

Author: Brianna Walker

Title: Stuck in the Middle With You: An Inqueery into Political and Sexual Difference at the U of I

About the Author: I am studying English and Poetry Writing. I have academic interests in Queer Studies, Post-Colonial Theory, Linguistics, and Prison Librarianship.

Keywords: Queer, LGBT, Sexuality, Politics, Linguistics

Abstract: Research Topic and Questions:

How do the political beliefs of University of Illinois students and faculty intersect with their relationships to the word "queer?"

Summary of Research Plan (including how you will contact potential participants and what you will ask them to do)

My research plan is to conduct one-on-one interviews with undergraduate students and one faculty member who does research on queer theory. I'm planning to rely mostly on my current connections to non-straight communities, but I also want to make with contact with the head of Pride, an LGBT student group, to find an active interviewee.

Possible Questions for Interviews/Surveys

-In what contexts have you encountered the word "queer" on this campus?

-When did you first come across the word queer? How was it used?

-If you feel comfortable, can you tell me if queer is a word you'd use to describe yourself?

-What is your academic background?

-How do you define the word "queer"?

-Tell me about the last time you engaged in a political disagreement with someone on this campus.

-Are you politically active on this campus? Why or why not?

-Can you tell me about the last political event you attended on this campus?

-Can you tell me about your past experiences with political activism on this campus?

Question: Initial: How do the political beliefs of University of Illinois students and faculty affect with their relationships to the word "queer?"

Current: How did the word "queer" come to be claimed by the political left at UIUC? How has it been received by people of color in leftist communities? How is it used by non-straight people in less left-leaning communities?

Plan: My research plan is to conduct one-on-one interviews with undergraduate students and faculty members. I'm going to rely mostly on my current connections to non-straight communities. My respondents will be my peers: co-workers, friends of friends, and classmates. I'm also doing extensive archival research to track the appearance of the word "queer" and the historical relationships between different gay political groups.

EUI References/Tagging: [1=Read, but not relevant, i.e., i took a look at this project but my own EUI project does not really have anything to do with it; 2=Somewhat Relevant, i.e., I think my project is related to this EUI project, but I do not really build specifically on any of its arguments or data in my project; 3=Very relevant, i.e., My project builds on this project; namely, my project's arguments confirm/contradict the discussions in this project.]

1 - McKeever, Lucas. "Queering the Curriculum?". Spring 2009

1 - Britton, Kari. Educating Our Youth in Queer Topics: Is UIUC Truly a Community Leader? Spring 2009

3 - Benham, Greg. "'Minority Times Two': A look at life for an LGBT student of Asian descent on campus." February 2008.

2 - Lane, Marcus. Conflicting Identities: Life of LGBT Students at UIUC. Spring 2009

1 - Kingsbury, Joshua R. "Exploring the Effects of Coping Behaviors on Adjustment During a Semester for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual College Students." August 2011.

1 - Romero, Jason C. The Facebook Effect: Social Network Sites and Changing Experiences of LGBT Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. February 2008.

Reflect: I like how seriously the IRB takes the guidelines and protection of research participants. The moodle was a wonderful way to access the projects, and I never felt like I didn't have access to equipment or information that I needed.

Recommendations: 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 (Anzaldúa262). 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 in 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 still mediums in 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.