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“Womanhood does not reside in documentation”: Queer and feminist student activism for transgender women’s inclusion at women’s colleges

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ABSTRACT

This article considers queer-driven student activism at Smith College, as well as admissions policy shifts at a number of prominent U.S. women’s colleges for transgender women’s inclusion. The author illustrates how student attempts to dismantle the transmisogyny at Smith as a purportedly feminist “women’s” space, as well as some women’s colleges’ shifts in admissions policy, challenge divisions between transgender and cisgender women. This paradigmatic shift reflects the campuses as comparative havens for gender and sexual exploration, the influence of postmodern gender theory in understanding identity, and the growth of “queer” as an all-encompassing signifier for sexual and gender transgression.

KEYWORDS

Transgender women;
women’s colleges; feminism;
transmisogyny; student
activism; queer; Seven Sisters

The contemporary United States is bearing witness to a cultural shift of importance for lesbian and queer studies, in which multitudes of younger, non-heterosexual, female-identified and non-binary AFAB (assigned female at birth) people are identifying with signifiers such as queer, pansexual, fluid, or simply assert a desire for their gender and/or sexuality to be unlabeled. This shift reflects the fact that the category of “lesbian” does not quite capture the cultural terrain of non-heterosexual female and AFAB populations the way it was thought to in the past (Miller, Taylor, and Rupp, forthcoming; Rupp and Taylor 2013; Rupp, Taylor, and Miller, forthcoming). Women’s colleges, several of which host prominent queer student cultures—and which have been associated with lesbianism in popular culture historically (Inness, 1997)—are key sites for analyzing these changes, as well as for considering the importance of environment on young adults’ budding sexual and gender identities. As colleges *for women*, they have also become ground zero for extended debates about the inclusion of transgender women (and students who transition to identify as transgender men, or who identify as non-binary) in

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“women’s spaces.” This debate has polarized self-described feminist communities since at least the 1970s.

Drawing on news articles, social media posts from queer and trans student organizations, administrators’ admission policy announcements, and interview data, I analyze the issue of transgender women’s inclusion in a number of prominent U.S. women’s colleges. These colleges, including the Seven Sisters colleges¹ of the East Coast, Simmons College in Boston, and Mills College and Scripps College in California, have elected to address the issue of transgender women’s inclusion and/or have been in national media around the issue. I begin by briefly outlining the history of transmisogyny² in U.S. lesbian feminist spaces in order to illuminate the context for, and recognize the interventions of, queer-led, third- (and/or fourth-? [Baumgardner 2011; Peay 2005]) wave feminist activism at contemporary women’s colleges on behalf of trans women.

In my analysis of student activism, I highlight Smith College as a site where students and the administration sparred in a protracted battle for transgender women’s admission that lasted until every other remaining Seven Sister besides Barnard—which has since updated their policy to admit transgender women—had already changed their admissions policies in favor of inclusion. The student activism at women’s colleges like Smith and Mount Holyoke, driven by queer, transgender, and feminist organizations, I argue, challenges historical patterns of cisgender lesbian feminist exclusion of transgender women. I also consider the ways that the interdisciplinary and overlapping arenas of gender and queer theory have helped shift the landscape for understanding the category of “woman” at many women’s colleges, thus influencing inclusionary policies for the admission of trans women.

Feminism and transmisogyny in “women’s” spaces: A brief background

It was in 1979 that self-identified radical feminist Janice Raymond published the infamous volume *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, in which she argued that transsexual women are not women and suggested that they, in fact, pose a threat to the safety of (what we would now characterize as cisgender) women’s spaces. Raymond, equating trans women with rapists, claims, “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception... often he [sic] is able to gain entrance and a dominant position in women’s spaces because the women involved do not know he [sic] is a transsexual” (1979: 104). Raymond’s writings, while remaining the most well-known feminist set of arguments against the inclusion of trans women in feminist movements, have been joined by the work of a chorus of other anti-transgender feminists known as TERFs, or “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (Jones 2014). Prominent TERFs

include Australian academic Sheila Jeffreys, whose recent scholarship has focused on problematizing “transgenderism” (Jeffreys 2014). The refusal to consider trans women “real” women, coupled with the fear that trans women will in fact conduct themselves like cisgender male sexual predators when granted access to “women’s” spaces, continues despite the reality that transgender people as a group are the target of disproportionate rates of violence, especially sexual violence (Stotzer 2009).

