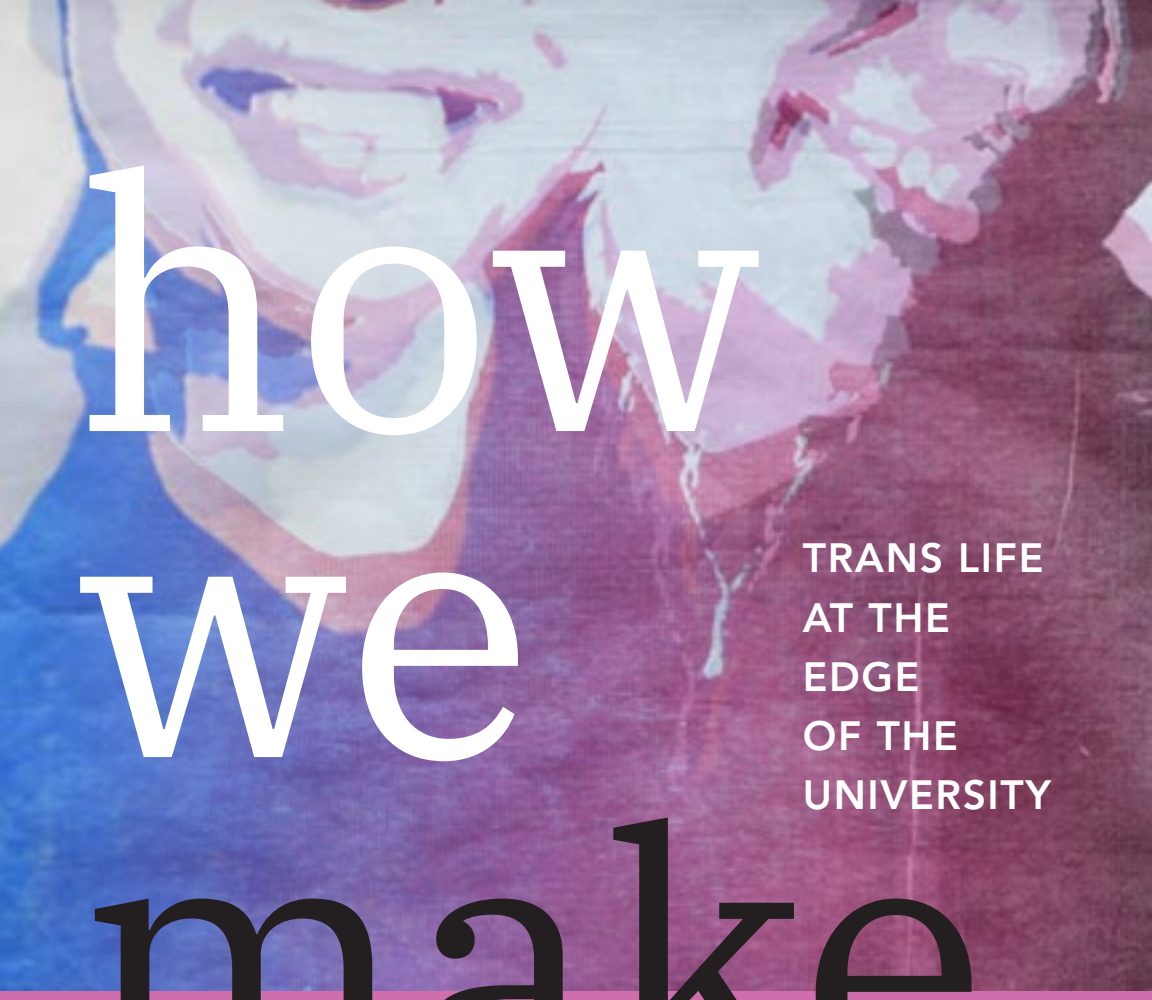

# how we make each other

TRANS LIFE AT THE EDGE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Perry Zurn

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# contents

# preface

This book began furtively.

Sometime during my college sojourn in the early aughts, I ordered a copy of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* from the college's interlibrary loan system.[2] While this fact might seem innocent enough, or even quaint, the context made it anything but. This was a school where feminism was a bad word. A school where we had a gendered dress code and daily chapel. A school where, when I took an interest in poststructuralism, my honors professor pulled me into his office and told me he was praying for my (presumably damned) soul. And it was a school where, when I fell in love with a girl, I was put on academic probation and forbidden to spend time with her, speak to her, or even look at her, on or off campus. An impossible demand, if she hadn't already acquiesced.

But this book germinated before all of that, in the early days of my gender wanderings. I loved the library. To this day, it is the campus building I remember best—each floor, each corner, where the reference books were, the classrooms, and the collaborative project space, the philosophy and theology corridor, and the windows overlooking the lake. More than my dorm room, it was my home. And it was a portal to adjacent worlds I was gingerly trying to reach. I had a premonitory sense that *Stone Butch Blues* would get me in trouble, so I kept it in my pillowcase and read it secretly in my top bunk. I was lucky enough to have a (closeted) gay roommate, who wouldn't rat me out, but various RA's would pop in at any moment for surprise cleaning checks and "behavior checks." So I kept the book secret, kept it safe. And cried my eyes out reading it. I felt so lonely and so connected at the same time. When I returned the book to the circulation counter, the student worker said, "Oh, the librarian wants to see you about this." My stomach dropped. When said librarian came over, she looked me firmly in the eyes, and said, "We will have to suspend your

borrowing privileges if you continue to order books like this." In a conciliatory tone, she then added, "You understand." She said it like it was obvious. And it was. And it wasn't.

Fifteen years later, and to my own surprise, I was a professor traveling to Holyoke, Massachusetts, to consult the Sexual Minorities Archives (SMA). Researching trans life in the Connecticut River Valley, I was thinking broadly about the ways in which transness collides with and escapes the university. The SMA is one of the longest-standing independent LGBTQ archives in the nation. It is housed in the personal home of Ben Power, founder of the SMA in 1977 as well as the East Coast Female-to-Male (FTM) Group—the first of its kind on the East Coast—in 1992. The old Victorian house in which he and the archives live—affectionately known as the Pink Lady—is in fact painted light pink with bright pink trim. A bit of loud on an otherwise quiet suburban street. I ring, I wait, I ring again. I knock. I pound. I decide to sit on the porch and do emails on my phone. Almost thirty minutes after our scheduled meeting, Ben arrives at the door, cats in tow. He gives me a tour of the house, full of evident love and pride. He pauses at the third floor, eagerly announcing, "And we house the Leslie Feinberg library!" He starts speaking quickly about the displays he is still organizing: a box of pins here, a stack of protest t-shirts, signs, and photos there. I scan the room and stand there stunned. How did I come so far? From a library that erases us, to an archive that defiantly remembers? My heart almost buckles under the weight.

