Author: William DeWayne Leone
Title: Slut Politics in Queer Spaces: Slut Shaming and Solidarity in U of I's Queer Culture

About the Author: I am a fifth-year U of I undergraduate majoring in Media and Cinema Studies with a minor in Mathematics and just short of a second minor in LGBT/Queer Studies. While I began identifying as a (white, middle-class) gay male as soon as I arrived at U of I's campus in 2007, it wasn't until my sophomore year (2008-2009) that I began visiting the LGBT Resource Center (LGBTRC). I did go to some PRIDE meetings during this time, but didn't become close to the group. However, I soon embraced the LGBTRC as another home, and continue to do so to some extent. After all, it is through the LGBTRC that I began to engage with U of I's visible queer culture and the queer registered student groups (RSOs) that helped to produce and sustain it. It is also how I began my education in LGBT studies and sexual education, both of which were denied to me in my private Catholic high school and middle school. Through these resources and social sites, as well as through the space of the LGBTRC itself, I began to participate in queer (but often lesbian and gay) culture and politics in the form of lunch lectures and educational events held by the LGBTRC, occasional RSO meetings, post-meeting bar nights, apartment parties, and a protest against California's Proposition 8. I would meet many of my friends at these sites, and during my fourth and fifth year, I would join the Student Cultural Programming Fee (SCPF) Advisory Board and, for a months, PRIDE's executive board. The sum of these experiences have guided my education by motivating me to switch first from the Mathematics major into Sociology, and then into Media and Cinema Studies with the encouragement of Prof. Cole, who taught my first queer classes during my junior year: Trans Bodies and Politics, and then Queer Theory. I would not have sought these classes out if it hadn't been for the LGBTRC, whose staff and frequent-visitor students encouraged me to learn more about transgender lives by virtue of my perceived absence of transgender visibility at the LGBTRC at this time. (This perception and/or reality has changed since, and both the LGBTRC and PRIDE have helped to produce and sustain a queer culture that celebrates gender-variant lives and bodies.)

During my participation at the Proposition 8 protest in Fall 2008, I was dating my second boyfriend, having already dated my first earlier that year. By the end of November, I had ended our relationship because he had continued cheating on me despite promising at least once to not do so again. But by early December 2008, I started dating the person who is a current boyfriend of mine. We were in a de facto monogamous relationship until about one year later: after I admitted to cheating on him at a New Year's party, we soon decided to shift to an emotionally and sexually open polyamorous relationship informed by Easton and Hardy's The Ethical Slut. For over two year, then, our relationship has been consensually non-monogamous, and has involved short- and long-term emotional and romantic relationships with friends and relative strangers as well. In March, I begin dating a second boyfriend and chose to promise to not initiate any additional sexual or romantic relationships, but do not hold either boyfriend to this restriction.

I mention this seemingly private account because these experiences have helped to shape the way I perceive monogamy in relation to the local queer culture in particular. Noting the loud silence on polyamory in the calls for legalized same-sex marriage, I began to question the merits of this popular movement, particularly in light of arguments calling for the elimination of a legal marriage category. And I suspect that I would not be quite so invested in this current project if it were not for the history I've experienced and attempted to translate.

Keywords: slut politics, knowledge-conduct, queer space, marriage

Abstract: This project will explore the ways U of I undergraduates narrate their experiences of slut politics at two queer spaces located on U of I's campus, Thursgays* and the LGBT Resource Center. How do participants collectively make sense of these places as meaningful queer spaces complete with their own normalized conducts? How do these narrated space-makings and spatial conducts engage U of I's
queer culture? And how do slut shaming and solidarity emerge through these queer spatial knowledges and conducts? By responding to these questions, I will argue that slut politics- the everyday spatial knowledge-conduct of slut shaming and solidarity- enable but hold captive the U of I queer culture's ability to challenge the material and affective consolidation and privileging of heteronormative time, and in particular ostensibly monogamous relationships between white, middle-class, and gender-normative US citizens.