One of the most prominent examples of this dual transmisogyny and transphobia in a “women’s” space has been found in the practices of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, an iconic annual event in the history of lesbian music culture. August 2015 marked its 40th anniversary, as well as its last gathering, as founder Lisa Vogel announced in April of that year (Ring 2015). MichFest continued to exclude trans women until the end through its “womyn born womyn” attendance policy, even though Vogel, countering various MichFest boycotts over its exclusionary policy, released a statement in 2014 reading in part, “[W]e reiterate that MichFest recognizes trans womyn as womyn—and they are our sisters. We do not fear their presence among us, a false claim repeatedly made. What we resist—and what we will never stop fighting—is the continued erasure and disrespect for the specific experience of being born and living as female in a patriarchal, misogynist world” (Karlan 2014). Indeed, some trans women managed to attend MichFest without being thrown out—as Nancy Burkholder was in 1991 (Williams 2013)—but “the Land,” as attendees reverently called the wooded campsites comprising MichFest’s terrain, continued to hold conflicting experiences for trans women who ventured there.³

In 2014, trans feminist blogger Kat Callahan unintentionally foreshadowed Vogel’s decision to shut down MichFest, rather than open it to trans women. Callahan expressed her ambivalence about continuing to fight for trans women’s inclusion in a space that she viewed as increasingly outdated for younger generations of queer women. She wrote, “A combination of ignorance of Fest ... and a distaste if not outright disgust from young queer cisgender women who increasingly know, are friends with, or are currently in relationships with young queer transgender women who do know about it as ‘that festival that doesn’t include all women’ is making Fest irrelevant” (Callahan 2014). It is these types of ideological and generational differences at play in the MichFest controversy—especially who gets to “count” as a woman and what it means to have “women’s” space—that animate the ongoing dialogues and debates between administrators, alumnae associations, and students with respect to trans women’s inclusion at women’s colleges. While not all students at women’s colleges are free from exhibiting transphobia, the queer-driven student environments at certain women’s colleges, aided by courses in gender studies and queer theory, allow for a diverse cultivation of knowledge about and exploration of gender and sexual fluidity. This, in turn, enables a type of experiential freedom and an expanded gender and sexual vocabulary that is largely

absent from institutions with a relatively older and lesbian-identified demographic like that found at MichFest.

It is important to note that while not all resistance to trans women at women's colleges can be directly tied to the TERF politics that I have described in relation to MichFest, there is significant overlap between TERF views and some of the most vocal alumnae opponents of trans women's attendance. Given the power alumnae have in affecting women's college policies, especially the power of wealthy alumnae donors' voices, the anti-trans views of some women's college alumnae must not be discarded as unimportant. One such vocal alumna is Elizabeth Hungerford, Smith College class of 2000 and self-identified feminist, who has written several pieces against the inclusion of trans women in women's spaces from a biological determinist perspective and who maintains at least two active websites dedicated mostly or solely to this purpose. On one of these sites, sexnotgender.com, Hungerford writes about TERF politics and directly connects the issue of trans women at women's colleges to the importance of keeping trans women out of MichFest (Hungerford 2014a). In her lengthy letter to the Smith administration urging them not to change their admissions policy for trans women's inclusion, posted to her website ehungerford.com, as well as to the Facebook page she runs called Keep Smith College Female Forever, Hungerford refers to trans women's self-understanding of gender as "extraordinary claims." She argues, "No Smith woman should be required to accept a male person as a 'woman' if she does not believe it is so ... it is fundamentally unreasonable to expect that *all* Smith women should uncritically co-sign the 'gender identities' of every male who wishes to lay a claim to 'womanhood'" (Hungerford 2014b). Hungerford, who identifies as lesbian, demonstrates how TERF understandings of gender and sexuality have been used to promote trans exclusion at women's colleges, even by some alumnae falling under the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) umbrella. Contemporary student activism, in contrast, marshals LGBTQ politics, queer theory, and postmodern feminism to come to an opposite conclusion.

