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Trans Futures in the Present Moment

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science in University Honors, Social Work, and Social Sciences

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Abstract

The current climate for trans folks in the U.S. remains increasingly hostile and many researchers have called attention to the “joy deficit” within the existing trans literature (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). This study investigates what trans individuals are currently doing to survive, thrive, and resist in a belligerent socio-political climate. To answer this, five community conversations with 25 participants were held using a semi-structured conversation guide. Within the analysis, the central theme that emerged was that trans individuals are using their communities to create radical futures. Our communities are supporting us through mutual aid and radical acts of care, which allows us to achieve joy and belonging.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my t4t community, our existence is resistance and we should never take that for granted. Dedicated to the trans and gender-diverse ancestors; I hope for a future beyond our wildest dreams. Dedicated to the folks whose concepts of gender and existence predate settler colonialism, western imperialism, and white supremacy. Dedicated to trans youth throughout the world, you are the future and you deserve to become trans adults. Dedicated to the trans lives lost at the hands of the anti-trans hate machine, you will never be forgotten. I hope for a future in which we never have to say goodbye to our trans siblings too soon. I hope that this work inspires a future where trans people are not lost at the hands of state violence, and where trans folks go from surviving to thriving. A future of trans joy and community.
Trans Futures in the Present Moment

“I remember distinctly last year when 360 anti-trans bills were posted in legislatures. I was like, I fucking just need to not have any more cis friends, and I also quit caring about even wanting to date cis people. Like, I only want to fill my life with trans people.”

- Study Participant (white, transsexual, woman).

This inquiry process began at a time when anti-trans legislation was on the rise throughout the United States. Since this inquiry's inception in early 2022, there have been over 460 bills restricting trans and gender-diverse individuals; this is a conservative estimate based on a variety of sources (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022; HRC Staff, 2023; Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.). These bills have and will continue to have material effects on trans individuals (Herron, 2023; Richgels et al., 2021). In this time of mounting political violence, trans researchers have turned their attention to the "joy deficit" in research on trans people's experiences. Multiple researchers have advocated shifting away from deficit-based research by focusing on the importance of joy in the lives of marginalized communities (Holloway, 2023; Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). This research is pivotal in order to envision a future where trans people thrive.

This thesis investigates the ways trans people and communities engage in radical resistance via world-making. By world-making, I refer to the idea of creating and visioning futures that currently do not exist. This work was inspired by my lived experiences as a white, queer, transfeminine individual, my desire to transform the deficit-focused approach to research on trans people, and the current moment of trans politics. Rather than focus on responses to these bills or other state-based solutions, I set out to answer the questions: how do trans folks

\[1\] Estimation based on reporting from a variety of agencies, this estimate is focused on trans-specific bills.
engage in prefigurative politics and world-making as a means of resistance? What are the ways that this world-making happens on an organized level and in the everyday lives of trans people?

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of what trans individuals are currently doing to survive, thrive, and resist. In addition to this, I designed the study to allow for a space for trans individuals to be together in community and learn from each other. The hope was that everyone might take the knowledge gleaned from the sessions and apply it to their lives, communities, and contexts. At this point, I will provide a brief note on the language being used, then review relevant literature, and then turn to my methodological choices. This is followed by a description of the emerging key themes, focusing on how participants found joy and belonging through mutual aid and radical acts of care with other trans people.

A Note on Language

At the time of writing, I made every effort to honor the ways that participants and authors referred to themselves. The pronouns that are used by participants are the ones they reported using at the time of encounter. I also want to acknowledge that I do not intend for any of this work to homogenize, colonize, and white-wash concepts of gender. This work is not intended to be a “trans 101” or the basics of gender diversity. If you want to learn more about transness or a critique of the idea of “trans 101” I suggest exploring works like binaohan’s *decolonizing trans/gender 101* and Koyama’s *The Transfeminist Manifesto*. I do want to note that I fluctuate between using trans, transness, gender-diverse, among other words as there is not one single word that can capture all the nuance that comes with gender. I use some of these words together and on their own, none of which is to differentiate from the others.

Literature Review

The main frameworks that guided this work are the concepts of world-making and prefigurative politics. Queer world-making is the imagining, visioning, and creation of futures that do not conform to the matrix of domination that has been imposed on marginalized lives
(Berlant & Warner, 1998; Hill Collins, 2000; Muñoz, 1999; Yep, 2003). It is a way of thinking that does not have a predetermined destination and is rooted in collective liberation. Queer world-making then uses the concept of prefigurative politics—putting our values and activism into practice to create radical futures (Fians, 2022). Queer world-making includes creating visions for the future and prefigurative politics is putting those visions into practice. In order to realize change, we must be willing to engage in praxis now. Together this means that radical trans futurism is a visionary resistance tool moving towards trans joy rather than just survival.