For this project, I have been handing out information sheets at Thursgays and the LGBT Resource Center (LGBTRC). These sheets describe the project and let students know how they can contact me to schedule an interview; they also let students know that participants will be limited to those U of I undergraduates who are at least 19 years old. All participants are being asked if they are willing to be audiotaped prior to our interviews, and if any refuse to be recorded, I will take written notes. Fieldnotes have been limited to the interviews themselves; no observation of participants has been or will be conducted outside of this context. [*Thursgays is the name attributed to Thursday nights at Murphy's Pub by many LGBT-identifying people who regularly attend.]

Question: As of now, I'm interviewing frequent visitors of Thursgays and the LGBT Resource Center (LGBTRC) to better understand how slut politics work through these two queer spaces to consolidate queer culture at U of I. Initially, though, I asked how queer U of I college students negotiate, oppose, and pose world-making alternatives to the US slut-shaming biopolitics through masculine performances. While I intended to respond to this question through ethnographic research of certain queer spaces, I had not yet highlighted the importance of space or chosen the places I'd study. I talked about space more as a place where things happen among individuals than as bound up in the production of localized knowledge-power through a collective queer culture comprised of individuals.

Moreover, I had privileged those students who identified themselves as queer or non-heterosexual. This identity-based approach continued as I revised my project in February to focus first on Thursgays and the Chester Street Bar's (C-Street's) Sunday night drag shows. But after I was denied the chance to do participant observation at either of these sites (because drinking participants were considered mentally-impaired and thus vulnerable), I decided to replace C-Street with the LGBTRC and successfully re-submitted a proposal that authorized me to conduct interviews minus on-site observations. It was only in March that I began to prioritize the specific spaces and collective queer culture under study rather than queer and non-heterosexual individuals. And because I saw all individuals- not just queer ones- as contributing to how these places were rendered as queer cultural spaces, and as important for understanding the way slut shaming worked through these spaces, I opened my potential participants to include anyone who frequented either Thursgays or the LGBTRC.

At the end of March, I moved my focus from the ways slut shaming worked through my chosen sites of study to the ways slut shaming and slut solidarity- which I've collectively referred to as slut politics- worked through these sites. Not only did this change give a name to alternatives posed by local queer culture to slut shaming, but it also emphasized the interplay between emotion and slut politics. This name change also foregrounded the contestation of knowledge-power rather than mere repression, in keeping with Foucault's unraveling of the “repression hypothesis” in History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction.

Up till April, I had been interested in how queer and female masculinities emerged in slut shaming and, more recently, slut politics. While I suspect local queer masculinities and slut politics do intersect in important ways, I have narrowed my focus to slut politics alone because I would like to use my limited research time to highlight slut politics as a virtually unexplored research site. This will allow future researchers to investigate the tentative relationship between local slut politics and local queer masculinities with some ready-made materials at hand. Of course, this de-emphasizing of queer masculinities may change as I continue my research if it proves to be more central to local slut politics than I anticipated.
Plan: As mentioned under the “Question” section, my initial plan was to combine on-site observation and interviews with participants frequenting Thursgays and C-Street's Sunday night drag shows. Following the IRB’s rejection of my first proposal, I decided to swap out C-Street for the LGBTRC, and in addition opted out of on-site observation at both of these sites. At the time, I thought this would better facilitate a comparative study of these two distinct sites, and that it would encourage me to invest more time into my interviews. After all, my method mainly consists of conducting interviews, then transcribing, writing fieldnotes on, and assessing these translations of my interview experiences. Simply put, my spatially and temporally dispersed interviews have become my actual sites of study; the embodied engagements among myself, my participants, and the spaces in which our interviews take place have become my primary source material. This has been an ongoing learning process for me, and until the end of March I approached interviews as future transcription texts alone rather than as multi-part translations of my interview experiences.