From omission to admission: A timeline of policy inclusion

Mills became the first women's college in the United States to categorically open its admissions to transgender women in the late summer of 2014 (Atkinson 2014), followed closely behind in September by Mount Holyoke (Kellaway 2014). Simmons changed their policy later that fall (Rocheleau and Landergan 2014), followed by Scripps in December 2014 ("Scripps College Will" 2014), Bryn Mawr in February 2015 ("In Affirming Mission" 2015), Wellesley in March (Krantz 2015), Smith in May ("Admission Policy Announcement" 2015), and Barnard in June (Harris 2015). At the time of this writing, Mount Holyoke remains the most gender-inclusive, admitting not only transgender women but also transgender men and non-binary people under its all-persons-but-cisgender-men policy.

Prominent women's colleges in the South continue to lack comprehensive policies on transgender women's inclusion, including Hollins University in Virginia and Agnes Scott College and Spelman College, both in Georgia. While Agnes Scott states that it "recognize[s] and value[s] individuals across the spectrum of gender and [is] proud of the trans women, trans men, and non-binary individuals who have been admitted and/or graduated" ("Agnes Scott College Statement" 2014), they fall short of providing a uniform policy for admitting trans students. A spokeswoman for Spelman stated in March 2013 that "the College addresses admission for transgender and genderqueer students on an ad hoc basis" (Adelman 2013). At Hollins, the 2014–2015 Student Handbook explains that students transitioning to male, whom the publication misgenders with female pronouns, will not be permitted to stay at the College. Female transgender applicants, meanwhile, "who have completed the physical sex reassignment surgery and legal transformation from male to female will be evaluated for acceptance to the undergraduate program on the same basis as other women candidates" ("Student Handbook" 2014: 7). This policy, based on surgery and "legal transformation," disregards the tremendous structural barriers that prevent the majority of transgender seventeen- or eighteen-year-old young women from securing these conditions prior to applying to college.

Student activism for trans women at Smith College

At Smith, located in queer-friendly Northampton, Massachusetts, the debate around the inclusion of transgender women on campus has been simmering since at least the mid-2000s. Roo Azul (pseudonym chosen by the interviewee), a trans male Smith alumnus from the class of 2006 who, at the time of his application to Smith, identified as gender nonconforming and genderqueer, told me during an interview that he had tried to fight for the inclusion of trans women at Smith. He did so during his last two years there in his capacity as president of a transgender student organization. Despite putting pressure on the administration, he laments that "we completely failed on that." In 2004, when Roo Azul gave a workshop titled "Deconstructing Masculinity" and attempted to educate transmasculine students on campus about issues of transmisogyny, he "got a lot of shit for that" from other trans students. These trans students, he explains, were more focused on the transphobic oppression they faced from cissexist society; as a result, they were resistant to turning their critique of gender oppression inward to consider their own male privilege and positionality in hierarchies of gender. Due to the growing visibility of transgender men on campus, it was trans male experiences and issues that students most focused on. Accordingly, student activism, campus conversations, and administrative public relations debacles related to trans issues centered on trans men during the mid- to late 2000s.⁴