Ben sits down for the interview I had requested. As he speaks, I see the flint in his eyes and the fire—from years of struggle. He has a bad cough. His voice is thin but his words heavy, purposeful, plodding. And I know immediately that and how he understands himself to be a man. He tells me the story of the SMA archives and of trans life in the valley. And he tells me the story of meeting Lou Sullivan. It was 1986 and Lou had sent the archives a pamphlet about his group FTM International. Ben read the pamphlet cover to cover in two hours and was on a plane to San Francisco within a month. Sitting at Lou's kitchen table, Ben talked as only a trans person with no one to talk to can. When Lou paused for a moment to take his AZT (azidothymidine), Ben realized Lou had AIDS and his newfound world came crashing down around him. Listening to Ben, I think about the ways we find and lose one another. And the seemingly fragile character of our connections. I think about how Feinberg found me, and how zie was gone before I thought to look.

I spent the afternoon in the SMA attic, where the local archives are held. It was August and the house had no central air. I heard one window unit barely whirring in another room. I took off my jacket and my tie. A few hours later,

my collared shirt and my shoes. Cracking box after box, I wish I had packed water. Finally, I opened the Restroom Revolution folder, a University of Massachusetts, Amherst initiative for gender-inclusive restrooms in 2001–2002. My body lit with excitement. This was the material I was most looking forward to. But when I opened the folder, the first item to appear was an undated memo from American University (my employer), detailing the trans inclusive policies the university ought to adopt (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms, housing, ID cards, faculty education, nondiscrimination policy, etc.). A cascade of questions washed over me. How did this get here? Was it misfiled? Or are our worlds really that small? And if so, what sort of queer, trans structures of belonging explain this remnant of unexpected coalition? Sometime later, I asked Mitch Boucher, who co-organized the Restroom Revolution and donated its records to the archive, about the memo. He recalled working with all kinds of folks, swapping resources and policy briefs, trying to get universities to listen to the demands of trans inclusion. Part of me wished that sad kid stuffing Feinberg in his pillowcase could have overheard the conversation and known there were others elsewhere, agitating and collaborating in the space of the university.

I never expected to be part of a story. As a queer and trans person, I'm uniquely acculturated to the idea that I am not the sort of thing that has a history. Stories don't call me "mine." But as I returned to American University's campus, walking past Battelle-Tompkins, the Mary Graydon Center, and the library (another library!), I found myself gripped by a certain nostalgia. My people agitated here, worked hard and wasted time here, felt crushed and built friendships here, swore off and moved on from here. Feeling both more and less alone, I wondered what happened to these folks.[1] How did they decide what to demand? And what desires did not make the page? Where did they shit-talk and where did they laugh? Who did they go home to? What hacks did they hatch to navigate a transphobic world? And how were those hacks shared, hitching a ride around the campus and beyond it? Thinking of my own frustrated activism for gender-inclusive restrooms at AU, I wondered how they handled disappointment. How did they keep up hope (or didn't they)? Hope that in ten, fifteen, twenty years (and counting), their recommendations would finally be adopted? Or did they hang their hopes elsewhere, hoping for respite in the clink of a coffee spoon, the warm sun on their forearms, the queer fire in someone else's eyes?

Trans life in the university is always already unhomed, always already misfiled. And yet, the worlds we make with one another take up residence in its cracks. All of these unofficial lines of communication, the offbeat channels of collaboration, and the unexpected friendships that lead to stuffed pillowcases

and jumbled archive boxes—these are our traces. We live in the interstices—never in a cohesive way, but in little clumps flung from one another in a yawning archipelago. And those clumps make histories, and stage mutinies, and shout poems at the future, in real isolation and vague companionship by turns.

This book is about unexpected lines of belonging and kinship. It is about refusal. And it is about hope. It is about all the ways of trans being together that demand something of the university and escape it. In the end, this book is also about a history that is always ever finding and losing me.

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If we make each other, what sort of gratefulness flows from there? I could not approach this project, nor can I now retrospect about this project, without feeling a rush of gratefulness—for the fact and the matter of trans belonging at the edge of the university. Nor can I deny the many networks that made this work possible. Of my book projects to date, this is by far the most indebted text. And so I set out to do only the briefest bit of justice to that indebtedness, marking a series of points along the many horizons within which this book took shape. Equal gratefulness goes to those I may have missed in this litany, or who wished to remain unnamed. You, too, are a reason this book—and this history—exists.

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# introduction *Of Small Places and Edge Ecologies*

It was summer 2018 and there I was, half-dressed in a turret, pouring over the archives in an August heatwave. Records of the Restroom Revolution (2001–2002), at University of Massachusetts, Amherst were the reason I had come to the Sexual Minorities Archives in the first place. I had learned of the group years before while reading a stack of books about toilets. My partner at the time had wisely insisted I not bring "work" on vacation, so I invested in a bunch of books about bathrooms—their mechanical and social history as well as their role as flare-points for multiple social justice movements. Food for my inner nerd, but also salve for my soul. It was in that pile that I came across the story of Restroom Revolution. According to Olga Gershenson, a professor at UMass, the largely student-led group advocated for gender-inclusive restrooms across campus years before the better known group at the University of California, Santa Barbara: PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms).[1] Offering a blow-by-blow of the resistance effort, conservative media backlash, and administrative negotiation, which mobilized hundreds of students and handfuls of local and national LGBT organizations, Gershenson narrates the results: "two single-stall [all gender] bathrooms (on a campus of thirty thousand people)."[2] Was Restroom Revolution really a failure, I wondered? Or had it succeeded in creating something else, something that a focus on trans-inclusive bathroom policy (and brick-and-mortar facilities) overlooks?

