

A Queer Compass of Champaign-Urbana

MARISSA HALTERMAN

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
halterm2@illinois.edu

Abstract

This research looks at the creation and navigation of queer spaces in Champaign-Urbana, and more specifically at the University of Illinois. By using newspapers, photos, maps, and other archival documents, the paper narrates how a queer compass of the University has changed, specifically comparing Champaign and Urbana. Another tool used in this paper are the voices of current (2015) queer students at the University, voicing their concerns, experiences, and opinions about campus spaces created by the University and their friends, and how some of them have reacted to these spaces by creating their own. The goal of this paper is to expose the ways in which the University creates space for queer students, how they have created their own space, and the differences between Champaign and Urbana as sites of queer experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

It was spring of 2013, and I had just begun school at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I tried to attend every event I was invited to due to the stifling fact that I was a transfer student and had no friends. So, I started to attend social gatherings in Champaign where my dorm was. They were just how I imagined college, heavy on drinking culture, socialization, and shared interests. A few weeks after my initial encounter in Champaign, I went to Urbana for a party for the first time. What I saw was incredible. Students in Urbana seemed to live on a different planet than the students I had previously interacted with. They dressed differently, spoke about different topics, listened to alternative music, and from what I observed, had much different kinship ties, romantic relationships, and community. From this point on, I noticed that this binary was inherent in discourse around each space and constantly being reproduced by the student population. These differences were seemingly assumed by most students I talked to, causing me to wonder more about the history and production of these differences, as well as what they meant to queer students navigating the University.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Living, studying, and experiencing the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) campus for almost four years has highlighted one major partition within the campus: the two towns of Champaign and Urbana. The official title of the University groups these two towns together, creating one shared space. Consequently, students constantly refer to the different towns as hubs of certain types of cultures, and go so far as to understand each as a possible identity category, determining characteristics and lifestyle choices of those that choose to live there. Some would disagree, and say that the two are relatively the same and that those ideas are based on stereotypes and gossip. I wanted to explore this difference through a queer lens, and a critical institutional lens identifying the LGBTQ students that live, work, and study in these places and learn from their experiences in them.

In this research “queer” is an important critical term used to question normative and nonnormative identity categories and formations (Somerville 2007) as well as directly describing the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ identifying individuals. Interest in this research stems from a personal intrigue of the passion, negative and positive, that some students portray for different areas of campus, whether that

may be Urbana, Champaign, or certain buildings or spaces at the University.

III. METHODOLOGY

My use of the term “*queer compass*” is used to provide a new logic of interaction with campus space based on the experience of queer students. This *queer compass* privileges safety, liberal or ‘progressive’ spaces, and other queer students as directors. It is necessary to queer the notion of a directive compass for students, as queer students experience spaces differently due to different orientations, sexual and otherwise. These ‘directives’ represent places that students’ minds and bodies are bringing them to, sometimes without explanation or reason. *Queer compass* works as not only a navigation tool but as a way to find meaning in these spaces based on collective ideologies and preferences. It is a way of knowing where to go to be fulfilled socially, academically, mentally, and sexually. *Queer compass* is a locator of different organizations of life, activities, kinships ties, and romantic relationships. These spaces may be different for each queer student, and are constantly in tension with normative ideals about student activities, extracurriculars, and taste. It is important to differentiate these ways of navigating space and time, as these distinctions may appear ‘natural’ to those within and outside. The ideology defining these locators is constantly being reproduced by those within them, and those who are queered as they too become part of these spaces and queer networks. Although this *queer compass* is inspired by those that I interviewed, this sample was entirely made up of white students, and further research and time are necessary to expand this optic to all important identities. This does affect the ways in which these cultures and communities are represented, as well as the results of the research.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The UIUC campus works to portray itself as diversified and accepting, recently creating ‘diversity courses’ and promoting discussions on social oppression through emails and forums. I wanted to specifically hear queer voices talk about their feelings about the narrative their University presents. Going

into this research, I needed to investigate what these differences in spaces were and how they were manifested in experiences, lifestyle choices, and kinship ties. More specifically, I asked: how did local cultures become queer? Where do local queers feel most welcome and why? What experiences do queer students share in these spaces, and how do these experiences differ? How does the use of a ‘queer compass’ challenge the assumption that Champaign-Urbana is a shared space? How do students use queer compasses to navigate campus spaces? Focusing on the creation of these spaces was an important place to start, whether students or the University inspired and established them and how this affected how welcome queer students felt and the ways they went about navigating these spaces.

