Stuck in the Middle With You: Political and Sexual Difference at UIUC

Champaign-Urbana is unique to the Midwest. Geographically it is close to the middle, and is surrounded by conservative Midwestern towns. The university brings hoards of people from outlying areas, notably St. Louis and Chicago – the prominent queer city of the Midwest. But Champaign-Urbana is queer too, despite the overwhelming dominance of white suburban undergraduate culture. It balances these two forces with surprising ease. It is home to both the largest Greek system in the nation and the School for Designing a Society\(^1\); the forces of mainstream US culture are everywhere, but so are the forces of leftist academia. Among undergraduates, this dual presence manifests in notions of Champaign and Urbana as separate and opposite towns. The so-called “People's Republic of Urbana” is home to hispters, leftists, queers, and others somehow outside the mainstream. Champaign is for everyone else. While I've largely found this to be untrue, the fact that these stereotypes exist speaks to a divide that exerts its power in the University and the town, even if it only exists in the imaginations of those who create it.

**Research Questions and Methods**

I began this research with an interest in the way queer communities use language. I was particularly interested in words that get re-claimed by non-straight people, especially those, like “queer,” which are used to signify identities. I had used my existing connections to queer communities to find respondents, so like me, my first interviewees were positioned outside the mainstream

\(^1\) “[A] project of teachers, performers, artists, and activists. It is an ongoing experiment in making temporary living environments where the question “What would I consider a desirable society?” is given serious playful thoughtful discussion, and taken as an input to creative projects,” according to their website.
Champaign-Urbana LGBT community. As my interviews progressed, I became interested in the experiences of those who align themselves with the queer left. As I read more queer ethnographies it also became clear that my research was replete with questions of race, particularly in the way people of color are included in or, more frequently, excluded by the language non-straight people use to describe themselves, even within purportedly intersectional communities and institutions. My final research questions, therefore, about how the word “queer” is used by the political left at UIUC, especially by people of color, and how that use is impacted by academia.

I interviewed five people: a white cis queer woman named Ava from nearby Champaign-Urbana, a white transqueer named Quinn from Chicago, a black cis gay man named Jeremy from Chicago, a Chicano cis queer professor named José from California, and an Iranian cis straight man named Omir from Champaign. There is a gap in this group in that no women of color were interviewed. Alongside this gap, I did not gather information on race as fully as I would have liked. This was in due part to a lack of access to that information as a white person, but more so to my own inadequacies during the interviews. Because, like all white people, I was socialized to never talk about race, once or twice I froze up and became uncomfortable when asking interviewees of color about it. While I still gathered a lot of data there is certainly more to be done.

Terms

James Darsey opens “Die Non: Gay Liberation and the Rhetoric of Pure Tolerance” with some etymology: “Our word 'radical' shares its origins with the word 'radish'; both are concerned with roots and often bitter” (45). Our word “left,” as it refers to politics, came from the spatial positioning of French legislative bodies, but the origins of its apolitical meaning are also interesting. It came from Kentish to replace the Old English word “winestra,” the origin of “sinister.” Today we use it to mean what is not included, what is left out. With this in mind, I've chosen to refer to the anti-capitalist politics informed by Queer Theory as the “queer left.” This politics is concerned with addressing structure rather than law and with redistributing wealth, power, and money. I think “radical” can also be
a useful term, but one that has too often signified the right, and too often been used in the pejorative.

“Left” is without those connotations, but still has echoes of the word “sinister,” which is appropriate given the way leftist politics are treated by the US public. Along these lines, I like that “Left” can refer to that which is excluded, such as when leftist politics are left out of mainstream media. The queer left, then, is a left closely informed by Queer Theory. Omir gave me a summary of the connection between the two:

If you don't look to deconstruct binaries in your life, you're never gonna have a radical politics, is the way I think about it. If you never question the idea that there are Democrats and there are Republicans, and so there are people who vote left and there are people who vote right, and that this means something... That's a dichotomy that people don't deconstruct on a regular basis.

In this way, they are inextricable from each other. Leftist politics requires the ability to deconstruct binaries, and Queer Theory can't help but deconstruct mainstream politics. That's not to say all leftist politics are queer, or are even friendly to queers. But as politics can be informed by forces of which we are unaware, deconstruction inserts itself in leftist politics with or without the intent of its participants. The queer left is notable for a deconstructive politics that includes accessible sexual resources, trans liberation, opposition to marriage as a cornerstone of rights, and a host of other issues that ask more of the public than simple “tolerance.”

