WHAT SPACES EXIST FOR QUEER YOUTH?
On institutional discourses and regulatory imaginations

By Julia de Montigny,
Undergraduate student in Human Environment at Concordia University and
member of the Prisoner Correspondence Project at QPIRG Concordia

Introduction

A queer youth geography has yet to be developed; queer youth's spatially constituted identities and experiences have remained in uncharted territories. Space for queer youth has largely been ignored, undermined, and not been made. Queer youth are rarely brought into focus by queer theorists, geographers, and others with adult power. Youth in particular exist in shifting institutional worlds; their experiences may most often be dictated by the rules of school, organized recreational activities, family, and the state; as such their experiences may be directly shaped according to the pressures, perspectives, and practices of these institutions. My research seeks to undermine the narrow visions of queer youth produced by and through institutional practices and discourses and propose new practices and strategies that function in the interest of queer youth. The questions that I hope to explore in my research are: what are the institutional visions of queer youth produced by those inside and how do the contours of the language and the imagination of these institutions limit or open up spatial possibilities for queer youth?

Purpose

The purpose of my research is varied and ranges from a desire to explore and investigate how queer identities and geographies are understood and controlled by institutional bodies, to challenging the ways that heterosexuality is normalized in adolescent development. By highlighting the ways that everyday public spaces are produced as straight and even homophobic spaces, I want to call attention to the

need and politics of the struggle for queer space. I also try to open up the positive potential for social equity and liberation by asserting queer identities in youth cultures. It is my hope that this article contributes to the greater project of destabilizing hegemonic ideas about youth's sexualities that are used to limit possibilities, standardize desires, and restrict access to space.

Methodology and process

Experiences and questions afforded to me through community work I do in Montreal with youth (queer and otherwise) have allowed me to reflect on the ways that queer youth are excluded and the ways that their presence in schools, urban spaces, and other institutional locations is made invisible. These insights have allowed me to see the ways that in social interaction queer youth are silenced, their identities are discounted, and they are too often presumed to be straight. These insights and the questions that arose offered the framework of this project's initial intent, which was to study how queer youth, aged 14-18 find, define, and create space for themselves in Montreal by looking at the role that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) youth organizations, and high schools more generally, have in the making of spaces for youth. Through qualitative interviews, I wanted to examine how queer youth identities were articulated in general and in high school spaces and community organizations specifically, while considering existing social, economic, and cultural distinctions within the queer communities I was to study. The aim of this project was to draw on experiential knowledge and promote youth's voices, ideas, and perspectives.

The process of obtaining ethical approval from the Office of Research's Ethics Board at Concordia University in order to work with queer youth under the age of 18, a "vulnerable population," provided me with an opportunity to shift my focus. As the process extended through time I realized that I would not be likely to obtain ethical approval and so I began to informally question and examine the concerns and the process of ethical approval. The formal process was organized by the demand that I produce several revised forms, return emails and phone calls, and attend meetings with my supervisors. It began in November 2010 and was only approved in April 2011, but not without a surprising caveat: that the motivation for identifying queer youth as vulnerable (and thus impossible to interview) was that the ethics board understood queer youth as also being street youth. This process and the resulting conversations and implicit assumptions provided me with a solid basis from which to pursue a critical analysis of the institutional discourses on which the members of the ethics board relied. This new project provided critical insights into the powers that shape and influence queer experience, specifically among youth.

To work around the lack of access to queer youth's own experiences I used two alternative methods to analyze the spaces of queer youth: telephone interviews with public high schools and a discourse analysis of the process to obtain ethical approval. The absence of space to do the research I had originally planned inspired me to develop a new research project. Thus my focus emerges both through my own identity and politics and through a process that provided me with the conditions for meaning-making through research.

Through the use of critical discourse analysis I investigated, and by so doing intervened, into the ways that spaces are both imagined and made to function as sites of social production and personal development for queer youth. I studied the ways that high schools and universities define and regulate queer youth's identities, spaces, and voices while exploring the assumptions that guided the perspectives and decisions made by those with power inside of institutional bodies.

