

Taking Care: Queer Belonging and Safety in The University

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Abstract

In this research, Brock University offers a case study of the tensions that result from desires for inclusion and the realities of pain, misrecognition, and harm many experiences. This project explored how queer students utilize and create systems of care that are both daily acts of nourishment required to engage with heteronormativity, and urgent critiques of neoliberalism. Four participants were recruited, all of whom are currently enrolled at Brock University and are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. This study used a semi-structured, open-ended methodology for the data collection process to ask how do queer students experience care within the university? Four individual interviews were done with participants on Zoom. Firstly, the participants use their identities to express their desires for care and systems of support that recognize their identities holistically. The second theme is the life-saving effect of queer kinship as a site of temporary relief from the stressors of navigating the heteronormative geographies of the university. The final theme identifies the precarious nature of safety in the classroom as experienced by queer students. I conclude that Brock University is at an impasse of care, I propose that students require care resources that engage meaningfully with queerness, acknowledging its implications for housing, individual pedagogy, and emotional wellbeing.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, colonialism, queer theory, feminist ethics of care, critical care studies.

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Introduction

Pursuing a university education is an expenditure of both temporal and monetary investments. The institutions of higher education that we attend provide certifications for our achievements, often symbolizing years of dedication and discipline. If achieved, these degrees and or certifications draw a connection between education, economic tensions, and identity production. For many poor and working-class students, a university education represents a hopeful transition to a higher socioeconomic status, ascending their past financial insecurities. Years of dedication and often, alienation, are supposedly softened by the familial comradery offered by these institutions. Brock University is no exception, describing itself as, “more than a school — it’s a community” (Brock University, 2022) and offering the promise to, “provide top-notch academic support, promote personal health and encourage positive connectivity” (Brock University, 2022). These statements carry a promise of support, and the university has multiple services, doctors, and care resources intended to support students throughout their education. There are myriad ways that marginalized students are not cared for by institutions of higher education and this thesis will explore ways to re-conceptualize support, community, and connectivity. Specifically, I will explore how queer and trans students navigate these spaces with distinctive stressors enveloped in complex systems of gender and sexuality as they interact with other social forces. In this research, I investigate how queer students experience systems of care, through their perspectives. Generally, the university is a heteronormative landscape, with histories of whiteness and colonialism embedded in its foundations. These histories have implications for students who are marginalized by gender, sexuality, social class, and whiteness. My thesis explored the life-saving ways that queer students utilize and create systems of care and support for one another to foster well-being and success.

Heteronormativity is the process of legitimizing and privileging heterosexuality as the natural and compulsory sexuality in society, rendering other sexual orientations and desires unnatural and deviant (Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997). My analysis will offer an exploration of how queer students utilize and create systems of care that are both daily acts of nourishment required to engage with heteronormativity, and urgent critiques of neoliberalism. This project exists at the convergence of critical care studies and queer theory, asking: How do queer students experience care within the university? By inquiring into how care is experienced by queer students within the university, I explore the relational practice of care when administered by an institution (Tronto, 2011), asking, is it possible for institutions to care for their students? By extension, I investigate if this relationship forces students to become reliant on colonial institutions through the care services they offer, rendering them vulnerable to these systems of power. Relatedly, I ask if students are empowered by the support offered by the university and in doing so, foster a necessary strength required to exist in a predominantly heteronormative society.

From my experience as a queer student at Brock University, I know the university can be a site of discomfort and tension. I have witnessed and experienced first-hand the minimizing of identities, misgendering, homophobic, and transphobic violence within the classroom. In contrast, I have also occupied classrooms with faculty who are affirming and establish safety through vocalized support. These textures create friction that is palpable, building a complex institution that has limits and procures moments of joy. In this research, Brock University offers a case study of the tensions that result from desires for inclusion and the realities of pain, misrecognition, and harm that many experiences. My familiarity with Brock University and the various services provided on-campus allowed for personal knowledge of the resources offered.

I use queer as a generalized term to refer to the participants who I spoke with about their experiences. These students responded to a call for queer participants. This term remains useful to me as it speaks to the expansive and limitless nature of the LGBTQ+ community (Dyer, 2019; Gilbert 2017; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). In this project, queer is a category with which to describe both an identity and a conceptual tool (Butler, 1993; Dyer, 2019; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018; Stockton, 2009) to describe experiences within the university beyond the limitations of institutional policies and curricular expectations. While inclusive, queer does not carry the same specificities as each identity within the LGBTQ+ acronym. Thus, the decision to use queer is not to suggest that identities are interchangeable, or easily collapsed. At times, I draw attention to how certain identities are swallowed within queer theory (Stryker, 2004). Trans people move through queer identities, and there are important debates and tensions in queer theory about trans embodiment. From the works of Susan Stryker (2004), Karen Barad (2015), and Jules Gill-Peterson (2019), queer and trans theories cannot be easily grouped together and are not always mutually exclusive. This research is not intended to reduce trans identities, but to harness queer theory as a lens to destabilize the normative structures that harm those who do not adhere to cis-heterosexism. The term queer as it appears here aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the project. Judith Butler (1993) proposes that *queer* can never be fully owned, as its existence rests in a fleeting temporality, contingent on the queering of itself to meet contemporary political or identity purposes. The multitude of personal interpretations represents the paradoxical magic of the word queer. Queer is a cosmic, immeasurable reclamation. Personally, queer speaks to the fluid nature of my gender and sexuality, as well as my political stance. My queerness is a fixed constant, informing all aspects of my life. The classrooms and colloquiums I attend and speak at, are queered through my presence, and the perspectives I offer.

My queerness is an aura which envelops and reverberates around me; It is the physical spaces I inhabit and move through, the lexicons of my speech; queer is how I exist in this world.

This study utilizes multiple theoretical frameworks to employ a transdisciplinary perspective. I draw on theories offered in queer theory (Brim, 2020; Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Dyer, 2019; Halperin, 2003; Sedgwick, 1991; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018; Stockton, 2009), critical disability studies (Dolmage, 2017; Mingus, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2020), mutual aid (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Spade, 2020) and critical care studies (Fritsch, n.d; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Tronto, 2010). I call on theories regarding care and mutual aid to understand how these function within circles of queer kin as care webs (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). These theories overlap and influence one another, drawing on similar themes of inequities. Through a review of past literature across these fields of thought, I weave a critique of colonialism, whiteness, neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and systemic racism throughout my research.

This project includes participants who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and enrolled at Brock University at the time of participation. To protect the participants, their program and year of study were withheld from the analysis. This study used a semi-structured, open-ended methodology for the data collection process. Four individual interviews were conducted with the participants on Zoom. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviews were conducted beginning in December 2021 and concluded in February 2022. An inductive approach was employed to code the data, identifying emergent themes for further analysis. The first theme explored the creative language harnessed by participants to describe their processes of identification. In doing so, participants utilized their identities to inform a desire for care that recognizes them wholistically. The second emergent theme is the life-saving effect of queer kinship as a site of temporary relief from the stressors of navigating the

heteronormative geographies of the university. Queen kin can provide comfort and soothe anxieties, creating a culture of care with ease and compassion (Gilbert, 2007). The final theme identifies the precarious nature of safety in the classroom as experienced by queer students. In being unsure of their safety within particular spaces, students often felt a palpable tension that manifests itself within the classroom as either relief or anxiety. I conclude that Brock University is at an impasse of care, as queer students express a desire for further care that recognizes their identities as a whole and the impact of queerness throughout their education. I propose that students require care resources that engage meaningfully with queerness, acknowledging implications for housing, individual pedagogy, and emotional wellbeing.

On-Campus Care

Post-secondary institutions are often sites of self-exploration, providing the opportunity for queer students to grapple with and celebrate their identities (Bragg, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2019). For many, the university is the first time they can express themselves freely, allowing themselves to take up space, free from parents and the communities that they previously moved within. Being queer within the university requires unique skills. Classrooms are frequently plagued with institutional microaggressions, leaving students vulnerable. Despite the stickers at the entrance of most classrooms, not all spaces are experienced as safe. Universities are compromised spaces, imbued in hunger for profit as institutions become increasingly competitive, forcing students to inhabit a politicized, capitalist environment (Brim, 2020). These tensions are omnipresent, rippling into pedagogies and directly impacting queer students. As such, students need their emotional and physical needs to be met while being let down by the neo-liberal aspects of higher education. My thesis explores the life-saving ways

queer students find systems of care and support within the university to foster their well-being and success.

As the LGBTQ+ population rises, post-secondary institutions must develop an appropriate infrastructure to support their unique needs and experiences (Logan, 2019; Pryor, 2018; Roberts et al., 2019; Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). In examining how LGBTQ+ university students thrive during their education, it is crucial to develop support systems that identify and respect the multiple identities students have (Hill, 2019; Pryor, 2018). From queer studies of education, we can learn that the presence of LGBTQ+ informed instructors and curricula, as well as interpersonal connections, creates positive environments for queer students throughout their post-secondary education (Hill, 2019; Pryor, 2018). In reading this literature, I have deepened my understanding of how post-secondary institutions that were not designed for queer students, require they establish their own spaces where they can create community (Pryor, 2018). The spaces queer students navigate are deeply gendered, including washrooms, gym changing rooms, intramural sports, and residency (Pryor, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). The normative boundaries of gender and sexuality within educational spaces render queer students vulnerable (Hill, 2020; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). In the context of the university, queer students are expected to contour themselves around heteronormativity as a means of survival.

Queer and trans students are significantly more likely to experience harassment, homophobia, and transphobic violence in post-secondary institutions (Gnan et al., 2019; Rankin, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010). Queer students are at an increased risk of suicidality and self-harm, anxiety, and depression (Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). This is intensified for trans students (Gnan et al., 2019; Haas et al., 2011; Hill, 2019; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). The most frequently

reported forms of harassment are intentional incivility and heterosexist violence (Gnan et al., 2019; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Making this point is not to frame LGBTQ+ students in a tragedy model, but to draw attention to the necessary and life-saving tools that must be provided for students. In previous studies, students have described how they employ multiple techniques to protect themselves, such as meeting faculty in advance to disclose any necessary information, utilizing queer-based resources and spaces, and connecting with other queer students (Hill, 2020; Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). While the university may be the first time many students embrace their identities, many have grappled with their identities throughout their time in high school (Fish et al., 2020; Gonzales, 2020). It is crucial for post-secondary institutions to provide LGBTQ+ focused care resources that are affirming and accessible for their identities (Logan, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019; Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Queer students need access to mental and physical health services that are informed and accessible (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019; Logan, 2019; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). A key issue regarding LGBTQ+ care resources is limited accessibility (Logan, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019; Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Many resources cannot be easily located on university websites, creating further blockages that impede students from accessing care services. Furthermore, these services require a degree of disclosure and identifying oneself which may make students feel hesitant to due to concerns of safety and privacy.

Students' identities are complex and for some, an intersectional experience with systems of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989) deepens difficulty in feeling cared for. It is crucial to explore how students of colour are impacted by systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and whiteness (Crenshaw 1989; Duran & Jones, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). Kimberle Crenshaw (2017) defines intersectionality as:

...a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things. (para 4)

Intersectionality asks that we do not observe and critique experiences of oppression as a singularity, but in its multitudes (Crenshaw, 1989; Cohen; 1997; Duran & Jones, 2020). Queer students of colour who attend historically white institutions (Duran & Jones, 2020) are frequently subjected to racism and heterosexism throughout their education (Brim 2020; Cohen, 1997). While there are courses that draw attention to systemic racism and heterosexism, these factors are not always considered on administrative and bureaucratic levels (Duran & Jones, 2020). It is crucial for post-secondary institutions to provide adequate resources for marginalized students (Duran & Jones, 2020) and my research seeks to understand how experiences of racism and white supremacy impact notions of care.

Access to Care Services On-Campus

To offer suggestions of how universities may support queer students more effectively, I must address possible techniques and lenses of critique. To do so, I lean on distributive justice, referring to how and where resources are allocated and demonstrating where institutions place their priorities (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). Queer students' overall well-being and mental health are significantly linked to the environment of their post-secondary institutions, often referred to as campus climate (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019; Hill, 2019; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Institutions that actively prioritize safety, inclusion, accessibility, and the well-being of their students, particularly those marginalized by whiteness, ability, and heteronormativity, demonstrate a positive campus climate for queer students (Duran & Jones,

2020). Positive perceptions of campus climate foster feelings of belonging, particularly for trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse students (Flores & Sheely-More, 2019; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). Gender-affirming care and inclusive care systems foster a positive campus climate and contribute to a positive experience with care (Logan, 2019; Pryor, 2018; Roberts et al., 2019; Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). This includes fostering critical conversations about whiteness, ability, gender, and colonialism. I draw on these examples of positive factors as an imagined care scene, describing possible futures of care and distributive justice within universities. In creating programs that are concerned with the experiences of all queer and trans students, there is hope for healing and joy.

In contrast, many institutions fail to recognize the unique needs of their students, rendering them continually vulnerable to harassment and trauma (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019). Some universities allow students to provide an alternative name to their legal name, or to select their gender from drop-down menu options on student profiles. However, there are vast inconsistencies regarding this process, with institutions using different or limited language for identities (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). It is crucial for students to have access to language that aligns with their identities, including that which is embedded in programming and curricula (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). Furthermore, the application of these changes must be ubiquitous across institution platforms, reflected on their student identification cards, online profiles, email addresses, and course registration lists. These administrative changes are key to protecting students. If a student is deadnamed (the name they were given at birth, which they no longer use or identify with), they are at increased risk for transphobic violence and discrimination (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Santos, 2018). Deadnaming removes student agency and often forces their identities to be announced to the entire classroom without their permission. Trans, non-binary,

and gender non-conforming students deserve the safety, respect, and agency to control their names and privacy (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Santos, 2018).

