

Queering Heterosexual Spaces

Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity

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Un nombre grandissant de campus universitaires et de collèges canadiens adoptent des campagnes pour créer un espace positif pour enrayer la marginalisation des étudiantes, du personnel et des professeurs LGBTQ. Ce papier décrit comment cette expérience à l'université Brock a dérangé la norme hétérosexuelle sur le campus.

An increasing number of Canadian university and college campuses are adopting anti-homophobia campaigns in an attempt to challenge the marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) students, staff, and faculty. Recently at Brock University, a Positive Space Campaign was launched with the intention of raising the visibility and number of respectful, supportive, educational, and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ people through the dissemination of cards, posters, and buttons indicating “Positive Space” at the university as well as through the facilitation of workshops around sexual and gender diversity. Positive Space Campaigns, as well as related Ally Programs and Safe Space Projects, have the potential to challenge campus heteronormativity. As the University of Toronto’s Positive Space website explains,

[t]here is still widespread reluctance to speak out about sexual and gender diversity, which stands in stark contrast to the routine talk of the sexual and emotional bonds of heterosexual people.

Positive Space Campaigns contribute to an imagined space that confronts homophobia and heteronormativity in the hopes of creating a campus that embraces sexual and gender diversity.

As a queer graduate student, I decided to conduct participatory action research, which involved the initiation, implementation and study of a Positive Space Campaign at Brock University. I acted as both a researcher and an activist in my capacity as a member of the Positive

Space Committee. This experience has informed my Master’s research on the topic and is the source of research for this article.

The domination of heterosexuality as a pervasive sexual “norm” regulates spaces, and therefore any expression of sexuality other than heterosexuality is, as Gill Valentine expresses, “out of place” (395). While many argue that expressions of sexuality are more appropriately articulated in the privacy of the home or bedroom, Valentine makes the case that heterosexuality is on display every day in public spaces. She writes that the

cultural dichotomy locating sexuality in private rather than public space, is based on the *false* premise that heterosexuality is also defined by private sexual acts and is not expressed in the public arena ... such is the strength of the assumption of the “naturalness” of heterosexual hegemony, that most people are oblivious to the way it operates as a process of power relations in *all* spaces. (396)

Displays of sexuality that fall outside of the framework of heterosexuality are thus considered to be out of place and are more noticeable as they are less frequently expressed. As Valentine argues, “[t]he lack of recognition of alternative sexual identities means that places and organizations [exclude] lesbian and gay lifestyles and so unconsciously reproduce heterosexual hegemony” (410). In other words, when expressions of sexuality other than heterosexuality are stifled because of homophobia, they prevent LGBTQ people from expressing their sexual and gender identities and heteronormativity pervades as the dominant discourse of sexuality.

Just as heterosexuality is normalized in every space, it is also normalized within academic spaces, and university campuses continue to be sites of structural forms of homophobia. Positive Space Campaigns are important because they demand attention and visibility on campuses

around sexual and gender diversity. David Rayside, a professor of Political Science and Sexual Diversity Studies and one of the founders of the Positive Space Campaign at the University of Toronto, explains that

political visibility is an important issue for any equity campaign. But around sexuality, it's especially important because so many people still, in the year 2004, so many people are closeted in one form or another. And that's true among students, it's true among faculty who are the safest and most influential

tioning," and as a part of the icon we use a rainbow to make reference to the rainbow pride flag. In some ways, the presence of Positive Space markers around campus disrupts the dominance of heteronormativity simply by being visible and drawing attention to the fact that LGBTQ people are on campus. By marking a space a positive one for sexual and gender diversity, the individual is announcing the welcoming of a queer presence.

While no academic work has been written about Positive Space Campaigns to date, other projects that use visual cues to mark spaces as queer have been explored. An

The Positive Space Campaign posters suggest that spaces can be queer-positive by advertising in the main walkways of the university that the Campaign is present and making an effort to transform the meaning of campus spaces.

constituency on any university campus, and it's dramatically true of administrators.

Positive Space Campaigns then continue to be important contributors to the disruption of silence and invisibility around sexual and gender diversity in academic settings.

At Brock University, Positive Space Campaign promotional posters are on the walls all over the university advertising the Campaign and providing information about upcoming workshops. Positive Space Campaign flyers, which provide more information about the Campaign, are also available around campus. The posters and flyers have contact information on them, which leads interested participants to the email address or website, and they can send a message to the Positive Space email address to express interest in workshop participation. Two-hour workshops are offered to all members of the campus community throughout the year. During these workshops, issues such as language and terminology, myths and stereotypes, privilege and power, and case scenarios are explored to get people thinking about the experiences of LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty on campus. Participants who attend workshops are then invited to post Positive Space cards or buttons in their working, living or studying spaces to indicate to others that they are contributing to the creation of a space that welcomes sexual and gender diversity. A Positive Space card or button also suggests that the person who is marked by it will challenge discriminatory language and homophobia to contribute to the creation of a welcoming and positive space.