A few years after working through that slim folder at the Sexual Minorities Archives, I worked through two overstuffed folders of Restroom Revolution material stored privately at UMass's Stonewall Center. The group is the first recorded instance of largescale organizing by people self-described as "transgender, transsexual, gender-queer, or something other than 'man' or 'woman'" at UMass.[3] Advocating for "all gender," "gender neutral," or "gender free" bathrooms,

the group got busy. They posted flyers all over campus, flooded key administrators with phone calls and emails, and tabled at the Campus Center. They also annotated plumbing codes, enlisted trans advocacy networks, and collaborated with other schools implementing trans-inclusive bathroom, housing, and healthcare policies. They got their proposal approved by the Student Government Association and the Graduate Student Senate and met repeatedly with the vice chancellor. That little came of the two-year effort is not, in fact, the point of the story.[4] Something happened here. Something beyond and before bathroom policy. Restroom Revolution created a broad network, a tight community, and a series of friendships that built capacity and strengthened voice. More than that, it embodied the day-in and day-out work of trans people making one another possible. A patch of resistant life at the edge of the university.

And that patch had a certain poetry to it. I got in touch with one of the organizers, Mitch Boucher, and he mentioned he still had a box of records. I jumped at the chance to take them off his hands. I arrived at his house promptly at the appointed time, but no one answered. I looked around the porch, thinking he had left the box for no-contact pickup (it was 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic had just hit), but there was nothing. I started thinking I was at the wrong house and headed back to my car. Just then, Mitch appeared out of nowhere, in his quiet way. He led me off to a small shed where he rummaged around and emerged with a large Shaklee box, covered in fifty-year anniversary tape. It started to rain, and I was off. Back at my Airbnb, I eagerly pulled the box open, launching a cloud of dust in my face. Its contents were soon scattered about the floor, the bed, and the desk. These were the records of the first trans studies class taught at UMass in 2002. Restroom Revolution activists were both its teachers and students. Alongside syllabi, assignment sheets, student papers, and trans studies articles, there were notes and reflections. Threads of anger, vulnerability, and joy were woven together throughout the pile of pages. What kind of friendships lead to an old box like this, stashed away in a shed for twenty years? After you have studied together, risked together, and burnt-out together, what keeps you nourishing the seeds and pebbles of a world you might still create?

Repeatedly, trans life in the university gets told as a story of trans-inclusive policy—a story of "trans" becoming part of the university. But that narrative neglects the much richer story of trans life lived at the edge of the university—behind and before and beyond policy. *How We Make Each Other* grapples with the difference between ameliorating an institution and flourishing in its cracks. During a renaissance of trans visibility and an ongoing battle between anti-trans bills and trans-inclusive public policies, *How We Make Each Other* aims

to understand what happens in the invisible interstices. What survives policy implementation and roll-back? It sets out to tell those liminal stories about trans life in the university: the moments in the shed, around the table, and between people. And it lingers in the space of poetry—indeed, of poetics—to appreciate how it is that, in a setting that can unmake us in a single instant, we nevertheless keep making things and making one another.

## How It All Started

In the summer of 2015, I moved to Massachusetts to assume my first faculty job. With all the gumption and anxiety of a newly minted PhD, I was eager to begin my academic sojourn as visiting assistant professor at Hampshire College. On the first day, I turned to my colleague Fae, who exuded genderfluid femme fabulousness, and asked where the nearest bathroom was located. They pointed me to an "all gender restroom" down the hall and announced with evident glee that all the bathrooms on campus were gender-inclusive. As I turned to go, I could feel both shock and relief vying for my body. In that instant, I viscerally remembered my time as a graduate student: the relentless dehydration headaches; the rushing in and out of gendered restrooms, holding my breath; the waiting in line at the nearest gender-inclusive restroom several buildings away, only to run out of time and have to turn back (to attend class, to teach, to meet with my dissertation directors, to hold office hours) before relieving myself, with tears of frustration and shame pooling in the corners of my eyes, and searing heat in my throat. Using the nearby restroom in peace, I wondered, "How is this even possible?" How did Hampshire get this way and when? What stories of trans agitation and world-building lay behind the innocuous bathroom signs? Two years later, I returned to the valley to study not only the history of trans-inclusive policies at the Five Colleges, but the history of trans life, of trans activism, and of the poetics subtending it all.

There are an infinite number of paths one might take to illuminate the relationship between trans life and the university. In situating my inquiry within the Five Colleges, I aim to honor the place where my inquiry originated, as well as the communities with whom I worked. Luckily, the Five Colleges are also a reason all their own. Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and University of Massachusetts, Amherst—these five schools are a loosely knit group functioning independently more often than not, their advertising rhetoric notwithstanding. Among them are small liberal arts schools and a giant state school, one historically men's college and two historically women's colleges, some of the most privileged and one of the most

precarious institutions in higher education. The Five Colleges are situated in a remarkably queer geographical region of Western Massachusetts, with an unusually robust history of trans life in and outside the universities. It is no surprise, then, that the Five Colleges were well ahead of the national curve when it came to trans-inclusive bathroom, healthcare, housing, name, and pronoun policies. The story of how these policies arose and the many ways in which queer and trans life intersected with (and escaped) these colleges, however, remains to be told.

It is a truism today that universities, like so many other social institutions, are not only historically spaces of gender segregation but continue to be spaces of gender policing. To say this is also to say that a wealth of social inequities, which inform gender norms, shape the institution of the university—only some of which are captured in the terms *settler colonialism*, *racism*, *sexism*, *classism*, *ableism*, *homophobia*, and *transphobia*. That higher education institutions not only expect but actively extract cis/heteronormative gender expression from their constituents, however, also means that these expectations are repeatedly frustrated and these extractions resisted. Where there is force, there is counterforce. Like fireflies in summer, the landscape of the university is littered with disruptions. Shit-talking huddles and mutual-aid circles; ramps and smartpens, grab bars and speech-to-text software; young children making cameos in class and elderly relatives turning exam schedules topsy-turvy. Gender unruliness, too, glints down hallways, refracting in and out of classrooms, and lighting up labs and late-night essays. The Five Colleges are no exception. Among early gender disruptors was 1886 Amherst graduate Clyde Fitch, who spent his college years in high fashion dresses, gloves, and rouge before becoming a highly successful playwright and having a brief dalliance with Oscar Wilde.[5] What other gender transgressions and transgressors populate this place?

