“Basement Boys” in the All-Gender Bathroom: Investigating Student-Inspired Trans-Activism and White Cisgenderist Barriers to Supporting Trans Students in School

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Abstract

Background/Context: The experiences of trans students in all-gender bathrooms are largely underexplored, as is the trans-activism by students to procure these spaces. Additionally, the role of teachers in supporting the creation of these spaces is largely absent from research regarding bathroom spaces.

Purpose: This article elucidates the impact of student-inspired trans-activism that was mobilized through a gender studies educator in an urban school and her class project to foster trans inclusivity that resulted in the creation of two all-gender bathrooms.

Participants: Four participants were involved in this study: a gender studies teacher, and her three students who either contributed to the creation of the all-gender bathrooms or actively used them following their implementation.

Research Design: This qualitative paradigmatic case study took place at one high school (Capital High) and employs thematic and trans-informed theoretical analysis to semi-structured interviews to elucidate the potentialities and limitations of student-led trans-activism and the barriers to bathroom access.

Findings: Emergent from this research is the significance of supportive educators and trans-inclusive education that collectively contribute to the overall trans-inclusive climate. However, pervasive white cisgender systems exposed white male gender entitlement

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Conclusion/Recommendations: The findings endorse the need to move beyond bathroom policy reform, and rely on a singular gender facilitative teacher to address the problem of cisgenderism. More gender-expansive commitments beyond one teacher’s classroom are required, such as system-level directives that support integrating trans-affirmative education across the curriculum and resources to foster ongoing professional development in schools.

Keywords
all-gender bathrooms, transgender, gender democratization, cisgenderism, gender facilitative teachers, trans activism, gender-expansive education, white privilege, colonization

In this article, I report on case study research to provide critical insights into the possibilities and limitations associated with trans-activism pertaining to the creation and sustainability of the all-gender bathroom space in one urban school. I also examine the role of one gender facilitative teacher committed to gender expansiveness through her “support [of] children of all genders by ensuring that they have an equal opportunity to learn in safe environments” (Luecke, 2018, p. 273). The focus is on an examination of student-inspired trans-activism, which was mobilized through a gender studies class project to foster trans inclusivity by creating two all-gender bathrooms. However, my study illuminates how such commitments to supporting trans students and fostering gender expansiveness in schools are easily undermined and unsustainable in the absence of a whole-school commitment to dismantling institutionalized cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014) and gender entitlement (Serano, 2013), as embodied by cis white male students referred to as the “Basement Boys” in this particular school.

As such, this paradigmatic case “operates as a reference point” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 232) that “maximize[s] what we can learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 4) from one school that implemented two all-gender bathrooms as a result of student activism, and it highlights the recalcitrance of white cisgenderist and heteropatriarchal systems of domination. It is in this sense that white cis male privilege is embedded in a heteropatriarchal system that operates as a system of power and control, positioning cisgender straight white males as superior and entitled, as manifested by their disregard for and colonization of trans-inclusive school bathroom spaces (Harris, 2011). Thus, this case study illuminates the problem of a broader cisgenderist, heteropatriarchal system that allows white cisgender boys within the school to capitalize on the creation of these trans-inclusive spaces for their own benefit, exposing the failure of a systemic commitment to addressing cisgenderism and gender-expansive education.
I first provide a review of some of the significant literature examining traditional bathroom design that normalizes cisgenderist structures of gender, with consequences for ostracizing and foreclosing recognition of trans and nonbinary people. I then elaborate on my trans-informed theoretical framework, which is complemented by a Butlerian focus on precarity in its potential to foreground trans epistemological awareness that, “as informed by transgender and non-binary scholars, [is] central to building on and elaborating the critical terms of gender democratization” (Martino & Ingrey, 2020, p. 79) as it pertains to theorizing the bathroom space. As Connell (2009) explained, a commitment to gender democratization is built around dismantling gender hierarchies to “equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing” (p. 146). I proceed by providing details about the study and my methodology, followed by an analysis of the data and consideration of the study’s implications.

The Political Significance of the Bathroom Space

The bathroom remains a site of segregation because of the “regulation of such spaces” where “binary gender is produced and becomes embodied” (Cavanagh, 2010, p. 78), prompting trans activists to challenge the bi-gender system that excludes and endangers transgender and nonbinary folks who struggle to fit within (Browne, 2004; Ingrey, 2012; Porta et al., 2017). Specific to this exclusion, Browne (2004) explained how bathrooms foster genderism, which she clarified as “hostile readings [of gender]” (p. 337). These acts of genderism are symptoms of “the bathroom problem,” where “individuals are challenged in toilet spaces and their gender [is] questioned” (p. 337). Rasmussen (2009) explicated how bathrooms are exclusionary for those who are unable to ascribe to hegemonic, cisnormative scripts, indicating that “toilets don’t just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don’t belong” (p. 440). Ingrey (2012) argued that the effects of regulation and self-disciplining through the bathroom “normalise[s] gender as binary” (p. 814). This assertion echoes Cavanagh’s (2010) problematization of the bathroom in that social subjectivity is spatialized, and, therefore, bodies “are either incorporated (aggressively assimilated) or abjected (ejected or defensively refused)” (p. 50). As Robbins and Helfenbein (2018) noted, such a “theorizing [about] gendered bathroom spaces [and the] forced gender performance that gendered bathroom spaces create suggests that gender neutral bathrooms are needed” (p. 274).

