia that transcends the confines of specific designated spaces on campus. This further extends beyond institutions of higher education to the broader societal structure, calling for a radical change in societal attitudes and norms towards queerness where 2SLGBTQIA+ people can feel comfortable and affirmed in every space they occupy. However, as mentioned prior, such changes can be daunting and deemed impossible. Leo expressed their disillusionment in re-envisioning an institution that would be affirming for all queer and trans people:

I don't think there is a way... I genuinely don't think there is a way to make everyone feel comfortable in a space. There are too many things about people that are different. So sorry to be a downer.

Their statement highlights the complexity and challenges in imagining a queer utopia to be fully accommodating to all the diverse experiences, needs, and identity within the queer community. Additionally, Leo underscored the subjective nature of the spatial experience, which results in the impossibility of achieving the universal sense of comfort and affirmation in all spaces for everyone.

Furthermore, specifically for 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, there is a lack of trust for institutions to be willing and able to create such spaces for community. This lack of trust is rooted in the historical and ongoing experiences of institutional violence faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students, specifically those of color, in higher education (Duran et al., 2022). Co-researchers discussed the factors that contributed to the lack of trust from queer and trans students of color for the institution:

Talia: Because it's put on by the institution, and institutions are inherently *not* like, particularly, you have the organization inside of the institution is for those students. Oftentimes, the institution itself is aggressive, maybe not outright, but it's very unwelcoming to groups like that. And also, in those spaces, for a lot of queer people of color, I guess we're more like...

looking out for ourselves in our communities. But in that space, we can't control a lot, right? Versus communities out in spaces outside of the institutions, where we're all coming together and we can, we know who's there, we can meet people but it's not put on by an institution.

Aiden: Spaces aren't curated by the community, they are not always accommodating the needs of the community or communities that the space is, in theory, trying to serve. And that is like counterproductive to the... I guess, the desire on the institutional side, even if the people are well-meaning and want to create a space for people, they oftentimes don't consider the needs of the space for those people, whether it's a very literal like, safety thing, or just like, well, this is not accessible for this community, or this is just not comfortable for this community, because they're not part of that community. Also, if it's an institutional thing, a lot of times that does not actually maintain exclusivity to the community.

This dialogue highlights the deep-seated skepticism towards institutions in creating spaces for queer and trans students of color. Co-researchers positioned the university as inherently unwelcoming and complicit in perpetuating systems of oppression. Consequently, Talia and Aiden emphasized the importance of kinship as a means for queer and trans communities of color to engage in community care. They stressed the significance of curating spaces and establishing pockets on campus that cater to the unique needs and desires of community members. Co-researchers highlighted the perceived lack of control, intentionality, physical safety, and overall comfort experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color in institutional spaces compared to community-curated spaces outside of the institution. Aiden underscored the disconnect between the well-meaning intentions of institutional members and the actual needs of the community they aim to serve, citing institutional constraints such as the inability to maintain exclusivity to a specific marginalized community, as previously discussed in Chapter 5.

However, co-researchers acknowledged the importance of financial support, resources, and facilities provided by the university system for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Ariana expressed this viewpoint, stating:

A strength, I guess, of having the institution on your side is that you can have the money and the resources to do stuff, like have food or have an event. I don't think you could have those opportunities as easily otherwise. So just on that very like logistical front, I think there's a benefit for it. I guess you could still have ... I don't really know if there's a way to have like the scale of events or whatever outside of having like institutional support because I don't think students would want to pay money to like have that sort of thing, so having it be free or paid for by the school is pretty important.

Abby recognized that without this support, queer and trans students on campus would lack the necessary funding for community-oriented or educational programs, and there would be no provision of free food and supplies at events, nor would there be institutional community spaces for students. While other co-researchers also acknowledge the benefits of university support, they viewed it as a tactic employed by the institution to appease queer and trans students. As Aiden expressed, "It's all part of our sinister agenda to get poor college students on our side," a sentiment echoed by other co-researchers. This perspective further illustrates the distrust among students, who believe the university has ulterior motives in supporting marginalized populations. However, as discussed the previous chapter, this assumption is not surprising, as 2SLGBTQIA+ students have observed the institution only actively showing support for marginalized populations when it aligns with their interests, such as virtue signaling for public relations or recruiting more students for financial gain. These interactions also underscore the desire among students to distance themselves from the institution, although they are constrained by material needs. When asked about what the university could ideally do to facilitate a queer utopia on campus, Aiden remarked:

One way to do it would be the institution handing you a bag of money and saying make an event or make a space, we're not gonna touch it, we're not gonna look at it, we're not gonna ask you about it... But that being unrealistic, I think one step towards that kind of thing would be building trust with the community, proving that you're able to keep their best interests in mind and not put the university's stances, desires, image, etc., above the lived experience and comfort of that group. Which it isn't going to happen in *this* university right now as it is.



This quote underscores the desire of queer and trans students for the institution to offer resources and support for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals without imposing control or influence over these initiatives. The suggestion of receiving funding without institutional interference reflects a longing for autonomy and self-determination within queer spaces on campus. Additionally, Aiden highlighted the crucial need to build trust between the institution and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Trust is perceived as vital for creating spaces and events that authentically cater to the interests and needs of queer students, free from the institution's agenda or image. However, Aiden expressed skepticism regarding the current state of affairs within the university, suggesting that the institution consistently prioritizes its own interests over the well-being and comfort of marginalized groups. By deeming the idea of the university fostering trust with marginalized communities as implausible and envisioning a scenario where the institution provides resources to the community without any strings attached, Aiden underscored a significant tension between 2SLGBTQIA+ students and the institution.

Disidentification emerged as a strategy for queer and trans individuals to navigate and resist institutional authority and control. Disidentification, as articulated by Muñoz (1999), resists binary thinking by eschewing both homonormative identification and complete rejection through counter-identification (Shrodes, 2022). While queer and trans students cannot wholly reject institutional support, they can adopt subversive strategies to resist institutional control and violence. These insights illuminate the thought process behind conceptualizing a queer utopian space and its intricate relationship with the institution. Due to the subjective nature of spatial experiences and the institutional constraints in place, coupled with the lack of trust among queer and trans students of the institution's willingness and capability to cultivate an environment supportive of queer thriving and to eradicate inherent systems of oppression, co-researchers

underscored that while the conceptualization of a queer utopia may exist within the campus context, it cannot be fully institutionalized.

### **Utopia in the Collective**

Through quotidian practices and utopian thinking, co-researchers identified glimpses of queer utopia in pockets of the campus and in present moments. These instances served as motivational forces that enabled students to thrive despite survival challenges and institutional barriers. However, due to the constraints imposed by institutional logics, the collective envisioning of a future queer utopia was impeded, leading co-researchers to disidentify queer utopia with the institution. The pragmatism associated with space and structures prevented co-researchers from fully embracing the radical and liberatory nature of freedom dreaming. Co-researchers were unable to envision a concrete space that would fulfill the needs and desires of all queer and trans students; instead, they pondered the future of queer utopia and questioned what it would entail if not tied to a physical space, and what queer worldmaking would mean if it transcended spatial construction processes. Aiden's remark encapsulates this sentiment:

It's very queer though for like community to transcend space, especially grow from a space and become the people rather than a space. Because frequently space is very transient for queer communities, like whether it's being kicked out or being bought out, or being like homogenized into being an accepting, like it's an unfortunate and common experience.

Aiden articulated the transient nature of queer spaces and the tendency for queer communities to evolve beyond the confines of physical locations. This observation underscores the inherent queerness in the ability of communities to transcend spatial boundaries and foster growth rooted in collective identity rather than mere physical spaces, a phenomenon often shaped by experiences of displacement, commodification, or assimilation. This quote captures the shifting

understanding of queer utopia from a spatial concept, to a communal one among the co-researchers. It reflects their recognition that true liberation and thriving cannot be fully realized within physical spaces constrained by institutional logics. Instead, they emphasize the importance of community and collective identity formation. Polletta and Jasper (2001) defined collective identity as “imagined as well as concrete communities, involv[ing] an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries” (p. 298). This concept is central to activism and mobilization, illustrating how individuals with shared identities unite towards common goals (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2018). Co-researchers drew upon the collective experiences and history of queer and trans individuals to inform their vision of queer utopia. They viewed it not as a physical space, but as the affirmation of shared experiences and collective efforts towards queer liberation.

However, the notion of queer collective identity is not without critique. Anderson-Nathe and colleagues (2018) highlighted how collective identity can potentially perpetuate the essentialist narrative of gender and sexuality, looking at identities as fixed categories and their experiences as generalizable across all members. Co-researchers critiqued this notion in itself. While 2SLGBTQIA+ students feel a sense of belonging through assumed shared understanding of experiences, co-researchers emphasized that 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are not monolithic, and the only shared experiences is that of trauma and marginalization in the cis-heteronormative society. Aiden discussed the formation of strong communities, noting that while shared identities can serve as a starting point, deeper connections are necessary for lasting friendships. For him, merely having similar backgrounds or experiences isn't enough; true bonds are formed through shared values, interests, and understanding of one another. These connections allow for mutual support during challenging times. He stated:

It's that kind of understanding that you come to with other people that lets you build community, right? It's not just, oh, we're all the same and that makes us a community. We've taken the time to get to know each other and understand how every single person here works individually so that we can be a group that is together and supportive of each other. And a lot of times community is presented as this massive sprawling thing. But at least in my experience, useful communities tend to be small, they tend to be tight knit, because that way you know what everybody in the community actually needs.