The first step involved consulting archival materials at the Student Life and Cultural Archives to study the ways in which queer students and Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) were represented in campus local media, and what message and purpose these groups had in creating and spreading queer culture. Another important part of looking at the difference between Champaign and Urbana and the cultures in each was getting a sense of where events were held historically, and the location of buildings that were important to queer movements and meetings. The maps and information about the buildings on campus were all found in the archives in the Main Library on campus. The most important part of this research lies in the words of the queer students that were interviewed and learning from their personal experiences with their identities on the UIUC campus. This project aims to uncover some of the ways queer students navigate Urbana and Champaign, and how they navigate the quotidian on campus with or without these perceived differences. Although the number of students interviewed was limited because of time, this research attempts to present an honest narrative about life at the University of Illinois for queer students.

V. ARCHIVAL EXPLORATIONS

The Student Life and Culture Archives is a great resource to the UIUC campus historically and culturally; it is where most of the background research for this project was done. The archival research that was most beneficial was the amount of

information that the Student Life and Culture Archives had about queer RSOs as well as news clippings describing queer life and events. These pieces of queer life from year ago, identified how *queer compasses* have changed based on the political and social moment on campus. Many specified locations of queer events on/off campus; some of these places still exist such as the Student Union, yet others do not, such as the Balloon Saloon, a gay bar that was once located on 317 N. Freemont Street, Champaign (Flowers 1975). Seemingly few places were welcoming to these kinds of events, and they were mostly broadcasted and marketed through personal pamphlets made by the groups hosting them. It was evident that some of these places tried to disassociate themselves from their connection to gay culture. In an article titled “Where gays can feel unfettered” (Hanson 1975) from the Daily Illini (newspaper) from July 8th, 1975 the manager of the Balloon Saloon asked the DI, “don’t name us” and “Champaign is still too small a town to be totally open about it”, referring to ‘gay’ as an association with this location.

A photo from The Daily Illini from March 27th, 1976 titled “Grinning with glitter” features photos of the annual Spring Glitter Ball that the Gay Illini, a queer RSO, hosted every year. The caption of the photo informs the reader that the event was at the Illini Union, and that “most dancers preferred to be photographed from behind, if at all...” (Daily Illini 1976). Both articles from the main campus newspaper show how taboo being gay or even being associated with this group was at the time, and the ways in which gay people had to protect themselves from public scrutiny because of media attention. Historically, local media has produced many articles on queer culture and the gay community, yet the representation of these queer bodies has always been distinctly separated from other news stories through the discourses of titles and content. Some titles include: “Lesbians strive to end bias: gay women face harassment; some distrust counseling serve” (Cohen 1974) and “Gay Women: A Different World”. These distinctions cause cultural dissonance, and the separation of queer news from ‘normative’ news stories. ‘Queer issues’ on campus and in local news have been framed as issues that are only applicable to the queer community. The pieces have all focused on the ways that queers live, or how

they feel about being queer, but never how they fit into ‘general’ routines as people with jobs, families, and their own struggles outside of their queerness.