By contrast, I am going to use the term “mainstream” to apply to the culture created by corporate America. This includes the Republican and Democratic parties – mainstream politics – and extends to Hollywood movies, commercial rap, beauty magazines, and any number of other media produced by corporations and disseminated to the general public, usually in exchange for capital. Mainstream queer politics are often labeled “LGBT.” Politically, this means the Gay Marriage lobby, but it also extends to media portrayals of LGBT people, like the television show Will & Grace, and the culture that can be found in mainstream LGBT groups at UIUC. Mainstream culture, including LGBT culture, is a product of the capitalist system the queer left opposes, and it constructs the binaries

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Note conservative pundit hysteria over alleged “socialism.”
queer left looks to dismantle.

Another term I have chosen to use is “circles.” By this I mean the groups of people with which my participants associate. “Circles” are not so loose as to include everyone a person interacts with, but not so constricted as to only include friends. At UIUC, many of these circles overlap and intermingle, some of them with my own. “Left queer circles” are groups of people united in part by their leftist politics. These people are not all queer-identified, and these circles are not united solely by politics. As social relations tend to be constantly in flux and bound by a variety of strings, so too are left queer circles. I have also found, from spending the last three years running in these circles, that they tend to include a host of people who are not UIUC students, which can perhaps be explained by a focus on grassroots organization, class privilege, and local politics. In Champaign-Urbana, the non-UIUC presence is boosted by the School for Designing a Society, which is separate from the University. The influence this school exerts on the Champaign-Urbana queer left landscape is considerable, and its arts-based, grassroots, presence is an important stepping stone between the theories of the academy and the local community.

**Access to Information in a Corporate Climate**

Over the course of this project, it became clear to me that the demographics of who identifies and acts as a leftist are directly affected by access to leftist ideas. The ideas of the queer left are not like liberal or conservative ideas in the way they are accessed, because they are censored by the mainstream. This became clear to me in my conversation with Jeremy, the only of my respondents who did not run in queer left circles. This is how our interview began:

Me: How do you define the work “queer?”
Jeremy: Um, unusual. Heh.
Me: It just means unusual?
Jeremy: Yees. [Laughs]
Me: Does it ever have sexual connotations. Like, for sexual orientation?
Jeremy: I haven't heard it with that connotation... It doesn't mean that to me.
Me: Yeah, it doesn't?
Jeremy: Like, I don't really care about it. It's just a word.
From a queer left background, it's surprising that Jeremy has not heard “queer” used as an identifier before. It follows that if he does not use “queer” to describe sexual identity, he also does not interact with Queer Theory, at least not in its academic form. It's evident that the circles my other respondents run in don't use the word the same way that Jeremy's circles do. It's also notable that Jeremy is a psychology major, and hasn't taken any classes that fall under the auspices of the academic left. This is important because the classroom was a common site of leftist discovery for my other respondents. Of the four who had encountered Queer Theory in classrooms, only Omir had heard of it before. But he too had to be introduced to it, and described the process as such:

"You know, the only people who were going to push a 14 year old, 15 year old boy on gender issues are a teacher, which is less likely, and their female peers. Which is why I liked those female peers a lot more and I ended up hanging out with them a lot more."

So his female peers helped Omir begin thinking about gender critically, and because he was receptive to their ideas he became more involved in leftist politics. For many of my other respondents, classes or mentors played this role. This was true despite geographic and age difference among my respondents. For instance, José first encountered Queer Theory in California in the late 80s in a class called "Queering the Canon," and Ava first heard about in a GWS class:

"I heard the professor say something about Queer Theory... And so hearing this professor, who clearly was affirming, because this professor was someone who had a strong focus in LGBT identities, made me curious. And so I looked into it and found that it was a word that it was being reclaimed."

The classroom is a key space for the queer left. The liberal arts have an un-liberal bent to the left, and classes in departments like Gender and Women's Studies and English regularly include the politics of the queer left. This is not to say that every freshman who takes an introductory GWS class becomes a leftist, or that all leftists are affiliated with universities. Omir recounted learning a “non-scholarly, almost non-linguistic form of feminism from [his friend Liz] that was just a way to be.” But there is certainly a strong connection between queer left students at UIUC and their access to queer leftist academia. In the end, this ciphering of the queer left into the academy contributes to the inaccessibility
of the queer left.