It would not be until the fall of 2012, when transgender high school senior Calliope Wong attempted to apply to Smith, that the issue of admitting trans women to

women's colleges received significant national media attention. Wong, who took the time to contact Smith and explain her specific situation, was told by Smith staff that per the College's "case-by-case" policy of evaluating applications, her application would be considered as long as all her submitted documents reflected her gender as female. While all her high school records and letters of recommendation reflected her gender identity as female, her application was ultimately rejected from consideration in March 2013 because her father had checked off "male" on her FAFSA, the form for federal financial aid. Chronicling the progress of her application on her personal blog, Wong wrote, "I cried the day my papers came back. I still feel like crying" (DiBlasio 2013). Wong's story went viral, gaining coverage in *The Huffington Post* and *USA Today*.

Students who were incensed by this exclusion formed the group Q&A to fight for the right of trans women to attend Smith. Q&A, said to originally stand for Queers and Allies,⁵ delivered a Change.org petition with over 4,000 signatures to the Smith Office of Admissions in early May 2013, demanding that the College adopt trans-friendly admissions policies for transgender women ("Smith College Group" 2013). The fact that Q&A's organizational identity and membership are both queer-centered reflects how queerness as an identity category—represented by the noun "Queers" in "Queers and Allies"—is seen by its members to be intimately connected to the politics of transgender inclusion on campus. The connection between queer identity and smashing rigid gender categories through trans activism, all of which is conducted within a women's college community, marks a significant departure from older generational divisions between cisgender lesbians and transgender women. While earlier lesbian feminist politics did not require that one must fight for the right of transgender women to be included in women's spaces (indeed, it often argued *against* transgender women's inclusion), contemporary student activists, driven by their own understandings of queerness and expansive gender—both in terms of what it means to be a "woman" and the expansion of options beyond the gender binary—are leading the way on these campuses for an alliance between cisgender queer students and trans students of all sexualities.

The Smith administration, responding to student and alumnae/i outcry that they had not even given Calliope Wong a chance to be considered, slightly amended its admissions policy the following January so that the FAFSA is no longer used to determine the veracity of an applicant's "consisten[t]" female status (Waldman 2014). (This change came too late for Wong, who gave up her quest to join the Smith community and ultimately enrolled at a coeducational New England school.) However, the College's continued absence of a concrete policy on admitting trans students, its overall evasiveness on trans issues, and the growing tension on campus continued to spur many trans Smithies and their allies to action.

The campaign for an admissions policy that is inclusive of trans women became more vociferous after the trans-inclusive admissions policy announcements at

Mills, Mount Holyoke, and Simmons. Q&A repeatedly sought to meet with the administration during the spring 2014 semester in order to put a clear trans-inclusive policy into place. They sought clarification on when trans women are considered women for purposes of admission, pointing out the harm done to transgender girls and women when their own self-identification as female is ignored. Such a lack of policy leaves transgender female applicants at the mercy of the patchwork protections currently (not) in place for trans people, especially minors, across the United States (Feldman 2014).

On April 24, 2014, Q&A helped organize a rally in support of trans female inclusion at Smith. According to a local newspaper, more than three dozen students picketed outside the Admissions Office at the beginning of business at 8:30 a.m. About 200 students signed up for various shifts to continue the protest throughout the day, while other students committed to remaining for the duration of the action. Students held signs with messages such as “Smith can do BETTER,” “Trans Issues Are Feminist Issues,” “Feminists United Against Institutionalized Transmisogyny,” and “Womanhood Does Not Reside in Documentation.” Meanwhile, “Karen Kristof, senior associate director of admission for the college, could not answer questions about the student demands and referred any questions about policy to the college website. But she said as far as the admission office was concerned, ‘it was business as usual’” (Lederman 2014).