While these studies have all highlighted the critical role that bathrooms play in dictating gendered personhood, the experiences of trans students in all-gender bathrooms are largely underexplored, as is the trans-activism by students to procure these spaces. However, scholars have embarked on unfolding the “complex relationships between toilets, embodiment and identity” (Slater et al., 2018, p. 952) that showcase how “these subjectivities are forced by the place of gendered bathrooms to reinscribe dominant narratives about gender” (Robbins & Helfenbein, 2018, p. 273), indicating the extent to which the bathroom effectively signals “problem bodies” (Millei & Cliff, 2014) and therefore “disqualifie[s] entry . . . of the abject [body]” (Ingrey, 2012, p. 810). Currently, only one other study has focused entirely and specifically on the
all-gender bathroom in schools and the policy rhetoric surrounding it that “forecloses ‘norms for recognition’ that affirm self-determined legitimacy and personhood for transgender and genderqueer youth” (Ingrey, 2018, p. 779). My study contributes to this body of work in that it illuminates the precarity of all-gender bathrooms for trans students in school, given the systemic forces of cisgenderism and gender entitlement.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study is guided by Spade’s (2015) *critical trans politics*, which advocates for going beyond mere “recognition and inclusion” (p. 1). Given that the creation of all-gender bathrooms is often a result of individualized accommodation (Ingrey, 2018; Omercajic & Martino, 2020), Spade’s (2015) critical trans politics encourages moving beyond such individualized “liberal and rights-based frameworks” that are often depicted as addressing issues of inclusion when in actuality, this “model of inclusion and recognition . . . leaves in place the conditions that actually produce the disproportionate . . . violence trans people face while articling it over with a veneer of fairness” (p. 86; see also Martino et al., 2020). Importantly, Spade (2015) stressed that policy itself almost always fails to change the material experiences of oppressed minority groups by ignoring powerful invisible forces, such as cisgenderism and heteropatriarchy. A strict focus on policy, Spade argued, can obscure important contextual factors that affect the lived experiences of students (i.e., curricular transformation and supportive educators).

Although the school board governing this particular school has a trans-affirmative policy that supports the creation of all-gender bathrooms in their schools, there is a lack of focus in the policy rhetoric on addressing hegemonic cisgenderist systems and gender facilitative education. Spade (2015) argued for the need to “think more broadly about how gender categories are enforced . . . that have particularly dangerous outcomes for trans people” (p. 9). While the board’s bathroom policy supports all-gender bathrooms, critical trans politics interrogates how such policies are complicit in the “administration of gender norms” that impact the lives of trans people and “how administrative systems in general are sites of production and implementation of racism, xenophobia, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and ableism under the guise of neutrality” (p. 9).

Critical trans politics allows for an understanding of the various levels in which cisgenderism is institutionalized and effectively constrains the possibility of meaningful inclusion. Such an understanding is significant, given the systemic impact of cisgenderism on “the individual, social, institutional attitudes, policies, and practices that assume people with non-assigned gender identities are inferior, ‘unnatural’ or disordered” (Ansara, 2010, p. 168). The institutionalization of cisgenderism in schools forecloses epistemological possibilities of trans self-determination and embodiment, and limits self-knowledge and intelligibility of trans personhood, underscoring that the development of bathroom policy and the creation of inclusive bathroom spaces per se
are not enough. Nicolazzo (2021), for example, argued that a trans epistemology must be interwoven into a trans-inclusive curriculum to ensure a commitment to gender expansiveness that transcends a focus on accommodating trans students and creating inclusive bathroom spaces in schools (Omercajic & Martino, 2020).

A trans epistemological commitment to gender expansiveness in schools aligns with Luecke’s (2018) gender facilitative school framework, which “support[s] children of all genders by ensuring that they have an equal opportunity to learn in safe environments” (p. 273). This framework emboldens teachers to ensure that the school system grows “from merely reacting to gender creativity . . . to truly facilitating gender diversity” (Luecke, 2018, p. 273). Such a commitment is exemplified by Nora, a teacher in this study who created the first gender studies class at Capital High, the case site for this study. It was her gender facilitative role and commitment to gender expansiveness that inspired students to advocate for an all-gender bathroom. In fact, Nora and her course illuminate the crucial role of trans-inclusive curriculum and gender-expansive education in addressing epistemic violence that contributes to a particular erasure—one that is a “defining condition” of trans people’s lives (Stryker, 2006) and that results, in this particular case study research, in the gendered colonization of trans-inclusive spaces in schools.

By colonization, I refer to “dominant displays of masculinity” (Cavanagh, 2010, p. 163) that are suffused with a ‘colonizing will to conquer the space of an ‘other’ . . . in an attempt to establish ever greater sovereignty of self and consequent otherness of the other” (Pronger, 1999, p. 376). Cavanagh (2010) noted that “the bathroom space is colonized by [white] heterosexual men” (p. 169), which contributes to feelings of unsafety and (self-) surveillance by bathroom occupants. This is largely because “[w]hite bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape. The bodies and spaces ‘point’ towards each other, as a ‘point’ that is not seen as it is also ‘the point’ from which we see” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158). Consequently, these occupied “spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in” (p. 158), and it is white bodies that “come to feel at home in spaces by being orientated in this way” (p. 160). Conversely, nonwhite (and noncis) bodies who cannot pass become subject to having their “legitimacy thrown into question” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 32) and therefore to enduring a “hammering, a constant chipping away . . . at our being” (p. 22). This whiteness and incessant hammering resemble covert “technique[s] for exclusion” (p. 30) that contribute to the silencing and invisibility of trans identities from public participation. It guarantees the continued precarity of trans students and their disposability.

Precarity is directly linked to gender norms, given that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk of vulnerability, harassment, and violence because “one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (Butler, 2009a, p. 14). Specifically, the ubiquity of cisgenderism, heteropatriarchy, and whiteness fosters a state of precarity for trans students that “characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability” (Butler, 2009b, p. ii). Similarly, the all-gender bathroom is also rendered a precarious space, given its politically-induced
creation and being governed by a cisgenderist system. Butler observes and links precarity to the fragility and powerlessness of humans under oppressive systems. Although the students in this study fought against their vulnerability through the creation of all-gender bathrooms, doing so only highlighted their precarity and vulnerability when these spaces became precarious themselves because of broader systems monopolizing them.