Within this framework, there are a few important theories that I rely on. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a critical lens to examine one's positionality or social location (Cooper, 2015). Fundamental to intersectionality are Black feminism and Black feminist thought. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discusses the use of intersectionality as a way of examining specific intersecting oppressions and then referring to the organization of all systems of oppression as the “matrix of domination”. This matrix then combined within trans-world-making means that this work is not a single-issue fight. Meaning the fight for liberation must center on Black, Brown, disabled, and low-income lives. This future building demands interrupting dominant understandings of transness by re-indigenizing gender, deconstructing the cis-trans binary, and divesting from the white supremacist ideals that created the dominant paradigm of gender in the Western world (Chaudhry, 2019; Chen & cárdenas, 2019; Malatino, 2019). Part of this work means recognizing that Western concepts of gender and the cis/trans binary cannot be mapped onto Black bodies (Chaudhry, 2019), Indigenous ways of knowing (Driskill, 2004), or any other culture. It also is salient to remember that those who experience marginalization are often the ones who are creating mainstream culture, in turn creating futures (Muñoz, 1999).

These frameworks were used simply because other ways of achieving trans liberation are not actually liberatory at all. As legal scholar Dean Spade (2015) argues, rights-based
frameworks, that are often utilized by large non-profits and governments, do not truly protect or liberate trans lives. Neoliberal political tools like legal protections do not improve the material conditions or life chances of trans folks, especially those that are Black, Brown, disabled, and low-income. These legal protections championed by major gay and lesbian organizations work as tools of cis/heteronormativity by using courts to decide the legitimacy of someone’s gender (Perkins et al., 2022), which ultimately reinforces ideas of gender essentialism. Even then these rights-based legal protections are being questioned and repealed across the U.S. (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022; Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.).

Moving into the idea of community, more precisely trans-specific community, there is the practice, value, and connection of t4t—trans4trans. Cameron Awkward-Rich & Hil Malatino (2022) explain that t4t came from early Craigslist personals and has since evolved into a practice, ethos, and ideal. Still t4t is most often used to describe relationships of all forms where everyone involved is trans. However, this ideal of t4t can break down and become an oppressive system. It has been used as a tool to further marginalize Black communities (Chaudhry, 2019), a tool of institutional gaslighting (Marvin, 2022), and a tool to convince ourselves to do more in the name of community (Greene, 2021; Malatino, 2020). Even though a community is t4t, it can still be a space that perpetuates white supremacy and burnout culture. As Malatino (2020) discusses, it is important to understand the effects of assuming a caretaker role, especially when you are already dealing with the effects of marginalization. Even so, t4t has the power to provide respite and care in the interregnum, which can allow trans folks to live joyful full lives (Malatino, 2019). As Amira Lundy-Harris (2022), a scholar of Black trans kinship, explains, t4t—when viewed using Black feminist thought—has the power to vastly expand our understanding of our community. It is a way to be understood and cared for, allowing for reprieve from the harsh realities of living in a political body.
Building on the idea of resisting while living in a political body, Eli Clare—a trans disability justice advocate—(2010) discusses how a lot of trans folks have come to make shame a state of home in their bodies, rather than resisting that shame to make our bodies home. He contributes to the importance of redefining trans research to shift away from deficit-based study. This contributes to the other calls from Holloway and Shuster & Westbrook to focus on joy and resilience in trans literature. Specifically, Clare concludes by highlighting the importance of pride and communities that resist shame.

Finally, as defined in Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next): “Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse” (Spade, 2020, p. 7). Mutual aid is not formalized care and it resists the oppression that exists within the (prison, medical, non-profit, etc.) industrial-complexes. As Spade outlines, the three keys to mutual aid include meeting survival needs while raising critical consciousness, mobilizing for movement work, and actively center collective action. An archetypal example of mutual aid is the Black Panther Party, which provided free breakfast, youth schools, health clinics, clothing, transportation, housing, and so much more (Abu-Jamal & Cleaver, 2016). Beyond this, mutual aid has taken on many forms including crowdfunding (Barcelos, 2022), care while incarcerated (Hwang, 2019), kinship (Lundy-Harris, 2022), information dissemination (Malatino, 2020), and the list goes on. These activities allow people to survive and thrive in life without relying on state-based solutions.

**Methods**

This inquiry’s methods were designed by using ideas from Black feminism, critical trans politics, theorizing on queer world-making, and prefigurative politics. Within Black feminist epistemology, there is a focus placed on the dialogue between individuals and lived experience

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2 For stylistic reasons quotes of non-participants are kept in-line, deviating from the standards of APA 7.
as a part of knowledge (Hill Collins, 2000). Inspired by the ideas of kitchen table conversations—the practice of engaging in critical dialogue in a more informal setting (Parry et al., 2020)—I used the term ‘community conversations’ to describe the focus group-like spaces that were held. One thing to note is that I, the facilitator of these conversations, am a member of the trans community. This was important for the nature of these conversations due to the harm so often caused by cisgender researchers entering trans communities (Harner, 2022). This allowed for the framing of the community conversations to include that the conversations were led by trans folks, for trans futures (see Appendix A for the flier).