It is perhaps no real surprise that queer and trans activism in the valley is remarkably robust. There is a long lineage of lesbians and genderqueer folks in the area, many stemming from the two historically women's colleges: Smith and Mount Holyoke. Northampton, moreover, holds a special place in the queer imaginary. In 1992, ABC's *20/20* called it the "Lesbian Ellis Island." The following year, the town was represented in the LGB March on Washington with a giant purple banner that read: "Northampton: Occupied Lesbian Territory."[6] Profiles in the *Chicago Tribune*, *National Enquirer*, and *Newsweek* quickly followed.[7] As Janet Cawley of the *Tribune* reports, Northampton was a place full of hippies, tax resisters, communes, interracial families, and, yes, lesbians, since at least the 1970s. By the early 1990s, one downtown shop offered a 10 percent

lesbian discount (imagine claiming this at checkout). Another sold T-shirts that read, "Lesbianville, USA / 10,000 cuddling, kissing lesbians in the wild" and coffee cups that read, "Northampton: Where the coffee is strong and so are the women." The local lesbian moms group went by the name "Momazons." Not everyone was equally thrilled by the situation. The president of Smith College at the time issued a statement distancing Smith from lesbianism and a local pastor advised congregants to avoid Northampton altogether, because of the "filthy statements on shirts" they might encounter.[8]

It is little remarked, however, that that same year, 1992, saw the local establishment of the East Coast FTM Group and Sunshine Club, both significant and longstanding organizations serving local FTMs and MTFs respectively. It is also the year Ben Power renamed the New Alexandrian Lesbian Library the Sexual Minorities Archives and began explicitly collecting trans materials. It is as if Lesbianville were trans (or transed) from the get-go. Waves of trans activist initiatives followed. There was Transgender Network (TNET) and Transgender Special Outreach Network (TSON) (1996–2001), Transgender Activist Network (TAN) (2001–2004), Northampton Trans Pride (2009–present), and the Miss New England Trans Pageants (2010–2015), just to name a few. In each instance, trans people engaged not only in place-changing but also in place-making, forming bonds and forging pathways. Reflecting on the intimate coexistence between himself and the archives, Power states, "Let it be known that since 1977, it has been a female-to-male TS [transsexual] who has lived with and breathed life into this resource."[9] Conspiring with his material and social worlds, Power brings old worlds to rest and breathe new worlds into being.

For decades now, genderqueer and trans people have been making space in the Five Colleges. It was not until after I had left my visiting position at Hampshire that I learned Fae had been a crucial part of the change in its bathroom policy. As I began to research, I wondered less about the trans-inclusive policy shifts themselves, at the various colleges, and more about the poetic ecologies of their actors. Where did they live and breathe? What intimate coexistences did they nurture and sustain? With what elements of the land did they engage and what histories did they weave? In documenting the trans poetics behind and beside trans-inclusive policies at the Five Colleges, I aim to track the poetry of place-based resistance in and among trans people. I tell folks that the project started in a Hampshire bathroom. But that is not entirely true. It really started with Fae. What I really wanted to know was not how this or that policy happened but how Fae happened. And how more of Fae could happen. This book is part of that story.

## Small Worlds, Deep Roots

Before further detailing the ins and outs of how this project got underway, it is worth putting an even finer point on the offbeat, backwoods sort of place in which it is set. There is a uniqueness to the geosocial ecologies here that ought not go unremarked. The Connecticut River Valley is, in the ruddiest of ways, a place of farm boots clomping on sidewalks and into classrooms; of a dozen used bookstores in a half mile radius; of somatic healing and true granola souls; of fresh beet juice and Mal Devisa. There are rotted out barns and junked trucks, boarded-up stores, and unoccupied homes. Towns so small you mistake them for a gas station. An oversized US flag luxuriates over one of the lakes. Folks go swimming in the quarries. Neighboring Sunderland boasts "the widest tree this side of Mississippi," a sycamore older than the union (of settler colonies) itself. And in seventeenth-century graveyards, names are barely distinguishable against the deteriorating stone. Here, leftist and lesbian communes have sought refuge for centuries, while radical experiments in art and education grow like weeds. In this valley—this *place*—the sense that one must abstract from the world in order to remake it is palpable, an excrescence of the earth itself. Here, too, is the sense that such remaking is not a "project." "It shouldn't have to be work," a galoshed old queer once told me. It is just a way of life.

The Five Colleges are situated in a rural, almost idyllic tract. Located in the breathlessly beautiful Connecticut River Valley, just southwest of the Quabbin Reservoir and southeast of the Berkshire Mountains, their respective cities of Amherst, Northampton, and South Hadley zigzag across the river rift and between the rolling hills of the Holyoke Range. Travel writers in the 1920s dubbed the place the "Pioneer Valley," a term I avoid because it evokes a pristine settler past, and even an Edenic paradise, leaving unacknowledged the wilderness and cultivation that preceded European settlements for thousands of years. Idyllic though it may be, the valley has always been a place of agitation. Records of course begin with the long story of Indigenous resistance to colonialization. Then, in 1786–1787, Daniel Shays famously launched Shays Rebellion here, mobilizing four thousand men in armed protest against the government's economic injustice that created and sustained the local debt crisis. From 1842 to 1846, Sojourner Truth spent time here in a utopian community of abolitionists, who raised mulberry trees and silkworms and ran a stop for the Underground Railroad. She remarked, in retrospect, that she found here "some of the choicest spirits of the age."[10] And in 1867, Gardiner Greene Hubbard, after his daughter contracted scarlet fever and lost her hearing, founded Clarke School for the Deaf, the first of its kind in the United States. The compulsion

to agitate, to demand something different, is in the blood, yes, but perhaps also in the land, in *this* land.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Springfield and Holyoke were major manufacturing cities, producing widespread working-class sensibilities in the region. Springfield focused on manufacturing engines, machinery, jewelry, and chemicals, and is credited with developing the first American gas-powered car, the first American musket, and the first American-English dictionary (1847 Merriam-Webster). Holyoke, on the other hand, focused its energies on paper, producing, at its height, 80 percent of the writing paper in the United States. To this day, people still call it the "Paper City." As such, the valley was a place of innovation and fabrication—a *making* place, if there ever was one. The neighboring towns of Amherst, Northampton, and South Hadley, while supporting manufacturing and agriculture, developed as cultural centers where, in each case, the colleges took center stage, making the region a proud part of the Hartford-Springfield Knowledge Corridor, which houses the second-highest concentration of colleges in the United States. As such, the Five Colleges are, on the one hand and in a historically meaningful way, a force of local culture. On the other hand, and in an equally historically meaningful way, they rupture local culture. Class, language, ideology, and gender all become grains across which town and gown sit.