Spencer (2019) conceptualized the public bathroom space in terms of a biopolitics of trans disposability that “works by making marginalized people disappear from public view by regulating their bodies into invisibility. They are, in a word, disposable” (Spencer, 2019, p. 546), or conversely, “worthy of symbolic and material annihilation” (p. 554). However, it is trans people of color who “face the most precarity as they move through the world, including in public restrooms” (p. 556). Cisgenderist systems operate in tandem with white privilege to ensure that trans people of color are especially ensnared by precarity. These interlocking systems are noted by Patel (2017), who signaled that trans people’s “experiences of violence in bathrooms are connected not just through gender, but also through race and class” (p. 61). Precarity is emboldened by cisgenderism, white privilege, and heteropatriarchy. Therefore, Patel (2017) urged that “activism for bathroom equity . . . ought to recognise that different forms of discrimination, as a result of colonisation, occur in a combined and interconnected manner” (p. 61). These violent cistems must be acknowledged and confronted in bathroom advocacy and in bathroom policy—otherwise, they are permitted “to render trans people disposable” (Spencer, 2019, p. 544) in bathroom spaces.

However, there is a capacity to resist these dominant systems through the trans-activism at Capital High, where bodies assembled to express their “indignation” and resultantly “demand[ed] to be recognized, to be valued” in their advocacy and pursuit of “a livable life” at school (Butler, 2015, p. 26). Butler (2015) reasoned that “if we accept that there are sexual and gender norms that condition who will be recognizable and ‘legible’ and who will not, we can begin to see how the ‘illegible’ may form as a group” (p. 38) and oppose their unintelligibility through their very advocacy as a result of their gender studies group project. I further this analysis by demonstrating how student-led activism attempts to resist or disrupt cisgenderist hegemonic structures and therefore acts “from and against precarity” (Butler, 2015, p. 58) that is imposed on trans people through their assembly. However, I also underscore that trans-activism and bathroom policy alone are not enough to work against white cisgenderist systems that covertly ensure that “marginalized people disappear from public view by regulating their bodies into invisibility” (Spencer, 2019, p. 546) and disposability.

About the Study

This study investigates the creation of two all-gender bathrooms in one urban school in one of the largest school boards in Ontario, Canada, which I refer to as Capital High. I examine the trans-activism that emerged as a project from a gender studies class,
resulting in the creation of two all-gender bathrooms. In doing so, I highlight the limits of this activism as it was confronted by broader cisgenderist and heteropatriarchal systems, pointing to the necessity of a coordinated whole-school approach that is committed to gender expansiveness and trans-inclusion. Given the specificity of this context and the emergent activism, I deploy case study methodology to generate further “in-depth knowledge” and to “construct a clearer reality” (Stake, 1995, p. 101) about how these all-gender bathrooms were created, utilized, and understood by the students at the school. In doing so, I conceive of this as a paradigmatic case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that contributes to the literature investigating the creation and accessibility of all-gender bathrooms. It is considered paradigmatic as it “operates as a reference point” (p. 232) regarding the possibilities associated with student trans-activism in the creation of all-gender bathrooms in schools, while also highlighting the limits of trans inclusivity that emerge within and around this very space because of cis hegemonic structures.

It is also considered an instrumental case study, which aims to “provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2005, pp. 444–445) about the tensions between trans-activism and the dominance of white cisgenderist logics that capitalize on progressive advances earned by transgressive movements. Altogether, the case study design allowed for “gather[ing] comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information” (Patton, 2015, p. 536) regarding student activism to implement all-gender bathrooms, and the limitations of these spaces that are due to broader cisgenderist, heteropatriarchal systems that permit a colonization of this space by white cisgender boys who render the all-gender bathroom an exclusionary illicit space.

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants (Patton, 2015). Initially, the gender studies teacher was recruited through my personal network connections. She agreed to an interview and shared details about the study with current and past gender studies students, several of whom contacted me to express their interest in participating in the study. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted over Zoom. This study relied on “data triangulation” through “multiple perspectives” (Patton, 1999) of the gender studies teacher and her students, who collectively provided insight into specific contingencies to secure accessible bathroom spaces. I was therefore able to verify the findings through the convergence and corroboration of their insights (Patton, 1999). Moreover, my use of multiple theories and scholarship to interpret the data provided “theory/perspective triangulation” (Patton, 1999, p. 1193).

The following four participants were interviewed: Nora, a white cisgender female gender studies teacher who has been a teacher for 18 years and who created the Grade 11 gender studies class in 2013; Casey, a 20-year-old white genderqueer former student at Capital High who was responsible for the initial advocacy that created both all-gender bathrooms; Quinn, an 18-year-old South Asian cisgender female who is a recent graduate from Capital High; and Lucy, a 16-year-old white cisgender female who is currently a Grade 11 student at the school.
The participants provided “in-depth knowledge about particular issues” (Patton, 2015, p. 219) related to the all-gender bathrooms and the activism around their creation. To generate further knowledge, I asked questions about experiences with the bathroom and how it came to be established. These questions elicited nuanced responses about trans-activism, the limitations and feelings of insecurity that were due to white cisgender heterosexual boys occupying the all-gender bathrooms, and Nora’s vital role in facilitating a trans-inclusive environment.

All participants signed consent forms agreeing to audio-recorded interviews; because Lucy was under the age of 18, a parent signed on her behalf. After interviews were completed, they were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted by means of “identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297) through a method of reading and rereading the interview transcripts line-by-line, which deepened the dependability of the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through color-coding “chunks of text that suggest[ed] a category [or theme]” and a “mutual interrogation of data and theory [that] occurs” (p. 219) during this process, three themes emerged: (1) education as mobilization for (trans-)activism; (2) the limits of trans-activism: the all-gender bathroom as an illicit site; and (3) white cis colonization of trans-inclusive spaces. In what follows, I first draw on participant insights into the school and its climate, and then proceed with presenting the aforementioned themes.

**Discussion and Analysis**

**Capital High as a Case Site**

The students of Capital High understand the specific particularities and culture of their school. Nora, for example, described Capital High as queer-friendly:

> Our school is very well known in the board as probably being the most queer-friendly school. One of my students last week said, “Miss. Nora, I don’t know if you know this, but Capital’s nickname is the Gayest School in [the district].” I think the school census says 30% of the kids identify as LGBTQ, but all of us think that is probably higher . . . . So, it’s a safe school.