A key issue regarding care and marginalized populations is the presence of power differentials in higher education (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). Within the university landscape, there is a distinct difference in power held by students amongst each other and between them and faculty. This contributes to a negative campus climate, further isolating students (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019). As such, universities must be critically reflective and engage in procedural justice (Shriberg & Baker, 2019). Procedural justice (Shriberg & Baker, 2019) is tied:

directly to elements of cultural diversity, power, and privilege. For example, neglecting to address homophobic bullying is a violation of procedural justice, whereas creating and implementing formal policies toward schools being safe spaces for students who are LGBTQ is a positive example of procedural justice. (p. 89)

By implementing policies of care throughout pedagogy and administrative policies, universities can better serve marginalized students (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019). Universities can play a crucial role in preventing mental health issues and suicidality by actively prioritizing students marginalized by gender, sexuality, and race (Gnan et al., 2019). Social justice is fluid and active (Shriberg & Baker, 2019) and supporting students requires constant effort and, gathering feedback from students themselves.

My findings are in line with an Ontario-based study that explored the accessibility of LGBTQ+-based online resources offered in higher education (Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Fewer than one-in-three on-campus counselling services offer an LGBTQ+ focus (Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Specifically, gender-based counselling is an increasingly challenging resource to find

(Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). In an online analysis, approximately 42% of universities did not list ongoing resources for LGBTQ+ students (Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). While these results do not mean resources are not being offered, it illustrates that these resources are not easily accessible and therefore invisible to most LGBTQ+ students. However, students have counteracted the insufficiency of resources offered by the institution by creating systems of care themselves (Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Regarding physical health, LGBTQ+ students report a lack of focused resources and knowledge of practitioners and physicians (Logan, 2019). In studies, participants experienced constant misgendering and a lack of knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues (Santos, 2018). Due to the complexities of LGBTQ+ based health disparities, it is crucial that the institutions they attend both accommodate and fulfill their needs (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). This suggestion does not mean offering universal services with the expectation of students to conform their needs to their only option for services. Rather, the university must create informed and affirming resources specific to curated for the multiple identities of the students who attend.

Transgender Students and Education

There is a rising concern about the capacity of universities to care for the needs of trans students (Santos, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). This concern is a direct result of the frequent attacks on transgender students through government legislation. These policies are most frequently observed in the United States (Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). However, these policies carry implications that echo into the psychic well-being of trans students in Canada. There is an emotional exhaustion that manifests beyond measure due to constant news breaks discussing trans people in sports, bathroom bills, and retracted access to health care (Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). Transgender students experience a significant rate of health disparities (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). While research regarding trans health care has increased over the

previous years, there is a gap in data regarding the experiences of transgender students (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Santos, 2018).

The current data suggest a lack of health care services for trans students (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). Many current health care providers are not thoroughly educated on the complexities of identity, as well as the difference between, and the importance of recognizing gender and sex as a spectrum. Beemyn and Brauer (2015) show that transgender students report having to educate their doctors on trans-related matters or having irrelevant and invasive questions asked of their bodies that were not related to their appointment. This reversal of roles is indicative of the emotional labour that queer and transgender students are forced to endure and expected to provide. If students do not feel safe seeing a doctor, they are at a higher risk for long-term health issues (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Santos, 2018). Frequent misgendering/dead-naming is a health crisis, as trans students are willing to avoid doctors and medication for fear of being outed and subjected to violence (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Santos, 2018). As research has shown, these students state that receiving no health care was better than the mental and emotional trauma of repeatedly facing intrusive questions, dead-naming and misgendering, or having to educate professionals (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2019; Santos, 2018).

Brock University's *Transgender Inclusion Guide* (2019) provides a sample of the services provided for trans students. This is generally inclusive of most medications, including hormones for full-time students. However, gender-affirming surgery is not included in this coverage and part-time students do not receive coverage. For graduate students, only two types of estrogen hormone replacement therapy (HRT) are covered, and most forms of testosterone are eligible for coverage. For international students, the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) does not cover prescriptions but is supplemented by the BUSU health plan. However, some

gender-affirming surgeries are covered within UHIP (2019). Additionally, Brock University offers Personal Counselling Services. However, these services are advertised for student-related stressors, such as upcoming examinations and post-graduation plans. MacLean's magazine (2021) awarded Brock University #1 for mental health support for students in Canada. The Student Health Services (SHS) offers videos of the types of contraceptive tools you can access through the SHS, as well as a step-by-step guide on how to receive STI testing. The Student Wellness and Accessibility Centre on the Brock University website offers lists of resources and links for LGBTQ+ students. However, these resources are not internal, but rather a database of quick links to remove the stress of searching for these resources independently. There is little online evidence to suggest the presence of formal, on-campus LGBTQ+ resources offered by staff. This is not to suggest that the counsellors, nurses, and therapists on campus are not educated in LGBTQ+-based concerns or that some may identify as LGBTQ+. Rather, it is not explicitly stated for LGBTQ+ students that the care they receive will be safe and inclusive of the complexities that queer students navigate. This discrepancy is crucial and necessary for the well-being of queer students.

Brock Coverage and Inclusion

I investigate how queer students at Brock University experience care, from their perspectives. In doing so, I draw attention to the relational practice of care when administered by an institution (Tronto, 2011). This work reflects on the impact that settler-colonial institutions have on students, particularly, those who are marginalized by whiteness, ability, gender, and sexuality. This project exists alongside the queer students who attend Brock University, asking them to speak to their emotional and physical experiences. The participants address their

processes of identification, the queer kinships they have developed, and the precarious nature of safety within the sphere of academia.

To investigate this inquiry of care, I employed multiple theoretical frameworks as a method of analysis. I draw on queer theory to destabilize and critique social concepts of normalcy, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997; De Lauretis, 1991; Dyer, 2019; Sedgwick, 1991; Stockton, 2009). Critical care studies, disability justice and mutual aid inform my analysis, addressing how care is complicated by colonialism, neoliberalism, ability, and whiteness, utilizing the works of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), Joan Tronto (2011), and Dean Spade (2020). To confront the continued manifestations of colonialism, I am informed by Eve Tuck's (2020) work on decolonization and the politics of the institution. My project requires a transdisciplinary approach to analysis that simultaneously acknowledges the texts I study and informs the interviews I conduct. I engaged with past literature on queer students within educational contexts, revealing that there is limited research oriented towards students' first-hand experiences with sensations of care. I elected to center the stories as stated by the participants to create an archive of queerness within Brock University. Through the methodology, I explore the queering of the interview environment and the data analysis process. The data collection consisted of individual interviews with participants. The interviews were coded through a queer theoretical lens, addressing the emergent themes with a deductive perspective. The themes were then grouped into categories for the data analysis and discussion sections. Lastly, the discussion section anchors itself as the summation of the project, exploring the emergent themes of the interviews and applying theory to the experiences of the participants. I conclude my thesis by imagining futures of care within the university that is critically conscious of the impacts of transphobia, and heteronormativity.

Literature Review

Queer Theory as Social Critique

Queer theory is the foundation of my theoretical framework. As a field of study and scholarship, it draws attention to the complexities, challenges, and joys of disrupting the conventional expectations of gender, sexuality, and development (Brim, 2020; Dyer, 2019). The use of queer theory in this thesis is a personal attempt to describe something incommunicable. In the liminal space of identity production, the expansive nature of queerness provides solace. When applied to research and pedagogy, Jenna McWilliams (2016) describes queer theory as an, “epistemological and ontological shift; embraced fully, it demands resistance to or rejection of dominant assumptions about who people are, what learning looks like, and how educational design can and should be undertaken” (p. 260). Queer theory asks how we may destabilize normativity and disrupt the systems of power, which actively work to reinforce violent boundaries upon those who exist beyond normativity (Bragg, 2018; Cohen, 1997; Dyer, 2019; Marshall et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2019; Stockton, 2009). In this project, queer is a category with which to describe identity formation and a conceptual tool to describe experiences beyond the limitations of institutional policies and curricular expectations.

I draw on queer theory to understand how queer students navigate the heteronormative landscape of post-secondary institutions (Marshall et al., 2019). These structures perpetuate and reinforce a heteronormative matrix, often intentionally (and sometimes unintentionally) leaving little space for queer students’ success. Because I completed this project in a program that is focused on Child and Youth Studies, I also recognize that the thin lines between adolescence and adulthood are as undefinable and messy as seeking a true definition for queerness, or the passing of time. Relatedly, I recognize the university as a site of sideways growth (Stockton, 2009).

These spaces of post-secondary education become an extension of adolescence, where students can explore their identities and test out new modes of recognition. Despite the stressors of academia, queer students must learn to survive within academic institutions (Santos, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020; Hill, 2020; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). There is no handbook or survival guide. Queer students often rely on community, kinship, and intuition to survive within these spaces.

The presence of queerness actively destabilizes conceptions of sex and gender (Butler, 1990; Dyer, 2019; Sedgwick, 1991; Stockton, 2009). Queer theory acknowledges that sexuality and gender are not simply embedded in cultural foundations, but socially constructed and reproduced (Butler, 1990; Cohen 1997; Sedgwick, 1991). It must be noted that queer theory in its traditional design was curated specifically to be an encompassing term, to alleviate the tensions between the distinct terminology of lesbian and gay (De Lauretis, 1991). While I find comfort in the undefined, fluid nature of queer as an identity, this cannot be recognized ubiquitously. I ask, can we collapse identities so easily into one term? Recognizing queerness in oneself and harnessing the language to describe it is a colossal task. There is comfort in the rigidity of fixed terms and identities, where others may find the rigidity to be suffocating.

Queer theory emerged in the late 1980s and was in part an attempt to unsettle complacency in lesbian and gay studies, by challenging the assumption that the experiences of these two identities were similar and equally balanced in their reception (Halperin, 2003). Prior to the 1980s, the release of the DSM-III removed homosexuality as a psychiatric illness but had replaced it with gender identity disorder of childhood (Sedgwick, 1991). This pathologization of queerness in young people bolstered cultural discourses of sexual deviancy and othering. Alongside the urgency of the HIV/AIDS crisis, these moments of homophobia and transphobia

demanded change. Teresa De Lauretis used the term queer theory in her work to intentionally provoke a shift in social sciences to create room for subjectivities and embodied forms of existing that did not adhere to discrete categories (De Lauretis, 1991; Halperin, 2003). The theories and provocations gathered under the term ‘queer theory’ were intended to illuminate the pervasive nature of non-normative orientations beyond the boundaries of cisgender heterosexuality, as well as to address the systematic violence against queer people during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 80s (Cohen, 1997). Since then, queerness has become a way to identify oneself, but also to enact a political and cultural lens to critique injustices and violence (Brim, 2020; Dyer, 2019; Eng & Puar 2020).

However, some critique queer theory as a marker of academic elitism (Brim, 2020; Spade, 2020). Its inaccessibility and anti-identarian substructure lead many LGBTQ+ people to feel their identity-based experiences are being denied by academics. I echo Jenna McWilliams (2016), in her statement, “Queer theory is not, has never been, an esoteric theory that hides in ivory towers; for me, queer theory is the language of my life” (p. 263). Considering queer theory was adopted as a lens to critique academia, there is a deep irony in its praxis through this project. Queer theory has established itself as a framework that rejects traditional expectations. Its rebellious nature is rooted in histories of violence against marginalized communities. The use of queer theory within academia remains contentious, as some wonder how a conceptual framework that is predicated on disrupting normativity and institutional systems cohabitate within the same institutions. One might pose this inquiry as an attempt to destabilize the institution from the inside out, causing cracks within its foundation. My privilege and access to post-secondary education give me the space to learn from queer theorists and scholars; directly affirming the academic elitism proposed by Brim (2020) but also, the nurturing potential of studying theories

and methods related to gender and sexuality. Queer theory, for me, is a name for the daily labour of support, activism and identity exploration that queer people experience.

As I have learned from a review of queer history in Canada, historically, queer people who attended university were forced to conceal their identities. Universities have always functioned for white, heterosexual, cis-gendered men. During the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism and the Stonewall Riots, marginalized communities were finally included in advocating for social justice, recognizing the histories of violence and discrimination. Canada saw the first LGBTQ+ campus-based club emerge in 1969, the University of Toronto Homophile Association (King, 2019). The 1960s saw the lifting of anti-Black segregation in educational institutions across Canada, as more schools were pressured to lift these racist policies (The Aeolian, 2020; Mccorkindale, 2018). This does not signify the end of institutional racism, which continues to impact racialized students across campuses. For those marginalized by race, gender and sexuality, queer theory began to offer a realm of critique and advocacy (Cohen, 1997). It is crucial for queer theory to include conversations of intersectionality and to be critical during the destabilization of white supremacy, institutional racism, ableism, class exploitation and hetero-patriarchy (Brim 2020; Cohen, 1997; Duran & Jones, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Puar, 2013).