The maps and information found in my search through the archives garnered some interesting results. When campus was first built, the women and men’s dorms were on opposite sides of campus. It was evident that the University was attempting to split up the two entirely, with other gendered buildings dictating the space that students inhabited such as gymnasiums, cultural centers, and sports areas (University of Illinois 1949). Over time, campus has shifted to be more gender heterogeneous and there are currently dorms where men and women live on different floors of the same building. Although still not trans friendly, the move for multiple genders to exist within the same spaces has improved. This is another way in which genders outside of the binary have been able to exist on campus as not all spaces are gendered explicitly. In a pamphlet distributed by the University from 1949, it is stated, “the individual is not forgotten nor lost at Illinois. Because of its size – not in spite of it – the University is able to offer unusual opportunities and the student to find associates to fit any interest...it has long recognized its responsibility in all phases of student life, outside as well as in the classroom” (University of Illinois 1949). This quote specifically fascinated me because of the University’s explicit statement of responsibility in “all phases of student life”. This pamphlet also locates the different Dean of Students offices as places of support if students felt as if their individual needs were not being met. This has also changed over time as we now have places such as the LGBTRC (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center) and the WRC (Women’s Resources Center) for concerns about sexuality, gender, and mistreatment on campus, information, and support.

VI. QUEER VOICES

The interview part of this research was the most important in creating a place where queer voices could be heard so that our University and larger community could look critically at the spaces we may or not be creating for queer students. Interview participants were found through queer friends of friends and peers. Considering a vast

majority of my friends are some ‘flavor’ of queer, this was a great resource. We met in coffee shops and had very personal, story based conversations that helped me to understand the daily thought processes of different queer students on campus, the ways they navigate campus, and why. My subject pool included 3 white students who live in Urbana; one genderqueer person, and two female identifying women, one who identified as bi and one who identified as pan. I also interviewed two white gay men that lived in Champaign.

Some restrictions of my subject pool were the difficulty of finding ‘out’ queer students of color, and the fact that most of my interviewees were from the same area, middle-upper class Chicago suburbs. Another important point is that all of my participants were able-bodied, limiting my research on the ways that all queers navigate the spaces at UIUC. Although I do think this represents a large amount of students on campus, these experiences are not shared throughout queer communities of color, queers from different class statuses, international students who identify as queer, queer students with disabilities, and other genders/sexualities that I was unable to explore. Other future possibilities include interviewing Alumni of the University to understand historical perspectives on queerness and the locations that were habitable and welcoming. In addition to alumni, current professors and workers on campus, queer RSO presidents, and a larger diversity of students would also be important prospects for more interviews and observations.

A lot of the questions that I asked participants had to do with where the main spaces that they occupied were located, who they were affiliated with or created by, if they were queer friendly, and what types of experiences they’ve had in them. Four out of the five people interviewed had been to campus-affiliated groups such as: Q at Allen Hall, Pride, Building Bridges, Women of Pride, and Infusions. The second person interviewed, Chris, is a sophomore, gay, white, male from Roselle, Illinois who had never reached out to any University LGBT groups because

I feel like if I had like a bad experience coming out or something like that then I would probably reach out to those groups, just so I could find an environment where I

could feel like, included in, but since all my friends are supportive and stuff I feel comfortable (Reynolds 2015).

This student equated going to LGBT clubs on campus to lacking sufficient support in other spaces. Each student’s experience with LGBT RSOs and groups obviously differed, although most of my participants stopped attending them shortly after going for the first time. My first participant, Jack, a gay, white male senior from Des Plaines, Illinois, claimed that Infusions was

... kind of cliquy. And me not coming from that place where they were coming from, being still unsure of myself, I think it kind of made a disconnect where I couldn’t really vibe with them on certain levels...I honestly didn’t feel very welcomed by this group, which was a shock to me because arguably the club was made for people like me who were unsure, and were looking for a place to talk about their lifestyles with (Carrera 2015).

The fourth person interviewed, Kailey, a sophomore pansexual female from Bloomington-Normal, Illinois remembered going to her first Women of Pride meeting, and felt

...like when I’m in an established group where people are already friends and I’m like here, I feel like a little uncomfortable sometimes, but they tried their best to like get me to feel included... so it was good (Blake 2015).

A consensus of most of my interviewees was feeling left out at queer meetings, that the space was already established and it was hard to find a place for themselves. Most of the interviewees also established their own queer or queer friendly kinship ties, surrounding themselves with people who understand their needs and experiences. They also mostly expressed that their favorite place to discuss their identities was in an intimate setting with their friends.