For Aiden, creating a queer utopia involves fostering intentional and deep connections within the community, not simply relying on surface-level connections of shared identity markers or trauma. The emphasis on understanding and supporting each individual within the community further emphasizes the sense of reciprocity and responsibilities within the larger collective. In this sense, the vision of queer utopia becomes intertwined with the formation of queer and trans kinship, where shared values, interests, and mutual understanding serve as the foundation for lasting connections. These intentional community connections not only empower individuals within the community but also contribute to the dismantling of cis-heteronormative societal structures by reimagining and building alternative systems of support and solidarity.

Another critique of the collective identity model within the queer movement is its "unity in diversity" approach, which tends to downplay the significance of lived experiences shaped by intersecting identities, particularly racial identity (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2018). Micah highlighted that queerness alone is insufficient as a connecting point between them and other white queer students, underscoring how whiteness, white experiences, and white norms often dominate designated queer spaces. They emphasized that white queers frequently expect queerness to automatically foster unity among all queer individuals, privileging the comfort of white people and disregarding racial differences. Micah articulated this by stating:

I can say that "I'm a part of the queer community at OU," and that's a fact. I can say that and that can be true, but also at the same time, this is not *my* community, you know?

This emphasizes that although queer and trans students of color can be categorized and assigned to a specific community, Micah's emphasis on how the queer community is not *their* community signals the lack of a sense of belonging due to racial differences. They recalled their experiences of microaggressions and racism within predominantly queer spaces:

I sometimes, I notice like, reluctance, a lot of people just don't want to be friends with Black people. I don't know what that is. Sometimes when I exist in spaces, people are a lot more reluctant to connect with me on a deeper level, and it has nothing to do, like the way that I act.

While the notion of "unity in diversity" may offer comfort to white queers seeking connections based on shared queerness, its failure to acknowledge racial differences among other marginalized identities poses a significant barrier to genuine connection. For 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, the emphasis on connecting solely over queerness by white queers represents a transactional approach to community and relationship-building. To truly engage with them on a deeper level, it is essential to recognize and address the racial differences in their identities and experiences. This perceived lack of effort further frustrates queer and trans students of color, as illustrated in this exchange among co-researchers discussing the performative attempts of their white peers to connect with them:

Aiden: It's like, "I'll take the effort to learn, like, all of the nuances of sexuality and gender, but I won't take the effort to learn about Black culture or other cultures of color."

Micah: Exactly! [beat hands] They'll go watch the video essay and they'll be like, yasss Marsha P. Johnson, yasss. But then like when it comes to like, actively engaged with like Black queer people who are still doing the work, they don't want to do it.

Both Aiden and Micah highlighted the selective engagement of white queers, pointing out a lack of genuine commitment to intersectionality and solidarity within the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community. They noted that white queer and trans individuals may invest effort into

understanding nuances of sexuality and gender or superficially engage with culture of people of different race and ethnicities, but neglect to learn about Black culture or cultures of color. Aiden and Micah suggested that white queer individuals prioritize their own development over establishing communal relationships across racial lines, illustrating an individualistic and self-serving approach to community building. The example of learning about Marsha P. Johnson, a prominent figure in queer history, sharply contrasted with the lack of effort in understanding the experiences and struggles of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in the present day. Furthermore, it highlighted the commodification of Black language and culture through the linguistic usage of "yasss," revealing cultural appropriation by white queer individuals who claim aspects of Black queerness as their own. While they may express support through gestures like watching video essays or using catchphrases, they fail to actively engage with and support Black queer individuals who are still working for equality and justice. This critique reflects a broader pattern of performative activism, where surface-level engagement with certain aspects of social justice is prioritized over genuine allyship and solidarity with marginalized communities, perpetuating tokenism and erasure of the experiences of queer and trans people of color. While collective identity development is useful in garnering political potential and building movements based on shared identities and experiences, frameworks that only recognize gender and sexual identities do not foster coalition building across racial differences and further marginalize queer and trans people in the process.

While the theme of inclusion of intersecting identity arose, the conversation on the exclusion of harmful rhetoric was brought up as a way to keep the community safe. The 2SLGBTQIA+ community was not without intra-community problems. Co-researchers highlighted the tension between their desire to build a queer utopia as a collective that is based

on the foundations of inclusiveness and the ability to exclude people who can cause harm to that collective.

Matthew: I know there are, specifically in my experience, gay men that do not believe I should exist as a trans person, that I don't belong in the community. I was just like, you know, there's also that in other identities like, racism, transphobia, even bi-erasure, things like that. I sit here, and I'm thinking, well you know, we are talking about doing stuff for the community, and they are having conversations that belong in the deep, deep, dark web of Tumblr, essentially. And so I ask if that's possible without excluding them? And my opinion is like, if they are excluding us, we should exclude them, until they're ready for the seat at the table, "Hey, we are going to accept people in our community."

Aiden: Very similar to the institutional inclusion versus exclusion. At what point does the exclusion of a person or people preserve a space versus, you know, for people that deserve space or access to the space...

Matthew: And also, just like harm in general? Like, at what point of harming are we saying, like, "Hey, maybe this is not it, you know?" Like, maybe we need to figure something out.

Matthew and Aiden's exchange delves into the multifaceted dynamics of community formation and protection within the 2SLGBTQIA+ context. By highlighting instances of discrimination and harmful rhetoric, they confronted the harsh realities of exclusionary attitudes within their own community. Matthew's recounting of his experiences as a trans individual facing discrimination from gay men underscored the existence of transphobia and gatekeeping behaviors within 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces. Despite the desire for inclusivity, Matthew questioned whether a queer utopia is feasible without excluding individuals who hold harmful beliefs. He expressed the opinion that if certain individuals are excluding members of the community, then the community should also exclude them until they are willing to accept others. Matthew's suggestion to exclude individuals perpetuating harm reflected a defensive stance aimed at safeguarding the collective well-being of the community.

Matthew's reference to the "deep, deep, dark web of Tumblr" underscores the prevalence of harmful rhetoric and exclusionary attitudes within certain online spaces, particularly those known for hosting contentious discussions on identity and belonging. Although Nicolazzo and colleagues (2023) emphasized the capacity of digital spaces for self-exploration and fostering community bonds, they also recognized the amplification of harmful and oppressive discussions present on the internet. When prompted to offer instances, co-researchers cited examples spanning from identity and gender policing, to gatekeeping and other detrimental forms of discourse. This allusion highlights the broader cultural influence of digital platforms in shaping intra-community discourse and suggests the need for a critical examination of online dynamics in understanding contemporary 2SLGBTQIA+ community dynamics. As mentioned previously, Aiden drew parallels between this internal community dilemma and broader institutional practices of inclusion and exclusion. The co-researchers' call for exclusion highlights the inherent tension between fostering a sense of belonging for marginalized groups while simultaneously protecting them from harm, further stressing the idea of collective accountability and the importance of actively addressing intra-communal conflicts and injustices. While 2SLGBTQIA+ students may find queer utopia and thriving in the collective, they raised a poignant point on the delicate balance between the inclusion of individuals and the protection of the collective. This prompts critical reflection on the issues of queer ethics surrounding communal relations within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and who gets to be included in this collective.

While co-researchers acknowledged the existence of a queer utopia within the collective and emphasized the importance of community-building and relational dynamics, they also recognized the complexities arising from the inclination of prioritizing individual needs over the



collective and the presence of different linked systems of oppression. Reflecting on their experiences within institutional queer spaces where the intracommunity interactions may not be the most conducive to a healthy community, co-researchers contemplated their ideal relational dynamics. Aiden, drawing from his experiences within cultural communities, shared observations of communal solidarity amidst personal conflicts:

In my experience with communities of color, a lot of times there's this kind of weirdness of, "Oh my god, I'm going to this function with, for this group that I'm a part of, and goddamn, I hate these 10 people there, but I'm going anyway, because I know I have to and this is my community. I'm gonna go to bat for them, but also these particular fuckers we don't get along." That's like my parents preparing to go to any basic event, my dad is always just like, "God, I hate these four dudes so much. They piss me off, they are the worst," and you still dress up and you go anyway. Right? And I feel like I feel like I've witnessed it in older queer communities. I feel like maybe understanding and embracing that aspect that a lot of other multicultural communities understand and have is something that we need to take into account when we're trying to build a queer ideal space, because realistically, there isn't one. But communities have found ways around that historically and looking into how they do that through the community actions, the building of solidarity and the mutual understanding of on a personal level, we might not get along, but on a community level, we are there for each other. I think a lot of queer community has that down. I just don't think that's conducive to a single space.