White supremacy and racism exist within the university, as also the proliferation of queer theoretical frameworks. Through processes of systemic violence against marginalized communities, normalcy has become synonymous with whiteness, cisgenderism, heterosexuality, and being non-disabled (Cohen, 1997; Duran & Jones, 2020; Tronto, 1995; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Asking what is considered normal, extends into what is not included in this definition. These scales are weighted by models of social exclusion, including but not limited to;

gender, sexuality, race, and disability (Dyer, 2019). The language of queer history is overwhelmed by whiteness, bolstering partitions of accessibility into particular spaces and conversations (Cohen, 1997; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Pryor, 2018). As outlined by Cathy Cohen (1997):

I am interested in examining the concept of ‘queer’ in order to think about how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality. (p.25)

The histories of queerness are predominantly histories of whiteness (Cohen, 1997; De Lauretis, 1991; Duran & Jones, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Pryor, 2018). Through systemic racialized violence, whiteness has placed itself as oppositional, and superior to any identity perceived as other. Without acknowledging queerness in racialized contexts, queerness is based on white settler-colonial frameworks (Eng & Puar, 2020).

By being critical of which identities are accepted and which are not, it is apparent that white queerness is more easily digested within the heteronormative institutions that frame Western social discourse (Cohen, 1997; Duran & Jones, 2020; Pryor, 2018). While the histories of queer liberation were founded on the work conducted by Black and Brown queer and trans people, they were quickly forgotten once progress had been achieved (Cohen, 1997; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Puar, 2013). As described by Barbara Smith (1998) in “Queer Politics: Where’s the Revolution?”:

Unlike the early lesbian and gay movement, which had both ideological and practical links to the left, black activism and feminism, today’s ‘queer’ politics seem to operate in a historical and ideological vacuum. ‘Queer’ activists focus on ‘queer’ issues, and racism,

sexual oppression, and economic exploitation do not qualify, although the majority of ‘queers’ are people of color, female or working class. (para 6)

Through a social demand for a distinct definition of queerness, there is a restrictive aura of who is permitted access to particular identities based on whiteness.

Queerness is a site of resistance against the normative structures that polices sexuality, gender, and bodies. By reducing queerness to only sexuality, we fail to account for how race, gender, class, and disability intersect with sexuality (Butler, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Duran & Jones, 2020). Queer theory is simultaneously a theoretical and political resistance against normativity (Halperin, 2003). By ‘queering’ theory, it is possible to confront heteronormative underpinnings within academia (Butler, 1993; Halperin, 2003). Heteronormativity haunts queer potential through its restrictive nature (Stockton, 2009), and queer theory is a response to the violence of normativity (Dyer, 2019). As such, it has become a deliberately disruptive field in academia, but the implications of this destabilization can be felt beyond the institution (Brim, 2020; Halperin, 2003). Queer speaks beyond the boundaries of cis-heterosexual imaginations and offers a liberation that cannot always be felt in rigid categories. Queer is the creative and infinite horizon where hope resides (Butler, 1993; Munoz, 2009). In challenging normativity, we may disrupt the socially constructed boundaries of sex, gender, and ability (Dyer, 2019). Through this investigation, I explored the life-saving ways queer students find systems of care and support within the university to foster their well-being and success.

An Ethics of Care

Through this investigation, I am also immersed in critical care studies and disability justice. This project draws on Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s book, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), and her critical investigation of care and all its

accompanying complexities. The book explores how sick and disabled people must navigate getting their necessary care in a system built on white settler-colonial and ableist frameworks. I investigate the presence of student-led *care webs* (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Care webs function through reciprocity and mutual aid (2018). Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) offers care webs to reject:

The model of paid attendant care as the only way to access disability support. Resisting the model of charity and gratitude, they are controlled by the needs and desires of the disabled people running them...they still work from a model of solidarity not charity. (p. 20)

I use care webs as a template for the structures of care that students create for one another. This project employs critical care studies and disability justice as a prophetic rubric. Disability justice advocates that bodies exist as infinite possibilities (Sins Invalid, 2020). The quality of care one receives depends on the person or institution that extends these gestures of care (Tronto, 2011). While care is typically seen in familial bonds, this model does not apply equally when examining the institutions that reproduce our cultural norms (Tronto, 2010). Institutions are not simply physical buildings, they house, perpetuate, and reinforce social discourses. As such, this relationship may be implicated in certain geohistorical contexts that further complicate care (Sins Invalid, 2020). In examining how care is experienced within the university, one must acknowledge the colonial and neoliberal underpinnings of this exchange (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Care can be manipulative and disingenuous, and for many, care systems have caused more trauma than support (Sins Invalid, 2020). As we learn from critical care studies, the institution as a governing body cannot extend care in ways that are reminiscent of familial

structures. Many are impacted by racialized, gendered or ableist violence, and can attest to the cultural stronghold of normativity that underpins universities and other institutions that espouse care (Dolmage, 2017). When care is extended to those deemed most vulnerable (Tronto, 2010), vulnerability then becomes synonymous with marginalized identities (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). The violence that marginalized communities face is indisputable. By drawing attention to the compounding gendered, ableist and racialized systemic violence, we continue this work of reconciling centuries of pain, fostering a future where care is encouraged and naturalized.

Mutual aid provides an alternative to care systems provided by institutions (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Spade, 2020). I draw on concepts of mutual aid and care as part of the foundational thread of this project. Mutual aid is built upon radical acts of care, respect, and reciprocity. By engaging in an exchange of services, we begin to see the dearth of resources that many cannot access. I investigate the possibility of hidden emerging histories of informal care communities beneath the formal resources offered by institutions. Mutual aid often manifests in seemingly small ways, but these acts centre on love and humanity above gain (Spade, 2020).

Formed by students to support one another either alongside or independently of the institution itself, I use this model as a foundation for a possible outcome of my research. Through peer ride-shares, study groups, and the emotional labour of friendship, we may begin to apply theory to everyday systems of care and support. These exchanges of informal care are theory in motion. Simply put, how we attend to the needs of others demonstrates the shortcomings of the institutions in which we are embedded, and the challenges faced by students. The kinship we develop within our communities creates a space of generosity and compassion; an auxiliary support system that meets specific daily basic needs that institutions may not be able to provide.

Kelly Fritsch's *Intimate Assemblages* (n.d.) explores informal and formal forms of care, specifically among disabled persons. She uses the concept of assemblages (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1984) to refer to the complex and interwoven entanglements of contexts that affect each other. Assemblage theory proposes that connections within relationships are not fixed, they are divided into specific components, each with specific territories and responsibilities, yet subject to constant change and shifting affect (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1984). In other words, an assemblage exists as a multiplicity, defined by its interrelations and constantly changing affective force. In Fritsch's work, assemblages are the necessary devices and support systems moving alongside and in tandem with the body, morphing into a cooperative network. These factors can be both physical and intangible. The formations and relationships within the body, as well as externally, work together to form the assemblages of our lives (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1984; Fritsch, n.d.). My thesis explores the assemblages experienced by queer students, as their identities, bodies and relationships are shaped by their environments. As Fritsch (n.d.) explains:

In calling into question the modes by which disabled people seek freedom, we discover that the struggle of disabled people is also the struggle of those people who have been racialized or gendered, those who are queer, those who have tenuous immigration status, and so on, as they also experience disproportionate assault by the state and capitalism.

(p.10)

This quotation illustrates the compounding effects of systemic discriminatory violence. These factors become assemblages as they are intertwined, shaping our identities and how we navigate society (Brockenbrough, 2013; Deleuze & Guatarri, 1984; Fritsch, n.d.; Mingus, 2011; Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2018). Through systems of care, we begin to heal from violent histories and build ecosystems of queer joy. Puig De La Bellacasa (2012) writes, "Care obliges us to constant

fostering, not only because it is in its nature to be about mundane maintenance and repair, but also because a world's degree of livability might well depend on the caring accomplished within it" (p.203). This framework, alongside queer theory, helps to guide my project. Care is both the seemingly insignificant exchanges we share that contribute to our general well-being, and the grandiose gestures to provide the necessary resources and tools for support (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Community and compassion are always radical in a settler-colonial state (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Spade, 2020). To care for one another without the expectation of compensation is revolutionary in its practice. It challenges the individualism of neoliberal capitalist subjecthood as an ideal. Care in the current system has been ascribed to weakness, where independence is associated with strength. In being critical of the current neoliberal capitalist systems, we may deconstruct and reimagine future care systems.

Those students impacted by racialized, gendered or ableist violence can attest to the cultural stronghold of normativity that underpins universities and other institutions that espouse care (Dolmage, 2017). Within institutions, care is stated to be extended to those deemed most vulnerable but in practice, things shift away from such promises (Tronto, 2010). Vulnerability then becomes synonymous with marginalized populations seeking to participate in post-secondary education. Considering futures oriented around care is crucial for the success and futurity of students. Attending university is a period of heightened pressure, balancing endless tasks while sustaining oneself. These factors weigh on the body, contributing to embodied stress and mental fatigue. By providing the space to account for physical and mental health, which is critical of the implications caused by histories of systemic violence, we continue this work of reconciling centuries of pain, fostering a future where care is encouraged and naturalized.

Settler Colonial Institutions and Land

In contributing to the growing conversations of care structures and care politics within institutions, I provoke thought into how and even if there can there ever truly be a safe space within a site built on white supremacy and settler colonialism? In the essay “Biting the University Hand That Feeds Us” (2020), Eve Tuck writes, “When we bring the settler-colonial roots of the academy to the forefront, we can also speak realistically about the futurities it can entertain” (p.151.). This line of inquiry examines the inability of institutions to shed the histories of violence and enact the necessary change to provide care for students. This is not to echo the calls to decolonize schools through the integration of Indigenous practices, as they are not interchangeable measures. As defined by Tuck and Yang (2012):

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. (p. 3)

Settler colonialism operates through the ongoing effects of colonial ideologies (Na’puti & Dionne, 2020).

Simply put, there is a complicated dynamic on campus when it comes to settler colonialism, land, and history. Brock University has embarked on a journey of decolonization and reconciliation (The Brock News, 2021), enacting an Indigenous Research Grant (Majtenyi, 2021), decolonization panels (Hunt, 2021) and participating in the Spirit Bear project alongside Dr. Cindy Blackstock, the acting First Nations Child & Family Caring Society’s Executive Director (Landman, 2021). While Brock University highlights Indigenous-related issues and panels, the campus itself is built on traditional Indigenous lands. Specifically, Brock University

inhabits the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people (Brock University, 2021). The continued occupation of land affirms itself as an inherently colonial project (Tuck & Yang, 2012). When the namesake of the university is a colonial administrator and the university exists on land stolen from Indigenous peoples, the prospect of reconciliation is complicated by its history. During the yearly birthday celebrations (Titone, 2018) for the \$1-million bronze statue (Mayer, 2013), there are histories selectively glossed over. The success of the university's namesake was dependent on a collective of Black soldiers, the Coloured Corps, whose freedom is not fully known (Newfield, 2011). These truths exist in tandem and demand recognition. I draw on these histories not to undermine the efforts Brock University has made to reconcile with the violence of Canada against Indigenous people, but to address the nuances within the infrastructure of the university.

As such, this investigation of care has an acidic aftertaste within its geohistorical contexts. In "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality and Purpose" (2010), Joan Tronto curated a list of indicators for institutions that are not caring well enough, describing bad care as, "callous, inadequate, rigid" (p. 163). Under capitalism, institutionalized care has become a calculated, quantifiable dynamic, subject to evaluation (Tronto, 2011). Care is further complicated through the existence of power dynamics, as universities are overtly capitalist, and unable to conceal their politics (Brim, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Puar, 2013; Spade, 2020; Tronto, 2011). In my thesis, I ask, is it possible for institutions to care for their students? Post-secondary institutions are transactional, acquiring financial gain in exchange for access to knowledge. As such, these spaces are not openly accessible to everyone (Brim, 2020). Higher education is often a symbol of socioeconomic status, eclipsed by the loans students must take to obtain their degrees. For many, the cost of hope for a more comfortable life is student debt.

These factors swirl together, forming multiple concerning themes. The institutions we attend are intrinsically connected to the manifestations of settler colonialism, including the gender binary (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Spade, 2020; Tronto, 2010). As such, these histories are embedded in the foundation they tread. The control of the land is extended to the policing of gender and sexuality (Puar, 2013; Sedgwick, 1991). The arrival of white settlers signaled the establishment of the gender binary, a two-gender system, which assigns masculine and feminine ideals to sex characteristics (Pryor, 2018). Rigid limitations of gender create an unforgiving erasure of identities, possibilities, and desires. This ideology was accompanied by white Christianity, which fueled racialized violence, accelerating the dispossession, exploitation and genocide of both culture and people (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The university is the convergence of white settler-colonial violence and the strict adherence to normative boundaries of identity and sexuality (Brim, 2020; Cohen, 1997; Dyer, 2019; Puar, 2013).

These histories manifest themselves within higher education, regardless of the work they do to repair centuries of violence. There cannot be decolonization without the return of land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The institution is a colonial project, grounded in colonial, ableist roots (Dolmage, 2017). Universities were never intended to extend themselves to include marginalized populations. The foundations of higher education are rooted in exclusionary politics (Brim, 2020). As such, they have not been formulated to set up the necessary care systems for marginalized students. Rather, queer, disabled and racialized students have been forced to contour their needs to the simplicity of what is offered (Dolmage, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Through this project, I imagine a future of care liberated from the restrictions of gendered and racialized oppression or centered by whiteness. I hope that students may reap a future that centres on those who continue to experience colonial violence.

I extend my theoretical foundations across multiple fields of knowledge. I draw on queer theory to understand how queer students disrupt conventional expectations of gender and sexuality (Brim, 2020, Dyer, 2019), and to address how these forces are socially constructed and reproduced within institutional frameworks (Butler, 1993; Cohen 1997; Sedgwick, 1991; Stockton, 2009). To strengthen this critique, I utilize Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), and her theory of care-webs to understand how queer students support one another through mutual aid and reciprocity (Brim, 2020; Spade, 2020). Lastly, Eve Tuck's (2020) critical work against settler colonialism and decolonization informs my critique of Brock University, and institutions, collectively. These theories weave together, creating the transdisciplinary theoretical foundation of my thesis. I use these bodies of literature to inform the methodology and data analysis. Having described the theoretical underpinnings that fuel this project, I next explore the methodology used to propel the research to fruition.