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from across the land colonially known as the Portland metropolitan area\(^3\) using tools such as social media, fliers, word of mouth, community groups, and email lists. It was important in recruitment to use a t4t lens. Therefore, recruitment materials were explicit to mention that the research was being done by a trans person for trans people. In addition, I successfully leveraged personal community connections to focus outreach efforts in spaces that trans people tended to frequent (such as social media pages tailored to trans people, gender-neutral bathrooms, trans community centers, etc). Interested individuals filled out an initial screening questionnaire to check for eligibility and gain demographic information. Participants were eligible if they self-identified as trans or gender-diverse and were over the age of 18. Demographic information included zip code, birth year, disability status, and self-description of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Individuals also selected a pseudonym to use for the study and could list any other demographics that they felt were relevant.

Based on the demographics, participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Priority was given to participants who were Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC),

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\(^3\) While recruitment was targeted at the individuals in the Portland metropolitan area, some study participants resided in other areas across the land colonially known as the United States.
transfeminine, disabled, or low-income. The main reason for this was to center the voices of people that are at the center of intersectional movement work, recognizing that people who experience interlocking systems of oppression have lived knowledge of its effects and of ways to resist (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Hill Collins, 2000, pp. 8-13). In addition to this, the land currently known as the Portland metropolitan area has a deep-rooted history of racism and to this day is the whitest city in the U.S. (Curry-Stevens et al., 2010; de Leon & Friesen, 2022).

While there has been a lot of cultural attention to trans women, there are high levels of transmisogyny that exists within this attention (Serano, 2016). The attention given to trans women, especially Black trans women, is predominantly deficits-based, focuses on depictions of violence, and not led by transfeminine individuals (Bailey, 2021). With this information in mind, I decided to explicitly center the voices of those who are most marginalized while sampling. All participants received a small stipend of $20, thanks to funding from the Honors College and the Portland State University President.

**Demographic Summary**

There were a total of 25 trans and gender-diverse individuals who attended the community conversations. Attendees were between the ages of 19 and 62, with an average age of 27. While most of the participants lived in urban environments, seven lived in suburban or rural areas. Most of the participants had some tie to an urban setting, either living there in the past, attending school there, or living near a larger city. About half of the participants identified themselves as having a disability (n=14), with an additional five who reported being in the process of determining if they have a disability or who stated they were unsure. Most reported their sexuality as either bisexual or queer (n=18), and none identified as heterosexual.

Participants identified their racial and/or ethnic identities as white (68%), East Asian-Chinese (8%), East Asian-Southern Chinese (4%), and multi/mixed race (16%). The folks who reported being multi-racial included mentions of Latino, Mexican, Black, and Native
American lineage. Of these, two folks reported being first-generation immigrants. In addition, 20% of participants reported being Jewish. There were folks across the socioeconomic spectrum with 8% being houseless/barely housed, 40% being lower/working class, 36% being middle class, and 8% being upper-middle class.

In the section to disclose other identities/demographics multiple participants disclosed being survivors of trauma, interpersonal violence, or sexual violence (n=5). There were some other one-off reports from different participants including being a single parent, recovering codependent, later in-life transitioner, and returning student.

**Facilitation**

In total, there were five separate community conversations, each with between three and six participants. Each session lasted about 1 hour and 20 minutes, over the Zoom teleconferencing platform, and was recorded with the built-in function. After the introduction of the inquiry and informed consent process, I asked participants to take three minutes to brainstorm a list based on the prompt: “What are all of the things that you are doing for yourself, your community, and your environment to survive and resist?”.

Once the time for brainstorming was up, we began the conversation. Based on knowledge from the literature review process, peer feedback, and consultation with my advisor, I developed the following questions for a semi-structured conversation guide:

- If you feel comfortable can you share one of the things that you do on your list?
- What are things that you do to survive/thrive every day? Have you always done this?
- How are other people involved in that?
- What does resilience/resistance mean and look like to you? How do you cope with the burden of resilience?
- What are things that you wish you did that you just either do not have the time or energy for?
What do you do for other trans people? Or other people who are marginalized?
Are there things that you do differently now in your community that you didn’t do last year, 3 years ago, or 5 years?

At the end of each session, I reminded individuals about the optional follow-up procedures. Participants were offered the opportunity to communicate to the researcher if there were additional thoughts or opinions that they had after the session.

Analysis
After all the community conversations were completed, each of them was transcribed using the auto-transcription feature of Zoom and then further refined to best match the content. The analysis and coding process employed strategies from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on the literature review and the information from field notes, I developed an initial codebook. Coding was performed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative research analysis software. While reading transcripts and doing the first round of coding, multiple concepts did not fit the initial codes so they were added through the process. After the first round of coding, I re-read transcripts to ensure the coding was evenly applied and no concepts were missed. Once the coding process was complete, I engaged in multiple brainstorming sessions to develop connections between codes and define the themes that emerged. Part of these brainstorming sessions included using a relational mapping from situational analysis (Clarke, 2016).