Aiden suggested that embracing the aspect of communal solidarity, prevalent in many multicultural communities, could inform the construction of an ideal queer space. His observation about attending events despite personal conflicts within cultural communities highlights a profound sense of communal responsibility and solidarity. By witnessing his family's willingness to participate in communal activities, Aiden saw the importance and plausibility of individuals setting aside personal grievances for the greater good of the community and committing to collective well-being. He emphasized the historical resilience of communities in navigating interpersonal conflicts and building solidarity, highlighting the need to incorporate these practices into queer community-building efforts. Through the emphasis on embracing communal solidarity, Aiden called for a reevaluation of how the queer and trans

community navigates interpersonal differences, implying a shift away from individualistic approaches towards fostering interconnectedness and mutual understanding within the queer community. By valuing community cohesion over personal grievances, individuals can cultivate a sense of belonging and shared responsibility towards one another.

However, there is a need to differentiate between interpersonal conflicts and intentional harmful rhetoric, as well as to recognize that overlooking interpersonal differences does not equate to ignoring different lived experiences due to intersecting identities such as race. Instead, the prioritization of reciprocity, responsibility, accountability, and practices of communal solidarity reflects a relational ethics that advances collective identity towards equity.

Furthermore, co-researchers also emphasized the importance of extending grace. Aiden stated:

Intra-community education isn't instant. Someone may have to exist in a community space for a long time to understand the essence of that community and the essence of the values and then interpret for themselves. It's a lot easier when it's a community you're born into, like a community of color, you tend to know by the time you're an adult, roughly where the community's values stand and where your values stand within that. Versus in a queer community where you're coming into it as a young adult or a full adult, you learn the values of that community as an adult who already has viewpoints and values. So while it is sometimes more difficult to extend that grace, I absolutely think that it does happen, needs to happen a lot more.

He highlighted that as a person of color, he was born into a culture and was socialized and raised with those cultural values. However, queer and trans people are not often raised by individuals who share their identities or values with them. Instead, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals must actively seek out those values externally as they internally navigate their identities. Furthermore, as important as it is to educate the outside community about queer and trans issues, Aiden also stressed the importance of focusing on intracommunity issues and educating members within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. He emphasized that accountability and responsibility also encompass intracommunity education, aiming to support individuals who are exploring their

identities and to socialize them with our cultural values within the larger community. Instead of distancing ourselves from problematic behaviors within the community to maintain a sense of innocence and righteousness, Aiden urged people to actively educate and extend grace to those who are making mistakes as part of their learning journey. He also emphasized that this is an ongoing effort, as intra-community education is a lengthy process. This sentiment further emphasizes the sense of responsibility not only through self-censorship or consideration of the needs of others, but also through active efforts to extend grace and educate individuals within the community for the purpose of collective identity development and tapping into the transformative power of the queer and trans community.

Micah echoed what Aiden had said, emphasizing that community building does not magically happen but rather an active decision from the individuals within the collective:

I think connection is a choice, and love is a choice. So whether or not you choose to make that choice is whether or not the community exists. I think that connecting with others, being in community with others, loving others is not contingent on how easy it is to do those things. Because at the end of the day, like, if you based community off of how easy you thought it was to depend on someone, I don't necessarily know if we'd be anywhere... With the queer community, this is a community that I care so much about that it goes past me liking someone, it very much travels far beyond that.

Micah underscored the active choice required to nurture connections and foster love within the community, suggesting that the existence of community hinges on individuals' willingness and active participation in building such connections. Echoing Aiden's sentiment, Micah emphasized that building and sustaining community necessitates intentional effort and commitment, regardless of the challenges or complexities involved. Their emphasis on the act of choosing to connect with others not only reinstates agency and responsibility to marginalized groups but also reflects a deeper comprehension of relational ethics within the queer community. Micah suggested that authentic community bonds are not solely predicated on convenience or comfort

but demand individuals to actively invest in cultivating meaningful relationships and supporting one another. This perspective challenges the notion of magical thinking, which posits that community formation should be effortless or inherently easy, and rebuffs the transactional approach suggesting that the university merely needs to create spaces for community connections to automatically materialize.

Micah: And so, I feel like you really have to make an individual effort instead of making a spatial effort. Because also I think being queer is also to not be tied down to spaces.

Aiden: I think transient nature of the queer community

Micah: Yeah, exactly! To be queer is to not be tied down to one space, I think, to be queer is to be tied down to each other essentially. You really just have to open up space within, not to get like woo woo but like... (*laughs*), you have to open up like the metaphorical space within yourself, to let other people in, to have that community instead of saying, like, "Oh, this is the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center, gay people square, we're gonna be gay here. And we're gonna have community." That's not really how it works, because you can have physical space, but if you don't have emotional space, it's just gonna go to shit.

This further reinforces the notion that queer utopia transcends physical constraints and resides within community. On one hand, co-researchers advocated for additional support beyond material resources, such as physical spaces, to foster a sense of community within designated institutional queer spaces. As Micah articulated, while the focus on creating more inclusive physical spaces and increasing access to them is crucial, it should not be the ultimate objective. As Micah elaborated, merely having physical spaces is insufficient without the capacity to forge connections, a conducive climate for authenticity, or a collective sense of responsibility, which are essential components for the creation of a community where queer utopia can flourish. They called upon community members, alongside institutional efforts, or in many cases despite institutional challenges, to collectively build and transform the culture into affirming and queer-friendly spaces. This underscores the collaborative nature of community-building, with both the

university or its allies and students sharing responsibility, rather than assigning sole responsibility to either party. It highlights the significance of proactive engagement in community-building endeavors, wherein 2SLGBTQIA+ students can genuinely express themselves and thrive authentically.

This sense of collective identity extends beyond the immediate inhabitants of the institution, transcending temporal boundaries to encompass a broader continuum of individuals across time. When deliberating upon the collective nature of their project, co-researchers were prompted to reflect on the intended audience and the entities to whom they are accountable. Drawing upon the notion of answerability, as described by Nelson and Shotton (2022), which intertwines concepts of responsibility and morality at the individual level, “an ontological consideration of how one’s values help orient their lived responsibility to oneself and others” (p.95). When discussing the collaborative art project's audience, some co-researchers suggested targeting the university administration. They aimed to use the project to assert queer and trans presence on campus and convey the needs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. However, as noted prior, Matthew and other co-researchers who were student activists on campus shared that the administration (responsive only to visible distress among 2SLGBTQIA+ students) wouldn't be an appropriate audience for a queer utopian project, as it might reflect a dystopian reality. Instead, co-researchers collectively aimed to direct the project's message towards the broader 2SLGBTQIA+ community, with a specific emphasis on incoming queer and trans students. Not only did co-researchers regard the 2SLGBTQIA+ community as a more receptive audience deserving of their efforts, but they also contemplated the project's future-oriented nature, aspiring to cultivate a utopian environment wherein future generations of queer and trans students at the university could thrive. The purpose of the project, as determined by co-researchers, was to

reassure future generations that thriving is achievable on this campus and that they can forge their own paths toward flourishing. The collages produced by the co-researchers reflect overarching themes of queerness, synthesizing their individual lived experiences under the umbrella of queer thrival. Utilizing present materials, the collages acknowledge the joy and vitality cultivated by the larger queer and trans collective despite systemic oppression, thereby paving the way for possibilities and potentialities of thriving for future generations of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. While the backgrounds of these collages depict instances in the institution's history where the university failed to support queer and trans students, the co-researchers also interpret them as manifestations of the efforts undertaken by previous generations to establish spaces and structures conducive to their present moments of queer thriving.

- Talia: As much as we want to set this place on fire sometimes, right, we're cognizant of like the history that is here, and how OU has been a place for a lot of people, but also we're also building and deconstructing the harmfulness that inherently exists in this place with the pictures on top.
- Aiden: And that we're not erasing the work done by, like, our queer predecessors, to make this a better place.

While co-researchers initially expressed a sense of pessimism regarding the daunting tasks of constructing queer utopia and effecting social transformation, this project served as a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between the impulse to start anew for radical reinvention, illustrated through the phrase “set this place on fire,” and the recognition of the enduring legacy forged by preceding generations. Co-researchers introspectively acknowledged that the thriving moments they currently enjoy owe a profound debt to the advocacy and labor of queer and trans predecessors, regardless of how imperfect it may be and feel. This reflective process led co-researchers to broaden their conceptualization of collective responsibility, extending beyond the confines of present-day 2SLGBTQIA+ students on campus. They acknowledged a temporal

dimension to their collective identity, recognizing a duty not only to forge a better future for subsequent generations but also to reverently acknowledge and uphold the enduring legacy of their predecessors. In essence, co-researchers grappled with the intergenerational continuum of queer activism, recognizing the imperative of honoring past struggles while simultaneously striving towards future progress.