When it comes to the history of the Five Colleges, a counterculture spirit seems to crop up everywhere you turn. First, Amherst College started as the coed Amherst Academy (1812), a grassroots project that aimed to offer sorely needed classical liberal arts education in the area. It was subsequently reformulated as an elite men's college (1821), which then became coed in 1972. Mount Holyoke College (1837), originally Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, was founded by a (queer) graduate of Amherst Academy: Mary Lyon. Convinced that women of all classes deserved educational opportunity, Lyon opened the seminary at a third of typical costs. The oldest of the Seven Sisters (a group of historically women's colleges in the Northeast), the college is now an elite, gender diverse women's college. In turn, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1863) began as Massachusetts Agricultural College, a land-grant institution with a mission to meet the needs of an increasingly industrial society, focusing on agriculture, military science, and engineering. UMass, Amherst is now the flagship state school, with a sprawling campus and high research productivity. Finally, Smith College (1875) was founded by Sophia Smith. Deaf by age forty, Smith had planned to establish a school for the deaf. After Clarke School opened, however, she decided to endow Smith, which was to offer general education to the women of her time. Smith is now the largest and most renowned

of the Seven Sisters.[11] What is signal about this series of stories is the gumption. To hell with historical precedent. Meet the needs of the present moment: classical education, practical education, women's seminary education, and women's general education.

It is that gumption that explains the origins of the fifth and final college: Hampshire. The youngest college—arguably with the biggest heart but scarcest resources (e.g., an endowment of $54 million compared to Amherst's $3.3 billion), Hampshire (1970) was a joint venture of the other four schools. Frustrated by the limitations of traditional education and sensing that learning needed to be far more flexible in a fast-developing infocentric world, the presidents of Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and UMass came together to form their dream school: a hub of experimental learning and innovation. With no departments, no majors, and no grades, Hampshire was to be a center for self-directed, interdisciplinary learning and creativity. Its founding motto, *Non Satis Scire* (To Know Is Not Enough), challenges students not simply to understand and succeed in the world, but also to generate the wisdom necessary to change it. Describing the sort of student he hoped Hampshire would produce, inaugural president Franklin Patterson once wrote: "[T]hey will be [. . .] neither privately disaffiliated 'achievers,' technocratic conformists, nor deviants. I hope they will be questioning themselves and the society they find themselves in [. . .] and be willing to go down hard roads that make genuine sense."[12] Although many queer and trans graduates would proudly identify as deviants today, Hampshire has indeed produced a stream of young people capable of guiding their own souls and the world into new eras. They are emissaries of another way of being, with indeed a willingness to "go down hard roads that make genuine sense."[13]

In a place like this where stories of doing and making abound; where people are open to striking out, fine with breaking rank, and at ease with enclaves; where gender and sexual dissidence (and deviance) are par for the course; and where higher education is repeatedly reimagined in response to organic need—again, *in a place like this*, what happens when trans hits the scene? It is no real surprise trans happened with comparatively more pith and verve here than elsewhere.[14] But how exactly? What is the trans story?

## Getting the Research Underway

I took the Five Colleges as a case study not to tell a single story, but to tell many stories. In a case study, the truth of any one story is not in question. Here, I read traces humbly, in full awareness that there is certainly more to each of

them (a moreness I welcome well after these pages go to print). The stories I tell, moreover, are limited by what I could see and sew together. I went sifting for largescale events and ephemeral moments, for feelings and for friendships that might outline how it is that trans life forms in the cracks of the university. How it beads up on the banks, how it rushes through gullies, how it settles in and on and with. The result is a love letter. A love letter to a very specific place-based community, but also to other past and future instances of trans life in the academy.

I did not choose this research; it chose me. And while I am a philosopher by training, this project made me part historian and part social scientist, too. To understand the offstage character of trans poetics, I had to understand both institutional and intimate histories. I had to talk to people and shuffle papers. I had to get out from behind a desk and go trekking.

While maintaining a center weight of philosophical reflection, my research methods expanded to include archival work, interviews with trans community members, and consultation of local trans cultural production. Canvassing general Five College archives, LGBT student group archives, and local trans community archives, I tracked how the term *trans* intersected with university cultures and resistant subcultures across its first few decades of use (1990–2020). Then, through more than one hundred interviews with trans students, staff, faculty, alums, and allies at the Five Colleges, I witnessed the innumerable ways in which interviewees made sense of themselves and each other. Together, the official archives, the interviews, and the paraphernalia people shared with me became what I refer to, throughout this project, as the Five Colleges archive of trans life. Finally, I did a deep dive into locally produced transgender scholarship and artistic creation. Too often, theory is thought in abstraction from place, as if soil did not already cling to it. I wanted to think *with* the communities in question, to sink my hands into the grit and humus of landed thinking. As such, I committed to consult local theory for this local project, and to construct local theory from these local projects. I wanted to resist the constitutive abstraction of theory through an obsessive return to place—to the thisness and hereness of things.

As with any place-based study, the setting provides as many possibilities as it does limitations. Squarely in New England, the schools are situated in an overwhelmingly White area, with Northampton being 87.7 percent White, Amherst 76.9 percent White, and South Hadley 90 percent White, according to the 2010 Census. It is the sort of place where, at a 2020 protest in support of Black trans life, UMass professor Cameron Awkward-Rich recalls being, as far as he could see, "the only Black trans person on the street."[15] Town and

gown tensions abound, where the often quite wealthy, liberal colleges are surrounded by poorer, more conservative local residents. It is a region in which class, race, and gender are consistently salient, and where disability is consistently underthought.

I started interviewing in the fall of 2017 and largely finished just two days shy of Christmas 2021. These were difficult years, spanning the Trump presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic. I launched an interest survey and it snowballed. Perhaps even more than electronic forwarding, however, the project circulated by word of mouth. People kept telling me, "Talk to So-and-So," and I did. Besides indicating I wanted to talk to trans students, staff, faculty, and their allies, I did not curate my sample; I talked to anyone willing to talk to me. Ultimately, I interviewed seventy-eight people and relied on interviews conducted by Sam Davis at Smith College in 2017 for another twenty-seven.[16] Throughout, I refer to interviewees by pseudonyms unless they requested otherwise, in which case I use their full names. Of 105 interviews, twenty-seven people self-described as non-White (Asian, South Asian, Armenian, Black, Desi, Dominican, Hispanic, Latinx, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Puerto Rican, and Roma); ten as Jewish (especially Ashkenazi); and three did not say. Thirty-five self-described as having a disability or a disabling illness or impairment. Although the intake survey did not ask (I wish it had), six self-described, unprompted, as coming from a low socioeconomic background. The sample skewed toward people who self-described as assigned female at birth (AFAB) and fourteen of the interviewees self-described as cis or cis-ish. Some interviewees were still teenagers, while others were in their seventies and eighties.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when asked about their gender on the intake form, interviewees answered expansively. The list of gender descriptors includes, but is not limited to, the following: andro, androgynous, binary transgender male, boi, butch, cis woman, cis-ish, cisgender-appearing, confusing, faggy, female, feminine, femme, fluid, FTM, gender conforming, gender expansive, gender neutral, gender nonconforming, genderfluid, genderless, genderqueer, grungy feminine, lesbian, male, man, man who is AFAB, man raised as a girl, masc, masc-ish, masculine, masculine of center, masculine with florals, metrically 80/20, MTF, multigender, nonbinary, nonbinary cis woman, nonbinary femme, nonbinary man, nonbinary with transgender experience, nonbinary trans masc, nonbinary trans woman, nongender, non-op trans woman, nongender, non-op trans man, not a man / not a woman, queer, shifting, socially male, soft masculine, trans, trans butch dyke, trans dyke, trans femme, trans guy, trans guy (not a man), trans male, trans man, trans masc, trans masculine, trans nonbinary, trans woman, transish, transfem, transgender, transgender femme, transgender man, transgender