Importantly, Nora signals that the school resembles a haven for queer students. Casey, a genderqueer former student of Capital High, specified their comfort and safety when exploring their gender identity during the time they spent at the school and in Nora’s gender studies classroom, which “nurtured gender identity skills and peer support” (Luecke, 2018, p. 273) and resulted in Casey feeling safe enough to explore their gender identity:

> It was during my time there that I learned about more gender identities, and I was in this space where it was totally fine to talk about that. . . . So, when I started to explore my own
gender identity, I didn’t worry that no one would accept me, I mean, at school at least. So, I came out as genderqueer.

Nora’s classroom “embrace[d] students’ identities across the gender spectrum, including gender expansive, gender fluid, and gender-questioning children” and “recognize[d] gender identity exploration as developmentally appropriate for children, including gender ambiguity and shifting gender identities” (Luecke, 2018, p. 274). It highlights the importance of a trans epistemology that mobilizes trans-centric ethic of knowledge creation that allowed Casey to explore their gender in a classroom that afforded them the language and comfort to do so (Nicolazzo, 2021).

Lucy, a Grade 11 student, noted that the school had a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) that the school decidedly terminated: “We had a Gay Straight Alliance up until about two or three years ago. . . . But it eventually stopped because students just saw Capital High as a Gay Straight Alliance type of school on its own.” While GSAs are “important contributors to a welcoming environment and fostered advocacy efforts for gender-neutral bathrooms” (Porta et al., 2017, p. 107), students at Capital High felt that the environment was welcoming enough to LGBTQIA+ students and therefore discontinued the club. Moreover, while advocacy for bathrooms typically occurs because of GSAs (Porta et al., 2017), it was instead Nora’s gender studies class that provided the platform for this advocacy. In this sense, Nora took on the work that would normally be considered the responsibility of the GSA, eliminating the possibility of a coordinated response when “the beleaguered colleagues expect a single person to bear the entire responsibility” (Luecke, 2018, p. 279) to advocate for gender expansiveness. However, that such educative work falls on GSAs still indicates a problem and a deflection of responsibility away from the system in providing resources and a systemic pedagogic commitment to trans inclusion and gender-expansive education. Lapointe’s (2018) research, for example, found that GSAs often served as “a proxy in the absence of an ongoing commitment to queer and trans-informed education” (p. i).

While Capital High is perceived to be a queer-friendly school, Lucy explained that the school is overwhelmingly white, signaling more sweeping systemic domination at place in the school: “I think a reason it’s predominantly white is because it’s an art school and with internalized and systemic racism, a lot of BIPOC people aren’t given access to the arts as much as white students are.” Quinn, as a South Asian student, also reflected on the disproportionately white student body that made up a majority of Capital High’s population: “It’s a lot of middle upper-class people, and therefore, a lot of white people. And so, it’s a lot of white queer people, which really puts a weird type of stamp on what queer means to the school.” Quinn signaled how “[w]hiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it” which ensures that “[s]paces are orientated ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). In addition to this pervasive whiteness, Lucy also noted the ubiquity of toxic masculinity, which demonstrates the tensions within the school; while it is a LGBTQIA+ affirming space, the school is also entangled with institutionalized cisgenderism and heteropatriarchy:
I stand by that Capital High struggles with toxic masculinity. A lot of the straight cisgender males there are very . . . stereotypical macho men. And will use “retard” like, “Oh my God, that’s retarded.” Not as a slur, but it is a slur, it’s not really something you should be saying.

Capital High’s school culture is seemingly accepting to the LGBTQIA+ population, yet it is also one saturated by a white heteropatriarchal cistem, and continued education and activism are required to combat this.

**Education as Mobilization for (Trans-)Activism**

The implementation of the two all-gender bathrooms at Capital High was a result of the gender studies class that Nora had pitched to be created in 2013:

I pitched the Grade 11 gender studies course. I said to my principal, “I think we should run this course because the school has a high LGBTQ population.” Though I think I was initially coming at it from a very white lady feminism. I thought it was going to be more about women’s issues.

The viability of a gender studies course emerged because of eight years of advocacy by the Miss G Project, a group of university students who successfully lobbied to implement gender studies electives in high schools across the province of Ontario after seeing growing media coverage of gender-based violence in the news (Goldberg, 2013). The Miss G Project’s success in adding gender and equity electives to the high school curriculum laid the foundation for Nora to create her own gender studies course at Capital High. This course was largely up to her to design and, as Nora stated, was initially conceived of as a white feminist gender course. As such, while Nora signaled the importance of creating the gender studies class, she had initially failed to account for trans personhood and overlooked Beauchamp and D’Harlingue’s (2012) encouragement: “Careful positioning of transgender bodies necessitates an extensive theoretical reframing of how we design women’s studies and curriculum, and how we teach and conceptualize gendered bodies more broadly” (p. 26). After Nora had consulted trans scholarship, she was able to transcend her “white lady feminism”:

I read *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano⁷ and my head exploded. That, along with what my trans students or my non-binary students were telling me and the conversations we were having in class, I was able to figure it out. And then it’s kind of grown from there.

Nora’s engagement with trans scholarship and the phenomenological experiences of her own trans and gender-diverse students provided insight into the potential of the gender studies course for challenging institutionalized cisgenderism—which ultimately amounted to the creation of the final project. Lucy noted the significance of this project:
In gender studies, the culminating activity is you have to create a social action initiative. So, I did mine about getting menstrual boxes in all washrooms because not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women. But one of the projects was actually getting an all-gender bathroom.

Lucy demonstrated a comprehension that gender segregation in traditional binary bathrooms is a key component of the biopolitics of trans disposability that “erases trans people, particularly those who are non-binary, genderqueer, or gender fluid or trans men who menstruate and therefore find women’s rooms discordant with their identities and men’s rooms unequipped for their needs in that moment” (Spencer, 2019, p. 545). This awareness emerged from Lucy’s enrollment in Nora’s gender studies class and Nora’s own engagement with trans scholarship.