## Chapter 7

### Working Towards Queer Utopia

#### Discussion

The objective of this study was to delve into the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and their conceptualization of queer worldmaking within college campuses. Guided by the central research question: how do 2SLGBTQIA+ college students envision themselves thriving in higher education institutions?-- this qualitative inquiry aimed to explore the expansive potential of queer and trans futures while challenging deficit or damage-based narratives that often portray 2SLGBTQIA+ lives through a lens of trauma and mortality. Rooted in both queer and trans theories and Indigenous epistemologies, this study sought to uncover the interconnectedness between 2SLGBTQIA+ students and the broader community, as well as their relationship with institutional structures. By emphasizing communal reciprocity and collective responsibility, the research underscored the importance of advancing collective consciousness within higher education settings. Moreover, the study shed light on the dissonance between institutional values and practices, highlighting how these discrepancies perpetuate systemic harm and violence against queer and trans students. Through the adoption of queer methodologies, specifically participatory-action research and visual arts-based methods, the research embraced alternative ways of knowing by fostering communal collectivism to develop a shared voice of the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community and amplifying diverse voices. Visual methods in particular, provided a platform for co-researchers to imagine and materialize visions of queer utopia, bridging the gap between abstract ideals and concrete realities. By employing these methodologies, the study aimed to challenge conventional knowledge construction within academic settings and foster active engagement from me as a researcher with co-researchers in



the collective dreaming process. In this discussion, I contextualize the research findings within the framework of queer thriving and the praxis of queer worldmaking, highlighting the transformative and radical potential of these concepts in reshaping higher education landscapes and promoting equity for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within the walls of higher education.

### ***Queer Thriving***

Greteman (2016) defined queer thriving as the ways that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals “develop or grow vigorously” (p. 310). In this dissertation, co-researchers conceptualized thriving for queer and trans students across several dimensions, including increased visibility and representation, access to safety and support, autonomy for self-development, and the ability to experience authenticity and belonging through everyday queer moments. Each of these frameworks illustrates the ways in which queer and trans students thrive within the higher education system as well as mapping the social and material conditions that facilitate or hinder their thriving. It is essential to recognize that queer thriving is subjective and deeply intertwined with individual identities and lived experiences, emphasizing that queer thriving cannot be universally defined, but rather emerges from the unique journeys of queer and trans students. While some co-researchers may have initially conceived of thriving in alignment with conventional norms, such as equating self-development with productivity and efficiency, many underscored the significance of challenging normative constraints and embracing holistic development. Greteman (2016) emphasized that queer thriving is not just queer people experiencing success, but queer as a political stance “to live outside social norms in ways that allow us to not only survive against but also thrive in the face of social pressures, violence, and the cult of normality” (p. 310). While some may critique that visibility politics or identity development may not be radical or far off the norms, I argue that in the hostile environment with

higher education and the state where queerness continues to be policed and face erasure, acts such as visibility politics and holistic identity development become acts of assertion and resilience. This framework challenges normative approaches to thriving, particularly within neoliberal paradigms, by advocating for a queer-centric understanding of thriving that encompasses dissent, disobedience, and disidentification with normative standards (Greteman, 2016).

Furthermore, the co-researchers offered nuanced perspectives on the relationship between thriving and survival, revealing a complex relationship between these concepts. Rather than viewing them as opposing forces, many scholars challenge the oversimplified binary distinction between thriving and surviving, especially within the dynamic landscape of queerness and queer theory (Denton, 2020; Greteman, 2016). The abstract nature of thriving often leads individuals to draw upon their tangible experiences of survival as a framework for understanding what it means to thrive. For some, survival acts as a baseline, a threshold that when surpassed by factors like joy, authenticity, or freedom, signifies the attainment of thriving. The distinction between surviving and thriving is subjective and fluid, particularly through the lens of queerness and queer theory. Co-researchers recognized that these concepts are not static but are shaped by individual experiences and perspectives. Greteman (2016) emphasized the importance of acknowledging and addressing survival concerns while simultaneously working towards empowerment and flourishing within the queer and trans community. Queer thrival emerged as a concept that acknowledges and builds upon the resilience and perseverance inherent in survival efforts, leveraging them as catalysts for creating a more fulfilling and empowered existence for queer individuals. Thus, the relationship between surviving and thriving transcends mere opposition, intertwining in a dynamic interplay that reflects the multifaceted nature of queer

experiences and desires for thriving — a symbiotic relationship where surviving lays the groundwork upon which thriving flourishes.

By framing the experience of survival as the baseline, it further underscores the systemic violence and harm prevalent within the higher education context. Co-researchers illuminated how accommodations for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, particularly for trans and non-binary individuals, are often perceived as if safety is the ultimate goal in and of itself, rather than as the fundamental experience that all students inherently deserve. Greteman (2018) critiqued the notion that safety alone is adequate, arguing that educational institutions bear the responsibility to transcend mere safety and cultivate environments in which queer and trans students, as well as queerness in its entirety, can truly thrive. In this dissertation, co-researchers emphasized how these harm-reduction practices, such as trans-inclusive housing or convoluted administrative procedures for name changes, serve as institutional strategies aimed at placating 2SLGBTQIA+ students, potentially absolving the institution of liability, while doing little to challenge or reform the existing gendered spaces and processes within the institution. Furthermore, these practices are often deployed as acts of interest convergence, serving as tools to attract more queer and trans students and to project a mirage of inclusivity for the sake of optics. However, these efforts risk diluting the radical and transformative potential of queerness by commodifying and commercializing it (Greteman, 2018).

As a result, 2SLGBTQIA+ students may become disillusioned upon recognizing the institution's hollow promises, particularly when they perceive the administration's inertia in the face of state violence. Instead of embodying ethical leadership when their students need them to be, higher education institutions act as legal entities for being overly compliant with harmful legislation that facilitates violence against its students, without putting up a meaningful

resistance. Once again, the institution's neutrality and risk-averse approach in its practices contribute to 2SLGBTQIA+ students feeling marginalized, alienated, and undervalued within the university environment, effectively rendering the institution complicit in perpetuating violence by failing to take an active stance for its students. Through the lens of desire and thriving, it is crucial to recognize that these practices are essential and fundamental for the thriving of queer and trans students, or as co-researchers articulated, these efforts should serve as the foundation rather than the limit. However, the failure to take action can lead 2SLGBTQIA+ students to set their sights low, as their basic requests for safety, representation, and self-development often go unfulfilled. The absence of support makes it appear that achieving their radical aspirations for queer worldmaking is nearly impossible, as meaningful changes seem implausible. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions not only to address immediate safety concerns but also to actively cultivate environments where queer and trans individuals can genuinely thrive. This involves creating spaces of authenticity, belonging, and empowerment, which are not only what 2SLGBTQIA+ students deserve but also essential for nurturing their ability for freedom dreaming and worldmaking.

While examining institutional structures and climate is important in understanding the factors that either facilitate or impede thriving, this dissertation urges us to expand our perspective beyond environmental influences and view thriving as an agentic process. Greteman (2016, 2018) suggested that thriving involves active advocacy beyond mere safety and should be approached from an access standpoint that holds institutions accountable. Co-researchers similarly portrayed queer thriving as a choice, regardless of institutional context. 2SLGBTQIA+ students recognized that waiting for ideal conditions conducive to thriving may be futile, given that thriving manifests differently for each individual and is often hindered by pervasive systems

of oppression such as white supremacy, colonization, and cis-heteronormativity. Just as queerness serves as an adopted stance to reject dominant structures and normative assimilationist strategies, framing thriving as a choice can restore agency and autonomy to marginalized populations, acknowledging their rich history of thriving in spite of oppression. As noted by Greteman (2018), “Queerness is not an ahistorical concept that traverses spaces and times unscathed by the worlds it encounters. Rather, queerness is rooted in contesting the worlds that have sought to expunge it” (p. 10). While queer thriving is intrinsically linked to its power in worldmaking and queer futurity, it is essential to acknowledge both past and present experiences beyond mere damage while awaiting a thriving future. Instead, we must view it as active resistance to oppression throughout history and into the future.

I acknowledge that this framing presents a double-edged sword, as it has the potential to further marginalize queer and trans individuals by perpetuating victim-blaming narratives and reinforcing resilience and grit narratives prevalent in higher education settings toward marginalized populations. However, I advocate for holding these tensions concurrently, recognizing the importance of both advocating for a queer utopia that facilitates easier queer thriving and recognizing queer thriving within our shared past and oppressive present as a means to manifest that future. Despite facing institutional violence, queer and trans students persist in strategizing and finding ways to work toward queer thriving, whether through forming kinship networks, asserting their identities, or demonstrating resilience. This creates an opportunity for students to engage in disidentification with the institution, countering institutional strategies aimed at pacifying and coercing students into identification. While Greteman (2018) expressed concerns regarding neoliberal rationalities within himself and the community at large, I will

delve deeper into this process of dreaming and disidentification in the following section on Queer Worldmaking and Queer Utopia.