Positive Space posters, cards, and buttons raise visibility and awareness around sexual and gender identities by marking campus spaces with words and with symbols. The Brock University Positive Space Campaign uses the words "Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Two-Spirited Queer Ques-

important example of this was done in 1994, when a group called the REPOhistory Collective embarked on a project called "The Queer Spaces Sign Project" in which a group of artists, educators, and activists in New York City installed nine triangular street signs to lamp posts in a variety of locations, marking previously unmarked spaces as "queer spaces." Each sign provided information about the importance of that location in gay and lesbian history, bringing about awareness and visibility to an otherwise invisible and unknown history. The signs were "part of a larger movement to make visible and validate gay and lesbian presence in the city and in public space" (Hertz, Eisenberg and Knauer 357). Betti-Sue Hertz, Ed Eisenberg and Lisa Maya Knauer argue that

[t]he signs proved to be a powerful intervention in the routine lexicon of the street.... Unlike monuments, the signs called attention to themselves first in order to encourage the viewer to think about the meanings of the space around them. (366)

The REPOhistory Collective made a direct strike on so-called public spaces of the street and marked them as queer. In doing so, they articulated clearly that street space is heterosexualized and heteronormalized unless otherwise marked. The presence of the "Queer Spaces" street signs were an effort to disrupt the heteronormativity of New York City streets.

A number of important similarities can be drawn between this *Queer Spaces* project and the Positive Space Campaign. In particular, the Brock University Positive Space Campaign offers the opportunity to be a "powerful intervention in the routine lexicon" of the hallway or other university space and is a clear reminder that staff, faculty, and students on the campus are not all heterosexual.

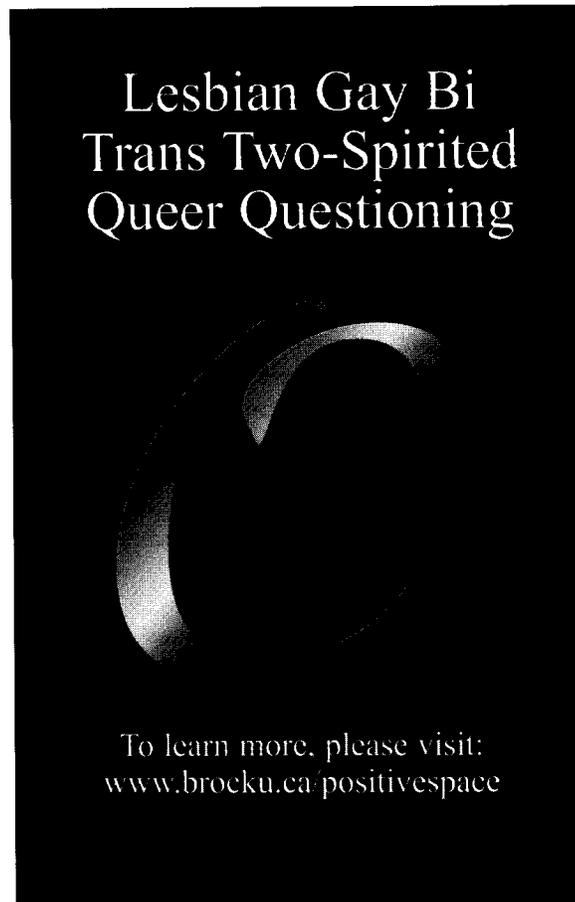
What's unique about the REPOhistory Collective is that they marked and claimed particular spaces as queer in the context of a remembered history. While the Positive Space Campaign posters are not claiming a history nor claiming fixed spaces as queer, they do suggest that spaces can be queer-positive by advertising in the main walkways of the university that the Campaign is present and making an effort to transform the meaning of campus spaces.

Spaces are also marked with Positive Space buttons and cards that are available after participants attend workshops. A person might put a Positive Space card on their office door, and this might mark that person's office as Positive. Similarly, a person might attach a Positive Space button to their bag, marking themselves as a Positive Space. Buttons and cards do not claim spaces as necessarily queer, as Positive Space materials are used by queers and allies together to create collective spaces with shared understandings of what a campus of Positive Space might feel like. The Positive Space Campaign, as we have conceived it, has the potential to be more radical than a designated queer-positive space on the campus. While some offices are marked as Positive Spaces, the implication is not only that the office is a Positive Space but that so too is the person who occupies that office. Individuals who mark themselves as Positive Spaces are thus beginning to challenge the heteronormativity that pervades the campus community.