The genderqueer lesbian senior that was interviewed created her own spaces on campus, and is in leadership positions in two different RSOs, as

well as being active in forming coalitions between activist groups on campus. She states that

the community that trans people find is either real life people, or online in places like Tumblr...then there are the stealth people, who are trans men who had overwhelmingly supportive families, transitioned in like junior high or high school, and can walk through the world just being a really short dude. And that's fine, like that's awesome for them, we've had people who were at CUTES (Campus Union for Trans Equality and Support) for like a year, and got on T, fully transitioned, got top surgery, and stopped coming because they felt that they weren't Trans enough to go anymore (Skora 2015).

Most of the places that these students occupied were located in Urbana, and it was an overwhelmingly shared opinion between most people interviewed that Urbana was a more 'open' place to be. The third person interviewed, Rhea, a pansexual sophomore from Naperville, Illinois talked about her experience.

Getting cat called and shit, it's not a great time. That's like one of the reasons I don't spend a lot of time in Champaign, because like Champaign is one of the only places I've been cat called (Smith 2015).

Rhea went on to tell me how one of her friends was called a 'fag' in Champaign, and beat up by guys who came out of their car. Later the cops found a gun in the car and a crime alert was sent out to the entire campus community. When asking her about the ways she viewed each town, she said,

I've just had very different experiences like Urbana versus Champaign. Like Urbana, me and [my friend] got really drunk last year and we were just walking around Urbana holding hands, you know, kinda like skipping, it's cool, it was nothing sexual and like people were okay with it. No one said anything. But then I'll walk out with a friend in Champaign and this was last year, and we were both getting cat called and it's just like an 'okay, enough enough' so, I don't know. I'm

guessing I was just really unlucky, and I'm guessing my friends were too because I guess a lot of other people have good experiences it's just I haven't (Smith 2015).

Kailey felt similarly, and talked a lot about the ways that Urbana and Champaign were different.

I just feel like in Urbana there seems to be more like minded people, for whatever reason I don't know why...of course there are totally like queer people living in Champaign that are like, around, but I just feel like, yeah, I don't know, maybe like, the gatherings in Champaign are more like almost like the mainstream college culture. I guess if that makes sense like 'oh yeah college, jello shots, we have a keg...it's fun...' um and then like Urbana is more like I guess the people who are sub culture type, like counter culture type people. You know because like when was the last time you went to a house show in Champaign? Like I've never been to a house show in Champaign, I've never even heard of a house show being in Champaign and so it's just like I don't know, your research is so interesting, because like why does this divide, like real or imaginary exist? Like what's happening here like why are all like the 'sensitive artsy kids who paint their nails black', why do they all live in Urbana? Like I don't know, frat douches live in Champaign. Oh! You know what I think? It could be like a class thing too, or even like a perceived like you know, a want to be perceived class thing, because I found that like the people that live in Urbana like um, tend to be people that have jobs, or are paying their own rent, or like they're at least something (Blake 2015).

Kailey talked about the ways that Champaign and Urbana differed in class status, it costs more to live in Champaign, so the kids with jobs paying their own bills live in Urbana. This was a remarkable point, looking at the ways that Champaign is growing as a city through the construction of new and more expensive high-rise apartment buildings, while Urbana lacks the same amount of Urban growth. She also mentioned the connection between the location

of ‘counter culture’ and queerness, which was an important point about queerness as not only an identity category, but as a challenge to existing norms. Jack found that there was a correlation between creative performance spaces and the welcoming of queer people in Urbana.

I think it has to do with the fact that all the frats and sororities are kind of located on the Champaign side, and it’s pretty widespread, and then you have on the other side, you have the more artistic, you have Krannert right next to Urbana, you have the dance studio right next to Krannert, so you have a lot of these more artistic things, and I’m not trying to say that there’s an exact correlation with artsy stuff and queerness, but I feel like there does tend to be more queer vibes with those more artsy, ya know, artsy ways of life (Carrera 2015).