woman, transmasculine nonbinary, twink-dykey, woman, 100 percent binary. Reviewing the list today, I have a deep sense that any attempt to boil this all down to trans femmes / trans mascs, or AMAB / AFAB, or binary / nonbinary does this archive—and the trans community as a whole—a huge disservice.

Despite speaking only to people formally associated with the Five Colleges (with the exception of Ben Power), I could not assume an easy relationship between interviewees and higher education. I talked to people completely disillusioned with the university. I talked to burn-outs, drop-outs, and stop-outs. I talked to people who gave up the major they loved because the department was unliveably transphobic. I talked to people who left one or more of these colleges in relief. And I talked to people who hated theory—precisely the kind of theory this book offers. In anger and frustration, Jason put it like this:

> When I got to Hampshire, I came from a large, underfunded, overcrowded public high school. I went to a supposedly "intro" to queer studies class (I remember it was a 100-level class). And I'm sitting in there, and they're talking about trans people and I don't understand the language. I'm trans and I have no idea what's happening. And I felt like I couldn't ask. [. . .] I think that's where a lot of the frustration for me really started. I understand the purposes of theory in a lot of ways, but I also think that sometimes it's used in a way that cuts off people who it's affecting. Then it becomes in a lot of ways really inaccessible to the people who are being written about.[17]

Hearing Jason speak, I had to ask myself: Am I writing a book that welcomes him into its pages? Am I writing a book that resonates, in some way, with each of my interviewees? What about the gender disruptors I met in the archives?[18] If my interviewees were not only associated with but alienated from the university and "theory," my book, too, needed to sit uneasily at the edge of both.

*How We Make Each Other*, then, is a book of story-led theory. It is so not simply because my research questions required archival and interview data, but because trans stories, again and again, house trans theory, as much as they exceed and challenge it. And luckily, stories are also the stuff of trans poetics.

## Trans Poetics

What do I mean by *trans poetics*? What is this pulse I am trying to find below and behind trans policies? In contemporary terms, *trans poetics* typically refers to the artistic approach or philosophy of trans poets. Trans poets, for example, bring (gender) trouble to the poem-body itself, messing with its syntax,

troubling its spacing, stretching and reshaping its contours of sense. For trans poets, much like for trans people, a certain ambiguity and shapeshifting, even slipperiness, is par for the course. Troubling the poem-body, moreover, is, for many if not all trans poets, a survival strategy—a way of putting themselves back together, but also of pulling other things apart, leaving them open, splayed, unsettled. Trans poetry in this sense is an act of resistance. But it is also a work of connection: part of the poetics of writing trans poetry is reconnecting to our histories, our presents, our futures by reconnecting to ourselves, one another, and the world. When I say "trans poetics," indeed when I search for trans poetics at the edge of the university, I mean all of this (e.g., the trouble, the ambiguity, the shape-shifting, the survival strategies, the resistance, and the connection), but I also mean more than this.

Historically, the ancient Greek term *poiesis* refers to the act of making or crafting. It can be used with reference to making or crafting poetry, but it can also be used with reference to making or crafting really anything at all. For me, "trans poetics" refers to the ways trans people—and gender disruptors over the centuries—make themselves and make one another. But it also refers to how they make meaning and community—how they hang out alone or in company, how they tell their stories, hatch plans to survive or topple cisheteronormative frames or imagine ways the world might change. It is this deep sense of making, as the thrumming heart of trans existence, that I mean to sound when I say "trans poetics." We are not simply bodies and souls to which things happen, or in which a logic of gender transgression is simply playing itself out. We are not simply those for whom others should make room. We are busy making new spaces and shapes in the world. We are creatively making sense of our own flesh and blood, in and between us. We are cracking open our horizons, materially and conceptually. That is the trans poetics I am looking for, the poetics that germinates behind and to the side of policy.

But I mean still more than this. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten place poetics at the heart of critical university studies. Poetics, Moten states, drawing on their collaborative work, refers to "a constant process where people make things and make one another."[19] But Harney and Moten do not mean anybody, anywhere, making anything. They specifically place poetics in the hands of marginalized people, in the underbelly of institutions, making sense and trouble there at the edge. While focusing on Black fugitive study in the university, Harney and Moten mean for the term *poetics* to be capacious. For them, it refers to all the ways in which oppressed people (e.g., Black, Yemeni, queer, poor, or mad) walk and talk, work and play, survive and triumph, in "any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night."[20]

In *How We Make Each Other*, I take more than titular inspiration from Moten. Offering an extension of Harney and Moten's work, following their own references to transness and the undercommons, I track *trans* poetics as the set of practices and affects whereby trans people make resistant meaning and presence specifically in and under the university. [21] I mean to understand how trans folks interface with this institution of education and knowledge production, how they come to know and make known there differently, what their bodies do and where, and how community gets built in a trajectory always oblique to the university, at an angle always askew.

For me, "trans poetics" refers to the ways in which trans folks make resistant sense of themselves and their world through material practices in peripheral and insubordinate spaces. In this sense, I draw on all three theoretical traditions of thinking poetics: trans poetry, classical poetics, and critical university studies. The alchemical amalgam of those sources and their tuning to trans life, specifically to trans life in the Connecticut River Valley, however, is unique to this project. Tracking trans poetics there means listening to the clang of crisis as it produces trans-inclusive policies, but also more importantly to the quiet murmurs of trans existence and friendship, art and analysis that always fall outside those policies. In order to trace trans poetics, I offer in this book a series of attunements and analytics that help illuminate trans life in the university. For me, attunements are practices of noticing that allow certain things to come into the frame, whereas analytics are frames that allow specific kinds of noticing to set to work. I ask, then, not only how to look for trans poetics but also along what vectors to look such that trans poetics has a chance of coming to the fore.