The messages emblazoned on these students’ signs speak to an expanded understanding of the need for women’s spaces, and feminism at large, to fully include trans women. This type of understanding is crucially needed in a world that continues to perpetuate wildly disproportionate levels of violence against trans women, especially low-income trans women of color (Mock 2014; Spade 2011; Stanley and Smith 2011). “Womanhood Does Not Reside in Documentation” speaks to an awareness of womanhood as a personally embodied truth versus a rigid status attained through biology and/or legal status, while “Trans Issues Are Feminist Issues” declares an implicit connection between feminist activism and trans women’s place within it. Similarly, the message “Smith College *can’t be* a women’s college without supporting trans women,” as displayed on a student sign from an October 2014 Board of Trustees protest (Figure 1), reflects an intersectional feminist understanding that “women’s spaces” are a lie when they bar the entrance of any group of women.

In November 2014, Q&A worked in coalition with various other student organizations, including the Concerned Students of Color Committee, Smith Disability Alliance, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Peer Sexuality Educators, to co-host an open mic titled “Who Can Access Smith & Thrive at Smith?” Other collaborations included spreading the word on the Q&A Tumblr account about a protest of the popular Vespers holiday concert in December as part of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and, in the same month, helping craft a “Pledge of Nonsupport.” This Pledge asks members of the Smith community to place a moratorium on donations to the college until the admissions policy is changed to allow the applications of all



Figure 1. Members of the student organization Q&A protest outside the Smith College Board of Trustees meeting on October 16, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Carolyn Brown.

self-identified women, consider undocumented students as domestic students, treat domestic and international students' applications as "need-blind," provide more scholarships for marginalized students, and craft an affirmative action policy "which accounts for class, race, disability, citizenship status, gender identity, and prioritizes non-traditional aged students" ("Pledge of Nonsupport" n.d.). These collaborations reflect an important commitment to intersectional feminist work around issues of racism, classism, and ableism that attempts to decenter the priorities of white, cisgender, economically privileged women, as well as illustrate how trans inclusion has become part of a wider student activist push for rights and recognition on behalf of multiple marginalized constituencies, including those facing multiple forms of oppression.

Q&A and other student organizations demanded that Smith implement these policy changes by the last Board of Trustees meeting of the academic year, which took place on May 2, 2015. In a major win for pro-inclusion students and alumnae/i, and in the midst of another protest organized by Q&A outside the trustees' meeting, the Board affirmed a vote in favor of admitting trans women. In so doing, the trustees were able to head off further protest against administrative transphobia in admissions. It is worth noting that, at the same time, the administration did not resolve the other forms of unequal access related to race, class, citizenship, and ability outlined for redress by the students' demands, illustrating that much important work remains to be done to create a truly welcoming environment in which all women can thrive.

The impact of postmodernist feminism and queer theory on queer and trans women's college students

Between 2011 and 2014, I interviewed fifty-six LGBTQ students who currently attend or recently graduated from Mount Holyoke and Smith. Several of my

queer-identified interviewees expressed that part of their attraction to the category “queer” was their ability to conceptualize sexuality as fluid and flexible, with the added understanding of gender identity and expression as multiple rather than a static cisgender binary. Some interviewees directly cited their education in gender theory and queer theory as helping them realize the social construction of identity categories and the fluidity of sexuality and gender, which has aided them in deconstructing monolithic, biologically determinist ideas of “womanhood,” as well as the gay/straight and male/female binaries.

Within these types of understandings about gender and sexuality, “queer” takes on a political meaning for many students as a contestation of sexual and gender rigidity and a celebration of sexual and gender transgression. As such, many queer and feminist student activists at women’s colleges are invested in the postmodern feminism they learned through college courses and which they have seen manifested in the gender and sexual diversity of the students around them. These students, fueled by their education and lived experiences, question the meaning of “woman,” “gender,” “sexuality,” and even “identity” itself. Advocacy on behalf of transgender women’s inclusion on campus then becomes part and parcel of queer and feminist advocacy to hold their educational institutions accountable to what it means to have a “women’s college” in the twenty-first century, a form of advocacy that rejuvenates both women’s higher education and the relationships between transgender and cisgender women. This latter point is especially important, given the history of exclusion of transgender women in lesbian feminist spaces.