All participants received a copy of the manuscript and were asked to provide thoughts, feedback, and ask questions they had. These two components of the methodology were used to offer multiple chances for participation and are part of a critical participatory study (Fine & Torre, 2021). At the time of writing, two participants provided feedback. In addition, multiple trans colleagues—peers, professors, and community members—were provided drafts to review. Edits were made based on the recommendations of the participants and colleagues.
While the following will discuss the trends noted from the five community conversations, I want to be clear that these are the experiences of the participants. Neither I nor the participants can speak for the “trans community” as a whole; rather, we can speak to our lived experiences in our respective communities. Additionally, many quotes are intentionally included throughout this analysis as the voices of every participant are just as, if not more, important than mine.

**Trans Experiences in Community**

The next sections highlight the different forms that community took in the lives of the participants, which include t4t community, intersectional affinity, and informal spaces. These themes serve as the frame of the participants’ community. Then I turn to mutual aid to show what activities participants do in their communities. Finally, because of the structure and activity of their communities, participants were able to achieve belonging and joy, none of which could have happened without mutual aid and community.

**“Being able to rely on each other is really nice”: The Potential Power of t4t**

Over half of the quotations coded as “community” were specifically about t4t community. As expected based on the literature, a majority of participants discussed the importance of t4t community in their lives. This took on many different forms and was a major point of discussion throughout the community conversations. The types of t4t community included support groups, friends, family, lovers, and social events. Multiple participants reported increased affinity towards other trans folks and described the importance of these relationships. A Chinese transmasculine/non-binary participant stated this in response to the question about surviving and thriving in the day-to-day:

But like, yeah, we’re still here. We get through. I guess things that I do to like help myself thrive ... I just like actively seeking out connection with other trans people. People who
understand it's really nice to like not have to think about all things you do, but you are just out in public, just being able to like rely on each other is really nice.

The idea of “just existing” came up across all of the community conversations and from numerous participants. When in a community with folks of the same identity, it would seem that the effects of oppression are reduced.

While the mentions of t4t community were overwhelmingly positive, there was discussion of participants’ experiences of harm caused by other trans people, or in trans-specific spaces. A multi-racial non-binary trans woman participant said this when talking about some of her experiences with trans friends in online and in-person communities:

Unfortunately realizing that just because someone else is trans does not mean they’re your friend or that they have your best interest at heart. And that has been another painful lesson that I have had to learn, yeah. It’s not, not nice but it's important.

She was discussing some ways that t4t communities have caused harm and speaking to the fact that just because folks share identity does not intrinsically mean they should be in your life.

Bringing back the literature from trans studies, there have been discussions about t4t dynamics breaking down in workplaces, relationships, and communities which has occasionally led to violence (Awkward-Rich & Malatino, 2022; Marvin, 2022). T4t has the power to erase experiences and nuances within communities, and should not be over-idealized.

“Being culturally connected”: The Importance of Intersectional Affinity

In addition to t4t spaces, participants discussed the importance of affinity across social locations such as race, ethnicity, class, disability, and size, among others. Within the focus groups, multiple participants expressed the importance of racial affinity in their community spaces, especially in queer and trans spaces. A southern Chinese transmasculine participant said this about culturally relevant community:
I personally do not relate much to like white trans mascs in particular, or like white trans people in general ... I have a group of friends where I’m from, who are all like queer [and] trans people, and like talking with them, and we tend to bond a lot over food and like making food or getting food that’s like culturally significant to us. So, it’s like the hand in hand, like community of trans, but also like being culturally connected and doing these activities that we otherwise probably wouldn’t be doing.

This individual was speaking about the positive effects that came from being in a community with individuals who also share their experiences. Racism in queer and trans spaces is common, and queer spaces are often dominated by white people (Chaudhry, 2019; Ware, 2017), which creates a need for spaces that decenter whiteness. This has led to many BIPOC individuals creating spaces and places like the one mentioned by this participant, which centers trans-BIPOC individuals and narratives.

In addition to conversations about cultural affinity, there were multiple conversations about accessibility that occurred throughout the community conversations. More specifically, there were multiple mentions of gender-inclusive/neutral spaces not being physically accessible for both disabled and fat individuals. One example was shared by a white transmasculine/non-binary participant discussing a school they went to:

I feel like [access is a] common issue, and like I remember some of the bathrooms that were gender inclusive, they were like up on the fifth floor, and these tiny little things, and it’s like, there was barely any room to get in and out of them...

While the school had gender-neutral bathrooms many of them were not accessible. Just before this quote, they shared about being on a committee for gender-inclusive housing where she and others advocated for more accessible and gender-inclusive housing and bathrooms on campus. This participant went on to discuss the ways that she advocated for more gender-inclusive
spaces that were also accessible to all as a form of resistance. This type of advocacy is vital so that all gender-diverse individuals have a place to take care of their basic needs.

“Let's just get together and draw”: The Need for Informal Spaces

In addition to the elements of t4t and intersectional community, many participants described informal spaces that they occupied. Unlike more formalized, and often non-profit, organizations these informal spaces are more focused on relationships and community building. For example, one biracial trans male participant spoke of community organizing that he had done to start a trans art collective:

And I've done some organizing in the city since I've come back from the desert, and it used to have these big, lofty goals, or there's a march, or there's like this big thing we're doing. And that's great. But for my own temperament and for my expectation, and it seems like for lots of people's nervous systems, it's not a support group, but it supports us, is saying, let's just get together and draw [because] anytime there's a group of trans people that come together great things happen, and sometimes without the pressure of a like really strong goal, or this big push, or this big initiative.