This book studies the sense-making practices of a specific set of trans communities in the university, whether fighting for trans-inclusive policies or surviving without them (and sometimes despite them). To do that, I build on trans studies' longstanding concern with the costs of inclusion and visibility.[22] As numerous scholars have made clear, trans visibility is not *prima facie* good. It matters what becomes visible in trans when trans becomes visible. What shows up and what gets hidden? What is made palpable and what made secret? If attunements and analytics are the method of trans poetics, for me, the source of trans poetics is story, the story of trans life in the valley.

## Plotting the Path

There was a time—a long time—when I thought this book was impossible. There were just too many stories, too many nodes. I was awash in people and moments, affects and events, with no through-line. I waited and kept listening (and

relistening). The stories started to get caught on similar tags and knotted around the same nexes. Behind all the flashy work of generating trans-inclusive policies, which emphasizes key actors, signal events, and distillable dreams, there is the piecemeal work of telling rhizomatic trans histories, the slow-burn work of building trans-resistance networks, and the resonant practice of generating trans hopes. After characterizing the pivot from policy to poetics (part 1), then, these are the major sections of the book: history (part 2), resistance (part 3), and hope (part 4). From the reservoirs of history and the nets of resistant habits to the ephemeral shimmering of hope, trans poetics reconfigures sense-making and world-making—in ways far deeper than I at first imagined.

Too often, the story of trans life in the university gets told through a series of important personages. There are the big names of an awakening trans revolution (Kate Bornstein, Loren Cameron, Janet Mock, and Laverne Cox) that fill auditorium rooms, their fancy catered receptions funded by handfuls of programs and offices across campus. And then there are the big actors: the spitfire student who galvanizes the campus queer/trans group, or the staff member who writes the final draft, or, more rarely, the (especially junior, nontenured) faculty member who insists change happen now. But the story of trans life is more than this and importantly other than this. To hear it (and to tell it) requires an attunement not to the monumental but rather to the miniscule. It requires listening for the offbeat, off-brand moments of trans in the making and looking for the edges and the cracks of main movements. It requires analyzing how ability, class, gender, and race skew the stories one finds most easily, but also asking what the transgressive histories we do hold tell us about ourselves. Cultivating these attunements in the Five College archives writ large, I find not major actors so much as minor analytics that crisscross the official trans story. In thematizing dust, stash, and scatter, in part 2, I attend to the dust our traces gather, the stashes in which they find new life, and the ways they can become a force of scattering for both cis and trans normativity.

Too often, too, the story of trans life in the university gets told through a series of important events. The big protests and loud insurrections, the campuswide marches and media-magnet sit-ins. Moments where bathroom access, healthcare, pronouns, and housing came to a head. But trans resistance is more than this. It is the flyers, posters, reports, and educational materials; the frustration, pain, disappointment, and triumph; the huddles, friendships, internal rifts, and broken relationships. It is the everyday habits that sustain quiet remakings. To track trans resistance in this guise requires an attunement less to catalyzing events than to structures of being with one another that allow for transformation of ideas and

practices. It requires homing in on trans hangouts and looking for the lines they weave around, through, and against cisnormative expectations on campus. It requires thinking trans resistance in the context of other rumblings for liberation, but also asking how trans resistance sometimes replicates oppressive habits in its very undertaking. Nurturing these attunements in the Five College archives writ large, I find not major actions but minor analytics that circulate beneath official chronologies of change. In thematizing thread, glue, and pebble, in part 3, I attend to the resistant threads we weave and wear, the glue we use to gum up the works, and the pebbles lying around with which we build another world.

Lastly, the story of trans life in the university gets told through distillable dreams, especially for representation, visibility, and inclusive policies. But trans hopes are more than this, other than this. Trans folks in the university hope for basic security, for creaturely comforts, for intergenerational community, for radical reshaping of the world, for full houses of meaning and fabrics of relation. They harbor fiery and fragile hopes, silly and excessive hopes, impractical hopes, incendiary hopes, hopes that cool the pain and heat up purpose. Hopes hanging in abandoned airspace and hopes coursing through the arteries of intimacy. To track these quotidian trans hopes requires an attunement to often inconvenient visions and impractical imaginations. It requires listening for the prophetic in the concrete stuff of trans life, even and especially when that stuff is trash (or trashed). It requires looking for trans folks dancing in the dirt, working and singing on the ground, as much as attending to whose grounds and whose dance gets uptake. Deploying these attunements in the Five College archives writ large, I find not major aspirations but minor analytics that suffuse and escape the official story of trans inclusion. In thematizing fatigue, risk, and world, in part 4, I attend to the fatigue we feel and create, the risks we are and we take, and the worlds we (un)make.

This book offers a theory of social change *as poetic life* drawn from the praxis of trans communities. As such, *How We Make Each Other* is a local project with translocal reach. It tells the intriguing tale of how the Five Colleges became trendsetters for trans-inclusive policies in the United States. But more importantly it marks what gets left out and left over in the process. It asks, how might trans leadership in social change, and trans contributions to the theory and practice of history, resistance, and hope, transform higher education? What would happen to the university and after the university? Ultimately, this is a story of poetics, not policy. Of sticky ecologies, not calculative solutions. It is a story of intergenerational community, fatigue and fury, but also generosity and abundance. And this is a story for the world.

## Ecologies of Belonging

In *A Queer New York*, Jack Gieseking develops the framework of constellations through which to understand lesbian and trans or gender nonconforming people's negotiation of the city. Gieseking, a Mount Holyoke alum, argues that the story of queer New York City cannot be told through city grids or neighborhoods (or gayborhoods). It is more "fragmented and fleeting."[23] The story is best told by attending to queer constellations, where the stars are spaces and places, people and activities, memories and histories through which queer people build lines of belonging. Much like the seasonal waxing and waning of celestial patterns overhead, those lines, he remarks, often bend and shift over time. There is, after all, a certain regularity to queer deviation. But those lines are also clearly foreshortened or obscured by the twine of gentrification and late capitalism, through which racism, settler colonialism, classism, and ableism constrain the grid. The stars and their lines are nevertheless there. As Gieseking writes, "The political insight of constellations is that lesbians and queers resist cis-heteropatriarchy in claiming and making spaces (for however long), and by finding one another (however few or multiple) in and beyond neighborhoods."[24] Importantly, he welcomes the association between the term *constellations* and astrology, insisting it highlights the queer "ways of making worlds all at once mythical, imaginary, and physical."[25] Such is the minor science, one might say, of producing queer space.