Methodology

This project required flexibility and reflexivity, which can be obtained through a complex and transdisciplinary approach to methods (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In the vein of queer theoretical exploration, I draw on multiple forms of knowing and reading, including those offered in the fields of queer theory, critical disability studies, mutual aid, and critical care studies. To stay with my theoretical framework while also engaging in qualitative methods, I draw on both queer theory and a participatory approach to the interview process (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; McWilliams, 2016; Sugarman et al., 2021). My project requires an interdisciplinary approach to analysis that simultaneously acknowledges the texts I study and informs the

interviews I conduct. In building from theoretical constructs, this approach encourages the destabilization of power dynamics from the researcher to the participants.

My methodology is qualitative in origin and is framed by queer theory and critical disability studies. Qualitative research fosters an in-depth approach to understanding how people perceive the world, social relationships, and institutions (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Mao et al., 2016; Tracy, 2010). In the bedrock of qualitative research, there exist multiple truths, with each participant offering their truth (Tangaard, 2009; Tracy, 2010). There is a natural connection that arises between queer theory and qualitative methodologies. While queer theory destabilizes normative models of gender, sexuality, and identity (Brim, 2020; Dyer, 2019), qualitative research unearths and illuminates stories that are often marginalized and ignored. These two methodological perspectives inform my analysis, illuminating perspectives that locate and invigorate change within dominant social structures. For the purposes of the study, it was crucial to employ a methodology that allowed participants to speak directly, articulating their experiences and emotions. Through their contributions, participants breathe life into this study, guiding the shape and direction.

Queer theory is particularly useful within this research as it disrupts normative boundaries of gender, sexuality, and development (Brim, 2020; Dyer, 2019). It is impossible to remove gender and sexuality from any situation, as it is embedded in the foundations of our social structures (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1991). As such, queer theory offers a lens through which all gendered experiences are examined, dissected, and understood. Queer theory holds space for subjectivities and embodied forms of existing that do not always adhere to the normative boundaries of gender, sexuality, and desire (Halperin, 2003). This approach to queer

theorizing creates space to disrupt and interrogate cultural discourses and structures of power, which actively work to reinforce these boundaries (McWilliams, 2016).

In addition, this project orients itself at the intersection of disability justice and critical care studies. In many ways, social institutions (such as universities) have been historical sites of violence for many marginalized communities due to the treatment they receive (Fritsch, n.d; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Queer and disabled communities face socialized violence that has become normative and expected at the hands of higher education and institutionalized care (Mingus, 2018). By implementing frameworks of disability justice, this thesis contributes to the destabilizing of institutions and the normative violence they perpetuate. For many, disability justice is, “a point of departure rather than a destination,” (Sins Invalid, 2020). Through this framework, I shift from viewing care as only a solution to viewing care as the ongoing and necessary support. Many social institutions historically enacted violence on disabled and diverse populations as a means of control through eugenic practices, and this continues within higher education (Dolmage, 2017).

Notably, as a queer student myself, I firmly believe this has contributed positively to the environment for the interview process. The participants in this study, while all identifying as queer students are unique within their identities and presentations of self. These students grapple with white supremacy, colonialism, gender, migration, transphobia, and homophobia. Their queerness does not equate to similarities that easily cohere, as each of their narratives and experiences is different. This diversity of experience deepens the importance of this study, as students speak directly regarding their experiences with violence and support within the university structure. As a collective, they draw attention to the tensions and discomforts felt by inhabiting the heteronormative landscape of higher education, each contouring the discussion

with their perspective. By establishing my own identity at the beginning of the interview, I intended to encourage a sense of safety in the participants, so they could speak about their experience in an environment founded on queerness. This project represents a small percentage of queer students at Brock University and is limited in its representation of the experiences of other students with differing identities.

This methodological approach offers a revolutionary potential to illuminate the unique needs, hopes, pain, and joys of queer students. Qualitative research influenced by queer theory provides a foundation to listen to unheard stories that are moving and revitalizing. The semi-structured interview framework encourages an organic exchange of information, allowing a natural discussion to emerge (Diefanbach, 2008; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The participants were encouraged to follow their emotions as they emerged within their narratives, exploring areas they had never realized impacted them so deeply. My approach offers possibilities of a destabilizing power, which may invigorate marginalized communities at Brock University, and draw attention to the unique complexities of queer students.

Participants Recruitment

This project explores how queer students experience care within the university. My research questions are intentionally broad, extending into the endless possibilities of students' experiences of care, including medical, emotional, physical, peer support, clubs, pedagogy, instructors, and self-care. To further understand care within the contexts of the university environment, I focused on a community with a long history of formulating its care collectives. In doing so, I witnessed and listened to the needs that institutions have historically failed to meet. This thesis used online, semi-structured interviews with students over the age of 18, who are LGBTQ+ and were enrolled at Brock University at the time of the study.

For this thesis, I recruited participants through promoted emails administered through the university and interpersonal communication. I designed a poster detailing the project and my contact information. To maintain a manageable project, the study was limited to four participants. In a larger study, many personal narratives may not be included in the finalized research project due to paper limitations. By having a smaller sample group, I ensured a higher quality and dedication to illuminating the specific experiences of the participants (Lareau, 2012). My thesis prioritized drawing attention to the experiences of the participants directly through their voices. It is not my intention to critique or analyze the emotions shared by the participants. Rather, I intended to create a living document, informed by, and created alongside queer students. My thesis does not speak on behalf of all queer students at Brock University but is a brief snapshot of a small collective within a larger community. My thesis intended to amplify queer students and their experiences, allowing them to speak on key issues they experienced and their impact on their lives. In prioritizing the students, this project meets students exactly as they are within their experiences.

Interview Process and Questions

While this research focuses on experiences of care, the word itself and its implications do not elicit the same affective reaction for each person. I invited participants to draw from their own experiences to define the care they receive or wish to receive. The term care is intentionally broad, and I invited participants to interpret the word however they wished. I intend to discover a definition of care as described by queer students. I do not have a working definition of care, rather, I have assigned constructs to give shape to the word. Care is that which soothes the ailments, stressors and violence experienced throughout life. As such, care may manifest in multiple forms, each unique to the person who receives or enacts care. I did not limit care to

being merely a physical act or exchange; rather, care can be a phantasmal, spiritual, and emotional experience. The criteria for care are subject to personal interpretation, encouraging the participant to find sites of either discomfort or relief they have experienced throughout their duration at Brock University.

I intended to destabilize power dynamics within the interview space. As a queer student, I exist both as a member of the group being studied and as a researcher. The duality of my identity creates a form of reciprocity that is grounded in empathy. I firmly believe this contributed to feelings of safety among the participants. To build a critical methodology I call upon feminist interview practices (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Lokot, 2021) to inform my methodological approach to the interview process. This approach fosters compassion within the interview environment while destabilizing power dynamics. Feminist interviewing practices are critically aware of the impact that being researched has on marginalized populations and are conscious of how the positionality of the researcher and the participant, as well as the implications of these positionalities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Lokot, 2021).

Through adjacent identities and positionalities, there is a sense of kinship and familiarity is found. I firmly believe that my experiences within the university strengthen my ability to engage critically. Due to my proximity to the participants, I have constantly reflected on how my experiences may influence the study (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). I understand reflexivity as, “an ongoing and relational process which requires active and continuous engagement from the researcher” (Mao et al., 2016. p. 1). As a white, non-disabled, queer student, I have had affirming and disparaging experiences at Brock University. My insistence on applying queer theory in all aspects of my education has been met with resistance, and I have

been asked to remove politics from the classroom when I discuss pronouns or trans-related issues. In contrast, I have met faculty who effortlessly validated my identity and provided the opportunity to grow personally and academically. As outlined by Roni Berger (2013):

Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research. (p. 220)

Through self-reflexivity, I acknowledge these truths exist within my experiences, and by extension, influence my research (Berger, 2013; Tangaard, 2009; Tracy, 2010).

In queering the interview environment, I centre the participant to decrease power differentials and foster open communication through prioritizing comfort and safety. Through this practice, I am influenced by feminist interviewing (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Lokot, 2021), and trauma-informed practices (Brown et al., 2020; Namakula et al., 2021). These approaches acknowledge that prior experiences influence all aspects of being, and deconstruct power differentials, establishing both parties as equally in control of the interview space (Brown et al., 2020; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Namakula et al., 2021). Through these techniques, I deepen my reflexivity and bolster qualitative research to acknowledge the transdisciplinary histories of destabilizing research as settler-colonial knowledge production (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

The interviews were approximately an hour in duration, conducted and recorded on Zoom. I utilized a semi-structured, open-ended methodology. The interviews all began with the same question. Still, they allowed the conversation to flow where the participant felt pulled to discuss, fostering a fluid exchange, as opposed to the rigidity of fixed questions. The open-ended structure encouraged conversations to shift from the template created and allowed participants to

explore further into sites of discomfort or relief towards the care systems they received. I introduced myself and provided my pronouns. I then asked the participant to describe themselves however they like. Some participants described their physical appearance, gender or sexual orientation, or personality. I intentionally did not explicitly ask participants to tell me their gender or sexuality, but rather encouraged them to share wherever they felt safe to do so without expectation.

Queer people are disproportionately more likely to experience trauma, violence, discrimination, and harassment because of their identities (Andersen & Knee, 2021; Levenson et al., 2021; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Due to the subject matter of this study, it is crucial to support participants as they disclose their personal experiences and traumas. As such, safety was of the utmost importance. Participants were reminded they were not required to answer any questions or share any information that they did not want to, allowing for individual agency. As a researcher, it is my responsibility to ensure participants feel safe and protected. I utilized a trauma-informed approach (Levenson et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2018) meaning the questions were worded so as not to intentionally re-trigger any traumas. It was crucial to creating an environment of compassion and safety, so participants could navigate the interview space without experiencing distress. The questions utilized emotionally driven language to encourage reflection. This created the space for the participant to guide the interview where they felt demanded the most attention, i.e.: housing, medical resources, therapists, etc. I prepared 7 SREB-approved questions for the participants as a foundation for the interview. Queer students are experts of their own lives, having lived through and navigated the heteronormative landscape of society. As such, their unique insight within Brock University offers knowledge that cannot be replicated. These questions are designed to encourage the participant to guide the interview

where they feel pulled, allowing them to be in control. I asked participants to describe specific moments where they felt supported or otherwise, to locate a detailed example of their experiences at Brock. This question was foundational for the interview, a talking point to which we could always return. While some questions may have felt repetitive, I hoped that the nuances in the wording might provoke creative responses. In asking about peer-based support, participants explored the depths of their friendships as a site of care supplementary to the resources offered by Brock. In asking participants to describe their ideal care, participants located themselves once again in their response, highlighting where they felt least supported, and in turn, describing what changes could alleviate the distress they experienced. The interview questions encouraged the hope to imagine a future in which queer students are safe, heard and supported on their terms.

To further utilize a participatory approach, I encouraged participants to ask questions in return. Notably, participants mostly asked personal questions regarding my gender and sexuality, which I offered with enthusiasm. I theorized that the questions they asked were to get to know me personally, to share vulnerabilities, or to learn about my identity politics. I met the participants in return by describing my uncertainties, and the messiness of self-knowing. I am committed to weaving queer theoretical principles throughout the methodology, data collection and writing process of this thesis project. This is to illuminate the importance of queer theory in social sciences, and within educational institutions. The focus on gender and sexuality draws attention to its immersion in all aspects of our lives, including the institutions we attend (Butler, 1993; Cohen 1997; McWilliams, 2016; Sedgwick, 1991).

Throughout the interview and debriefing process, I provided mental health and support resources to all participants in the event of any distress following the conclusion of the interview.

I recognize the possibility for vulnerable experiences or emotions to emerge, which must be handled with the utmost care and consideration. I intended to witness and hold space for the participants as they chose to articulate or express their emotions. As care is the thread weaving this project together, it was my responsibility to extend these matters of care into the foundations of this thesis. The emotional vulnerability of this project speaks to the unlearning of socialized ableism, which encourages minimizing individual needs out of fear or embarrassment. This thesis reimagined futures where vulnerability, compassion and mutual aid are commonplace, everyone has sovereignty over their bodies and the care they desire, receiving their needs without judgement or guilt. As such, it is my responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of my participants. By providing adequate, queer and disability justice informed resources, we may begin to create a caring future built on compassion, accountability, and responsibility

Coding and Analysis

The interviews were all approximately one-hour in duration and were conducted and recorded on Zoom. The interviews were transcribed using the transcribing software, Descript. I chose to use a transcribing software to honour my care needs as a researcher. The transcripts were then assigned pseudonyms and made confidential for the protection of the participants. For this study, I chose a thematic approach to coding. Due to the number of participants, it was possible to code the data manually. I utilized an inductive approach to coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) seeking the emergent themes as they appeared through verbal repetition or thematic importance. The key terms were then organized into themes as they related to one another to streamline the analysis process.