The Greek life on campus was another important topic of conversation in each interview. All of the people interviewed felt as if the Greek community promoted heteronormative ideals and some queer students felt threatened and unsafe because of their identities in the area of Champaign where most fraternities and sororities are located. The trans student that was interviewed felt that if they went to this side of town their life was at risk. Queer students felt as if the language and shared views of Greek students were either against them, or not concerned with their community or lifestyle choices. All of the interviewees were asked how they felt on campus being queer, and most talked about their experiences in the dorms. Although historically the dorms were completely separated by gender, there are now mixed gender dorms, although they have a long ways to go before they are trans/all gender friendly. Most queer students found their ‘queer’ community specifically in Allen Hall, and felt that this was a very welcoming place for students to talk about queerness due to the group Q, and the amount of information and events held here. The queer students interviewed were either not into ‘mainstream’ bar nightlife, or would engage with it only when it was with friends or specifically at gay events such as Murphy’s Thursday night ‘Thursgays’ event or the openly gay bar C-Street, both in

Champaign. When asked about where he mostly hangs out, Jack responded,

I don’t go out nearly as much as my other collegiate friends, but, I’ve gone to Murphy’s quite a few times this past year, Firehaus...and yeah, also more of apartment house parties, more low-key settings, I generally prefer these if at all possible. Bars can sometimes be hectic environments that aren’t always enjoyable (Carrera 2015).

Students also talked about the ways that some places may market themselves as queer but do not actually live up to this culturally. C-Street was talked about with both gay men interviewed, but other queer students did not see this as a ‘queer’ space.

VII. CONCLUSION

Each student’s queer directives are created and navigated in different ways depending on where the student started out living, what their experiences were prior to coming to college, if they were less accepted at home they were more likely to reach out to support groups here, and the memories and feelings that are associated with each town. Although each student is affected differently by each experience, there were definitive ways that queer white students navigated Champaign and Urbana. The ways that students talk separately about Urbana and Champaign was always incredibly thought provoking, prompting research about what this meant for queer experience, and how it may have differed in the past. This topic was so important because of the implications that spaces have for queer students, for their safety, wellbeing, and overall happiness. The University of Illinois brands itself as an inclusive and diverse space that is constantly re-evaluating and improving approaches to diversity, and queer perspective is and continues to be necessary to determine what this really means to students. It was also crucial to look at the two towns separately as places outside of the campus community, as autonomous areas that host and encourage differing cultures and experiences due to the people and places within them. Obviously there are many more factors to explore around this topic, and future research is necessary to fully understand all student’s

perspectives and variety of experiences as living queer in Urbana Champaign.

After looking at students' responses coupled with historical and archival research, Champaign and Urbana each had important distinctions in the context of queer space and directives, leading to the notion of a *queer compass*, or a certain way of finding meaning in and navigating spaces. When thinking of queer spatiality, it is imperative to think about safety (physically and mentally) and the threat of possible conflict. Champaign was framed as the less 'safe space', due to multiple incidents that happened to students there, including violence, verbally and physically. Students felt safer in Urbana residential areas, due to the perceived and experienced "accepting" nature of the area and people within it. Views of Champaign were also affected by the ways that Greek communities were perceived as sometimes intolerant of different identities, and more prone to act on this intolerance. My sample included only white students, which limits the range of possible and important knowledge about queer spaces. Another important aspect of queer spaces is the way that each space promotes possibilities for open discussion about multiple identities. Students felt that the University did not meet these needs, causing them to create their own groups, RSO's, or kinship circles of other queer friends. Comparing history to now, UIUC has become a seemingly more integrated and tolerant place for the discussion and performance of queer identities. Although this may be true, institutionalizing queer spaces has created divisions in how students are able to experience their identities. This research has helped to uncover some of the reasons students inhabit and create the spaces that they do, and shown that it is imperative to start more conversations around queer spaces on campus to meet the needs of the queer community. Queer students have and always will exist at the University of Illinois, our history is important to learn from, and our future is critical to imagine.

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