Lastly, through the framing of self-development as a part of thriving, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to the concept of queer thrival by emphasizing the role of agency and freedom in self-development as integral components of thriving. It underscores how 2SLGBTQIA+ students actively engage in ongoing self-examination and exploration, challenging conventional models of identity development that often overlook the intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality. This aligns with the principles of queer thrival, which advocate for individuals to resist societal norms and advocate for alternative modes of existence and flourishing (Greteman, 2016). As echoed by Greteman (2018), co-researchers also shed light on the intersectional dynamics in their efforts to navigate and seek support from the institution, hindered by institutional structures that prioritize single-identity frameworks. This not only perpetuates whiteness as the norm within 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces but also presents additional hurdles for queer and trans students of color in finding their place on campus and envisioning thriving within the institution. Moreover, it impedes our progress in developing collective consciousness, as co-researchers emphasized that focusing solely on queerness without acknowledging racialized experiences and other intersecting identities fails to unite us all. To said point, Greteman (2018) urges us to engage in intra-movement organizing rather than pursuing single-issue strategies:

To thrive, beyond surviving, cannot only involve attention to a single component of our complex realities nor attention to the self as a private individual - rather, it requires sustained attention to exposing the work of oppression while attending to creating collective alternatives rooted in shared identities and culture (p. 8).

This call challenges homonormative narratives and emphasizes the interconnectedness of systems of oppression. It prompts us to shift from individual perspectives of thriving to a collective understanding of thriving within the broader community. This necessitates a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of all members within the queer and trans community, including the frictions within our realities at large and particularly those experienced within campus environments. Furthermore, co-researchers advocated for extending the concepts of thriving and self-development to the advancement of the community as a whole. They illustrated how thriving can be a communal endeavor, with the act of helping others thrive being inherently intertwined with experiencing thriving oneself. Additionally, as noted by co-researchers of color, it is essential for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, especially white individuals, to take responsibility for their own self-development without disregarding the needs of others. We grapple with the tension between the pursuit of freedom and agency inherent in queerness and the responsibility and reciprocity within the community, particularly among those at the intersections of marginalization. This intersectional lens not only complicates our understanding of thriving but also informs our development of collective consciousness and the dreaming process, which will be further explored in the following section.

### ***Queer Worldmaking and Queer Utopia***

As articulated by Zaino (2021) queer worldmaking entails a deliberate rejection of cis-heteronormativity through a range of social practices, cultural productions, and political activities. Central to the queer worldmaking project is not only the rejection from cis-heteronormative standards but also the centering of queer and trans joy, hope, desire, freedom, agency, and futurity. The notion of queer utopia, introduced by Muñoz (2009) exemplifies such worldmaking endeavors. Muñoz (2009) characterizes queer utopia as an imaginative realm that

empowers 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to challenge the constraints of the present and envision alternative futures, while simultaneously decentering cis-heterosexual identities and instilling hope in marginalized communities. Muñoz (2009) argues that queer utopia is not simply an idealized or perfected version of the present nor a version that moves queerness closer to homonormativity, but rather a radically different and transformative world. To embrace the radical potential of queer worldmaking, co-researchers embarked on freedom dreaming and engaged in the imaginative exploration of a radical future. However, this practice was not an easy task, as our ability to imagine is often circumscribed by our individual lived experiences. While Muñoz (2009) presents queer utopia not as a fixed destination but as an "opening horizon" (p. 91) — a space for individuals to contemplate the potentiality of the future and envision alternative modes of existence that embrace queerness — this dissertation delves into both the substance of the envisioned queer utopia and the process by which co-researchers arrive at it.

As previously mentioned, co-researchers embarked on the envisioning process of queer utopia both individually, through interviews, and collectively, during focus group sessions. This shift from individualistic to collective imagination reveals significant disparities in both the content and the ways in which co-researchers envisioned queer utopia. In the individual interview, co-researchers proposed practical ways in which they thought the university could create a more affirming environment for queer and trans students. Their recommendations encompassed a wide range of initiatives, including adhering to the recommendations outlined in the Campus Pride Index, establishing more gender-neutral spaces such as housing and bathrooms, adopting inclusive practices such as introducing inclusive language and pronouns, increasing education to foster allyship and improve the campus climate, providing spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ students to explore their identities, creating opportunities for community



building, and fostering a climate where students can authentically express themselves without fear of violence or commodification by the institution. These proposals were deeply intertwined with the collective experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the institution as utopian visions often stem from discontent with the current state of affairs and are directly influenced by existing realities, addressing issues that hold personal significance and relevance to individuals (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018).

In this case, the individual utopian visions serve as reflections of the deficiencies of the current environment, envisioning alternatives to address the absence of support within the institution. Co-researchers leveraged their personal experiences and relationships with the institution as a foundation for transforming their visions into tangible realities, linking their conceptions of queer utopia to immediate needs within the present context. While some queer theorists, like Muñoz, may critique the pragmatism inherent in this imagining process, as I will address later, I contend that there is inherent potential within this framework of freedom dreaming. By exposing the shortcomings of the current reality, as argued by Jovchelovitch and Hawlina (2018), this process destabilizes the compulsory nature of the status quo and challenges what is perceived as normal. “The mere existence of an imagined alternative makes the current state of affairs a matter of choice; not only does it introduce the possibility of change, but continuing without change also becomes an option that demands attention and justification” (p.141). In essence, by articulating their desires and demands for institutional change, 2SLGBTQIA+ students continue to hold the institution accountable for its failure to address their needs, framing the institution’s resistance to change as an active choice and an investment in cis-heteronormativity and its future. Furthermore, similar to how some co-researchers expressed frustration with the abstract nature of thriving and sought to anchor it with conventional

benchmarks to render it less daunting and more attainable, this pragmatic approach relocates the utopian vision from the realm of the intangible ‘nowhere’ to the realm of the possible ‘not-yet-here’ (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018), imbuing queer and trans students with a sense of tangibility and generating optimism and advocacy for concrete transformative changes.

However, Muñoz (2009) criticized the pragmatic nature of the modern queer movement, saying:

Gay pragmatic organizing is in direct opposition to the idealist thought that I associate as endemic to a forward-dawning queerness that calls on a no-longer-conscious in the service of imagining a futurity. The not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present. (p. 21)

He argued that pragmatism prevents queer folks from reaching the radical potentials of queerness, challenging the prevalent tendency within contemporary queer activism to prioritize practical immediate gains over expansive visionary futurities. This tension between pragmatism and idealism was evident throughout the co-researchers' imagining process, particularly in the group settings. Despite their desires for a utopian future - one in which they have a glimpse of a world that is free from marginalization, co-researchers often became so fixated on the feasibility and practicality of their ideas that they ultimately abandoned their visions due to perceived realism constraints, adopting and saying something like, “That's not realistic.” This inclination to dismiss ambitious utopian ideals as unrealistic reflects the influence of pragmatic thinking not only within higher education but also in the larger queer discourse, which prioritizes achievable goals over radical transformative possibilities. Muñoz (2009) and many other queer theorists criticized the claim that the politically tangible objectives, such as the rights for 2SLGBTQIA+

people to participate in the normative institution of marriage or their ability to serve in imperialist military forces while being queer or trans, as freedom. Therefore, he drew a distinction between freedom and liberation, claiming that the freedom that comes from assimilationist politics is “mere inclusion in a corrupt and bankrupt social order” (p. 20). As he suggested, embracing the “not-quite-conscious” realm of potentiality is essential for transcending the confines of the present and envisioning alternative futures that challenge the status quo.

On the other hand, this sheds light on how queer and trans students perceive what changes are realistically achievable on campus. Co-researchers' frustration with the institution's inaction regarding seemingly possible changes, such as gender-neutral housing or streamlining the name change process, can amplify the difficulty of envisioning radical transformations. Oftentimes, marginalized students often find themselves in the position of not only highlighting systemic issues but also being expected to propose tangible solutions for the institution to implement and address. This burden not only adds extreme stress and responsibility onto marginalized students but also shapes their perception of possibilities, framing them more as logistical challenges to be solved rather than potentials to be realized. This became evident when queer and trans students attempted to design a space using a “trickle-up” (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018) high-impact practices approach, aimed at having the institution prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable students while acknowledging the oppressive contexts faced by those with multiple minoritized identities in higher education. Instead of fully engaging in the imaginative process for such a space, they found themselves preoccupied with devising a system for the institution to quantify individuals' marginality. By prioritizing what the institution would do, co-researchers inadvertently aligned with institutional logic and its constraints rather than embracing the expansive and radical nature of queerness. This adherence to institutional logic

often leads to political pessimism rather than hope, with students feeling that the only path to institutional reform or the creation of a utopian 2SLGBTQIA+ space is to dismantle existing structures entirely and start anew, requiring a societal "apocalyptic" event to break free from current realities and structures in order to start dreaming.