Discussion

In this discussion section, informed by the theory I have studied, I engaged with the experiences described by the participants. Following the data collection and coding process, three themes emerged from the experiences of queer students currently enrolled at Brock University. First, the participants explored their processes of identification (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974) regarding gender and sexuality, sharing the creative and unique language they use to describe themselves. The second emergent theme is the life-saving ways queer kinship offers temporary relief to the stressors and violence experienced by the participants. Collectively, these students developed friendships based on subject-formation and reciprocity to create their circles of queer kin. In the third and final theme, I explored the dynamics of the classroom and the complexities that inhabit the spaces queer students occupy. Students arrive at university with both trauma and hope, and these spaces become overwhelmed with the affective expectations they bring with them. Some spaces queer students occupy are felt to be safer than others, and as such, these educational spaces become a melting pot of mixed outcomes. Furthermore, in this section, it is my intention not to simply analyze or critique the experiences of the participants. Through archiving the stories shared by participants, I have created a time-capsule dedicated to documenting their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. The documentation of their stories might provoke change by creating an opportunity for the participants to be heard. In their archival, the participants provide testimony to their urgent needs and desires for care within this moment of time. In the discussion section, I organized these narratives individually for each participant within the larger thematic categories.

Identification and Subjectivities

This study observed the nuanced ways students identify and call home to their queer identities. Some participants more freely utilized queer as an umbrella term, others preferred

more specific labels. Multiple participants expressed feeling unsure of the language of their identity or inventing their terms. Their time at Brock University has provided them with the opportunity to explore their identity further. From them, I learned that the independence of living away from family allows students to experiment with names, identities, and appearances without the same scrutiny or fear they previously experienced. The new forms of identity and subjectivity offer moments of joy, where students may find themselves amidst the messiness of gender and sexuality. This is not to say that experimentation and self-expression should be conducted in secrecy; for some, that is the safest option, while others use their newly found independence to familiarize themselves with the nuances of their identity. This section is oriented towards the unique ways students created the language for themselves, and how participants knew themselves within their queerness.

David

One of the participants, David, described himself as, “gay-sexual, because it's like I love my boyfriend, but I'm on- I'm on the ace-spectrum.” He offered this comment with a smile, his sense of humour bubbling over while he speaks. David recalled compartmentalizing his identity over many years, breaking it into smaller pieces for his parents to understand. His parents know he is gay but are unaware that he is on the ace spectrum. Being a second-generation immigrant and the only queer person in his family, David described himself as, “the first piece of success of my three siblings” the implications of this statement drawing attention to the expectations he feels. David felt he must balance these identities simultaneously, fighting the pressure of academic success alongside the tension of being a queer student. While attending university, David fully utilized the mental health services, sourcing his medical care through Brock. He is diagnosed with ADHD, depression, and anxiety, all factors which complicate his lived

experiences. He explained that he is exhausted from not being recognized holistically. The components of himself are fragmented; being treated individually, rather than recognizing how these factors influence one another. David described how this feels:

We have access to [mental health services]. And we are allowed to be like, 'Hi, can I have prep medication please?' And my doctor would be like, '100% sure. Here you go'. But then like, if I'm sitting in a lecture and the entire time is someone saying, we need to be equitable and accessible to all. And it's like, okay, but where are their voices in this space...where are the readings...when am I going to be academically supported in this space as a queer student?

David located the dearth of support as impacting him most deeply. He desires a care system within the university that recognizes queer students in all spaces, not simply the ones designated exclusively for queerness. David's personal experiences with mental health services on campus have been relatively positive:

I can just like go right next to my lecture and like having access to someone who understands my identity and understands everything where it's like, cool. I can talk about like, why I don't feel comfortable being on campus during COVID. But like, you also understand like, outside of that, like there aren't many people like me and were really hard to find.

Having a therapist that affirms his identity contributes to overall well-being. However, he described a reluctance to reach out to these services, particularly due to how they are advertised:

When you get the email every day, it doesn't feel like they actually care. It just feels like they're doing their diligence. But like when someone who actually goes, like, 'I respect your identity here is a resource,' there's a big difference when, how it's offered to you...

If someone explicitly that wasn't understanding of me, didn't go, 'Hey, this is safe for you.' Why would I ever reach out?

David spoke about how many queer students navigate formalized care systems with hesitation. Queer students must prioritize their safety above all else and this can manifest as a deterrence toward care services. Like other participants, he would rather receive no support at all than be met with ignorance. Fortunately, David described a positive experience with his care team, speaking highly of the services he receives.

Kai

Another participant, Kai, remarked, "I don't, wouldn't use the word struggling with, but, uh, I still have no idea what my identity really is, to be honest, just because I've never had a chance to explore it." The home environment in which Kai was raised was, "quite homophobic" and conformed to cisgender, heterosexual expectations. Kai has fully embraced queer as a generalized label, laughing while describing themselves as a "gay bitch" who is, "loud and proud". An aspect of Kai's renegotiation of identity was the decision to shave their head. Being Indigenous, Kai remembers being told at a young age that hair is sacred and must never be cut. During the interview, Kai recalls sitting in the classroom, only being able to associate Indigeneity with the violence of colonialism taught in elementary school. The ability to recognize Indigeneity as a complex identity emerged for Kai alongside the acceptance of queerness. Kai explained:

I definitely think from a young age, uh, I recognize that. Like, I'm not the same as everybody else...I used to be kind of ashamed to even say that I was Indigenous before...when I was younger and I wasn't educated on it. And I wasn't well connected to my culture.

Kai attributed the strengthening of these two identities to the knowledge shared by their grandmother. Kai described the weight felt living as an Indigenous student, inhabiting these colonized spaces both within and beyond academia. These spaces are entrenched with gendered ideology and whiteness. Kai has recently been grappling with emotions about the experience of both Indigeneity and queerness:

I guess accepting the, uh, Indigeneity and queerness can be hard, because, I mean, you do sort of feel less than sometimes...Especially when both of my identities, like being Indigenous and being queer, you know, are sort of always being targeted, I guess. Um, so having both of those identities can be hard at times.

Kai acknowledged that there is tension between the textures of these two identities. Navigating a society that actively erases and minimizes both Indigenous and queer people is an exhaustive task. This is not to say these identities are equally disparaged, but to acknowledge the overlapping oppression that unfolds. Through all this, Kai's identity and self-expression are where freedom emerges. For example, they stated:

So, I've just gotten to a point where I'm just like... I am what I am, and some of my family members literally despise me for it and I don't care. I'm like, okay, and? Next, like, I don't care.

Instead, Kai has begun to face these acts of violence with a sense of joy and relief. The ability to celebrate both queerness and Indigeneity is an important moment in Kai's subject-formation and sense of self.

While Kai described feeling generally positive toward Brock University and the faculty in the department, there is also resentment towards the ways that colonialism continues to

structure the institution. The university itself is a colonial site of violence (Dolmage, 2017; Tuck, 2020), as it inhabits the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples (Brock University, 2021). While land acknowledgments draw attention to this occupation of Indigenous territories, they do not undo or reconcile the inherent violence of its occupation (Na'puti & Dionne, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuck, 2020). The university is the convergence of white settler-colonial violence (Dolmage, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and often abides by strict adherence to normative boundaries of identity and queerness (Brim, 2020; Puar, 2013). As others have shown, many educational institutions in Canada and the U.S. have historical roots in upholding whiteness (Tuck, 2020), cisgenderism, and heteronormativity (Gnan et al., 2019; Pritcher & Simmons, 2020; Pryor, 2018; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). Kai's reclamation of these two identities offered a unique sensorial and affective experience, and leads to a repetition of the statement, "being queer is the best." Through both the historical and contemporary violence Kai faces, there is also growing strength in a sense of self and community

Harper

Harper described themselves as a white, genderqueer trans student at Brock University. During the interview, she showed me her earrings, pronoun pin and makeup, describing the happiness felt when expressing their identity. For Harper, the space to experiment with appearances without expectations or rules allows them to exist more freely. As such, navigating the rigidity of a cis-gendered landscape of the institution is a daily challenge. Harper faced being misgendered, dead-named, and the invasive questioning of cisgender people. These experiences are compounding, contributing to the stressors of being trans within the university. Harper described how trans students are not permitted the liberties of 'off days' and are expected to perform their gender constantly. Harper talked about how when they elect not to shave or do not

wear her breast forms, it is perceived as a “masculine day”. Yet for Harper, these discrepancies do not impact her continued desire to be known and welcomed. Other people’s projections and definitions of transness are rooted in outdated and violent forms of socialized gendering, where trans-feminine people are expected to perform their femininity to maintain their acceptance within certain spaces. This is often referred to as ‘passing’, which implies not being perceived as transgender. Passing, as a concept, contours itself to the prospect of others assuming someone to be cisgender (TransgenderMap, *n.d.*; TransHub, 2021; TransLanguagePrimer, *n.d.*; Urquhart, 2017)

However, in many ways, passing is political. Moreover, the term is rooted in Black history for passing as white (Beck, 2013; Bennett, 2021; Bell, 2021). I call upon the term cis-assumed in replacement of passing, to acknowledge the important racialized histories of passing, and to address urgent critiques of its application in socialized gender. Passing, regarding gender, has been given a connotation of a pass or fail system, implying deception or falsehood. I draw on cis-assumed to recognize that this process is ascribed to transgender or non-binary people, based on perceived traits and appearances correlated with being cis-gendered (TransHub, 2021; TransLanguagePrimer, *n.d.*; Urquhart, 2017). Being perceived as cisgender offers both the hopeful intention of safety and for some, achieved personal aesthetic goals. Others find cisgender expectations to be suffocating, rejecting them entirely, and presenting their gender in deliberately confounding ways (Urquhart, 2017). While gender is reproduced and reinforced through social constructs, the body experiences the performativity of gender through repetitious acts, which naturalize the effect on the body through sustained practice (Butler, 1991). This repetition is where the gendered stylization of the body manifests, and the socialized expectations of gender (Butler, 1991).

As Harper described, she experienced a complicated relationship with social perceptions of gender. When she goes to the gym, she feels she must present as a cis-male to avoid harassment or violence, “There are times where I don't mind passing as a male, but I hate it when it's the only identity as expected for me too” she stated. It is the rigidity of discrete identity categories and labels which causes distress. In being genderqueer, Harper found relief in the spaces of liminality between these distinct spheres of socialized gender and experiences. In the presence of rigidity emerges a frustration; at one point she asked: “I just got out of one box. Why are you shoving me back in another?” Harper’s journey with gender is unique because it is hers:

My relationship with my dead name, per-se, whatever, is kind of indifferent as opposed to hated... I don't really care, but I care a lot more about what came with it as opposed to the name itself. So, for example, being male, being cis-male being... I cared a lot more about that than I cared about the actual name.

Harper is continuously affected by the implications associated with the male identity. In feeling the pressure to adhere to stereotypical feminine traits, she has committed to actively unlearning and renegotiating gender norms:

No, one's perfect. Um, and I think that's something else that really needs to be discussed more in the community too. You can still be trans and queer and still have stereotypes and biases within yourself. And you can even be a perfect ally and still have them yourself.

Harper described a process of “unlearning” as a renegotiation of understanding what their gender means to them. In the interview, she described a resentment towards toxic masculinity. I understand toxic masculinity to be a by-product of socialized manifestations of patriarchy and biopolitics (Burns, 2017; Mohr, 2019). The standards created and perpetuated affirm one’s

position as a 'man' through expected normative behaviours. These traits have developed a culture of limited emotions, violence, and dominance of other genders (Waling, 2019). The violence of normative gender expectations harms everyone across the spectrum of gender and intersects with race and class (Butler, 1999; Duran & Jones, 2020; Marshall et al., 2019; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Stockton, 2009). Cis-gendered people are impacted by socialized normativity; however, they are expected to adhere to these boundaries to maintain the performance of their gendered experience (Butler, 1999). In Harper's unlearning, they were confronted by the implications of what it meant to be a cis-gendered man, and in turn, how they wanted to express their identity moving forward. Harper actively challenged the traditional markers of gender and imagines a future in which these markers are not required for people to respect how someone expresses their gender. A key aspect of our conversation was the expression of distaste for labels and the categorical way identities are reinforced, saying:

Everyone just assumes when I say I'm trans, and they assume I'm trans female, but that's not really true. I identify with a lot of it. Maybe I am, but maybe I'm not too...I feel like genderqueer is the label that kind of says, 'Fuck you' to all their labels. And that's kind of why I like it a lot, to be honest. Cause I'm kind of sick of being put back in the box.

The rigidity of labels is exhausting, particularly for those who are still coming to know their identities. She described that the pressure of external expectations to locate discrete identities can easily be explained and categorized as harmful to queer and trans students. In placing boundaries around gender, there is a flattening that occurs as diverse gender identities are minimized and erased (Pryor, 2018). The university is an innately heteronormative and cisgendered landscape, isolating and tokenizing queerness simultaneously (Pritcher & Simmons, 2020; Pryor, 2018). In

separating gender from assigned sex, emerges a limitless potential for self-expression and self-discovery.

