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Big U Knows Best: Patronizing Queer Campus Culture

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Chapter Six
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"If GSA can help one or two people a semester come out, feel comfortable and grow

personally, then we are doing more than any other organization on campus."

-- Robby Thompson, Big U's Gay Student Association Vice-President, 1983

(Bedenbaugh, 1983)

Orientation: Histories of Exploitation and Exclusion of Queer Campus Folx

A southern institution surviving upon the labor and capital of its marginalized groups is

how one institution has survived the thirty years of queer justice. Reflecting on this move toward

a more inclusive campus environment, reveals that each increment has been accomplished not by

institutional leaders, but by those most affected by the intolerance. At each juncture, a critical

moment for change was championed by those seemingly without agency, but who found that

inner strength to make their community more inclusive despite the regressive tenor of regional

and state politics.

At each one of these critical moments of time, how has a large state institution of post-

secondary learning reacted? Often the labor has been thrust upon the marginalized. This

assumption upon the shoulders of the marginalized signifies a deep violence upon the assumed.

Institutions of higher education represent the dominant, as they have agency and thus the power

to act. The two ways in which institutions reify their domination are through gifts and debts

(Bourdieu, 1977). These gifts and debts are symbolic forms of violence that reinstantiate the role

of a benevolent father figure, old, wise, and wizened, whose force upon the student is to maintain the status quo. It is these "gentle, hidden exploitation[s that are] the form taken by man's exploitation of man whenever overt, brutal exploitation is impossible" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192).

In a shift from the campus of yesterday, administrators can no longer remove queer students from campus, institutions must deploy strategy (in the de Certeau construction) to maintain their habitus of normality (Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984). This habitus becomes embodied by queer students, not only as they need the work to be done, but as they see their work as the only way it will be done.

Take as an example the quote from Robby Thompson above. Thompson, then vice-president of Big U's Gay Student Association (GSA), spoke to the labor required by a then 'controversial' group of students and faculty to educate both members of the university and the larger community on what it means to exist as queer within the hostility of the 1980s American South. Occurring alongside a hostile relationship between the university and its persons of color, this advocacy showed that work was done not by university initiatives, but by the wills of oppressed communities. Theoretically, the university was fine with communities existing, but affirming existence and deeming rights to such persons were hardly practiced. Indeed, only months earlier the University denied validity to GSA by arguing that it "advocated conduct that [was] illegal in South Carolina" (Staff and Wire Reports, 1983). It was only due to the actions of an ACLU lawsuit that GSA was allowed to function and then, as Thompson states, it became the singular duty of GSA to advocate for inclusion.

The university has since fostered iterations of organizations like the GSA and included representation within the larger queer spectrum, however, these changes rarely came quickly, often involving direct confrontation with the implicit heteronormative logics of institutional

practices. Whether it be unenforced guidelines for respecting pronouns of queer students or the false coupling of sexual orientation with gender identity in health services information, such acts serve to remind queer folks that their presence is at odds with campus-defined "normalcy". The result is repeated attempts to dismantle queer mobility on campus both implicitly and explicitly. Facing adversity in regards to such demobilizing practices, the queer community stood their ground, creating outlets and alternative means with which to build their own safe spaces. Frustratingly, such work, when successful, was often insidiously co-opted for the benefit of the university's image. The unsupported labor of queer folks became the product of campus pride. The irony resting here in the pride of the university, being at odds with pride as it pertains to the community it proclaims to protect.