To gather participants in the first place has posed its own set of challenges, and to address them I’ve been making and remaking handouts that briefly describe who I am, what my project is, who can participate (U of I undergraduates over 19 years of age), and how to contact me (via email or text). Moreover, I’ve been distributing these fliers at the LGBTRC and at Thursgays in ways specific to these familiar spaces. Together with my initial focus on local queer masculinities, I had also planned to restrict the number of participants identifying as white, male, or as men; I have lifted this numerical restriction for now, but am prioritizing and seeking out participants who do not identify as white, male, or as men in my handout-distribution.

At the LGBTRC, this distribution has involved placing handouts on the tables roughly once every two weeks; having picked up the (perhaps inaccurate) impression that the LGBTRC staff does not appreciate this, and given the lack of participant response this tactic has afforded, I have decided to stop doing this. However, during late February and early March I addressed those students at the Center a few times to verbally encourage them to participate in my project, and asked them as a group and as individuals to participate in my project. The group appeals were surprisingly ineffective, especially given that all of the people present at the Center at these times are also my friends (which is often the case). However, specifically asking individuals if they wanted to be interviewed seemed much more effective, perhaps in part because they felt more obliged to help me as a friend when asked one-on-one. And after one lesbian woman suggested through words and body language that she did not want to be interviewed for a project centering on queer masculinity, I removed this from my handout's project description and replaced it with 'gender and sexuality'. Similar changes have been made to these handouts in keeping with the changes recorded in the “Question” section.

At Thursgays, I attempted to approach people to ask them to participate in my research, but did not get any volunteers this way; then again, I did convince a friend, the president of a local queer RSO, to distribute my fliers at his group's next meeting. I've had one person respond to a handout I placed in the men-only bathroom- I placed fliers on the tables in the outdoor smoking area as well- though I've had difficulty securing an interview with this person. Similarly, I received a text from another person who had been interested in my project, but despite my attempts to contact this person, I have yet to hear anything further from them. The conspicuousness of the research materials I brought into Thursgays led some people to ask me what I was carrying, which helped me to introduce my project to them and to hand out fliers. However, only one person has declared his intention to be interviewed; this person also emphasized that they are “in the closet”, particularly to his Indian friends. (I had mentioned prior to this that my project was limited to non-heterosexual and queer people, which was the case at the time.) This is notable, I think, insofar that it shows that my methods may reach those who are either “in the closet” or identify as heterosexual regardless of queer desires and conduct.
Reflect: Recording the history of my research method was especially helpful for me because it allowed me to draw connections between my methods and findings more easily. For instance, my move away from failing random sampling to sampling from my friends may have contributed to my finding that slut shaming was unimportant precisely because those who were slut shamed tended to stop going to the Center, at least in one case noted by myself and another noted by a participant. Preparing for and
participating in the presentation was another especially useful part of this project since it pushed me to prioritize my data/analysis to an extent I was unfamiliar with, and also prepared me for the final report.

Recommendations: In addition to further research on slut shaming at specific resource-oriented spaces across campus, I would also suggest more studies focused on the experiences of those students who see various university facilities and cultural centers as unwelcoming. This work could mobilize administration, faculty, staff, and students alike in overt opposition to on-campus segregation in all its forms and spatial contexts, including the racial segregations charted by Nancy Abelmann (2009). Drawing on the Boyer Report’s “Academic Bill of Rights”, I suggest that students be able to and made responsible for conducting, organizing, and reshaping this anti-segregation research in substantive ways “with talented senior researchers”; while the Ethnography of the University Initiative may help facilitate this effort, both other classes and cultural centers could also contribute. At the same time, I want to contest the Boyer Report’s failure to hold universities accountable for segregation and exclusion that students (and perhaps also staff, faculty, and administrators) experience in campus spaces, particularly in spaces of resource allocation. After all, as Abelmann said of one of her participants, “He claimed that Korean American were segregated at U of I precisely because the university refused to acknowledge, let alone “care about”, that very segregation” (11). The university cannot claim it is unable to eliminate segregation on its campus when it does not even try to understand it, let alone do something about it, so I hope it will lead the charge against segregation across campus spaces.