For Harper, the ability to change her name and gender marker within the administrative infrastructure is crucial. While Harper currently experiences very little distress regarding their legal name, the ability to do so on school documentation is an affirming care practice. Harper spoke at length about the inconsistencies they experienced while trying to change their student profile, and the failure of the administration to update this data across all forms and documentation (Brockenbrough, 2017). As a result, Harper's professors had the incorrect name on the class list. Due to this error, Harper had to correct the instructor in front of their peers. They shared with me, "I get people are busy, but when you get put on the back burner, especially when you're trans, that actually compromises my safety too." The names queer and trans students give themselves are their names, it is not a nickname (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). Harper expressed that she understands that staffing issues, remote working, burnout, and the sheer volume of emails staff receive may hinder the efficiency of these changes being enacted. However, trans students should not have to rationalize and settle for the insufficient care they receive and experience the trauma of misgendering and deadnaming within their classrooms due to these bureaucratic errors (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019; Santos, 2018). In the interview, Harper described while having multiple experiences with being deadnamed and misgendered, generally, the faculty within their department have made a conscious effort to correct themselves:

For me, uh, emotional support...understanding of my identity and even if they're not always perfect, you know? I got misgendered last week and the professors had said, 'oh, sorry, she', I didn't even need to say anything. I was like, 'oh, thank God'. You know, I

don't really care if I get misgendered, I care a lot more if it just gets assumed as okay. You know?...thankfully they've been pretty good about it, but even though I still get misgendered and occasionally deadnamed and I'm like, I can't tell if that's a passive-aggressive comment.

For Harper, it is the inconsistent accountability where she draws disdain. The unexpected whiplash between the correct and wrong pronouns is violent, even if it is accidental. They laughed sourly, saying, "There's definitely room for improvement." As stated above, when she is misgendered, Harper struggles to identify if it is intentional or not. It is an injustice that queer students must grapple with a swinging pendulum of support. Queer and trans students should not feel that they must question the intentions of the faculty, as an extension of the care provided by the university. These precarious situations are where queer and trans students often find themselves, between the liminal spaces of safety and uncertainty.

Claire

Claire is a bi-sexual student at Brock University. She joked that the isolation of the COVID-19 lockdowns and the queer content on TikTok helped her realize the depth of her sexuality. While Claire had always known she was bi-sexual, she recently recognized how essential her sexuality was to her identity. Despite coming out at a young age, her family struggled to accept her queerness, saying she was too young to know her sexuality. In sharing this, Claire said:

Yeah, it's kind of frustrating and then, because like I've always known, I've just, didn't tell them until like, I think I was in grade eight until like, then. Yeah, they definitely believed that it was like just a phase because I was only bringing guys home.

Childhood sexuality is contested through the socialized assumption that children will be heterosexual, yet are asexual beings and therefore cannot comprehend, name, or locate any possible sexuality (Stockton, 2009). These factors contradict and irritate one another, creating an unstable realm for queer children to navigate, in which they are ascribed as too young to comprehend sexuality. By Claire identifying her queerness during her childhood consciousness, the presumed heterosexual futurity that was assigned to her, was confronted by queerness. She locates the gay child of her childhood, identifying where she was different from her peers, and disrupting socialized assumptions of childhood sexuality. In doing so, she locates memories of where her identity collides with her desires for care.

Queerness is often depicted as a temporary experience that occurs during adolescence. The phase of queerness will then be overcome, and the role of heteronormativity will take its rightful place (Monaghan, 2016; Pritcher & Simmons, 2020; Stockton, 2009). The queer child has become a beacon for queer temporalities, as queerness is seen as a normal development phase during adolescence, but not recognized as a legitimate identity in adulthood (Monaghan, 2016; Perkins, 2017; Stockton, 2009). Under a homophobic impulse in others' expectations of young people, queerness becomes a temporary resting place as they progress towards heteronormativity (Stockton, 2009). Not only does this erase the complexities of queer identity, but it perpetuates the narrative that sexuality is a choice. It renders desire as a fantasy that can never be fulfilled due to societal expectations for women to marry a man and bear children, securing their legacy and subsequently, growing up (Monaghan, 2016; Stockton, 2009). Stockton (2009) theorized that queer children grow up sideways, meaning they do not meet socialized benchmarks of maturation, leaving them in a peculiar state of limbo, suspended by queerness:

I coin the term “sideways growth” to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive. (p. 13)

Youth may experiment with the liberties of their adolescence but must be subsequently left behind as they reach adulthood (Kamal et al., 2021; Monaghan, 2016). Heterosexuality is then transformed into a destination for children to achieve when they graduate from their innocence and reach maturation. These temporalities render queerness as a phantasmal homoerotic imagining and not a legitimate identity. Heteronormativity haunts queer potential through its restrictive nature (Stockton, 2009). The presumed loss of futurity creates anxieties in those who hold heteronormative expectations (Stockton, 2009).

These factors have contributed to an infantilization of queerness. From Claire’s perspective, her relationship with men had previously signaled heterosexuality in the minds of others. Claire’s queerness, as she described, is not dependent on the gender of whomever she is romantically involved. Queerness is rendered illegitimate when depicted as a pause in normative development (Dyer, 2019; Stockton, 2009). It is the dependence on developmental milestones that enables the violence of heteronormativity (Stockton, 2009). This framework both erases and discounts the legitimacy of queerness. Claire has at times, protected herself by adhering to normalcy. In the interview, Claire described herself as, “...just a normal student, I guess.” Only moments later regarding the importance of representation and queer visibility, she mused:

So, like, I don't feel like I'm the only one. I know I'm not the only one walking around that's queer, but sometimes kind of feels like that because no one's openly like walking around being like ‘I'm queer’ you know?

The tension between these statements is palpable. There is a psychic shield that emerges by leaning on concepts of normalcy, all the while feeling queer.

The participants in this study stated that the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic provided the space to explore and negotiate their queerness. This is not to undermine the impact of loneliness and isolation, but to acknowledge these two truths. The recurring lockdowns were both damaging to mental health and created the opportunity to reflect on individual identity (Fish et al., 2020). The solitude of isolation fostered ruminations for both gender and sexuality. As such, the participants emerged from isolation with identities to call their own. Harper described the moment she experimented with her identity:

After that, I just broke the walls down. I kept breaking them down and that was like, I could feel it in my head. I felt like, I felt like I just shoved the brick outside of my brain. It was this kind of heavy burden I've been carrying for decades of what it meant to be a man.

There is a social expectation on queerness that those who claim it must know their identity completely or locate a moment within early childhood where queerness emerged. While this expectation is often bound to adolescence, some people do not know their identity until much later in life. These pressures impact people differently, with many people internalizing heterosexuality as a component of their identity. This claim is not to undermine any singular experience, but to acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexuality. This fluidity does not perpetuate notions of identity as a choice, but that maturation and self-reflection may create the opportunity to understand oneself more intimately, highlighting previously unknown aspects of identity. I hoped to contribute to the destabilizing of this expectation, fostering a reality where queer people know multiple identities throughout their lifetime without judgement.

The queer students at Brock University that I spoke to are passionate and determined to persist despite the limitations of the institution. Collectively, these students have expressed their desire for care in support of their identities. I proposed that faculty, administrators, and the institution as a governing body, are avenues for potential care providers for queer students. I theorized that when someone is trusted with their identity, that individual is seeking acknowledgement that care providers can engage and interact with them in an affirming manner, setting an example for the future care they will receive. In expressing their identities, they are measuring the institution, and the faculty's, capacity to care for their needs. While the participants are gathered under an identification (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974) with queerness, they each require a system of care that recognizes their identities wholistically. As defined by Jean Laplanche (1974), "Psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides" (p. 205). I call on the term identification to describe the process of how queer students search for the language to describe an identity that feels like home. It is the way the participants contour themselves to a vocabulary that reflects their emotions, desires, and embodied experiences. However, language cannot capture the affective excesses of sexuality and gender entirely. Rather, language is harnessed to describe the surface layers of identity but cannot describe the emotional experiences of gender and sexuality.

While some participants came to know their identities with ease, others have struggled immensely, and for most, pain mingles with the pleasure of coming to know oneself. David created the term, "gay-sexual" due to limitations of language. Harper uses genderqueer for her identity, as it is the closest to how they feel. Kai is still exploring possible identities beyond describing themselves as a "gay bitch". While Claire found the term bi-sexual with relative ease,

her journey with legitimacy has been met with challenges. If there is no language to describe our identities, how can we begin to navigate conversations of care and acceptance? It is emotionally laborious to describe that which there is no language to describe. This exhaustion was present in nearly every interview. The participants were exhausted from having to educate and advocate for their queerness. As disability studies scholar, Jay Dolmage (2017) writes:

But academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism. In fact, few cultural institutions do a better or more comprehensive job of promoting ableism. (p. 7.)

Academia actively perpetuates ableism by glorifying students' willingness to work beyond sustainable limits, jeopardizing their physical and mental well-being as the merit of success (Dolmage, 2017). The participants described frustration about their identities being minimized and dismissed within their personal and academic lives. As a student myself, I understand these realms to be overlapping and compounding, their implications leaking into one another. As such, the participant's frustration toward faculty can be understood as an extension of Brock University itself. The participants have faced homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination in their experiences in school, classrooms, and their education more broadly. The desire for their identities to be supported within the classroom reflects a lack of larger institutional support and policy. Queer students deserve to learn within a space that respects and affirms the nuances of their identities and does not invalidate them. The participants of this study wield their identities as a beacon of hope for themselves. By reclaiming their identities and creating their own language to describe themselves, the participants of this study disrupt conventional boundaries of normativity.

Queer Kinship

Within this study, emerged a tendency for participants to describe a desire for kinship and community. This unanticipated theme relates to theories of mutual aid, which I read as part of my theoretical framework and links to my continued reading into theories of queer kinship. Collectively, the participants described their chosen kin as a life-saving resource. As such, I examined the ways kinship is found and reproduced by queer students. Biological families can be sites of complicated emotions, with many people experiencing both care and pain (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). Rather than always providing a rubric of care, families can be sites of contention. This is particularly relevant to the experiences of queer and trans people. Familial rejection is a familiar conversation within queerness (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). For some participants of this study, their biological kin are a site of violence, homophobia, and transphobia. To cope with this, students rely on kinship and community. As others have detailed, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students had to stay within these unsupportive households (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Fish et al., 2020; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020), forcing queer students to conceal their identities for safety. These tensions carry heavy implications, eroding the idealized family that some find solace in and creating unsafe spaces for LGBTQ+ people. For many, the opportunity to leave home and attend university fosters the opportunity to explore their identity and build queer kinships (Fish et al., 2020; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020).

The friendships queer students build can create a form of kinship that transcends the traditional relationality of familial bonds (Gilbert, 2017). These connections are not built on blood, but on emotional reciprocity. Kinship is unique in its rejection of reproductive expectations, tending to the emotional intimacies of chosen communities (Gilbert, 2017). This project understands kinship as the relationships with others built on a deep emotional connection

that transcends familial bonds and creates networks of care. For participants, queer kinship offers a form of care. Considering the implications of colonialism and white supremacy, heterosexism, and genderism, which emerge within educational institutions, we must explore how queer students navigate these oppressive forces (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020). The presence of queer kinship provides the necessary support to ensure their success (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020). As described by Jen Gilbert (2019):

Friendship lies in between, and, perhaps because of this liminality, friendship is at once an ordinary, everyday relation and an intimacy too great for words. Friendship not only pushes relationality beyond family as a site of ancestry, genealogy, and blood-ties, but also suggests that home, domesticity, and heterosexual, reproductive sexuality are not enough. (p. 419)

For the participants, the friendships they developed were often described as life-saving tools. Together, with close friends, they fostered their own unique community spaces that helped to heal from experiences with homophobia and transphobia.

In line with much of queer theory, I proposed that the queer kinships offer temporary relief, making life less daunting and formidable. In the space of higher education, queer kinship may help students overcome and cope with the violence and traumas they have experienced. For each of the participants in this study, they experienced something that should not have happened to them. While there were multiple supportive factors involved in restabilizing for each participant, the friendships they developed were the common thread in each of their stories. The participants of this study experienced sexual assault, housing insecurity, unsupportive family structures, and transphobia. This is not to argue that friendship is the magical cure-all to the ailments of living through systemic inequities and violence, but to propose that the relationships

queer students create become sites of rest, relief, and validation, particularly when they are evicted from other families.

David experienced multiple traumas while attending Brock University, developing a hesitancy to trust the institution. To cope with this, he has created an online space for his friends to discuss difficulties without fear of discrimination. His queer group exists off-campus, and he stated:

I recognized that I get to choose my club, I let queer people in...And then we create these spaces... we all just like made a group chat and we're all like, this is our one spot where we can rant anything that no one else will understand, but us.

David is exceptionally passionate about advocacy. His desire to develop these spaces is rooted in a personal need for community and inclusion. David described a hesitancy in attending queer-based clubs on campus, “because like queer communities are very cliquey...I had to create my own space, so I had to get my own space, off-campus.” His queer kin have fostered a space of mutual aid and community; a lifeline amidst the stressors and traumas he navigates in his daily life, rejecting heterosexist norms of kinship models built on whiteness, cisness and heterosexuality (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020). Where biological kin had rejected their queerness, the participants have found comfort and security in those who recognize their queerness as a site of joy that is worth celebrating.

The participants described the ease with which many of their queer friends can empathize and have compassion for the issues they face. Kai described how it is easier for them to talk to other queer friends instead of a therapist who might not be queer. Notably, Kai also created an online group chat with fellow queer students as a mutual system of support. Like David’s group, Kai’s friends were able to check in and provide the support they needed. Due to Kai’s tendency

to internalize emotions, they struggle to express when they need support. However, through this group chat, they have been able to slowly extend their capacity to receive care. It is through digital spaces that participants support their kin most frequently. The online dynamic transcends the limitations of physical presence, allowing connection despite any distance. Friends can connect with one another instantly to communicate support needs or simply share something funny. Through technology, the ease with which people can be contacted has fostered new friendships, alleviating the anxieties of in-person communication. Rather, group chats swirl with emotions, creating a space for mutual vulnerability regardless of location.