Not only does this experience speak to the importance of space together, but it also demonstrates that support can exist outside of formal or professional contexts. These informal spaces also highlight the assertion that organizing can take many different forms as there is no one way to resist and organize. This art collective is another way that trans people are choosing to create spaces that we belong in and that are designed for us. It demonstrates that multiple forms of organizing are needed to build futures together.

In addition to these in-person community spaces, there are informal communities that span across space, place, and time. Many individuals spoke about the role that online communities have had in their lives. A white genderqueer participant expressed the importance of online community after moving:
Yeah, finding the right pocket on the internet is so important, because often when you move to a new area, you really pick up your roots, and you move them somewhere else, and maybe you don’t have that immediate, connection, to people in the community but online it’s, literally, like, wherever you go and with other people, around the world. It’s very nice.

This individual went on to describe the way that having someone available to chat at any time is beneficial. With the prevalence of suicidality among trans individuals, having the ability to tap into a supportive community at any time is an essential aspect of preventing suicide attempts (Herman et al., 2019; Herman & O’Neill, 2021). Even if an individual does not have any support in the physical world, online spaces can supplement some of that care that is needed for survival. That is not to say that online spheres are perfect, as some participants spoke to intragroup conflict, echoed by showing the negative effects of cyberbullying (Evelyn et al., 2022). Even still, there is evidence to suggest that online spaces have helped increase trans youths’ desire to live (Austin et al., 2020).

**Mutual Aid and Care**

Participants described a wide array of roles, tasks, or functions that their communities served, creating a large bank of mutual aid strategies. In the classic sense of the term mutual aid, many participants described supporting each other with material needs. In addition, many participants supported their community with emotional care and resources relating to their gender and transition. Sub-themes of mutual aid are described below, including material needs care, community care, and voluntary gender work.

**Material Needs Care**

The prime example of mutual aid that was presented in the literature was often related to material needs (Spade, 2020). As the foundation that we need to have our basic material needs met, this was often a point of organizing that was presented by participants. One example of this
that came up frequently was supporting their communities by supplying and making food for each other. The participant referenced earlier who is Chinese and transmasculine/non-binary said this:

I'm always like telling my friends, and like I also have them mostly, mostly trans friends now which is really awesome. So just like checking it on people, and like asking how they're doing, and if they're hungry or something like that ... I'm really big on food, and I feel like nourishing people's bodies is like a direct affirmation like saying that I love and support you.

This person not only expresses the importance of providing food to their friends, but he also intertwines that with making sure that his community is cared for as an act of love. Another participant who was a white transfeminine/genderqueer individual shared that the day they tested positive for COVID-19 a friend of theirs dropped off soup, while the others started a grocery order. They also mentioned that organizing meals was very common after folks in their community had gender-affirming surgery. Distribution of meals like this is engaging in world-making by creating communities that care for each other. This example connects deeply to the idea of community care that will also be discussed, and they call back to the extra level of care that can exist within t4t communities.

Within trans communities, gender-affirming clothing and supplies are often vital to feeling a greater sense of self and safety. To me, this would suggest that gender-affirming clothing is a basic material need for survival. This need was also something that folks addressed in their communities. Another white non-binary/transmasculine individual shared that they received a chest binder from a friend and then gifted it when they had top surgery. This same individual also shared that they would offer to tailor their friends' clothing to be more comfortable and affirming. While this is just one series of examples, many participants spoke to similar ideas of sharing material resources that aided in gender affirmation.
Additionally, like many marginalized communities, trans individuals are disproportionately low-income and poor (James et al., 2016). Through the literature, there are emerging themes around documented uses of crowd-funding platforms such as GoFundMe to pay for basic needs and gender-affirming care, among other things (Barcelos, 2022; Fulton, 2020; Malatino, 2020). Of note, Barcelos, 2022 uses an intersectional lens to explicate whose crowdfunding is more successful. Hint: it is often young, white, transmasculine individuals. This continued inequitable distribution of resources further supports my prioritization of BIPOC, poor, and transfeminine voices in this inquiry. While crowdfunding was not explicitly mentioned in the community conversations, there were a few mentions of financial mutual aid. These included small amounts of money being transferred between community members and desires to financially support friends’ transitions. These mentions were brief but spoke to the care that exists even when financial means are limited.

**Supportive Care**

Building on the ideas that came from sharing material needs, many participants spoke about the importance of providing non-material supportive care. There were many examples of what this supportive community care looks like, with two main categories being emotional support and resisting gender policing. When discussing emotional support, a white non-binary participant spoke about their distinction between self and community care:

So, self-care for me, is just I’m able to take care of myself. To, of course, take care of myself, but also, so like that I could help take care of my community because if I’m not doing well, then I can’t physically, or mentally partake and like mutual aid and I can’t help anyone else when I’m in a certain space, so community care to me is being able to provide care and support to the community kind of intersecting with mutual aid.