Discourses are those representations and practices that structure thoughts, make meanings, constitute identities, produce subjects, and make social relations legible (Gregory et al. 2009). In other words, discourses make the world as we understand it; they are those groups of ideas that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way people act on the basis of that thinking. Rose (2007) argues that the power of a discourse lies in their claims of truth. As she puts it:

> knowledge and power are imbricated one in the other, not only because all knowledge is discursive and all discourse is saturated with power, but because the most powerful discourses, in terms of the productiveness of their social effects, depend on assumptions and claims that their knowledge is true (Rose 2007: 144).

As such, discourses have the power to limit and restrict alternative ways of imagining the world and the social realities of its subjects.

Results and Discussion

Throughout my research I tried to reveal the spatialized contours of heteronormativity that queer youth navigate in these institutions. I also identified many significant discourses and discursive practices. First of all, I found that institutional policies discursively limit queer youths' identities. The university imagined queer youth to be victims and vulnerable to further victimization. The possibility that this story (if relevant), not to mention other, more complex stories might be told through my interviews was thus stopped. On the other hand, the discourses that were produced by high school staff I consulted were more varied. Individuals in these institutions seemed interested in opening up diverse ways for queer youth identities to be accepted and articulated. However, some staff members

continued to echo heteronormative discourses and the identities of queer youth were limited.

Secondly, I found that ambivalence and uncertainty surrounds queer youth, ultimately making their voices silent and their experiences invisible. For example, I found that the attitude of the ethics board was largely incongruent with the perspectives articulated by the participants at the high schools that I consulted. Overall, high schools did not create space for queer youth because youth were not seen to be at risk, contradicting the vision held by the ethics board. I realize that this position is a little tricky to break down and may encompass contradictory attitudes, but let me attempt to expose the complicated reality that unfolded through my research.

On the one hand, I argued that the ethics board was perpetuating a silencing fear over queer youth by describing them as being vulnerable, at risk, and in danger. On the other hand, I pointed out the ways that it appears that queer youth experiences, as people who may face systemic discrimination are not being taken serious. Ultimately, I maintain both positions because the results of these assumptions in practice are similar; institutions, for a variety of motivations, make little or no space for queer youth. The discourses that were used by the high schools and the ethics board produce limited identities and regulate possibilities for change.

Thirdly, I tried to demonstrate how the spaces and institutions queer youth rely on are by and large created by adults. This process makes it so that queer youth's needs cannot readily be addressed. Throughout the interview process with high school staff I found myself wondering to what extent my questions even corresponded with the concerns that queer youth might have. I still do not know what queer youth might have wanted to speak about, but the process and discourses produced by these institutions made it so that I could not find out. It is worth noting that none of the high school staff spoke with me about plans to consult youth about their desires or having done that already. The university prevented me from interviewing youth and asking them first-hand what their thoughts and experiences were about how queer space is made or not. In a way, the fact that space was not made for queer youth by high schools made it so that the staff could not really reveal what the perspectives of queer youth were because they had no reference point.

Fourthly, and finally, these institutional processes contribute to the difficulty queers already face in challenging spatial heteronormativity and make it so that space is not made for queer youth. Many queer geographers have argued that heteronomativity is embedded in the landscape of the city (Davis 1995); throughout this essay I tried to

expand on that by showing how heteronormativity may also exist in institutional spaces, in the social practices which they constitute, and in the processes that regulate knowledge production. Some have suggested that it might be interrupted and undermined through struggles for queer visibility, so I propose that future studies could work with queer youth and promote their voices and experiences and make space for them.

As Rofes put it over two decades ago:

> Gay and lesbian youth attend schools throughout the nation, and they have existed quietly throughout the history of (…) education. These students — from every ethnic and racial background, in urban, suburban, and rural schools — have sat passively through years of public school education where their identities as gay and lesbian people have been ignored and denied (1989, 445).

The need to hear queer youth voices is real and this may just be a beginning.

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