Due to classes being online, students had to learn new ways of connecting with classmates. For Claire, social media was a useful tool in finding people in her program. The creation of program-specific online spaces became a starting place for friendships to develop. While the spaces were not queer-specific, they remained a place of comfort to balance the anxieties of not knowing anyone. Claire recalled:

I actually got really close with a handful of people in my program, even though it was online. Like one of my best friends now who I know, like in person, we were still like extremely close last year, even though we had never met in person.

The transition to online classes isolated students, removing the organic way students connect with one another during class. Rather, online lectures perpetuate a sense of formality, making it challenging for natural friendships to develop. While Claire is the only queer person in her friend group, she described her friends as extremely supportive, encouraging her to explore her identity without judgement.

For Harper, a key focus within her friendships is the promise of safety. While searching for a place to live, Harper had to grapple with potentially having to conceal her identity:

I finally found a place. I have a queer friend there. I might have to go back in the closet, but to have at least one friend helps a lot, you know, so I don't have to be in the closet all the time...at least have one friend or I'm back at square one and I have to start over, and I have to risk potential safety again.

The urgency of these words speaks to the danger at hand. For Harper, she had to decide between “living out” or having a place to live. The precarity of this situation echoes the issues trans people face. Queer and trans people are deeply implicated by housing insecurity (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Brockenbrough, 2017; Fish et al., 2020; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). She described this moment as pushing her to the edge of a mental breakdown, reliving these anxieties in the interview. However, knowing she would have a friend nearby to support her and affirm her identity, was a key component in her decision-making.

Harper felt safer knowing that there is someone she can turn to and exist freely with. While at Brock, they have developed friendships with other queer students. She offered, “the benefit of living out is sometimes I find other people that are also living out, and I'm like, ‘Oh, thank God. It's not just me. It's you too’”. There is a sense of safety that accompanies witnessing other queer people. Harper described it as “living out”; the visibility of seeing other queer people can be a beacon of hope and safety, knowing they understand the stressors of living openly.

Additionally, she feels safer in class due to the support of her queer kin, offering:

I actually made another friend...they also are outwardly queer too. Um, so having them to hold onto was helpful, cause even in times where I got misgendered and I was like, ‘ah, shit’ ...I can't really say it without making the whole class awkward, someone else, actually, that was queer, said, ‘oh, it's *she*, not *he*'.

Having queer friends in class who can intervene when Harper is misgendered, alleviates the emotional exhaustion of having to correct them herself. They describe the mental exhaustion of these mistakes, “I would have brought that misgendering with me the rest of the day. I'm getting better with it. But it's hard for me. And it's even harder when I'm online.” For Harper, their queer kin are a confirmation of additional safety as well as emotional support.

Collectively, queer kinship is a resting place for queer students to ground themselves. As described, navigating the university is an exhaustive and daunting process that is relived each day. The participants describe creating spaces of support and enacting both physical and digital care webs (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) as cycles of support. While not knowing one another, they all employ similar systems of care for themselves and their queer kin. David described how he is often charged with disseminating resources amongst peers, his knowledge and passion for advocacy rendering him as the first resort for information regarding queer resources. Harper shared how a friend helped her to find housing when the university was unable to provide safe housing. While not explicitly stated, the participants all describe either engaging with or benefiting from mutual aid amongst their queer kin. There is a bond that is created, in knowing that despite how scary the world may be, within queer kinship, there is a promise of safety. Their queer kin provide spaces for mutual reciprocity and emotional support, fulfilling a space that may be lacking in support.

The Classroom and The Precarity of (Un)safe Spaces

The classroom is subjected to certain rules, the expectation of silence, and the stillness of students' bodies. In these spaces there is a queering that unfolds; the shuffling of restless legs, the hushed confused whispers that break this silence. For queer students, the classroom can be claustrophobic. Not simply from the content of the lecture, but the atmosphere created by the

instructor. The participants described that there is an instinctual sensation that emerges when queer students suspect an environment may not be safe for them. Even courses that do not specifically focus on queerness are inherently shaped by the social implications of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1999). The normative discourse of gender and sexuality is embedded in all socialization aspects and its implications (Butler 1999; Dyer 2019; Gilbert, 2017; Hill, 2017). The classroom is quickly transformed into a liminal space that mirrors the hypothetical closet metaphor that haunts queerness.

The classroom is a political landscape, charged with the affective emotions of students and faculty alike. While these perspectives are not always symmetrical, they exist in tandem. The classroom becomes a site of leaky emotions as students arrive at the university with both trauma and hope. These spaces become overwhelmed with their affective projections and expectations of desire. University is often the first opportunity for students to leave their family homes and express themselves on campus (Duran & Jones, 2020; Fish et al., 2020; Schenk-Martin et al., 2020). The dichotomies of classrooms are rooted in perceptions of safety. While there are students who challenge and confront queerphobic hostility, not everyone can do so. The classroom then becomes a vacuum for two realities: the classroom as a space for students to freely express and discuss their queerness, affirming their expectations. Alternatively, the classroom is a volatile environment where queer students feel they must tolerate ignorance or minimize their queerness to avoid conflict or detection.

The term safe space must be unpacked to appropriately understand its implications. In application, safe spaces are intended to establish specific spaces and those who occupy them, as protection from discrimination, harassment, or violence (Fish et al., 2020; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). However, these spaces are not made equally and may prioritize identities over others. As

seen with queer-based clubs, whiteness and white experiences are centralized, and those who are impacted by racism are silenced (Baams & Russell, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). While spaces may be intended as sites of protection, whiteness, colonialism, cisgenderism and ability permeate all spaces (Tuck, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). It is crucial to be aware of who these spaces serve, and from what forces they are safe. Or are these spaces also bound by the hopeful desire for queer safety?

In the interview, David described the anxieties he feels when entering spaces, “Cause like you never know when you're going to talk to someone, if it's safe, like you're never going to know in any lecture, in any class... I can get the look. You never know.” The emphasis on the unknown draws detail to the emotional uncertainty of navigating academia as a queer student. Most of the participants used this language of uncertainty in various forms, never truly knowing if they are safe in particular spaces. While strangers, they utilized almost verbatim language to describe the emotional distress they experience in the face of uncertain safety. In queerness, safety is a currency that is not applied equally and is subjected to the same privileges as monetary currency. With the uncertainty of safety, queer students must place themselves in potentially dangerous environments. Whether it is emotionally, or physically dangerous, queer students must step into these spaces for their education. Safety is not simply declaring spaces as safe, but actively acknowledging power imbalances, privileges, and their implications on queer students. Instructors must be aware of how gender, sexuality and whiteness may limit the safety felt by queer students, particularly queer students of colour (Duran & Jones, 2020; Gilbert, 2017). As such, these spaces become unpredictable.

Seminars and lecture halls are sites of precarious safety. Due to the group discussion structures of seminars, there is a higher risk of being exposed to opinions that may be harmful or

violent towards queerness. David described how in the seminar; the class discussed a queer family in a sitcom as representation in television. He retold this moment with disdain, the sarcasm staining his words as his classmates discuss how amazing it is to have a gay couple on a television show. On a surface level, this statement may appear accurate to those who are not queer. For David, his insinuation rings clear; he cannot stand caricatures of queerness being viewed as productive and beneficial. Queer representation has become an area of yearning, most notably, for a form of representation that does not reproduce harmful stereotypes of queerness. In these stereotypes, queerness is weaponized and mobilized as truth, as though these characters are representative of all queer relationships. While not all queer couples mirror this caricature, everyone who is queer is subjected to the implications of depictions. When David attempted to speak about representation, the seminar leader told him to let others speak instead, silencing David's lived experiences and allowing others to speak over him.

Within these spaces of learning, queer students are forced to listen to opinions dismissive of queer students' realities. With their consent and autonomy taken away, queer students are silenced, minimizing their embodied knowledge of queer experiences. This is violence that has become normalized within particular spaces of academia, with multiple participants describing similar experiences of being dismissed by faculty. The occurrence described by David is a brief glimpse into the experiences of queer students at Brock. It is crucial to note that micro-aggressions are covert but consistent. Both Harper and David spoke about their multiple experiences of passive-aggressive comments, and the ways their identities are ignored or dismissed within the classroom. While different, their collective experiences speak to the heterosexist cultural underbelly of academia. When faculty and administrators are inconsistent in their capacity to recognize when they are perpetuating heterosexist violence, queer students are

expected to compartmentalize the pain it causes. David in particular spoke to the lack of academic support he has experienced. When asked if he felt fully supported by the university, he responded, “Emotionally and physically? Yes. Academically. No.” He described a distinct scarcity of queer-informed content across all courses:

It's just the fact of like, we have to take a lot of courses... And it's more like if I want to be in a school, why is it that I need to take a statistical analysis course, but there's never once a requirement or any real options for [...] courses that are inherently queer.

He evoked a demand for queerness to be administered within pedagogical frameworks. David's desire for care manifests itself through academic support and visibility. He imagined a future where queerness is included across all programs, incorporating queer perspectives into the curriculum.

By extension, these desires project onto instructors. While instructors are not typically explicit in expressing their queerness, there is an unspoken familiarity that fosters recognition. As such, students recognize themselves in their queer instructors, bolstering a kinship based on mutual understanding. For the participants, having a queer instructor, or vocally supportive instructors, provided a sense of safety and reassurance. I theorize that queer professors are subjected to a unique transformation in which they become trauma holders for their students, not simply through the disclosure of legitimate traumas, but in that they symbolize futurity for queer students who often grapple with mental illness. Queer professors are expected to hold space for the pain felt by their queer students. They become an embodiment of queer futurity, hopes and dreams. The participants spoke at length about the relief they felt by having queer faculty. As David described, “And I saw [...] on the first day, and I was like, ‘You're stuck with me. I want to make you my best friend. Cause you're the one person that when I look at, I feel validated.’”

This emotional reaction to witnessing a queer professor resonates with dialogues of representation and safety. David elaborated further, “That was the first time I ever had a queer professor that like outwardly expressed like ‘This is a safe space. Don't mess with me.’” Having a professor who is queer was not only affirming his identity but established the course itself would be a space for queerness to exist freely. In queering the classroom through both presence and pedagogy, there is a reclamation of traditionally heteronormative spaces.

The participants also described a profound joy in witnessing someone like themselves hold a position within academia, as Kai states, “I am obsessed with [...]. Every time I talk to her, I'm just like, I'm literally obsessed with you. Oh my God.” By establishing the classroom as a space of safety, queer students may feel safer being themselves and speak openly of their identities. This aura of protection allows students to relax within an academic space, subverting urges to minimize oneself for safety. However, these experiences may not be ubiquitous. I account for whiteness as the prevailing foundation within these forms of representation, as many of the faculty mentioned by the participants are white. For the faculty discussed, while queer, they experience a privilege of safety in whiteness. This is not to undermine the emotions of the participants or the joy they feel in knowing queer faculty. But to acknowledge that the sensation of safety and representation is not felt equally.

There is very little representation for queer students to recognize themselves in their professors (Bridgman, 2012; Eng & Puar, n.d.). Being queer can be exceptionally isolating. Claire described during her interview how she often feels as if she is the only person, she knows who is queer. While the population of queer students at Brock University is likely larger than we are aware of, the sensation of queer solitude demonstrates the importance of this visibility. Yet, it is crucial to note that representation does not equate to safety. Queerness is seen as political,

heterosexuality is not. Where instructors are encouraged to maintain professionalism and not disclose their private lives to their students (Bridgman, 2012), this doctrine is most implicitly attributed to queerness. For instructors to exist publicly within their queerness, they too become subject to criticism, violence, and discrimination. While students deeply crave the validation of knowing about queer professors, it is a balancing act of who is permitted safety.

However, the participants each described feeling differing levels of safety. Kai described having a generally positive experience within the classroom as well as with faculty:

I think mainly, in the classroom, they've really created that safe space for us...I think the faculty that I've come across so far are really accepting, um, and understanding... I've never once felt like bad or judged about speaking out about queer issues.

The support Kai experienced within the classroom has fostered a sense of empowerment in being able to openly discuss queerness. This has encouraged Kai to engage with the course work more strongly, further benefiting academic success. While Claire has never experienced feeling unsafe within her classes, she has a homophobic roommate who has created a toxic environment. Due to this, Claire is scared to discuss her queerness out of fear of judgement within her home.

The university is a site of whiteness, heteronormativity, and colonial violence. These histories have implications for queer students as they manifest into contemporary urgencies. Collectively, participants voiced that classrooms become a landscape of messy emotions. Expressing their desires for queer representation within the classroom. They describe how these spaces are sites of tensions and anxiety, noting their uncertainty of if particular spaces will be safe for them or not. While some found classrooms to be liberating, feeling heard and represented in a meaningful and empowering way, others felt the classroom to be claustrophobic or disparaging. I theorize that participants project themselves onto their desires for queer faculty.

The university is an exceptionally heteronormative space, the gendered implications embedding themselves into the physical and psychic landscape of students. Queer students described how they wish faculty could be more transparent about their identities, or vocal about their support within all classrooms. Their requirements for care manifest through their desires for queerness to be included within curriculum and pedagogy.

Through their frustration, the participants spoke about the urgency of their care. They describe needing further queer-informed mental health services, housing, spaces, scholarships, and curriculums that affirm their identities. I recognize these areas of lack contribute to a culture that is not supportive of queer students in ways that directly affirm their identities and meet their needs. This culture then creates the space for faculty, classrooms, and staff to be unsupportive or unaware of the violence they may be inadvertently contributing towards. The lack of accountability and inconsistent levels of support described by the participants illuminates a heterosexist and homophobic culture which further enables micro-aggressions on campus. This culture is a multi-layered issue, beginning with the overarching institutional culture and rippling into small realms such as faculty, classrooms, curriculum, and health services. These factors work in tandem, creating an ecosystem which enables heterosexism, and homophobia within classrooms across campus.