There is a poetry to Gieseking's choice of words here. As he went about his interviews, he repeatedly noticed interviewees sporting the blue star tattoo; sometimes it was boldly brandished on arms and wrists, other times it peeped from behind a time piece. The blue star tattoo was a mid-twentieth century lesbian signal, originating in Buffalo, New York, which over time has taken on nine lives. It is from this unruly archipelago of blue stars that he got to thinking about constellations. While it goes unremarked in the text, astronomically speaking, blue stars are not only rarer and more short-lived than their red counterparts, but they also emit greater heat and luminosity. The symbol captures, then, something about queer life and desire. Our lives often begin later and end sooner than others, but they burn with an exceptional brilliance.

The term *constellations* is poetic for yet another reason, of which Gieseking may be unaware. The first recorded instance of queer life at Mount Holyoke is a letter published in the student newsletter on October 2, 1975.[26] The author, who takes the pseudonym of "Astronomer," titles the piece "Anniversary in Loneliness." Two years prior, she had come out to her then Amherst boyfriend, although her journey began another two years before that. She had

since not told a soul. She wonders if there are others like her. "I look for you in the night," she writes, "we are like stars. They can't be seen during the day, but I know they're there."[27] In this single, haunting line, Astronomer crystallizes the searching that marks queer life, the squinting to see if that light is there or no, whether in oneself, in another, or out there in the web of the world. In a follow-up interview the next week, she adds, "If there is a lesbian underground here, it is so far underground that it's like drilling for oil."[28] It's as if the sky is the earth's underbelly, and yet gazing into either extremity is like groping around in utter darkness. When, almost fifty years later, Gieseking publishes a book on queer constellations, he himself becomes a new star in Astronomer's sky.

In *How We Make Each Other*, I, too, find myself staring up and down at the stars, tracking the constellations of trans life that escape the lines and the grids of the academy. I look for the forms of trans life that fall outside of the university, or sit blithely on the edge of it, or grow insistently in its cracks. I am less interested in the policy grids that pick people up and drop them into a trans center, or a trans class, or a trans dorm, and more in the unofficial and non-professional, insurgent, and campy arrangements by which trans people "make things and make one another." What are the shapes of those constellations? In this book, I aim to feel out those lines of belonging that lie scattered around campuses and across queer generations. And to ask not only how it is that we belong, but how it is that we build belonging. Not only what are our constellations but how do we constellate?

In a place so often marked by isolation and alienation, from which trans people continually drop out and drift away, or die inside in order to survive, or never even get a chance to arrive—in a place like that, in a place like the university, the story of who we have been, what we have done, and where we're going matters immeasurably. It matters not only how we make space but how we unmake space. It matters what stars guide us home and, when there are no stars to be seen, how we become companions in shipwreck.[29] This is part of that story.

# notes

## PREFACE

1. At the urging of this moment, I collaboratively reconstructed the story of trans life at American University. See Zurn et al., "The AU Experience: Then and Now."

2. Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Chess, Kafer, Quizar, and Richardson, "Calling All Restroom Revolutionaries!"

2. Gershenson and Penner, "Introduction," 8; Gershenson, "The Restroom Revolution."

3. Dove, "Mission" email to Restroom Revolution members.

4. For five definitions of failure relevant to activist work, see Zurn, "Work and Failure."

5. See the W. Clyde Fitch (AC 1886) Collection.

6. Lester, "Gay? Straight? Vive la Difference."

7. Cawley, "You Don't Have to Be a Lesbian to Live Here."

8. Cawley, "You Don't Have to Be a Lesbian to Live Here."

9. Power, "Brief Autobiographical Information on Ben Power."

10. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 89.

11. For more on the original design and mission of Mount Holyoke College and Smith College, see Horowitz, *Alma Mater*.

12. Patterson, *The Making of a College*.

13. Personal interview with Jorge, October 5, 2017.

14. See UMass alum Siegel, "Transgender Experiences and Transphobia in Higher Education."

15. Awkward-Rich, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free."

16. See Davis, Trans Archive Oral History Project.

17. Personal interview with Jason, October 4, 2017.

18. I borrow the term *gender disruptors* from Micha Broadnax, Mount Holyoke librarian.

19. Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, 24.

20. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 74–75.

21. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 50; Tsang and Moten, "All Terror, All Beauty," 347.

22. Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, eds., *Trap Door*.

23. Gieseking, *A Queer New York*, 198.

24. Gieseking, *A Queer New York*, 198.

25. Gieseking, *A Queer New York*, xix.

26. Astronomer, "Anniversary in Loneliness."

27. Astronomer, "Anniversary in Loneliness," 8.

28. Horsman, "Astronomer Led Double Life," 1.

29. Tolkien, "Letter to Michael."

### 1. PROBLEMATIZING TRANS INCLUSION

1. Russell Pollitt, Li, and Grossman, "Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms."

2. Catalano and Shlasko, "Transgender Oppression."

3. Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*; Pitcher, *Being and Becoming Professionally Other*.

4. Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," 30.

5. Medina, "Preferred Gender Pronouns." Another student revised the handout title in 2016 to simply read "Pronouns Handout."

6. Personal interview with Mateo Medina, January 10, 2018.

7. Manion, "The Performance of Transgender Inclusion."

8. Spade, "We Still Need Pronoun Go-Rounds."

9. Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," 218.

10. Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners*; Spade, *Normal Life*.

11. Manion, *Female Husbands*; Spade, *Mutual Aid*.

12. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," 118.

13. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 74.

14. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 74, 171.

15. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 13.

16. Foucault, "Problematics," 418.

17. Killerman, "Genderbread Person."

18. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*.

19. Beemyn, "Serving the Needs of Transgender College Students"; Beemyn, "Making Campuses More Inclusive of Transgender Students"; Beemyn and Rankin, "Transgender Youth and Implications for Higher Education"; Beemyn, "Introduction."

20. Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, and Smith, "Suggested Steps to Make Campuses More Trans-Inclusive."

21. Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith, "What Is Needed, What Is Valued."

22. Personal interview with Crys, July 21, 2020.

23. Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*, 16.

24. Pitcher, *Being and Becoming Professionally Other*, 191.

25. Personal interview with Crys, July 21, 2020.