This chapter looks critically at one large, southern state institution's movement at the intersection of hate and fear that impacts the lives of students, faculty, staff, and community members. This site provides glimpses into the temporal specifics of a grouping of people, but not the totality of the queer experience. The chapter analyses the university's enactment of sub-institutional documents and practices with regards to their inclusivity. This approach borrows from Sarah Ahmed who asks inclusivity practitioners to decentralize inclusivity as "management strategy" from the nature of diversity itself (2012, p. 53). For Ahmed, it is the difference between acknowledging practices of inclusivity and talking directly about those 'being included.' This chapter examines inclusive discourses at the aforementioned institution, asking how inclusivity fails when the university merely gives lip service to inclusivity within a neoliberal agenda. Each practice will be examined for approaches to queer inclusion. Focus will be given to moments where express identities are mentioned and where mention fails to either account for the totality of queer inclusivity or rejects the basic rights and needs of queer persons. These critiques are

made with a constant acknowledgment that such failures result due to underlying desire for heteronormative comfort within traditional, Westernized modalities of university system structures. While specifically a critique of queer inclusivity, such oppressive and exclusionary practices could hold true for other marginalized groups as well, though instantiations change in unique ways. Finally, the chapter concludes with alternative approaches towards university inclusivity while also acknowledging the uncomfortable conversations about universities' problematic history.

Research 101: A Review of Literature on Campus Inclusion and Heteronormative Regimes

Often queer inclusivity is a function of neo-liberal agendas. Liberal multiculturalism too is part of the "disciplinary apparatus of the state" forcing its subjects into boxes (Puar, 2007, p. 212). Furthermore, in looking at LGBTQIA+ justice, we cannot cleave apart queer issues from other aspects of identity politics. By forcing subjects into boxes, this precisely becomes the outcome and thus we must be cognizant of this move, so as not to create division amongst oppressed populations, as well as internalized oppression.

The early movement for queer justice was explicitly a justice for the gay white man, a demand to reinstate his white privilege; contemporary movements seek to implicitly reinscribe white privilege (Puar, 2007). This assumption of homonormativity further marginalized queer and trans voices of color (Duggan, 2003). At play within discourses of justice is the division between the role of recognition within oppressed communities and the function of acknowledgment of difference. Is it, as Ahmed states, a "management strategy" or is it actually serving to discuss the operative roles of difference (2012)? Moreover, early queer justice cannot

be severed from the necropolitics of the AIDS epidemic (Mbembe, 2003). Contemporary

reactions to violence within the queer community hold resonance against these early acts of state

violence against the queer community. This is most recently seen clearly in the blood donation

ban that enacted a psychological toll upon gay men wanting to help their community after the

PULSE tragedy in Orlando, FL.

In the university archives of the student newspaper, as well as the city newspaper, little

prior to the early 1980s was written about queer students. Little surprise exists that some of the

earliest evidence of the queer community comes in the form of speaking to the impact of AIDS

upon the community. In a 1985 article, the director of student health services says that the

university has to be realistic, that "we have gays. There is a very distinct possibility AIDS will

show up in one form or the other" (Salahuddin, 1985, p.1-C). This same piece later goes on to

interview the president of the GSA wherein he remarks that their group serves to ensure that

"gay students fit into the community and be at ease with themselves" (Salahuddin, 1985, p. 6-C).

Moreover, historically the students at the institution who developed AIDS "would likely be

asked to go home" (Salahuddin, 1985, p. C-6). This is due to the understanding of the institution

that these students would "likely be too sick to keep up with school work" (Salahuddin, 1985, p.

C-6).

By removing these students from the place that has been their home serves as a form of

exile from their community. Giorgio Agamben speaks to the history of the exile of a class of

people in his seminal work Homo Sacer, or the *Sacred Man* (1998). This exile of people creates

a subset of individuals of whom have no rights and are in some regards freed to act without

regard to law. This fosters a sense of freedom to act beyond legality, something not in the best

interest of the institution. We argue that due to this exteriority to university policies, the

university deemed it prudent to keep these students under their juridical control, and thus end the university exile for queer students.