In our current moment with constant stressors, we must take care of ourselves so we can take care of each other.
When we take care of each other, we can change the world. This sentiment echoes that of Mia Mingus (2012), a disability justice and transformative justice advocate echoes this sentiment found in my research: “Any kind of systematic change we want to make will require us to work together to do it. And we have to have relationships strong enough to hold us as we go up against something as powerful as the state, the medical industrial complex, the prison system, the gender binary system, the church, the immigration system, the war machine, global capitalism.”

Community care, in all forms, is an act of rebellion, activism, and change. It takes courage and strength to be able to exist together. As one participant (white, transsexual woman) said:

It's really, really easy to throw someone out of your life but it's really, really hard to build connections, more. So I think part of it is doing the hard work, of navigating intercommunity and intra-community conflict in a way that moves us toward healing and building our strength.

This individual emphasizes the importance of navigating conflict to stay in their community. Community care is thinking and believing that we each have inherent worth, we are not disposable, and we need each other. It is recognizing that the state will not save or protect us, so we have to support each other.

On a similar note, multiple participants discussed the importance of protecting themselves from others policing their genders. While no specific strategies were identified, there was the general sentiment of divesting from policing others. One participant who is a white gender-nonconforming fairy said this:

One thing that has made me do all that I'm trying to do to foster resilience and resistance in myself and my community, is not letting transphobes decide what being trans means

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4 For stylistic reasons quotes of non-participants are kept in-line, deviating from the standards of APA 7.
or like who is allowed to call themselves “trans.” Because in my opinion, identifying as trans is already radical, regardless of like your personal decisions about your body.

Being trans means occupying a political body, and therefore we have to protect ourselves from the opinions of others. Being in a political body is an act of resistance and can lead to building individual and collective power. While this individual describes an internal experience, another participant (white, genderqueer) explored how this act can be applied to community-based care:

One thing that I do think is important is to not police others when they're talking about their own experience or to like to correct their language, surrounding their own experience.\(^5\)

These participants build on each other to say we need to not allow others to police our bodies, and then we need to not police each other. This concept of divesting from policing each other is not new. To be clear, abolitionist thought has been around for decades and generations.\(^6\)

Refusing to police each other is an act of care and love and allows for self-determination.

**“Voluntary Gender Work(ers)”**

In addition to all the mutual aid work, there was a significant number of participants that discussed the idea of “voluntary gender work” across the groups. This practice took many forms, but all surrounded the theme that it was trans people, helping other gender-diverse people achieve gender affirmation. In this context, gender affirmation is used across all areas: social, legal, medical, etc.

One of the main forms that gender work took includes information sharing. Information about transness is not always available, especially in the current moment of book bans and attempts at trans erasure. A white trans woman spoke about her experience sharing information within her community:

\(^{5}\) To highlight quotes of participants they are always block-style, deviating from the standards of APA 7.

\(^{6}\) For a foundation of abolitionist organizing in the present moment, I recommend Mariame Kaba’s book *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*.

\(^{7}\) As mentioned in the literature review, this concept comes from (Malatino, 2020) but it is credited to Rupert Raj. Malatino heard Raj discuss this idea at the 2016 Moving Trans History Forward conference.
I think another, really important thing, the community does is just share information. Like, I was just totally alone, and I didn’t know what the heck to do I knew I was trans for the longest time I didn’t know anything like what to do about it.

While this participant did not share details of the information they received from others, many participants spoke about the specifics. A big part of this information sharing was educating both cis and trans people that trans and gender-diverse people exist and dispelling myths about gender. In addition to just educating about our existence, many participants discussed educating other trans folks on gender-affirming processes. Examples included how to navigate legal name and gender changes, how to navigate the medical system, and more. One of the most common things participants discussed in this realm related to gender-affirming care.

On that note, participants expressed ways that they made quality health information more accessible. Many medical providers, especially trans health providers, often are not culturally responsive, particularly in having documents translated. This participant, who is a light-skinned Latino, mixed race, non-binary trans male, spoke about their experience translating:

I've been translating [the documents], to Spanish, because every time I ask if there's any Spanish resources, they never have any, and while it's mostly for myself to share with my family because I want them to be involved with my transition, I also hope to be able to share it with like my community.

Not only does this person want to support their community, but they also want to include his family in his transition. Even with legal protections to receive linguistically responsive care (Youdelman, 2019), gaps still exist throughout the medical-industrial complex. Individuals like this participant, are taking a variety of approaches to make trans healthcare more accessible and culturally responsive. By translating informational documents, this participant actively engages
in prefigurative politics by making a place for Spanish-speaking trans and gender-diverse people to be a part of the future.

Continuing with the theme of medical information, multiple participants discussed sharing information on gender-affirming care. One example of this was providing friends with unofficial medical referrals⁸; to illustrate what this means, one participant (southern Chinese, transmasculine) said:

Oh, like this [provider] is where I went to, to, to go do this, this is the doctor I saw, this is how much it cost to me, and this is how it looks, kind of thing. Because at least where I'm from originally there's only like 2-3 places that do it, and it was at a point when I was starting where it's like you have to hear about it ... Oh, I heard about it from, from, from somebody, and then you check it out, and it's like legitimate...