This inaccessibility is a source of tension along a political divide between mainstream LGBT circles and queer left ones. According to Ava, queer theory has to be eased into conversations with those who aren't familiar with it. She described talking to people in one of her RSOs about gender-variance and trans* issues:

So if you give somebody a concrete example and say to them, “this is something I've encountered, this applies to real people in real life and you need to care about this,” then usually they're like, “Okay, help me understand.” But if I'm just saying like, “you're wrong, this is wrong,” it doesn't necessarily get anywhere.

She can't simply speak up and say “you're wrong, this is wrong” not only because it's abrasive, but also because it's confusing. Because of the relationship between the academy and the queer left, leftist ideas can come of as aloof and pretentious, or entirely nonsensical. But this tension isn't only felt by the mainstream. Quinn discussed hir opposition to the focus on legal rights in the gay lobby:

There's always ways to get around [the law]. Like, the, like the fact that like Brown vs. the Board of Education was how many years ago, and the schools are more segregated now than they were then. That shit's fucked up. What has the law done? You know? I think in a lot of ways it just invisibilizes oppression. Cause it's like, 'look the law says you're fine. Just like, get over it.'

This attack on law-based reform is echoed in “Die Non,” in which Darsey discusses mainstream gay lobby support of AB70, the first bill to ban “discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations based on sexual orientation” (58). He says:

The arguments surrounding AB70 can be fairly characterized by the fact that they center on the legal arena, either the courts or the legislature, and rather than radically confronting society on its own god-terms, homosexuals and their supporters prefer to define the legal arena very narrowly, avoiding confrontation on fundamentals.

This critique is foundational to the queer left, and utterly confusing to those whose notions of reform have have been shaped by the mainstream, which never includes reform beyond what is possible in the law. This view makes dialogue between the queer left and the gay rights movement a tricky thing, as evidenced by Quinn's frustration that LGBT RSOs at UIUC “never focus on issues of race and class;
they're not even aware of it.” The lack of intersectionality in mainstream LGBT movements is an identity politics of its own breed. It is because the queer left can see the roots of heterosexism in institutions like marriage, religion, and government, that it can make connects between heterosexism and other power structures. It is only at the roots of these institutions that intersectionality is visible. Without that “concern with roots,” as Darsey says, intersectionality vanishes and politics becomes identity politics.

**People of Color, the Queer Left, and the Assumption of Whiteness**

The inadequacy of law-based LGBT reform is paramount for people of color. First of all, as Cathy Cohen points out, the gay rights lobby silences those who are “operating through multiple identities and thus not fully served or recognized through traditional single-identity based politics” (Cohen 440). Quinn too notes that on this campus, one of the a mainstream LGBT organizations “ignores [the] status [of] people of color. And makes them choose [between identities].” The law fails, and always has failed, to protect the well-being of people of color in ways that are too numerous and complex to do justice to in this paper³, but Jeremy's disenchantment with politics is certainly related to this failure. When I asked why he doesn't care about politics, Jeremy said:

> I've never really cared for them. It's not real to me. Like, they do things with the wrong reasons and people go for it and they just blatantly just do stupid stuff. Like... there are so many simple answers to all the problems that go on. But because people are just so damn greedy, they just don't do it. They do what's in their interests and then mask and act like it's everybody else's interests, and people go for it. So I don't pay attention to that stuff because it's so stupid. It's just not real, it's all a fucking conspiracy, it seems like.

His notion that politics is a conspiracy is fascinating in that it's not an uncommon critique from the left. Nor, for that matter, is the criticism that greedy politicians act in their own interests without regard for their electorate. But Jeremy maintains a distance between himself and politics. He claims it's “not real” to him, that it doesn't affect him. This distance gives him the liberty to not care, but it also shows the failure of the law be at all relevant to his life. By contrast, José's leftist politics leads him into direct

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³ The prison-industrial complex is possibly the most glaring current example
contact with institutions. Instead of treating the law as the crux of social change, José works against
ehegemonizing forces in the University. He says:

I think it is important to work within the institution. Not to work with it but to really keep
people in check and to really challenge things. Like in one of my departments, there's this
whole debate right now about implementing a diversity requirement in the major. And a
lot of faculty are resisting it, and fighting us to the nail, because they think it's feeding
into some multicultural, anti-intellectual position... So that's why I think it's important for
people who are politically conscious to occupy positions like this, so that it's not just this
watered down, Westernized apolitical curriculum.