Beyond a historical approach to the medicalization of sexuality, today we are hosting LGBT Open Houses through the health center for students. The invitation to this event reads: "Student Health Services is the patient-centered medical home for ALL *Big U* students. We invite students from the LGBTQ community and their allies to join us for a drop-in reception at the *Named* Student Health Center" (Student Health Services, 2016). Hosting a drop-in reception for students who are explicitly part of the queer community is a vestige of the medicalization of queerness. In the 19th century, queer people became people, and not just people engaged in a sex act. As Foucault stated, "sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it" (1990, p. 44). Sarah Ahmed points out that welcoming events for historically marginalized groups reinforce ownership of space, and thus those who are welcomed in are not the original owners, or even new owners, but guests of the privileged (Ahmed, 2012).

Such consistent messaging by the university on the topic of queer members of the community and their connection to HIV/AIDS commits a symbolic violence against these communities (Bourdieu, 1977). The agency to control death, or necropolitics, dictates who lives, who dies, and whose narrative gets centered (Mbembe, 2003). For the queer students, and those impacted directly by HIV and AIDS, this constant reminder of how they are branded as diseased outsiders means university success for these students is of a secondary concern to both the individual and the institution.

Special Topics Seminar: A Case Study of Queer Exclusion at One Southern University

College is meant to be a learning space. Students feeling a sense of connection to university life has proved to be instrumental to the success of these students (Astin, 1999). When students do not feel part of the community, they are more apt to leave the institution (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, Frazer, 2010.). Several experiences of student involvement at our site prove to have the opposite impact upon queer students. One of the largest events to take place at many large state institutions, homecoming, serves as a re-inscription of heteronormativity in the role of king and queen. Moreover, this institution hosts an annual competitive blood drive in competition with an athletic rival, once again, excluding queer men. While the policy that prohibits queer men from blood donation is not specific to the university in question, it does not resist by standing up to the event.

Not all programs at the site are exclusionary. However, in tradition with putting the impetus upon the oppressed, we see the events that largely involve the queer community are led by the queer community. As discussed above, the university's queer student group was founded (as is common) by queer students on campus. Beyond the founding of this student organization, it was students that advocated for a full-time student affairs position that would serve specifically queer students. This was finally accomplished in the fall of 2013 after many other universities had accomplished such a position. With the position came the implementation of the LGBTQ Community Development Program spearheaded by members of the student senate and Ben Muller (2012). In reflecting on his work to build the program, Muller notes that he "experienced the harsh realities of inequality many times" within the university system and that his work not merely to acknowledge the queer community as a "remainder of the population". Understanding that even with the inclusion of an office and staff, the programming and presence of a queer community only truly came at the demands of queer students. This is also reflective of the

founding of a minority serving office, which would one day find itself home to the queer student services administrator.

The institution and the students in contemporary times prides itself that the largest event on campus, unrelated to a sporting event, is the GSA's annual spring drag show. This event, which began by students in the late-90s serves as a spectacle for the non-queer community, coming in to observe the queer community (Ladenheim, 1998). Even today, in 2016, this event still has ties to the AIDS crisis, teaching those in attendance about condoms and other STI prevention materials. The constant barrage of misinformation about the promiscuity of queer students on campus not only perpetuates stereotypes but alienates queer students who do not fit into this stereotypes that many students have internalized of what it means to be queer.

Many university library collections include a variety of online resources for students hoping to do research, often colloquially called library guides. Amongst the guides included at our institution's library is a section for "Women/Gender Studies" (Women's and Gender Studies: Welcome, 2016). Navigating the guide a user is met with a handful of tabs on how to engage with women's and gender studies research and a final tab reading "LGBT issues". Delving into this tab reveals the ways in which the university comprehends issues almost exclusively from a research standpoint, seeing queer populations not as agents with knowledge, but as objects for study.