However, despite the school being gender- and queer friendly, the necessity of the student activism illuminates the dominant cisgenderist system that still obligates trans students to make “a public insistence on existing and mattering” (Butler, 2015, p. 37). Nora’s gender facilitative role is also instrumental, given the administrative failure to enact the school board’s trans-affirmative policy that dictates these very expectations from all teachers and the administration. Such a gap in the policy–practice nexus demonstrates the significance of a critical trans politics that suggests that even when “reforms are won, conditions do not improve” (Spade, 2015, p. 68); it therefore necessitates “mov[ing] us away from an uncritical call to ‘be counted’ by the administrative mechanisms of violent systems and instead” underscores the need “to strategize . . . interventions on these systems with an understanding of their operations” (Spade, 2015, pp. 86–87). What is required is deeper transformation beyond only policy reform, which often addresses individuals rather than targeting system-level issues.

Casey, the genderqueer student who was primarily responsible for the creation of the all-gender bathrooms, noted how the final project in gender studies inspired them, given that the school did not have any all-gender bathrooms:

We didn’t have any all-gender bathrooms. . . . When Ms. Nora said, “OK, we’re going to do a big project at the end of the year, and it has to do with activism, you’ll pick something you want to accomplish.” And I looked at some of my other friends and went, “I really want a bathroom.” Not just so that I can use it and feel comfortable, but so that my friends can use it and feel comfortable.

Casey’s noncompliance with gender norms “call[ed] into question the[ir] viability” (Butler, 2009b, p. iv) and, in this case, amplified their desire for an all-gender bathroom. Casey understood that “it is not only that we need to live in order to act, but that we have to act, and act politically, in order to secure the conditions of existence” (Butler, 2015, p. 58). It was Nora’s gender studies class that provided the capacity for “the assembly of bodies” (Butler, 2015, p. 59) to advocate for their needs and combat the structural conditions that contributed to their precarity.
Casey emphasized the importance of the support that their group was shown by both Nora and the school principal:

Ms. Nora was amazing. She said, “I can take you on a tour of the bathrooms we aren’t really using. So, we can just turn one of these into a bathroom. And I can set up a meeting with the principal.” So, we went to the principal and he just said, “Which bathroom do you want?” and we said, “We want one of these two.” And he said, “You can have them both.” He was like, “I just don’t want this to be a big deal, I want it to be put into place like it’s normal. Not make a big show of it like it’s something special we’re doing, but like it should have been here all along.”

Casey highlights Nora’s gender facilitative work “that teachers and students engage in together” and that entails “[e]xploring the schemas that shape our interpretations and put parameters around gender” (Luecke, 2018, p. 277). As Luecke explained, it is this collaborative work that characterizes a gender facilitative school through the promotion of “expanded understandings of gender identities, language, and narratives that recognize each child’s unique experiences” (p. 273). Moreover, it is Nora’s gender facilitative approach that exposes the amount of work that is still required to secure gender expansiveness, despite the presence of trans-affirmative policy and the creation of all-gender bathrooms. Such a reality underscores Spade’s (2015) encouragement to redirect attention solely from “recognition-and-inclusion-focused” policy and law reform that have “little impact on the daily lives of the people they purportedly protect” (p. 11).

The school principal wanted the implementation of the bathroom to be organic without any kind of announcement, as though “it should have been here all along.” However, while it should have been in the school, its creation necessitated a gender-queer student advocating for it. Moreover, the absence of this space in the school, given its significant LGBTQIA+ population and the school board’s trans-affirmative policy encouraging the creation of all-gender bathrooms, raises important questions about the necessity of this advocacy. The school board’s trans-affirmative policy is thus both eclipsed and dictated by administrative enactment that demonstrates precisely why administrative systems “are the greatest sources of danger and violence for trans people” (Spade, 2015, p. 16), because their very liveability hinges on them. It also demonstrates the necessity of having a gender facilitative conduit like Nora—who “functioned as a bridge” (Luecke, 2018, p. 280) between the students and administration—without whom such activism may not have materialized, given the institutionalization of cisgenderism in the education system. For example, Frohard-Dourlent (2018) problematized the tendency of “students being tasked with making decisions within an institution whose established norms work to erase trans and gender-nonconforming subjectivities” (p. 338) without any kind of support from educators. However, because of Nora’s investment in supporting her students, she actively “enable[d] students to be recognized and integrated into established school practices” (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018, p. 329).
Casey and their gender studies group subsequently engaged other students in the school to become involved in the project. Specifically, when asked how students became aware of these bathrooms, Casey explained that they mobilized engagement by bridging activism with education:

We started thinking about “how do we put proper signs on this?” And then we realized we’re at an art school, and it’s time for culminating activities. So, we went to some of the Grade 12 art classes, and we said, “Does anybody want to make their culminating project painting a door for the all-gender bathrooms?” And so, we actually did find two students, and they both picked one of the doors, and they came up with a whole design, and the doors became these art pieces.

Nora’s mobilization of her students through the gender studies course caused a ripple effect; she inspired Casey and their gender studies project group to assemble more students through education to promote these spaces through their artwork in a “form of political performativity” (Butler, 2015, p. 18). These bathrooms garnered attention and were regularly used by all students, becoming congregating spaces.

The Limits of Trans-Activism: The All-Gender Bathroom as an Illicit Site

The two all-gender bathrooms that were created at Capital High were done so with the intention of widespread use by the entire school’s student body, as Casey pointed out:

We wanted a space where you could just go and there wouldn’t be any expectation of what you are or how you identify. We didn’t want something that was going to turn into the “trans bathroom” and people would feel like even if they’re just exploring their gender identity, that they could walk in. . . So, we had a lot of conversations about that, and we did settle on we’d like something that’s multiple stalls and we want everyone to feel like they can use it!

Casey and their gender studies group “did not conceive of re-doing the entire system but responded to how it could be reworked” and resultantly created these bathrooms “as an alternative to what currently exists” (Ingrey, 2012, p. 812). While it was conceived of as serving the needs of trans and nonbinary students, it also was envisaged more broadly as a gender-expansive space for all students. However, Nora explained the issues that began to emerge as a result:

What has been happening with that bathroom is it becomes a place where [cis] kids congregate, and it is largely cisgender kids. . . . They vape in there and then when someone wants to use the washroom, they don’t feel comfortable because they open the door and it’s like these people they don’t know hanging out there. So, then they don’t use it.