Emerging scholarship supports the notion that having access to queer theory impacts the identities of twenty-first-century queer college women in the United States. As Rupp et al. write,

We find that women students call themselves ‘queer’ and ‘pansexual’ because their desires are expansive and include the possibility of attraction to transgender and genderqueer people; their identities shift and more fixed identities do not always fit; and their new fluid identities evoke a rejection of binary sexualities and have a political meaning. Students come to these new collective identities when they arrive on campus through courses and literature on sexuality and queer theory and socialization in queer organizations and the campus queer community. This process reveals ... the double hermeneutic, in which social science research and the concepts of individuals and groups have a complex two-way relationship. That is, the scholarship on queerness and sexual fluidity that helps to shape students’ identities is in turn based on the ways that individuals and groups who are studied define themselves. (forthcoming: 1–2)

These modern, nuanced ways of identifying revise older coming-out models and speak to the power of postmodern feminism and queer theory to shape individuals’ conceptions of self, even as the studies shaping the students are premised on their respondents’ lived experiences.

The queer-positive student cultures found at many women’s colleges directly benefit trans students. As Wendy Schneider observes, “[P]eople who favor making

women's colleges accessible and supportive for transgender students noted that the climate at these institutions is built on empowerment and self-expression in a way that most co-educational institutions have not matched. This creates an environment which is conducive to identity development, particularly around gender identity and expression" (2010: 102–103). Jayke, a 2012 Smith graduate, echoes Schneider, explaining that "I think [Smith] gave me the freedom to experiment with gender presentation." He adds, "I know a lot of first-years who said they came here because they would feel safe for being trans, genderqueer, or just queer in general ... it is a refuge for a lot of people."

The impact of gender theory on women's college admissions policies

The development of postmodern gender theory, gender/women's/feminist studies, and queer studies have, of course, had an impact beyond the classroom. Women's college administrators and presidents have also been impacted by these academic developments as they gain input from the same faculty who are teaching courses in gender and sexuality. For example, faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Wellesley provided Julia Serano's indispensable transgender studies text *Whipping Girl* as background reading for the committee charged with reviewing the admissions policy, the President's Advisory Committee (PAC) on Gender and Wellesley. The goal of this committee, formed by College president H. Kim Bottomly in the early fall of 2014 and "composed of faculty, staff, students, and alumnae, ...[was] to review College policies and practices in light of an evolving understanding of gender issues" ("Reaffirmation of Mission" n.d.). Women's and Gender Studies faculty member Irene Mata, who was also a member of the PAC, reported back to me that the book was successful in helping administrators better understand transgender women's issues and generated "productive dialogue" in a way that she did not think other books would have. The findings from the PAC were used to inform the recommendations made to the Wellesley Trustees by the Trustee Committee on Gender and Wellesley, which resulted in a favorable policy change to consider transgender women for admission beginning in March 2015.

Preceding the other Seven Sisters, and following⁶ Mills' new policy to accept transgender female applicants (Atkinson 2014), Mount Holyoke went even further in September 2014, accepting anyone who does not identify as a cisgender man (Kellaway 2014). College President Lynn Pasquerella delivered the good news to the entire student community during her Convocation speech, which received raucous applause and a standing ovation. She even wiped away tears at one point, explaining, "We must acknowledge that gender identity is not reducible to the body," and she compared this modern notion of gender to the shifting feminist notions that cisgender women are not reducible to their bodies.