One instance includes a listing on the opening page of information regarding literature and videos on queer populations and links to "overview sources". The only information available of any potential benefit to queer students, rather than queer or queer-interested scholars, is a suggested link to the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. Furthermore, the link leads to said office's homepage, but not to the express portions of the website concerning queer campus

populations. Like the community events and engagements mentioned above, even the research

provided within this library guide orient towards a narrative of AIDS and its cultural impact,

reinstating this narrative's dominance within queer groups. Even guidance on research within

databases remains ineffectual as library personnel often suggest terms that are supposed to help

navigate subject headings within database searches. Essentialist and exclusive of many within

the queer community, terms like queer or agender are not subject headings and thus hinder

research within the library catalogue. Admittedly, the challenge of subject headings is not solely

the onus of the university and is symbolic of a larger queer exclusion within information systems

which has a well-explored history (Adler 2013; Berman 1993; Drabinski, 2013, Olson 2001).

However, the offering of these limited options without explanation as to the failings of an

organizational structure speaks to the manner in which this institution implicitly chooses to

account only for those queer groups accepted within *current* notions of equality. The fact that no

mention is made of persons who may be queer, intersex, or agender identifying shows a limited

concern for recognition of queer inclusivity. In line with theories of "library anxiety", such a lack

of appropriate terminology can lead to a queer user feeling "helpless" when encountering such a

library guide and subsequently reading the entire library as an "overpowering" place which

induces "fear" (Mellon, 1986). Pair this failure with the lack of a single gender neutral bathroom

within the entirety of the university's library and the space becomes latently violent.

Finally, the aforementioned library guide offers its prospective users a link to explore

"coming out resources". The page, while full of useful LGBTQIA+ coming out resources, *only*

links to organizations outside of the university's walls. Specifically, the link to a counselling

center links to the University of Illinois (U of I) Urbana-Champaign. A person needing

immediate support would fail to find any direct links to counselling services on the part of the

university. Instead, they are met with a link to a physical site in which they can schedule appointments on weekdays between 9 am and 5 pm, assuming students have the means to traverse the over seven hundred miles necessary to get between this institution and the U of I Urbana-Champaign (Women's and Gender Studies: Welcome, 2016). In all likelihood, the library guide's creator intended to link out to a specific document or guide for coming out that has since been relocated within the university's web page, or removed, and fails to load. In fact, with further investigation, one can find the U of I Urbana-Champaign site which has its own *Coming Out* series that guides individuals through the challenges of coming out.

While likely unintentional, this failure is indicative of a larger misguided attempt at institutional concern for their marginalized queer students. First, the dead link shows a clear indifference to the need to make sure that resources for LGBTQ students are both timely and, more importantly, accessible. Second, the presumed resource is neither free, nor wholly representative of the queer spectrum. By providing such a venue as the 'idealized' version of a coming out resource, this institutional document negates the need for institution-specific resources (Coming Out, 2015).

One can read this failure to properly link to this institution's own resources as an aggravated version of Ahmed's (2012) understanding of diversity existing merely "by virtue of being addressed". It also validates Ahmed's concern for acts of inclusion as being "shared objects" that can be repeated and reused as shallow affirmations without actualized validity (p. 56). Ultimately, by including the coming out resources of other entities, this institution can give voice to *concern* for the safety of its queer community; instead, it leaves the labor required to obtain safe, easily locatable spaces for coming out as the burden of queer students.

Returning to previous discussions of health and queer identities, another information

resource at the institution shows the troubling relationships between the university's prescribed understandings of queerness and the actual lived experiences of the queer folks at the institution. Within the student health section of the university's website resides a section focused on "wellness, prevention, and advocacy services", which links into a section for "sexual health" (Sexual Health & Relationship Communication, 2016). The online resource offers many of the expected resources for an individual seeking sexual health information about STD and HIV tests, contraceptive access, and a hotline to discuss issues. Aside from the binary structuring of sexual supplies offered, the extended explanation of the hotline's services includes the offering to talk about HIV/AIDs, partner communication, one's sexual orientation, and navigating one's gender identity and expression. While it is certainly crucial that each of these topics can be considered crucial to health and well-being, the conflation of these terms into one hotline under the umbrella term of sexual health suggests implicit singular relationships between one's sex, one's sexual orientation, and one's gender identity. Here the university, through an attempt to include more diverse components of interest to the queer community, ultimately suggests essentialist ties between distinct moments of queerness.