This sentiment embodies a manifestation of queer pessimism within the anti-relational stance of queer theory, which inherently opposes Muñoz's call for hope. Queer pessimism embraces "the romance of singularity and negativity" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 10) as a means of disengaging from envisioning a hopeful future, thereby rejecting cis-heteronormativity. As Kelley (2002) asserts, the questions surrounding the envisioning of freedom and liberatory spaces are seldom raised and often relegated to the background of oppositional thinking. Marginalized individuals, hyper-aware of the oppressive forces they endure, tend to fixate on what they oppose, overshadowing the focus on what they support due to its complexity, uncertainty, and expansive nature. However, it is within these complexities, uncertainties, and expansiveness that utopia lies – what Muñoz (2009) refers to as potentiality. The fixation on pragmatism grounds co-researchers in imagining the possibilities of what might happen rather than the potentiality of what could happen. This preoccupation with the tangibility of a radical future engenders overwhelming feelings of impossibility and disappointment, leading to a refusal to engage with the freedom dreaming of a better world. Yet, Muñoz (2009) urges us to risk the feeling of disappointment if certain impasses are to be resisted by thinking towards collectivity and queer relationality.

Throughout this exercise, co-researchers oscillated between pessimistic sentiments and a desire to refuse engagement with institutional politics, and the hopeful realization of the potentiality within the queer collective. Ahmed (2020) challenges the binary approach between

queer pessimism and queer utopianism, arguing that queer pessimism calls us to refuse to organize around hope for a certain kind of future – one that perpetuates systems of domination. In this sense, co-researchers embrace this tension as they forge ahead in envisioning a queer utopia, devising a strategy of refusing to engage with institutional logic and disidentifying with the institution while crafting a subversive queer future organized around community and collectivity. Co-researchers did not conceptualize queer utopia as attainable within the institutional context given its constraints and limitations. However, the hope of queer utopia is found in the connections and relationships of queer and trans kinship, guiding each other through survival from the past to the present as a path forward to the future. By charting this course, co-researchers underscored the significance of centering reciprocity and the responsibilities of individuals to the collective, viewing relationships as transformative rather than transactional. It necessitates 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to cultivate a queer politics centered on relations, setting aside interpersonal differences to support and hold each other accountable in their pursuit of individual and collective happiness.

In conclusion, this dissertation has delved deeply into the intricate processes through which 2SLGBTQIA+ students engaged in queer worldmaking and envisioned a queer utopia within the context of higher education. Through the lens of queer worldmaking, co-researchers have actively rejected cis-heteronormative standards and centered queer joy, hope, and agency in their collective endeavors. The concept of queer utopia, as introduced by Muñoz (2009), has served as a guiding principle, empowering marginalized communities to challenge present constraints and imagine alternative futures that prioritize collective thriving. Throughout this exploration, tensions between pragmatism and idealism have emerged, reflecting broader debates within contemporary queer activism. While some criticize the prioritization of practical

immediate gains over radical transformative possibilities, others argue that pragmatic thinking offers tangible pathways for advocacy and concrete transformative changes. However, this tension also holds potential for transformative change, as it exposes the shortcomings of the current reality and challenges institutions to be accountable for their failure to address marginalized students' needs. Ultimately, the vision of queer utopia is not a fixed destination but an ongoing process of collective imagining and worldmaking. By centering reciprocity and collective responsibility, 2SLGBTQIA+ students can navigate the complexities of pragmatism and idealism while advocating for radical transformative possibilities. Through collective action and solidarity, marginalized communities can continue to challenge oppressive structures and envision alternative futures that prioritize joy, freedom, and collective thriving.

## **Implications for Theory & Research**

### ***Desire-Based Approach and Imagining Futures***

This dissertation emerges against the backdrop of a concerning surge in attacks on the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the United States. For instance, 2023 witnessed a historic high of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation, with 510 bills recorded by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Oklahoma notably ranked third in the number of bills introduced that year, with 35 anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills. Alarming, the trend continued into 2024, with Oklahoma introducing the highest number of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills at 54 by the time this dissertation concludes. This escalating assault, coupled with the proliferation of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) laws, has profound implications for educational institutions, particularly in higher education. These legislative measures obstruct access to diverse curricula, affirming facilities, and life-saving resources, while also limiting institutional capacity to provide crucial support and interventions for queer and trans students and combating homo- and trans-phobia both within

and beyond campuses. In light of this political climate, there may be a natural inclination to dwell on negativity and pessimism or to view 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences solely through a damaged-based lens of trauma and hardship (Tuck, 2009; Strunk et al., 2023). However, this dissertation contends that it is now more imperative than ever to center positive experiences and affective states such as hope, joy, and desire as foundational elements for imagining alternative futures where queer and trans individuals can thrive. Through a desire-based approach, this research elucidates the desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within the context of higher education and how they produce pockets and moments of queer thrival amid hostile environments. By doing so, it not only exposes the oppression experienced by queer and trans students and critiques the systems perpetuating it but also centers 2SLGBTQIA+ students' desires and agency in pursuing queer thrival. An integral aspect of queer and trans studies is not only to question and challenge the *what is* in the present but also to envision *what could be* in the realm of the not-yet-here. This desire-based approach also privileges collective knowledge, drawing from not only the queer and trans community but also from communities of color, Indigenous communities. By integrating practices of freedom dreaming and collective imagination, queer and trans studies can transcend mere deconstruction and critique, to imagine and enact more liberatory futures in education (Strunk et al., 2023). In essence, by centering desire, coupled with collective imagination and a commitment to liberation, this dissertation offers a pathway towards envisioning and realizing a more equitable and affirming future for queer and trans individuals within higher education and beyond. As we navigate these challenging times, it is imperative for theory and research to continue centering the desire and agency of marginalized populations and imagining liberatory futures. By centering queer desire and collective imagination in research, we pave the way for envisioning a future where every

individual, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, can authentically thrive without fear.

### *Utilizing Intersectionality*

While existing research in higher education often centers on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, there is a pressing need for a broader exploration of queer and trans higher education research that delves into the multifaceted identities of these students, particularly those who face marginalization based on intersecting identities. This study has illuminated disparities in campus experiences between white 2SLGBTQIA+ students and their peers of color, yet there remains a plethora of identity markers warranting further investigation, including disability, religion, nationality, and more. Additionally, it is important to not only look at the differences in experiences or the ways in which these students must negotiate their identities within higher education but also look at how higher education continues to perpetuate or act as a site or system of domination. By shifting the focus to the institution as an active agent in perpetuating various systems of power, including cis-heteronormativity, racism, colonization, white supremacy, and ableism, it helps illuminate not only the reasons behind those differences in experiences but also why those inequities continue to be tolerated if not actively upheld.

Both intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997) and the matrix of domination (Collins, 1991) offer invaluable frameworks that help to deepen our understanding of individuals who experience intersecting systems of oppression; they enable us to explore the various ways these systems exert power and how marginalized communities continue to survive, persist, and resist within them. Specifically, Collins's matrix of domination prompts us to explore various dimensions of power, encompassing structural, institutional, cultural, and individual realms (Collins et al., 2019). While this dissertation has highlighted the imperative of unveiling systems



of oppression and 2SLGBTQIA+ students' resistance to them, it underscores the need to confront all forms of oppression holistically, recognizing their interconnectedness. By doing so, we can devise interventions to combat these oppressive systems, empower marginalized students to persist and resist, and reimagine higher education practices to foster thriving for all marginalized populations.

To deepen our understanding of the experiences of queer and trans students with multiple intersecting identities, it is essential to employ diverse methodologies and conceptual frameworks. This approach allows researchers to examine the complex interplay of issues and systems of oppression that impact 2SLGBTQIA+ students' lives. The use of frameworks from field of studies such as queer of color critique, crip theory, Indigenous theory, and critical whiteness is particularly crucial in critically analyzing the multifaceted experiences of these students. The dissertation leverages frameworks derived from queer and trans epistemology, as well as Indigenous epistemology, to not only capture the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students but also to highlight the values of communal reciprocity and responsibility. Such frameworks are vital as they provide a lens through which the complexities of identity, oppression, resilience, and community, However, employing these frameworks involves not just the application of diverse theoretical perspectives but also a commitment to ethical scholarship. Decolonizing scholarship in queer and trans studies involves acknowledging and critiquing the colonial foundations of research methodologies and theories. This is crucial to avoid perpetuating colonial attitudes and biases within academic inquiry. While this dissertation makes use of Indigenous epistemologies to enrich the analysis, it is important to state explicitly that I am not an Indigenous person. This acknowledgment serves as an invitation for Indigenous

scholars to engage with, expand upon, or critique the interpretations presented, ensuring that the scholarship remains responsive and accountable to the communities it seeks to represent.