While the all-gender bathrooms were created to dispel the stigma ascribed to those who might access them, these spaces also became social sites that deterred
trans students from using them because of the discomfort that emerged from cisgender students recreationally congregating in the bathrooms. This emphasizes Ingrey’s (2018) indication that while “gender neutral washrooms must permit all genders access and thus avoid denying entry to any person; the concern is rather with how that access is represented and under what terms” (p. 779). Indeed, even a gender-neutral design does not ensure equitable access because of the pervasiveness of cisgenderism that forecloses this possibility for some trans and gender-diverse students.

Quinn elaborated on the bathroom serving as a common room where students could congregate and fraternize, rather than use it for its intended purpose:

> Sometimes, I would go in and be like, “There’s boys in here, I’m not peeing.” Because they weren’t just using the space as a bathroom. . . You kind of go, you hang out a little bit, you talk a little bit of shit, and then you go back to your classes.

According to Nora, the design and the ample number of cisgender students congregating in the bathroom also deterred trans students from accessing this space because “people they don’t know are hanging out in there.” Incidentally, trans students “become certain about the dangers of bathroom spaces, even in the absence of support for those fears” (Robbins & Helfenbein, 2018, p. 271). These feelings emphasize the colonization of the bathroom by these cisgender students, and, as a result, the trans student is rendered precarious; their “life is always in some sense in the hands of the other . . . a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all” (Butler, 2009a, p. 14). Their access to the bathroom is contingent on who they might find occupying this space. And for this reason, “we must ask in what ways a space alone supports human rights or social justice” (Ingrey, 2018, p. 779). We must also ask in what ways a space might become antithetical to these social justice ventures and how it inhibits human rights, justice, and livability.

Participants remarked on the tendency for students—primarily cisgender students—to vape, graffiti, and hang out in this space:

**Casey:** I personally haven’t heard any big issues with regards to safety, at least physical safety with those bathrooms. It really—it’s mainly just been the vaping, the graffiti, people hanging out.

**Quinn:** Unfortunately, a lot of cis people took advantage . . . because it’s two stall bathrooms and a lot of people went in there to vape. . . . People knew it was a safe space to pee, but it was also a safe space to vape. . .

**Nora:** What has been happening the last few years is that cis kids go into the gender-neutral washroom, primarily the one in the basement, because it’s so quiet and it doesn’t have a lot of traffic, and they vape in it.

The pervasiveness of cultural cisgenderism (Kennedy, 2018) and gender entitlement effectively permit cisgender students to capitalize and take advantage of gender-neutral spaces afforded to trans people. The space affords these students the opportunity
of “creating spaces of freedom ‘within the frames set’” (Millei & Cliff, 2014, p. 257), which allows cisgender students to engage in illicit liberatory practices that emerge through their socialization with one another in the all-gender bathroom. This speaks directly to the problematic of administrative governance; while the bathrooms were granted without question, there was no motivation or desire to confront or challenge more expansive systemic problems of the institutionalization of cisgenderism and heteropatriarchy. Such an approach demonstrates “how harm and vulnerability operate and are distributed” (Spade, 2015, p. 73) to trans students, even in the space of all-gender bathrooms.

Students and teachers had to retroactively try to educate those who misused the bathroom about its significance and the necessity for transgender students to make them aware of their cisgender privilege (Serano, 2007). For example, Lucy and Nora explained having to confront students about their misuse of the space:

**Lucy:** It’s kind of a hook-up/hangout spot for a lot of people. Students or Ms. Nora come in and will say, “Hey, I totally get that you want to hang out and there’s lot of spaces to do that, but this is the only space a lot of nonbinary or trans folk feel comfortable using.”

**Nora:** The issue we’ve been grappling with for like three years is trying to educate the students about what that space is, why it was created, and why they should not be hanging out there. . .

Because Casey has graduated, it is Nora who continues to educate about the space. She serves as the key ally in her leadership and “collaborative spirit of shared responsibility and multiple communication pathways” (Luecke, 2018, p. 274) that bridged discussions between administration and the student body to confront emergent cisgenderism that threatened the all-gender bathrooms. Hence, it is Nora and, by association, the students in her gender studies class who unremittingly educate cisgender students about the all-gender bathroom. It is a consequence of Nora and her class that students have “the tools and space . . . [so] they can challenge the tyranny of oppressive narratives” (Luecke, 2018, p. 278) in the school outside the classroom itself.

The need for ongoing activism is something that Casey discussed:

We’re worried about people congregating and looking threatening because these are supposed to be safe spaces for people who are already not feeling that safe. And you don’t want somebody who is trans or nonbinary who thinks this is the only bathroom I can use to go and then feel uncomfortable and unsafe and then not have anywhere to use the bathroom. So, we have greater concerns over the all-gender bathrooms because we’re worried they’re going to get taken away and we’re worried that they’re making these hopefully safe spaces unsafe.

Casey highlighted the necessity of continued commitment by teachers and administrators in reflecting on the “administration of gender norms [that] causes trans people the
most trouble” (Spade, 2015, p. 16) and how unmarked cisgender privilege contributes to the reality of “the relentless nature of harassment against trans people” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 28). Consequently, it is Nora who takes up this role through educating her students and mobilizing activism through the final class project, which exposes “how the administration of gender norms impacts trans people’s lives” (Spade, 2015, p. 73). This education helps them consider “how the administration of life chances through traditional gender categories produces trans vulnerability” (p. 15). However, the education that Nora provides is not enough to do the work that is required of an entire school to confront and challenge its complicity in a white cisgenderist heteropatriarchal system.

**Male Privilege and White Cis Colonization of the All-Gender Bathroom**

While the all-gender bathrooms at Capital High are largely social hubs that invite student socialization, these spaces are primarily occupied by white young men, as described by Lucy:

From my experience using the gender-neutral bathroom, I’ve only seen white cis macho men in there for the sole purpose to vape or to pop [pills]. I’ve never seen them use it for its intended purpose. They don’t really care about the purpose of the bathroom and that some people can’t use any other one.