Conclusions of Care

My thesis utilized a queer theoretical framework to explore care through the perspectives of queer students attending Brock University. In applying theory to the experiences of queer students as they were shared with me, I have sought to address a gap in academic literature and within Brock University specifically. In this section, I revisit the main findings, explore the strengths and limitations of this study, and consider the future implications through a manifesto

for queer care. In reflecting on the work done for this thesis and the conversations I had with queer students, I am struck by the knowledge that all the participants experienced something difficult that they should not have had to and hope that increased consideration of how homophobia and transphobia impact students will improve other student's experiences in the future.

In this thesis, I note that the participants have unique processes of identification (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974) regarding their gender and sexuality, sharing the creative language they use to describe themselves. For some, the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity for self-exploration and reflection, illuminating parts of themselves they were not previously aware of. The participants emerged from lockdown with newly discovered aspects of their fluid identities. In reflecting on their experiences of identity, the participants articulate their desires for care and systems of support that recognize their identities wholistically. Moreover, when students trust faculty or care providers with their identity, they seek acknowledgment that these systems of care can support them in an affirming manner. By living their identities, queer students measure the capacity of the university to care for their needs. Their urgency for queer-informed mental health services, housing, scholarships, and pedagogy reveal how queerness is compartmentalized within academia. My thesis inquired as to if Brock University is capable of meeting the needs of queer students, and their emotional sensations of care were measured through the perspectives of queer students.

Furthermore, I draw particular attention to the nuances my data yields. My thesis explored how queer students experience care at Brock University. This research question is intentionally open-ended, opening possibilities for the participants to interpret what their experiences meant to them, and their impact on their lives. Within my analysis, I conclude that

Brock University is a governing body, predicated on colonialism. The faculty exists as an extension of the university itself; they are agents within a larger issue. While they can be culpable and should be held accountable for the harm they perpetuate, isolating the faculty as the sole liability is an indirect critique of the institution as a whole. Rather, I orient my analysis towards recognizing that the urgencies expressed by the participants reflect a culture that is not supportive of queer students, which then creates the space for professors, classes, and staff to be unsupportive. The participants describe the indirect, but violent ways that Brock University fosters a heterosexist and homophobic culture that enables microaggressions and covert oppression within specific spaces across campus. The anger and frustration the participants express over their identities being minimized or dismissed can be associated with a broader lack of institutional support and a culture that allows heterosexism to flourish. This is not to dismiss or discredit the current policies and programs currently at Brock, many of which were employed by participants. Rather, my thesis draws a thread through the experiences of the participants, weaving a map as to where Brock may orient itself next to implement structural reform, and develop further supplementary programs for queer students.

Students require affirming care in all spaces. The small sample of this research is only a fraction of the vast identities of queer students at Brock University. Queer students are impacted by race, cisgenderism and heterosexism, and require care systems that effectively acknowledge all aspects of their identities. Queerness informs how they exist and navigate academia and deserves the appropriate systems of care to mitigate the tensions they experience. The participants expressed desires for queer and trans health care providers, residency, scholarships, and queer-informed resources within all courses. As experienced by the participants, the university became a site of emergence and discovery.

Furthermore, the participants describe the life-saving effect of queer kinship as a site of temporary relief from the stressors of navigating the heteronormative geographies of the university. The participants established friendships based on mutual queerness, seeking connection with others who may share similar stories and experiences. In doing so, developing circles of care, safety and understanding. Participants describe how the friendships they built provided safety in precarious classroom dynamics and emotional support during times of crisis. Queer kin were often prioritized as the first line of care. Collectively, the participants created care webs within their circles of kin, both online and in-person (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). These care webs function through mutual aid and reciprocity for one another (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). For some, this is due to fear of gender-based violence and discrimination. While others were hesitant due to their extended experiences with trauma and discomfort in disclosing this information to strangers, regardless of medical professionalism. Queer kin can provide comfort and soothe anxieties, creating a culture of care with ease and compassion. It is through their kinship that queer and trans youth find knowledge and connection.

Finally, I explored the classroom as a space overwhelmed by emotions. Queer students navigate these spaces precariously, unsure of their safety. These experiences create a palpable tension that manifests itself within the classroom as either relief or anxiety. Participants describe their desires for queer faculty to identify themselves within these spaces, locating an urgency for representation. I theorize that the presence of queer faculty can create psychic futurity for students to project themselves into. In seeing queer faculty, students witness futures of success, and more importantly, they see faculty who are alive. Students arrive at the university with experiences of trauma and hope. The textures of the emotions rub against one another, offering a complicated landscape for education to unfold. The presence of queer faculty manifests itself as

a promise of safety. By extension, heterosexual professors do not always provide the same affirming environment, psychic space of projection, or form of identification (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974).

These classroom spaces become a melting pot of mixed outcomes for queer students. The classroom becomes an unpredictable and turbulent experience, with students anxiously anticipating the reactions from their professors and peers. As described, students are often forced to occupy spaces with students who are blatantly homophobic. Queer students are unable to consent to these shared spaces overwhelmed by violence and are pressured to minimize their identities for their own safety. I draw a parallel to the metaphor of ‘the closet’ as a space that is resurfaced within these environments, in which, students are coerced into concealing their identity to minimize the possibility of violence. It is inexcusable for students to grapple with these factors while pursuing higher education.

Through this investigation, I explored the life-saving ways queer students find systems of care and support within the university to foster their well-being and success. The findings I have presented are grounded in queer theoretical frameworks, shaped by critical disability studies, mutual aid, and critical care studies. I must admit that the findings of this study were not as I had predicted. In exploring how queer students experience care within the university, I had predicted responses regarding clubs, therapists, or doctors. Rather, I found myself enveloped in conversations about settler colonialism, representation, and visibility. I theorize that the participants being a mixture of undergraduate and graduate, created a nuanced sample of highly intelligent and critically aware participants. The queer students of this study invited me into their world, entrusting me with raw and personal experiences to provide context to their statements of care. All the participants experienced something they should not have had to. Together, the

interviews became a testimony to their existence at Brock University, archiving their stories within this document.

Strengths and Limitations

This research is strengthened by the multiple theories used to reinforce and bolster one another. In the vein of queer theoretical exploration, I utilized multiple forms of knowing and reading, including those offered in the field of queer theory, critical disability studies, mutual aid, and critical care studies. Moreover, in having shared identity contexts with much of the participant group, my position as the researcher made the study more approachable, fostering a rapport that may not be present if the researcher had been heterosexual. Furthermore, conducting the interviews online created a more relaxed environment, allowing participants to disclose their emotional experiences from the comfort of their own homes. Lending itself to the benchmarks of safety and care is the foundation of this research.

As noted, most but not all participants were white, or white-passing. It is crucial to be aware of how whiteness affects all spaces at the university. While I attempted to achieve my greatest ability to be reflective and aware of these implications, in being white, I am unable to fully understand or adequately explore issues of systemic racism and white supremacy as they shape the encounters students have on campus and with each other. Many racialized experiences are frequently ignored within the studies of queerness on campuses, resulting in a white-centered, queer culture that is not inclusive. Further research at Brock University must be conducted, focusing on racialized queer students. By broadening conversations of queer care to be inclusive of multiple identities, a more wholistic perspective can be observed. Consulting with more queer Black, Indigenous, and students of colour would provide more insight into their specific experiences of care and offer sites of improvement. Further research should be inclusive

of a broader range of experiences, as well as a larger participant group to account for the multitudes of queer students.

As a response to my thesis, I imagine a future where Brock University, and its faculty evolve to be compassionately aware of the impact that policies, resources, and curriculum have on queer students. It is crucial for Brock University to place funding into scholarships and bursaries to further support queer students, with multiple funding opportunities for transgender, Black and Indigenous students. As I write this conclusion, Brock University is celebrating Pride Month with weekly events dedicated to queer representation, education, and celebration. These events, while affirming, are annual. As the glitter of June fades into July and the Pride flag is taken down, Pride and queer students, are tucked away until the following year. Like all things, care is not one size fits all. Some of the participants expressed that they feel supported emotionally, and appreciated the visibility provided by the rainbow decor and raising flags (Hunt, 2022). Others described needing to be supported academically, be protected in the classroom and through the bureaucracy of institutions. They had desires for queer faculty, mandated educational seminars, and consequences for homophobic violence. The needs of the participants reflect the individual challenges and traumas they have faced. This is not to dismiss the work Brock does, it is a call for radical compassion, to listen to the needs of queer students directly so they may guide queer futures of care. Queer identities cannot simply be hidden until the warmer weather of June returns, queerness is not a removable costume, but an embodied daily experience.

Implications of Futurity

The futures of care as imagined by the participants, often feel out of reach. The institutions we attend are sites of political discourse and capitalist gain, rendering queer students'

needs negotiable. Queer futurity requires the creative and thoughtful insight that is only possible to understand within its community. As queer people, survival has been a task we must personally attend to and advocate for. It is the constant bombardment of new homophobic and transphobic bills that break news lines, followed by the call to action that both exhausts and invigorates queer and trans communities. These communities are expected to tirelessly fight against violence, both within and beyond the classroom. Institutions simultaneously benefit from, and further marginalize queer students. The presence of queer students permits the space for institutions to provide calculated and selective support, perpetuating an aura of virtue signaling. The resources provided by Brock University during Pride Week (St. Denis, 2019), and Pride Month (Hunt, 2022) are fantastic, yet fleeting. They are temporal as they only exist for a limited time, but queerness does not exist in a vacuum. The resources and events that are isolated to Pride must be constantly accessible. When queer students are subjected to micro-aggressions in the classroom and do not feel safe reporting violence, raising a flag will not protect them. It is not an effort to protect queer students, but to protect the institution itself.

The participants of this study harnessed their awareness about the lack of spaces dedicated to queerness, and actively created these spaces for themselves. Their ability to do so is a tool of survival. There is profound compassion found in those who are so frequently excluded and marginalized. This is amplified when identities are intersectional, compounded by anti-Blackness and systemic racism. This is not to perpetuate the resiliency models, but rather to acknowledge the heaviness and exhaustion queer people experience merely to survive. My project speaks to both the exhaustion and hope that resides in queer students, individually imagining futures of change for everyone's benefit. Together, they imagined a future built on joy and independence. Queer people will always find creative and hopeful ways to create change,

support one another, and foster a future where the institutions we attend actively care for us because we deserve to be cared for.

This study embarked on a journey of ethical listening. By creating a space for queer and trans students to speak openly about their experiences with care, through their own perspectives. These students have had vastly different life experiences, all contributing to their emotional and physical reactions to the space they occupy. It was my intention to draw attention to the unique needs, hopes, pain and joys that this group of queer students has to offer. Future research must be done on a broader scale, accounting for the various identities of queer students at Brock University. Queer students are expert witnesses to the shortcomings, and success of institutional care. While institutions vocalize prioritizing their students' well-being, it is crucial for them to actively improve the care they receive. Queer students deserve to feel safe, seen and supported. Through this investigation, I explored narratives of colonialism, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism. These forces work against queer students, alienating them within a space they pay to attend. Queer students are disproportionately more likely to experience mental illness, violence, and discrimination, and deserve to be protected. While these spaces were never designed to be inclusive of queerness, we are here now.

I am passionate about the queer community as it appears at Brock University but also, more broadly across institutions of post-secondary education. My own queer identity is implicated in all aspects of my life, particularly in my education. Like the participants of this study, I understand what homophobic violence feels like. I recognize, though, that at times I also navigate these spaces with an ease that is not universally felt. As such, I do not necessarily experience violence to the extent that others do. I locate myself within this research, both as the researcher and as a student. By seeking out other queer students, I attempted to find community.

My meetings with these participants were vibrant and rich. Together, we held space for personal experiences, hopes and pains. Despite never having met before, mutual queerness brought us together in conversation about how to improve a school we feel both proud of and disappointed by.

Collectively, the participants felt relief knowing they were not alone, as Harper said, “Oh, thank God, it's not just me. It's you too”. I conclude that Brock University is at an impasse of care, as queer students express a desire for further care that recognizes their identities as a whole and its implications for their education. I propose that students require care resources that engage meaningfully with queerness, acknowledging its implications for housing, individual pedagogy, and emotional wellbeing. This project speaks to a small corner within this institution, a mere four students amidst a growing population of 19,000 (Brock, 2022). Mia Mingus writes:

I would argue that ‘disability justice’ is simply another term for love. And so is ‘solidarity,’ ‘access,’ and ‘access intimacy.’ I would argue that our work for liberation is simply a practice of love—one of the deepest and most profound there is. And the creation of this space is an act of love. (para 34)

This project is equally for the students who could not participate and for the ones who did, to know they are not alone, and that there are people who feel their presence with respect and admiration. Within this study, I have met students who inspire me, not simply to do this work, but as a person. These participants deserve to be seen and heard. My witnessing is not nearly enough, but it is a step toward the future.

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Appendix

1. Can you tell me about a time when you felt supported in the university?
 - a. Can you tell me about a time when you did not feel supported?
2. Do you feel your emotional and physical needs are being met or ignored by the university?
3. Has there been a time when you relied on your friends as an alternative to the care offered by the university?
4. Do you believe the resources offered by the university are capable of meeting your needs?
5. In a better world, how would you like to see the university take care of you?
6. How do you practice self-care within the university?
7. Are there any questions you want to ask me?