By placing such components of an individual's identity in the same textual space as words like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and AIDs, the hotline implies an adversity to such identities and expressions. To return to Foucault, relating gender identities and sex to the act of sex itself, suggests not a concern with the psychological well-being of a student grappling with their gender identity, but instead, a tying of that gender identity to the potentials in which they may *do* sex differently. For as Foucault asserts, when sexual acts become "obsessions" they no longer represent individual acts, but things to describe ad nauseum, envisioning every "image" and "modulation" that could be feasible within these acts themselves. Earlier, Foucault

states that this shift in identifying sex as a thing to be named, meant that those engaging in non-reproductive sex fell into a state of mandated confession, regardless of their practices (1990, p. 63). Accordingly, sex becomes a way to codify difference and individuals whose embodiment and lived experience represent the perception of difference become doubly tied to their respective sexualities. By including connotations of sexual deviancy such as STIs within the same space as one's gender, the two are conflated and the juxtaposition affirms a preoccupation with a queer person's sexual behavior.

Graduation: The Future of Queer Inclusion in the Academy

A neoliberal reading of the queer movement at this institution, like at most institutions, is to understand that while the work for queer justice has been put on the backs of the oppressed, queer justice is never accomplished without a convergence of interests between the oppressed and the oppressors (Bell, 1995). This is most commonly seen at this site with the addition of a full-time staff person to work to serve queer students. While this was certainly a benefit for the queer students at the institution, this move allows the institution to use this as a talking piece in respect to the credibility of its diversity and inclusion. Often, this commitment to inclusion can serve as little more than a tick-box for institutions, leaving the real work of inclusion not only unfinished but truly unstarted. Something as simple as an underfunded office serves merely as a way for an institution to maintain an illusion of commitment, leading the institution to maintain a post-oppression perspective regarding issues of hate on their campus (Ahmed, 2012).

Universities are built upon a European tradition, so it is no surprise that the "language of diversity becomes easily mobilized as a defence of reputation (perhaps even a defence of

whiteness)" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 151). In a contemporary landscape, moving for queer justice, when cleaved apart from racial and/or intersectional justice becomes another tool of white supremacy, arguing for the HRC model of LGB justice. This is to be expected, as Jasbir Puar concludes that "queerness [is] indebted to modernity, and modern sexual identities are built on the histories of colonialism, nation formation and empire, and racialization, the nation is founded on the (homo) sexual other" (Puar, 2007, p. 49). But the acceptable, homonormative queer has become the liberal fantasy of college administrators. The new homonormativity proffered by Lisa Duggan ensures that the homonormative queer is apt to accept dominant norms "while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2003, p. 50). A clear example of Duggan's homonormativity emerges in the aforementioned institutional artifacts, and it can occur within the failure of the library to have information resources that cover non-normativised queer persons. Alternatively, it can happen through accepting and idolizing the homonormative queer allows for university administrators to tout their own attempt at inclusion, while still keeping at bay the undesirable, no less than they did in the 1980s by keeping at a distance those impacted by HIV/AIDS. Each iteration is unique, but as a whole they reflect a concern, not for those they aim to aid, but instead a systemic, microaggressions which serve to block mobility and place the university as a place of unattainable access.

　　While this site is specific, the realities herein are less so. University administrators must continue to push boundaries for inclusion. We need to move beyond the welcome events, to a space wherein queer students arrive on campus and feel as if their presence has been expected, as opposed to a burden that must be shouldered, in part by their peers. In order to make this a reality, institutions of higher learning may need to shrug off conservative legislatures which

demand the removal of funding for these spaces, for the censorship of queer reading materials,

for the requirement of heteronormative binary housing assignments, and finally institutions must

acknowledge their past failures and a plan of action to be more intentional to challenge and

change their community.

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