While the school’s population is depicted as being queer- and gender friendly, there is still a “culture of masculinity sustained” by those who are “endorsing and performing a particular heteronormative and cisnormative masculinity, which is embodied” (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2017, p. 137) and exemplified through their colonization of the all-gender bathroom for their own illicit activities. This was consolidated by Quinn when she detailed her own observations:

There’s a group of guys called the “Basement Boys,” and they’re skater boys or the cool boys. . . . And you’d always just see them in there with their beanies vaping in the corner and you’re like, “I kind of just need to pee” and also, “I kind of need to change my pad and I don’t really want you in the bathroom at all, especially when you’re only in here to vape.”

These Basement Boys represent a compounding of cis, white, straight, hegemonic masculinity that affords them the authority and privilege to colonize this space for their own illicit ends. Resultantly, Nora and her current students have had to build on and preserve Casey’s activist legacy by confronting these problematic ideologies and educating white cisgender heterosexual students in the all-gender bathrooms. Without Nora and her commitment to gender facilitative education, virulent cisist systems remain unchallenged, demonstrating the significance of having GSAs in place that share trans-affirmative accountability (Porta et al., 2017).
Participants highlighted the ignorance that governs the privileged behavior of the Basement Boys, leading to their indifference while annexing this space from those who need to use it without any regard for how their presence in the all-gender bathroom affects trans and gender-diverse students in particular:

**Quinn:** It’s supposed to be a safe space and I think out of the entire school, those are the people who are at most risk for being homophobic or transphobic. It’s kind of awkward to pee in there with boys who probably don’t understand why that bathroom is there and so don’t really have the great attitude of being in this bathroom while someone else is peeing there, and that someone else is not a cis guy.

**Lucy:** They see it as a space where every gender can go in and hang out in there, but not realizing that I have this incredible privilege of having a bathroom that I feel comfortable using where I go, and me being in here and hanging out or blasting my rap music doesn’t really help create this safe welcoming space for people who don’t have that same privilege.

Lucy specifically speaks to the fact that these young men are “not realizing” the impact their presence and misconduct in the bathroom might be having, and the extent to which they are overlooking their own privilege. This ignorance perpetuates a harmful practice of silencing where trans students are made “invisible (driven from public spaces for fear of harassment, violence, or arrest)” (Spencer, 2019, p. 551). This underpins a kind of discipline that “denote[s] a reduction of violence because control often becomes internalized and thus rendered largely invisible” (Spade, 2015, p. 55), to both the victim and the perpetrator.

Quinn framed this space as a safe one, despite its occupation by the Basement Boys:

I’m going to go and pee and wash my hands, leave. I’d still rather not do it with a bunch of cis het[erosexual] guys in the bathroom. . . . But I think that as long as people weren’t occupying the bathroom, the space itself wasn’t dangerous. It was just sometimes white cis dudes would misuse the space.

Such a suggestion ignores the fact that “cisnormativity couples with White supremacy to produce particular precarity for trans people of color” (Spencer, 2019, p. 543), and, given the overwhelmingly white population of the school, what might be considered safe for the trans white student may not be the same for the trans student of color. In this way, “non-white bodies . . . are made invisible” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159), consequently illuminating the limitations of trans-activism as “not sufficiently alter[ing] conditions facing [trans] people of color” (Spade, 2015, p. 10).

Incidentally, Quinn—being of South Asian descent—was also able to remark on the inconceivability of race by the white population at Capital High:
I think a lot of the race things at Capital, people don’t really think about it because everyone’s white and everyone who is white doesn’t really think about how their race plays into their part in society because that’s one of the privileges you get: You don’t have to think about it.

Quinn explained that “whiteness is invisible and unmarked . . . to those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). This ignorance is often excused by others as unintentional despite the implicit harm and precarity that it invokes for transgender and gender-diverse students. In fact, Nora elaborated on this ignorance that justifies their presence in this space, despite how they render it an illicit one through their misconduct:

That’s the thing is people use it and don’t think about it or they think, “Why would someone be scared of me coming into the washroom? I’m a friendly person!” But the reality is some people just don’t and they certainly don’t feel that way when they walk in and it’s four guys just hanging out.

However, Spade (2015) insisted that the “conditions under which we live do not result solely from ignorance,” and therefore, “convincing elites to think about those conditions in a certain way is not the path to building meaningful transformation” (p. 104). Hence, simply convincing the Basement Boys that their actions are problematic will not resolve the broader systemic issues emerging within and around these spaces. As such, more is needed beyond bathroom policy and depending on one teacher who takes it upon herself to educate an entire school about a cisgenderist and heteropatriarchal system. Casey noted that more is required than mere implementation:

If you’re in a place where half of the student body is not accepting of trans identities, then these bathrooms aren’t going to go right. . . . Even if you try to push that these bathrooms are for everyone, you’re probably still going to get people who call it “the trans bathroom,” who use it as a place to target others. So, I think you can’t just put an all-gender bathroom in any school and hope that it’ll be fine. I think that you need to make sure that the space itself is welcoming first.

Casey highlighted why they believe their activism for this space was successful—because of a large LGBTQIA+ school population—but also signaled the potential future problem that inevitably emerged following their graduation from Capital High. While the bathroom is being used by all the students at Capital High, it is still a space that provides “all the agency and visibility on the White cisgender enforcers” (Spencer, 2019, p. 551). In the absence of a systemic commitment to addressing and educating about white cis male entitlement, a culture and biopolitics of trans disposability remains intact whereby “those most worthy of social fear and erasure become the least deserving of the protections of the social contract, or even respect and decency as basic as the right to exist in public” (Spencer, 2019, p. 555). Quinn acknowledged how this culture heightens the vulnerability of trans students and turns these spaces into
repositories for the illicit (Cavanagh, 2010), rendering them unsafe for trans and gender-diverse students:

I would like to alter the culture around those being the bathrooms to vape in. Because those bathrooms aren’t just there so that people can pee, those bathrooms are there so people feel safe. I would [also] like to change the level of respect the white cis guys have for those bathrooms because they’re not just bathrooms, they’re symbols of safety and symbols of our school’s commitment to being a safe place and just go vape in your own bathroom. They just assume that the other toilets are just a viable option for everyone. And when they do that, they forget the entire point of those bathrooms.