Distinct from the spaces taken up by the promotional posters are the spaces taken up through workshop facilitation. Workshops are a much more concrete space where two facilitators and a group of interested participants come together in a room to discuss and conceptualize LGBTQ experiences on campus and to work towards the creation of more inclusive and positive spaces on campus. Workshops have the potential to create a counter-hegemonic space within the wider community. In Positive Space workshops, there is the opportunity to unpack heterosexist assumptions and stereotypes and get people contemplating the heteronormalization of the everyday university campus.

Workshops do have limitations around the extent to which they can really change spaces. It's worth noting, as does Kath Browne, that despite the limitations of the sex/gender, male/female binaries, and despite a constant attempt to trouble and destabilize these categories, that these categorical constructions are also quite useful. Browne writes that "a tension exists between challenging the borders of gender and sex and using these terms to enable a discussion of embodied experiences" (334). In the context of the workshops, the use of binary constructions are both useful and frustrating, and as Browne explains, she uses the terms in the hopes that she will "also render them unstable and fluid, and through their disruptive (mis)use, illustrate the impossibility of these purified categories" (334).

During the first activity in the workshop, facilitators use



a "mix and match" definition sheet to get workshop participants to think and ask questions about vocabulary. In this activity, two of the terms listed are "sex" and "gender" and are defined as follows:

Sex: A biological distinction referring to whether a person is female, male or intersex.

Gender: Behaviour, personality, dress, choice of work, etc. that the dominant society traditionally attributes to, or associates with, biological sex; the cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity.

Although intersex is included in the definition of sex, the definitions of sex and gender are constructed intentionally as a nature/culture binary, despite the fact that this construction is problematic. As Myra Hird explains,

[t]his bifurcation serve[s] a number of functions, of which the most immediate [is] to provide a convenient, tangible means to constitute identity and proceed with the immediate concern of challenging the hierarchical relationships that subordinate women to men. (348)

One of the difficulties of a two-hour workshop is that many ideas need to be addressed in a short amount of time.

It is useful to understand and construct the binary definitions of sex and gender in order to be able to understand why it is important to take them apart again. Unfortunately, in the time allotted for workshop presentations, it would be difficult to first present definitions of sex and gender within the binary framework to a group of participants to whom these definitions may be new, and then to deconstruct those same definitions. The limitations of the workshop time frame do not allow for the exploration of some of the more complex theoretical approaches to queer or feminist theorizing around the deconstruction of sex, gender, and the sex/gender and nature/culture binaries, despite the fact that this deconstruction may be part of the underlying motivations for some of the organizing around the Positive Space Campaign. For some, it is in the complexities found from the deconstruction of sex and gender that their identities are rooted most profoundly.

A few days after Brock University hosted its annual open house for secondary school students interested in attending the university, an email came through the Positive Space email inbox from a visiting student who attended the open house and noticed the Positive Space Campaign posters around campus. The student expressed interest and excitement in the campaign, explaining that he hoped to be able to get involved in the initiative so that he could help out others who might be struggling with their identities on campus. This email serves as a reminder that despite the constraining limitations to the disruption of heteronormative space, the Positive Space Campaign *can* have an impact. Julie Podmore writes that “[q]ueer politics places a great deal of emphasis on ‘becoming visible’ as queer subjects. While the primary objective is to be visible to a mainstream public, a secondary aim is to be more visible to each other” (347).

Visibility is central to the disruption of homophobia and heteronormativity on the university campus. The spaces taken up by the Positive Space Campaign at Brock University have the potential to be expansive and fluid, and ultimately radical. The extent to which this potential is realized is constrained by the fact that the number of resources and spaces available for LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty remains low. The Positive Space Campaign is only the beginning of this process, and as a result, the Positive Space Campaign can create the illusion of inclusivity within an institution. Nevertheless, Positive Spaces are imagined spaces that challenge and change people’s conceptions of queer identities and conceptions of space.

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RAGHAB NEPAL

Friend to Be

When you cover yourself under the veil
Hiding thoughts to your inner soul
And cry the pain which you conceal
Remember there lay this friend to hold.
I know your feelings and your pangs.
So to the thunders I pray for your name,
For your smile, I can renounce this world.
But remember, Raghav be my name.

Raghav Nepal was born in Kathmandu, Nepal.