As Pasquerella's comments indicate, for the women's colleges that have made the shift to admissions policies inclusive of transgender women, explanations for

the new policies tend to invoke social constructionist theories of gender that are reflective of the postmodern queer turn in feminist academia (e.g., Bornstein 1997; Butler 1990). As I have suggested earlier, this postmodern turn has shaped the education of many of the students advocating for change. The wording of Mills' policy on admitting trans women provides a fruitful example of the use of postmodern, social constructionist gender theory: "Mills admits self-identified women and people assigned female at birth who do not fit into the gender binary at the undergraduate level; and all genders at the graduate level. ... Mills shall not discriminate against applicants whose gender identity does not match their legally assigned sex" ("Applying for Admission," n.d.). The focus on self-identification for determining female gender, rather than outmoded biological or subjective legal definitions, illustrates an understanding that gender identity is both separate from "legally assigned sex" and is best judged by the individual experiencing their own subjectivity. In addition, Mills' recognition that gender is not binary, and that some applicants' gender identities "do not fit" a binary schema, is remarkable in providing non-binary visibility and support in a context where non-binary gender is so often rendered invisible outside gender studies (e.g., Bornstein 1995) and gender-non-conforming communities (Coyote and Spoon 2014).

As mentioned above, Mount Holyoke's policy, as the second women's college to change its policy and the first Seven Sister to do so, connects the social construction of gender to Mount Holyoke's history as a women's college ("Admission of Transgender Students" n.d.). Through this reasoning, excluding transgender women from admission by virtue of biological determinism falls into the same types of anti-feminist ideologies that would historically bar all women from education based on assumptions about the meaning of their biology. If cisgender women want to be seen as more than their genitals, why then deny this to transgender women? Simmons' policy, arriving on the heels of Mount Holyoke's, expresses a similar sentiment, citing their "strong tradition" of "challenging traditional gender roles." The policy continues, "Simmons is committed to our historic mission as a women's college. We also recognize that traditional notions of gender are evolving, and increasingly individuals do not conform to the gender binary" ("Admission Policy for Transgender Applicants" n.d.).

Conclusion

Given women's colleges' professed aims to promote female empowerment, combat gender inequality, and in some cases explicitly promote their institutions as feminist, it makes sense for their admissions policies to be reconfigured to correlate with the very theories and inclusive frameworks increasingly being taught in their classrooms and mirrored in the student body. Thanks to the work of trans-inclusive, queer-driven feminist student activists—often undergirded by post-modern understandings of gender and sexuality in the classroom—and changing

women's college admissions policies, reductive and harmful ideas about transgender women's place in cisgender-dominated women's spaces are being countered with love, respect, and excitement for the future. While full inclusion of trans women at women's colleges *after* admission remains to be seen—and we should thus not write a premature happy ending to the story of trans women's place at women's colleges—the LGBTQ-driven activism for their inclusion competes with the “traditional” transphobia of lesbian-centric women's spaces such as MichFest.

To deny transgender women access to women's colleges, and women's spaces in general, is to promote the stale, damaging, and transphobic message that trans women are not real women, that women are defined primarily or exclusively by their genitals versus their social experiences—an especially insulting and contradictory line of reasoning in an educational environment committed to fostering strong female leadership in a larger sexist world—and that women who are transgender are liars, tricksters, and criminals who wish to gain entree to women's communities for predatory purposes (Serano 2007). It is clear, then, that trans women belong at women's colleges in equal measure to cisgender women. In this sense, the fight for transgender inclusion flows alongside the process of beginning to remedy racial segregation, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and classism when it comes to which women are considered “worthy” for admission, as the open mic held by the coalition of Smith groups attests to.

One question for the future of women's colleges is whether admission should, following Mount Holyoke, be open to people of all marginalized gender identities, defined here as anyone who is not a cisgender male, at the time of application. Many of my Mount Holyoke and Smith interviewees argue that the LGBTQ student cultures at their campuses are so vibrant in part because of the gender diversity present, in terms of gender identity and gender presentation. If women's colleges are already home to cisgender women, transgender women living in stealth,⁷ transgender men, and genderqueer students, why not explicitly allow students from these backgrounds to apply as a way to promote safe(r) havens for all gender-marginalized young adults? In contrast, some individuals, particularly a few of my trans male interviewees—in line with most of the administrations who have recently changed their policies to admit trans women—feel strongly that women's colleges should only admit women. According to these interviewees' arguments, to admit people who do not identify as women is on some level to disregard both the unique importance of women's space and the reality that trans men, for example, *are not women*, thus disrespecting trans men as not “really” men.