Moreover, there is a growing body of literature exploring the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color, particularly how they navigate and make sense of their intersecting gender, sexual, and racial identities. This increasing research is crucial in highlighting the unique challenges and strategies employed by these students to navigate different systems of oppression. However, the examination of identity and institutional domination should not be limited to students of color. The experiences of white queer and trans students also require further examination through the lens of critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies help illuminate how whiteness operates as a normative force within queer and trans spaces, marginalizing and othering non-white identities even within already marginalized communities. By critically examining how white queer and trans students understand and navigate their identities, researchers can uncover the ways in which racial privilege intersects with queer and trans identities. This examination can reveal the complexities of allyship, complicity, and the potential reinforcement of racial hierarchies within queer and trans communities. Moreover, employing critical whiteness studies in research on queer and trans identities challenges the often unmarked and unexamined positionality of whiteness, which can invisibilize its impacts and perpetuate its dominance. This is essential for moving towards a more equitable and just academic practice that truly considers all aspects of identity and oppression.

### ***Queer Intra-Community Conversations***

As a part of participatory-action research, this dissertation was collaboratively developed with queer and trans students, with a broad audience in mind extending beyond university administrations and the academic community to include our 2SLGBTQIA+ community. While

existing research predominantly focuses on the impact of external oppressions faced by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, scant attention is paid to the internal challenges among its members. For instance, while there is considerable literature on the challenges faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and an increasing body of work on the experiences of queer and trans students of color within queer spaces, there is a noticeable absence of research addressing how queer and trans students navigate coalition-building across racial and other identity divides. For example, Blockett (2017) investigated how Black queer men interact within predominantly white 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces and their efforts in forming and finding community support. In contrast, Patton and colleagues (2019) examined the experiences of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), focusing on how they access resources related to gender and sexuality while feeling distinctly visible in queer spaces. This dissertation delves into the nuanced complexities of queer and trans experiences on campus, revealing them not as a singular experience but as a myriad of internal issues the community grapples with. Pitcher and Simmons (2020) called for further examination of the racial dynamics in queer and trans communities, emphasizing the importance of fostering connections, community, and kinship among queer and trans college students through recognizing the complexities of their identities to improve retention. This research offers a deeper understanding of the experiences of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community beyond the broader strokes of external oppression but also examines the internal challenges, such as dynamics of power, privilege, and exclusion that often go unnoticed or unaddressed.

While some may critique the reluctance to expose our internal challenges to the larger academia, I argue that such transparency serves to underscore the pervasive issues within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, whether it be the perpetuation of whiteness or the ongoing critique of

intra-community issues like gender policing and identity politics. This underscores the significance of ethical considerations within queer and trans relations and challenges the essentialist notion that 2SLGBTQIA+ identity labels serve as an immediate unifying factor or that communities within marginalized identities can automatically coexist. Moreover, investigating intra-community issues allows for a more holistic approach to queer and trans liberation. While external oppressions certainly pose significant barriers to 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, internalized biases and conflicts within the community can also hinder the process of developing a collective identity or consciousness that progresses towards equality and justice. By identifying and addressing these internal challenges, researchers can contribute to creating safer, more affirming spaces for all members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, thereby advancing collective liberation efforts. Moving forward, further research should delve deeper into the dynamics of intra-community relations, exploring the intricacies of coalition-building and solidarity across diverse identity lines within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

## **Implications for Practice**

### ***Ethical Leadership from University Administration***

In this dissertation, the plea for ethical leadership from university administrations is deeply rooted in the lived experiences and collective desires of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. 2SLGBTQIA+ students, alongside other historically marginalized groups, are acutely aware of the political and climate pressures as well as the legal and administrative constraints that universities face. However, students are asking ethical leadership from university administration. In their exploration of professional ethics among student affairs administrative staff in higher education, Reybold and colleagues (2008) addressed the complexities of ethical leadership and presented a multifaceted view of professional ethics as the nexus of societal standards,

institutional standards, and personal values. The authors stressed the inadequacy of relying solely on personal or professional values for ethical decision-making in complex university settings. Instead, they advocated for ethical environments fostered through modeling and relational leadership, where ethical considerations are interwoven into daily administrative practices. This approach emphasizes the importance of continuous ethical engagement and the development of frameworks that support ethical behaviors across all levels of university administration, thereby ensuring that decisions are aligned with the institution's commitment to fairness and integrity (Reybold et al., 2008).

During politically challenging times, queer and trans students urge university administrators to prioritize their safety and well-being as they continue to navigate and consider institutional changes. This entails challenging the university's tendency to be overly compliant with anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation out of fear of potential legal repercussions. Instead, universities must assert their political and social power by taking a clear stance against sanctioned violence stemming from state legislation. At minimum, this call to resist their tendency of legal compliance and embrace a proactive stance in safeguarding their rights and well-being challenges universities to reevaluate their role not just as educational institutions, but as moral agents with the power to shape social norms and advocate for justice. Despite the critique of the performativity of visibility politics, the institutional transparency in their process, as well as explicitly stated support from the institution, is crucial to cultivate hope and promote a sense of belonging and support for queer and trans students. The current perceived neutral stance regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ issues only perpetuates the status quo and fails to address systemic inequalities. Rather than adopting institutional logics that perpetuate cis-heteronormative norms, university leadership must join students in refusing to adhere to such frameworks. Giving in to

political pressures and ignoring the presence of 2SLGBTQIA+ students on campus or critical institutional efforts for those marginalized communities due to fear of legislative backlash reflects a scarcity mindset that further marginalizes students. Instead, universities should uphold their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by actively supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ students and resisting discriminatory laws and policies. Furthermore, as anti-DEI and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation continue to spread across the nation, it is crucial to critically examine how university administrations and institutions respond to hostile legislation that seeks to undermine the civil rights of students and community members, as well as response to the calls for action demanded by student leaders, activists, and community advocates. While it might be tempting to view these issues as unique to Oklahoma or other conservative states, it is essential for scholars and practitioners from various institutional and state backgrounds to critically examine our practices in different political climates to further our collective commitment to social justice and liberation in the field of higher education.

This dissertation underscores the unique challenges and efforts in queer worldmaking by students in conservative, rural, non-coastal states like the University of Oklahoma, aiming to enhance their livability in such contexts. Although expecting ethical leadership from university administrations may seem modest, 2SLGBTQIA+ students often perceive the university's adherence to ethical codes, policies, and commitment to the well-being of marginalized students as an almost insurmountable challenge.. As Catalano (2015) pointed out that (trans) students' low expectations for institutional support are not the issue, this dissertation highlights the deep distrust that marginalized students have toward institutions, a sentiment rooted in their current experiences within the university. Although the larger call for equity and justice may seem like a utopian hope, ethical leadership from university administrations appears to be a crucial step

toward achieving this goal. However, it is important to recognize that ethical leadership, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own to achieve liberation. It serves as the foundation upon which more comprehensive reforms can be built. This necessitates a paradigm shift in how institutional leadership approaches their decision-making processes: rather than succumbing to fear-based narratives and scarcity mindsets, institutions must embrace a bold vision of equity and justice. This means challenging the very foundations of cis-heteronormativity and dismantling the structural barriers that impede the full participation and thriving of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within academia. At its core, the call for ethical leadership is a call for universities to embody their professed values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in tangible and transformative ways. It requires courage, empathy, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic inequalities. Effective leadership should thus serve as a catalyst for these broader changes, not as an endpoint. Only by embracing this ethos of ethical leadership can universities truly fulfill their mission of providing the best possible educational experiences for students, allowing them to thrive and fostering their self-development and community engagement. Rather than relegating these aspirations to institutional mirages of unachievable ideals in our current dystopian reality, universities must actively work towards realizing them as tangible outcomes for all students.

### ***Moving from Harm-Reduction to Thriving-Centered Approach***

Another paradigm shift that 2SLGBTQIA+ students are advocating for in university practices is a move away from harm-reduction strategies towards prioritizing the ability of queer and trans students to thrive, emphasizing the need for universities to actively cultivate environments that prioritize their holistic well-being and development. This goes beyond the mere provision of physical safety measures to encompass a comprehensive approach that

addresses the multifaceted needs and experiences of queer and trans individuals on campus. Nicolazzo and colleagues (2018) challenged the idea of “best practices” as a point of arrival that prioritize the institutional compliance to a set of recommended practices over students’ needs, arguing that this standardized approach lack intentionality. To bring their sentiment around practices surrounding gender-neutral housing practices to the larger context, student affairs practitioners must critically reflect on our responsibilities as not to get the university to be in compliant with “best practices,” but to create an environment and practices in which queer and trans students can thrive. Rather than viewing safety as a reactionary measure to mitigate risks, institutions should embrace a proactive stance that centers on the empowerment and agency of 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Rather than focusing solely on ensuring the safety of 2SLGBTQIA+ students within a hostile and harmful gendered system, practitioners and university leadership must shift their perspective to consider how 2SLGBTQIA+ students can thrive.