Quinn highlights how cis white straight male privilege and entitlement saturates the school culture even though a third of the student population identifies as LGBTQIA+. If this problem is emerging in the “gayest school” in the district, then it signals a more significant issue of the omnipresence of cultural cisgenderism (Kennedy, 2018) and white privilege that effectively permit white cisgender boys to occupy and befoul gender-neutral spaces, rendering the lives of trans students as precarious because of these very “conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one’s control” (Butler, 2009b, p. i).

The impact of cisgenderism was further clarified by Nora:

I’ve discussed it a lot with my classes, and they definitely think that there is a contingent of kids in the school who just don’t give a shit. They see that as a space where they can hang out and they don’t care how it affects anyone else.

While the trans-activism at Capital High was carried out with good intentions, the emergent problems confirmed Ingrey’s (2018) assertion that “the gender neutral washroom in schools cannot be an add-on” (p. 784). Largely, the limitations of this activism are elucidated by the materialization of the Basement Boys, who are the embodiment of white cisgenderist and heteropatriarchal colonizing forces, signaling the need for a broader school commitment beyond Nora’s classroom to confront and subvert these broader cistemic forces. In the meantime, Nora and her students continue their activism by “confronting the harms that come to trans people at the hands of [these] violent systems” (Spade, 2015, p. 19), and further, by lobbying the “administrative systems that distribute life chances and promote certain ways of life” (Spade, 2015, p. 52).

Implications and Conclusion

This case study has illustrated the possibilities that student-led trans-activism can have in creating all-gender bathrooms in the school. Moreover, it has underscored the significance of supportive educators and trans-inclusive education that collectively contribute to the overall trans-inclusive climate of “Gender Facilitative Schools[,] . . . ensuring that the school building as a whole is a safe space for children of all gender
expressions” (Luecke, 2018, p. 281). However, this research has also highlighted that despite the creation of all-gender bathrooms, white cisgenderist hegemonic structures are deeply institutionalized and thwart the maintenance and sustainability of these bathroom spaces for trans and gender-diverse students. The collaborative activism exhibited by Nora and her students in confronting these structures points to the significance of chipping away at these very cisgenderist foundations, exemplifying Ahmed’s (2016) assertion that “hammering, however exhausting, can become a tool” of the subject; we can
direct our attention toward those institutions that chip away at us. We chip away at those walls, those physical or social barriers that stop us from residing somewhere, from being somewhere. We chip away at those walls by trying to exist or trying to transform an existence. (Ahmed, 2016, p. 32)

This political project of resisting these cisgenderist structures was, and continues to be, addressed by Nora and her students at Capital High who chip away in their efforts to support and educate about gender justice. However, such interventions are fragile and would have likely dissolved had Nora decided to leave the school at any point, exemplifying the tenuousness of “designating a point person in the school” (Luecke, 2018, p. 279). Nevertheless, because Nora is seen “as reliable” and “function[s] as a bridge” (Luecke, 2018, p. 280) and a conduit to consulting with administration to address these systemic issues, she is therefore instrumental in inspiring activism from her students who gravitate toward her, as we “become attracted to those who chip away at the worlds that accommodate our bodies” (Ahmed, 2016, pp. 32–33). It is this collaborative relationship between Nora and her activist students that results in the fearless confrontation of the Basement Boys and their embodied white cis male privilege as they work to “facilitate lives of rich authenticity for children of all genders” (Luecke, 2018, p. 282).

The findings of this case study research endorse the need to move beyond bathroom policy reform and relying on a singular gender facilitative teacher to address the problem of cisgenderism. The data in this study problematize the notion that the implementation of a bathroom or trans-affirmative policy “can ever dismantle systemic oppression [because such a policy] is not only overly optimistic, it is, in and of itself, a continuation of that oppression” (Nicolazzo, 2021, p. 529). More gender-expansive commitments beyond one teacher’s classroom are required. For example, the school’s decision to dissolve the GSA left Nora as the only educator who actively seeks to support transgender and gender-diverse students in the school through her gender studies course and the social action final project. It supports the view that the mere presence of a large number of queer and gender-diverse students in a school means that gender democratization has been achieved.

This study points to the necessity of “coordinated steps to create gender-inclusive classrooms and schools [that] are taken proactively” (Luecke, 2018, p. 281) to ensure that white cistemic barriers are proactively acknowledged and confronted. In this
sense, the case study serves as a cautionary tale about failure of the system and its abnegation of responsibility to address and support gender democratization, which ultimately falls on the shoulders of one teacher and the students in her gender studies class. More system-level directives are needed that support integrating trans-affirmative education across the curriculum and resources to foster ongoing professional development in schools. Without confronting broader hegemonic and interlocking systems of cis white privilege and oppression in schools, a commitment to addressing trans marginalization will be hampered by the hammering forces of cisgenderism and white privilege, as represented by the case in point of the “Basement Boys.”

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1. Gender expansiveness encompasses a “wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the gender binary system” (Human Rights Campaign & Gender Spectrum, 2014), which “gives rise to an ever-growing number of possible combinations of identities, expressions and bodies” (Pastel et al., 2019, p. 45).
2. Cisgenderism is a “cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth” (p. 63).
3. Serano (2013) explained gender entitlement as the projection of “assumptions, expectations, value judgments, and beliefs about sex, gender, and/or sexuality onto other people, and favor such interpretations over the way those individuals understand themselves” (p. 242).
4. The policy was created as a result of a mediation settlement following a human rights complaint by a trans student whose request for accommodations in bathrooms and overnight trips was denied by his school.
5. I assigned each participant a pseudonym.
6. Casey self-identified as “genderqueer,” often understood to describe “people who feel that they are in between male and female or are neither male nor female” (Teich, 2012, p. 115).
7. Serano’s (2007) book is a collection of essays that debunk myths about trans women, sift through debates between essentialism and constructionism, and present reflections that draw from her own experiences and those of others to critique cisgenderist systems.

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