Julia Marciano of Smith Q&A, arguing in favor of allowing all applicants who are not cisgender men to apply, put it this way: “Women's college' is a bit of a misnomer. ... They're places for minority genders, where those genders can flourish, learn, and feel safe” (Waldman 2014). Or as members of the Smith trans group Tangent explain on their student organization website,

It is our feeling that an institution of higher learning for people who have been at a disadvantage in the classroom because of their gender was Sophia Smith's goal for Smith College. We therefore believe that Smith is a space not only for the women, transgender, and otherwise gender variant folks who already attend, but also for individuals who are still excluded from our community. For Smith to truly fulfill its intended duties, we need to re-evaluate the inhabitants of our space and include the rest of the population of women who are routinely excluded from women's spaces. ("Who Belongs" n.d., emphasis mine)

In other words, it may be useful to reconfigure twenty-first-century women's colleges as places where women (cisgender and transgender) continue to be centered, while people from various marginalized gender backgrounds are invited to come together to champion feminist empowerment, personal transformation, and social justice *as an extension of the mission of those institutions*. In this scenario, women's colleges will be able to retain their campuses as spaces that promote female leadership and the importance of fighting back against continued gender inequality *while also* embracing the reality of the fact that there are more than two genders in the world and more than one type of gender-based oppression.

Notes

1. The Seven Sisters historically were comprised of Mount Holyoke, the founding member, as well as Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Smith, Radcliffe, Vassar, and Wellesley, established in the nineteenth century as the female equivalent of the then all-male Ivy League. Radcliffe eventually merged with Harvard University and Vassar became a coeducational institution, thus leaving five of the original seven colleges as women's colleges into the present day.
2. Transmisogyny refers to the particular ways in which misogyny is manifested against transgender women. See Serano 2007.
3. For example, trans woman Kayley Whalen, who attended MichFest in 2010 and 2011, writes that "the Land is indeed my home," speaking to the myriad of trans-positive experiences she had at MichFest in 2010. At the same time, she adds, "Sadly, it was made very clear to me in 2011 that I would not feel safe returning there" (Whalen 2014). Whalen came to this conclusion after sharing the Land with cisgender women who pinned red badges onto their clothing as an intentional statement of their pro-exclusion beliefs, a tradition she explains formed in response to pro-inclusion attendees wearing white t-shirts from the organization "Trans Womyn Belong Here."
4. For example, the Smith administration tamped down on a trans male student who used footage of the campus as part of his appearance in the 2005 Sundance Film Channel documentary *Trans*Generation*, prohibiting him from filming anywhere outside his apartment halfway through filming, despite initially permitting the filmmakers access. In 2011, Smith denied trans male student Jake Pecht from acting as an overnight host for prospective students as part of his Gold Key guide duties. Pecht had proposed to the administration that he explain how he identified to any prospective students ahead of time and to secure the prospective students' consent before having them stay the night in his room, but this proposal was declined (Giovanniello 2012; Pecht 2011).
5. Another meaning ascribed to the Q&A acronym is "Question and Answer," a reference to the group's Tumblr page, whose header reads, "Question: Trans women at Smith? Answer: Trans women at Smith!" (see <http://smith-q-and-a.tumblr.com>).

6. While Mount Holyoke's announcement came after Mills' policy change, the Mount Holyoke administration had been planning a change prior to Mills' official news. I thank my colleague Genny Beemyn for providing this information.
7. Student groups at Smith have confirmed that there is at least one student currently on campus who is a trans woman, but who does not feel comfortable having her identity public.

Notes on contributor

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