This participant also mentioned that where they live now, in the Pacific Northwest, it has been easier to find providers. These word-of-mouth referrals are important to accessing quality gender-affirming care, especially in the current socio-political climate where gender-affirming care is increasingly being restricted or banned. Knowing who provides quality gender-affirming care is vital when the medical-industrial complex is not designed to best serve marginalized patients. While it is not transforming the system, providing these referrals allows trans patients to have increased knowledge leading to a greater degree of self-determination.

Related to the quality of care that trans individuals can receive, there is also a need for providers to deliver accurate information. One white transfeminine participant explained how they are working to dispel myths about hormone replacement therapy (HRT):

But with trans feminine HRT, there's so much misinformation. Like the most common method for taking it is, is, the oral method ... You're supposed to take that by dissolving them under your tongue, but, like most of the people I have seen who get prescribed this

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⁸ Unofficial medical referral meaning word of mouth suggesting places to go, not an official referral from a primary care provider that is usually for insurance purposes.
are like I have been taking this forever, and I see no difference in mine. I just had blood
work done, and my levels are so way off from where they need to be. And like, how have
you been taking your pills? And they are always swallowing them.
This participant also went on to share that because doctors are not performing this patient
education, the medication is not being absorbed into the body and therefore has a decreased
efficacy. Especially in a population that is disproportionately low-income (James et al., 2016)
paying for medication and then the medication not being effective is a waste of resources. This
example is yet another instance where trans people are showing up for their community when
institutions, especially the medical-industrial complex, have failed to do so. This information
sharing is engaging in prefigurative politics via direct action.

The last example of gender work and mutual aid was participants’ discussions of sharing
of HRT within communities.9 In the current socio-political climate, there are so many barriers to
accessing HRT. Medical care alone has become a significant expense (Montero et al., 2022),
combined with the number of proposed bans on gender-affirming care (American Civil Liberties
Union, 2022; Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.). For their protection, I am choosing to not include
any specifics from participants. However, these participants discussed ways in which they would
hypothetically share hormones within communities when they were unable to access care. The
idea is that sharing hormones, while risky, reduces the possible harm of going without. This is
rooted in principles of Harm Reduction.10 It is important to know that drug policy enacted by the
war on drugs also affects some HRT as testosterone is a controlled substance (Authority and
Criteria for Classification of Substances, 1970; Plume, 2022), and the enforcement of drug policy
is disproportionate to Black and Brown communities (Morrison, 2021). In addition to sharing

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9 For safety, it is recommended that you only utilize HRT under the guidance of a medical provider and do
not share your medication with others. While HRT is generally safe (Weinand & Safer, 2015),
complications can arise and should be monitored by a professional.
10 See (National Harm Reduction Coalition, 2020) for more information on Harm Reduction.
hormones, there have been zines and literature circulated through trans communities on ways to achieve gender affirmation without HRT (FlyingOtter, 2009).

All of these examples of mutual aid—resource sharing, translation, emotional support, connections to care, etc.—are engaging in world-making and prefigurative praxis. These community practices are reclaiming power and creating spaces and futures for trans lives. When trans people engage in these various mutual aid practices from mundane to community organizing, they are creating trans futures.

**Belonging, Creation, and Trans Joy**

The final section is about the effects that being in a community that cares and supports has on trans individuals. Trans people re-create themselves which is pivotal to world-making and survival. It allows individuals to create themselves and to have active participation in their sense of being and belonging. In an anthology review describing pieces of poetry about trans creation, trans and two-spirit poet Amir Rabiyah (2022) says, “It does not beg for trans people to be given a seat at the table; rather, it builds multiple tables and rooms for trans people to exist in.” Similar to Rabiyah, I assert that the participants in this inquiry are continuing to build rooms and tables for trans people to exist. When trans folks can take part in the creation of themselves it is an act of rejecting societal norms and creating spaces where deviation is not rejected.

When in t4t community, many participants discussed a sense of belonging and ease that existed due to the assumption that others “get it.” Participants often reported that their conversations with trans friends often focused on things other than their transness. Another participant, who is a multi-racial Black woman/non-binary individual highlighted their experience of ease:

... Like the more carefree discussions to kind of alleviate the much more like difficult conversations that we have had, and especially with everything going on right now and
just using that as almost as a form of checking in be like we can talk about carefree things and be more fun about it we don’t have to so restricted all the time I feel like.

This ability to have carefree conversations where you can be yourself is easily taken for granted without the experience of daily oppression. Being able to shift the focus off of the weight of marginalization is one of many outcomes of being in community. It allows for a level of decompression that does not always happen when individuals who do not share these experiences are around. This connects deeply to something that another participant, who is a biracial trans male, said when talking about a trans-only space he organizes:

We do like monthly trans-figure drawings. Just trans artists, just trans models, and that creates what you were saying like an acceptance or self-acceptance sort of thing. But I think it is super important, because if, if there was one, cis artist in the room, we’d all be trying to think about how we’re drawing the trans person and make sure it’s a good example or make it extra transgressive.