For instance, housing arrangements for trans and nonbinary students should not only ensure physical safety but also foster a sense of belonging and community. This entails creating living spaces where students can freely express their gender identities and connect with peers who not only share their identities and interests but also affirm and support them. Moreover, universities should implement policies that facilitate gender-affirming practices, such as allowing students to easily update their personal information and access necessary resources without facing bureaucratic barriers or discrimination. This approach contrasts with the punitive nature of harm-reduction strategies, which often focuses on mitigating immediate risks without addressing underlying systemic issues. The institution should refrain from penalizing 2SLGBTQIA+ students for undertaking the self-exploration process, especially when it inconveniences others or is thought of as a potential opportunity for cis-heterosexual students to commit potentially



harmful acts. Such punitive measures perpetuate harm and unfairly target 2SLGBTQIA+ students for actions that do not warrant punishment, exacerbating the existing inequalities and biases within the institution.

It is essential to recognize that harm reduction and thriving-centered approaches should not be seen as a false binary; rather, they are concurrent necessities that institutions must integrate effectively. However, an overemphasis on harm reduction can limit our ability to reimagine educational environments. To move beyond this limitation, it is crucial that student affairs practitioners acknowledge that while harm reduction is vital for immediate safety, it should not be the end goal. Instead, there should be an equal, if not greater, emphasis on creating conditions under which queer and trans students are not merely surviving but actively thriving. This involves a shift from viewing safety as a reactive, compliance-driven endeavor to adopting proactive strategies that foster an empowering and inclusive academic environment. By focusing predominantly on minimizing harm, we risk constraining marginalized students within exclusionary or even harmful settings.

Ultimately, the shift towards prioritizing the ability of 2SLGBTQIA+ students to thrive represents a transformative approach to institutional practices. Pitcher (2015) championed this transformative change by promoting an intersectional social justice praxis that addresses the neoliberal influences on higher education. By critiquing how harm-reduction approaches might perpetuate neoliberal agendas through compliance with institutional logics, Pitcher proposed both analytical and practical strategies for an Intersectional Social Justice Student Affairs Praxis that undermines neoliberalism while promoting equity and justice. This dissertation encourages higher education practitioners to reassess their roles, responsibilities, and intentions within Student Affairs praxis, particularly in how they support the liberation for 2SLGBTQIA+ students

within oppressive systems. It requires a commitment to challenging existing power dynamics and dismantling oppressive structures in order to create truly inclusive and empowering educational environments. By embracing this ethos of ethical leadership and centering the well-being and agency of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, universities can fulfill their mission of fostering the personal and intellectual growth of all students.

### ***Challenge and Support in Identity Work***

The 2SLGBTQIA+ resources centers serve as a vital sanctuary for queer and trans students on college campuses, offering not just physical space but also a nurturing community and invaluable support and advocacy from staff. In the face of a campus climate rife with homo- and transphobia, where students constantly grapple with microaggressions, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center stands as a haven for respite and a hub for advocacy and activism. It serves as a centralized resource hub for 2SLGBTQIA+ services, staffed by supportive individuals, and provides opportunities for students to not only nurture their queer and trans identities but also to cultivate leadership skills through engagement in student activities and activism. However, the center is not immune to challenges. One pressing issue is the pervasive presence of whiteness within the space, which can render it inaccessible, unwelcoming, or even hostile to queer and trans students of color. This challenge has become even more difficult to curate spaces that meet the specific needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ students of color due to the increase in anti-DEI legislations that perceived those spaces as preferential treatment.

Harper and Quaye (2009) explored the "myth of magical thinking" (p. 7), the belief that merely providing resources and services is adequate for student education. As they argue that exposure does not equal true learning, this dissertation illustrated that the mere existence of institutional queer spaces does not guarantee the emergence of community or successful cross-

cultural interactions leading to community building. As highlighted in chapter 5, co-researchers identified issues such as trauma-bonding, gatekeeping of resources, and policing of labels and identity expressions in said community space. In response to this, co-researchers advocate for increased intervention, guidance, and accountability measures to support students' development. While the focus of student affairs support staff often lies on creating an environment of affirmation due to the frequent encounters with hostility and violence, co-researchers emphasized the importance of balancing individual self-exploration with collective experiences. They stressed the need for students to approach their exploration intentionally and consider their personal responsibilities to the collective. Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) discussed the role of student affairs professionals to help students to understand this balance between self and others as well as expose students to the awareness of intra-community power dynamics in order to create community and mutual respect on campus.

Co-researchers recognized that the 2SLGBTQIA+ Resources Center is a safe space for students to explore, but there is a risk that some 2SLGBTQIA+ students may overstep boundaries and engage in gatekeeping behaviors within community spaces or allow toxic behaviors to persist under the guise of challenging dominant culture. This underscores the notion that support alone is insufficient for fostering effective partnerships in student learning. The Learning Partnership model, introduced by Baxter Magolda (2004), offers a framework that many student affairs practitioners have embraced. This model promotes autonomy and student choice in the knowledge production process, positioning educators as supportive figures who collaborate with students to address their challenges while respecting their autonomy. However, educators must also provide appropriate challenges and accountability as critical interventions for student identity development and community building. While this may pose discomfort for

practitioners, as it may seem akin to identity policing in a space meant to support students' identities, it underscores the need for educators and student affairs professionals to leverage their expertise and engage in practices that foster intra-community dialogues and restorative justice. This approach should not be punitive but rather should promote individual critical reflection and a sense of responsibility toward the collective. Ultimately, by embracing both support and challenge within 2SLGBTQIA+ community spaces, universities can cultivate environments where all students, regardless of their identities, can thrive authentically and contribute meaningfully to the collective well-being.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research delves into the nuanced experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in higher education, shedding light on the challenges they encounter and their navigation of hostile environments. Embracing the theoretical frameworks of Tuck's desire-based approach and Muñoz's concept of queer utopia, the study reveals the complex interplay between individual desires and collective imagination in shaping the higher education landscape. By centering a desire-based approach and collective imagination toward a queer utopia, this research highlights the agency and resilience of queer and trans students, showcasing their ability to thrive and freedom dream despite adversity. Through participatory action research and visual methods, the study uncovers the dynamic nature of queer thriving, illustrating how these students navigate, resist, and reimagine institutional norms through queer and trans ways of knowing.

Furthermore, this study concludes that queer and trans students' conceptualization of thriving surpasses the institution's narrow definition of success, prioritizing holistic development and communal reciprocity. Despite encountering challenges and violence within institutional settings, these students engage in acts of worldmaking and freedom dreaming, paving the way

toward a queer utopia that transcends oppressive structures. The research highlights how 2SLGBTQIA+ students' vision of a queer utopia is informed by their individual experiences as well as a shared sense of responsibility and reciprocity within the collective community. It encourages students to disidentify with institutional norms and resist engaging with institutional logics, situating their conceptualization of queer utopia beyond spatial boundaries and within their collective identity and the ethics of queer and trans relationality. This charts a path forward in the process of queer worldmaking, capturing how 2SLGBTQIA+ students cultivate critical hope, foster community, and build coalitions across identity divides.

This research calls for a fundamental shift in higher education paradigms, urging institutions to move beyond mere harm reduction as the sole focus and embrace a thriving-centered approach that prioritizes the holistic well-being and empowerment of all students. Moving forward, it is imperative for universities and colleges to heed the voices and experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, recognizing their agency and contributions in reshaping the educational landscape. Ethical leadership and genuine allyship are essential in fostering inclusive environments where these students can thrive. By challenging systemic injustices and championing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, institutions can pave the way for a future where every student, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, can fully realize their potential within the higher education ecosystem. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to envision and realize a more equitable and affirming future for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals within higher education and beyond. By centering desire, embracing intersectionality, and fostering inclusive community spaces, universities can take meaningful steps towards creating environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to pursue their aspirations without fear. As we progress, it is crucial for theory, research, and

practice to continue centering the voices and experiences of marginalized populations, working towards a more just and inclusive society for all.

## Interview Protocol

### Phase 1: Individual Interview

1. How do you define thriving on campus, and what does it mean to you personally?
2. What are some factors that contribute to your sense of well-being and success as a college student?
3. Can you describe a time when you felt like you were thriving on campus, and what made that experience so positive for you?
4. In an ideal college setting, what would you need to thrive academically, socially, and personally?
5. How do you envision yourself thriving in the future, both in college and beyond?
6. How are you representing those thoughts in your artwork? What are some visual representations of the ideas of thriving that you mentioned? Why did you pick those symbols specifically for said ideas?
7. Where do you feel belonging and thriving on campus right now? How were you supported as an LGBTQ+ student?
8. If we are envisioning a university that is affirming to LGBTQ+ students, what would you want to keep from the current system? Why?
9. In an ideal college setting, what would be different about the college experience that would help all students thrive, regardless of their background or identity?
10. How have you observed higher education perpetuating cis heteronormativity? What impact does it have on LGBTQ+ students' experiences?

11. In what ways do you believe higher education fails to address the specific needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, and what changes would you like to see in this regard?
12. How do LGBTQ+ students carve out and build their own space on campus? What do those spaces look like? How do LGBTQ+ students engage in building those spaces?
13. What about queer culture that you want to see on campus? In what way and why?
14. What dreams do you have for future LGBTQ+ college students to ensure they have a positive and inclusive college experience? What does that look like?



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