Without the presence of POC activism in the academy it would entirely fail to address the concerns and
experiences of students of color. Jose's engagement contrasts Jeremy's disinterest, but also mainstream
LGBT politics. His concern with change within the institution is more rooted in its structural racism –
the tendency to white-wash curricula, for instance – than in changing its rules. He thus takes on the
queer left's structural critique of institutions, and remembers that queer left institutions like the
academy are not immune to structural racism, and have to be explicitly checked.

The queer left perpetuates racism with the same identity politics Cathy Cohen criticizes in the
gay rights movement. She says: “It is my contention that queer activists who evoke a single-oppression
framework misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and
transgendered communities, and therefore limit the comprehensive and transformational character of
queer politics” (441). The queer left's susceptibility to identity politics is evident even in the word
“queer.” It's a part the white dialect and always has been – it comes from Scottish by way of German.
At the very least, “queer” is not used by Jeremy's black gay circles in the same way queer theorists use
it. So if the queer left wants to avoid being complicit in the pressure on queers of color to choose
between ethnicity and sexuality, “queer” cannot continue to be the only term at the left's disposal. When
Gloria Anzaldúa says that “naming his how I make my presence known,” she is conscious of the
erasure of experience that accompanies the absence of a name (Anzaldúa 264). The term “queer”
participates in this erasure because ethnicity and sexuality are interwoven. This was clear when José
talked to me about adopting “Chicano” and “queer”:
I had just grown comfortable with the term “gay,” and then all of a sudden I was told I was queer. But then I actually liked it too. This was also the same time when I was embracing the term “Chicano” and a lot of people were like, “Oh that's such a dirty word. I'm Mexican, I'm not Chicano. It's so low-class.” So I thought, if I'm gonna identify with this term, this abject term, then why not take on another? So the two terms for me existed side-by-side.

He also called Chicano “a confrontational, in-your-face identity that railed against the norm and was counter-mainstream and was all about political action and anti-establishment positionality.” These qualities are also all true of the word “queer,” which shows the insufficiency of either word as a single identifier for him. So Cathy Cohen's critique stands – Intersectionality is not only necessary; it needs to be foundational to any queer leftist politics, because no matter their intentions, when organizations are not explicitly intersectional they become “white” just as “queer” does.

The queer left needs people like José and Quinn to consciously work against structural racism to avoid the trap of whiteness. It needs to open space for other words, like Anzaldúa's reclaiming of “marimacha” because “[l]esbian' doesn't name anything in [her] homeland,” and in opening space for these words it needs to maintain space for the narratives of people of color, without which the movement itself is hegemonic (Anzaldúa 262). It also needs to escape being ciphered into the academy. This is an issue of access, and therefore of class and of race. Because UIUC cost $11,104 in tuition alone for an in-state student in 2011-2012, the demographics of who can afford to enroll here are tilted toward upper class white people. When only these people have access to leftist ideas, the movement becomes bourgeois and white by default. Of course, this is not quite the case in Champaign-Urbana, or anywhere, because the academy is never the only factor in a political climate. In fact, some of the brightest beams of hope for queer leftists in Champaign-Urbana are not even attached to the university. The School for Designing a Society, the Independent Media Center, and the Champaign-Urbana Libraries all do leftist work – often including queer leftist work – that includes the local community in the dialogue of the queer left. More collaboration between local citizens and academics is necessary. The academy has some great ideas, but they're confined to the academy, even in the way language is
used. Much academic writing takes years of practice to be able to read, and years more to be able to write. This intellectual pirouetting may sound smart, but it's detrimental to the foundation of a grassroots queer left informed, but not dominated, by academia.

Of course, the censorship of the left is rooted in non-academic causes. The corporate interest in silencing anti-capitalist voices is the larger foe. But in a landscape where such censorship dominates, the queer left has to work harder to engage with as many citizens as it can, and the current avenues between academics and the outside world are insufficient. Queer left resistance can be found all over re-appropriated pop culture: zines, hip-hop, and documentaries, for instance. These mediums are important because they are accessible to those who don't have access to academia, and are still mediums through which thoughtful dialog can occur. These mediums should be the focus of a queer left academic movement. That's not to say that academics should drop their pencils and put down their books for good – the role of thoughtfully engaging and responding to culture is important and helps create a fascinating dialogue. But academia, if it is truly left, does need actively work to make itself more accessible to the community.
Bibliography