This discussion of the importance of a trans-only space brings to light how being around individuals with shared identities allows for a sense of belonging and ease. When people are allowed to just exist it opens the ability to feel like they belong.

When trans people feel like they belong, they can express themselves and engage in creation. One participant who is a white non-binary/trans male stated the following when discussing ways they find joy:

When I am having a really, really bad day, I go look at my new birth certificate, and like, yeah, that's who I am ... I still go look at it, and I cry when I am having a really bad thing.

While not everyone has access to name changes and changes to birth certificates, this participant highlighted the importance of being able to see themselves reflected in their documents. This example also demonstrates the importance of being able to access transition, including legal transition, even with the end goal of dismantling systems that require these documents. The
literature is clear that “for trans people, administrative gender classification and the problems it creates for those who are difficult to classify or are misclassified is a major vector of violence and diminished life chances and life spans” (Spade, 2015, p. 77). While this participant was not discussing a negative experience he had before the legal affirmation of his gender, he was discussing the release he had when being able to see himself accurately reflected. Despite the larger harm of these administrative systems, we still live in them and can benefit from their affirmation of our gender.

As participants continued to describe their personal experiences in self-creation, there were continued mentions of the euphoria that it allows. A white non-binary trans woman participant highlighted the importance that transition plays in seeking joy:

The other thing, I think, is the most important thing about transition. It's not hormones or surgery, or presentation, or this stuff. Transition for me is about learning to love myself and learning to value myself over what other people want me to be.

This is one of many examples of ways that trans folks achieve joy and self-actualization through transition. Transition allowed this participant to authentically value herself for who she is no matter how she expresses herself. Similarly, many participants shared stories of being unapologetically themselves and being more self-expressive. This refusal of societal norms then allows trans folks to realize or create their most authentic self-expression.

Continuing on the theme of creation, many participants highlighted the place that art played in their lives. The Chinese and transmasculine/non-binary participant referenced earlier described how creating art has positively impacted their life:

I'm really big on crafts. So, I really like crafting things or working with my hands. I kind of just get into that like flow state, where you don’t need to think too much. You just are focused with a task at hand and creating something beautiful. I feel like all us trans people know the joys of creation, cause kind of creating a new identity for yourself.
This participant’s experiences of creation are examples of literal world-making by creating oneself while creating elements of trans culture (art). The participant described a type of joy that is associated with creation and went on to identify this as a way of building personal resilience.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This work is by no means all-encompassing and is not without limitations. As mentioned at the beginning it is not an introduction to transness or contributing to the vast deficit-based research on trans bodies. It also only contains a modest sample of 25 participants and myself. These voices were sampled only from the land known as the Portland metropolitan area, with an over-representation of transmasculine and white voices. While not a limitation, this work is not a study catering to a cisgender audience and their subsequent gaze.

There are many directions for future study, especially around the everyday lives of trans and gender-diverse folks. There is much to be learned about trans resistance; yet, I do not necessarily believe that future study is deserved by the academy. While I did create this project for the academy it was not without hardship. It was a massive undertaking and one that often pushed me to my limits. It involved me spending countless hours to make sure it would hold up to academic scrutiny, even after my advisor and peers said it was good enough. Even with this hardship, I do not invite cisgender people to that table or to lead that research. Cis people stand up for your trans colleagues and consider this as a cautionary note before embarking on future research.

**Conclusion**

This inquiry was for the creation of knowledge on trans people not only surviving but thriving in spite of the current socio-political moment. It finds that trans people need community connections, to engage in world-making, which ultimately leads to experiences of euphoria and resilience. This work has been one of putting values into practice and centering the voices that it seeks to represent. It has contributed to a small amount of literature that exists by
trans people, about trans people, for trans people. It has highlighted a path to a future where trans people (and other marginalized communities) are able to thrive. This inquiry has demonstrated the ways that community is integral to positive outcomes via radical care praxis.

As a reminder, if our organizing and world-making are not intersectional, trans folks run the risk of perpetuating the same systems of oppression we seek to resist. Our liberation will be intersectional which comes from the work of Black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Aboriginal scholars like Lilla Watson, grassroots movements like Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) led by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, among many others, have led intersectional movements throughout history.¹¹

Finally, to all the fellow trans folks reading this—I see you, I love you, you belong.

¹¹ This list of activists and visionaries is not all-inclusive; rather, just a few that have inspired me in this work and in life.
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Appendix A

Outreach Flier with Contact Information Redacted

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
led by trans folks • for trans futures

Want to share what you are doing differently to navigate the world as a trans person? Do you want to build community knowledge? Fill out this interest form to be contacted with more information - bit.ly/trans-futures-convos

Participants engage in group conversations that will take approximately an hour and a half. The goal is for folks to learn from each other to foster interdependence and community resilience.

Participants must ID as trans and be 18+
A small stipend of $20 will be provided

questions and concerns should be directed to (call/text)

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