



(Un)Straightening the Syracuse University Landscape

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“Stay in your closets” was just one of several hateful messages chalked on the SU sidewalks during Coming Out Week in October 2000 (Blum, 2000; Davia, 2000). These anti-gay chalkings on the quad sparked considerable controversy within the SU campus community, but this is not the only instance in which the quad has acted as a space where conflicts between LGBT-supportive and non-supportive students find violent expression. It is with a particular series of incidents involving the use of visible spaces on the SU campus

that I seek to alert the reader to the intersections between sexuality and space, particularly the relationship between heteronormativity and the visible landscape of SU.¹ How is sexuality embedded within the landscape? How does the visible landscape, particularly the SU campus, embody, privilege, and reproduce heteronormative social relations? I suggest that struggles over sexuality—made visible on the concrete spaces of the landscape (such as the sidewalks on the SU campus quad)—can, on the one hand, be

representative of broader conflicts about sexuality within society and, on the other, serve as historic moments in defining social relations and longer-term institutional responses to these struggles.

Why should you be interested in reading this essay? Why does the landscape matter to anybody? For graduate students, faculty, and administrators who might not otherwise engage with these issues intellectually, I suggest the following reasons for reading this essay. First, drawing upon a lively literature on the landscape (both in its representations and its material form) within cultural geography, I suggest that it is important to not view the visible landscape at face value. The landscape necessarily needs to be understood as a product of the social relations that it embodies and reproduces (Mitchell, 2000). In other words, normative understandings of the landscape can lead to the reproduction of heteronormative discourses that continually make the landscape an inhospitable space for those who do not conform to its assumptions, i.e. the queer community. If we view the landscape at face value, not only do we uncritically accept its assumptions but we also play a part in reproducing and perpetuating its privilege. Therefore we, as teachers of a wide range of students, need to be cognizant of and perceptive about how



...because
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<gets>
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these embedded discourses relate to their lives, and our own. Second, once we recognize the importance of the visible landscape in embodying and reproducing heterosexual privilege, we can be active in creating spaces for the articulation of alternative discourses. These ‘safe spaces’ that allow for the existence of alternative sexualities are critical to the successful maintenance of a diverse campus community.

Several scholars have written extensively about the relationships between sexuality and space. My purpose in this particular essay is not simply to summarize and reiterate the brilliant insights that these works have provided, but to use them to provide an alternative reading of the SU landscape. Designed space has often acted

as “a regulator of public and private realms” and the “collusion of architecture in [a] ruse of heterosexual mythology is now well recognized” (Ingram, Bouthillette, & Retter, 1997, p. 374-5). The design of the American suburb, for instance, has been related to the entrenchment of patriarchal and heterosexual norms within society (Coontz, 1992; Ingram et. al., 1997). Indeed the critical role that the built landscape can play in shaping identities is a point that outgoing Chancellor Kenneth Shaw also recognizes in a letter that prefaces the walking tour guide of campus:

This is a campus shaped by students’ needs and desires. The 170 major buildings, the quadrangles, the walkways, the hills, and the playing field are far more than solid realities. They have had a part in forming each of our students’ experiences. They are rich in memories. This is also a place where a vision has taken hold. Our physical environment is designed to help make that so (Syracuse University, n.d.).

Much as the “University’s history is embedded in the campus itself” (Syracuse University, n.d., 3), so are unspoken assumptions about sexuality. One does not have to look too far beyond the seemingly apolitical process of the allocation of students to rooms in residence halls or even the design of locker rooms in the

gymnasium, both of which assume heterosexuality, to infer a narrative of sexual norms that are built into our physical environment. To this end, in the following sections, I will alert the reader to the conflicts that can result when assumed sexual norms are transgressed in the physical spaces of the landscape, and the ways in which these struggles can lead to potentially emancipatory outcomes.

Chalkings and hosings on the quad: Sexuality and public space

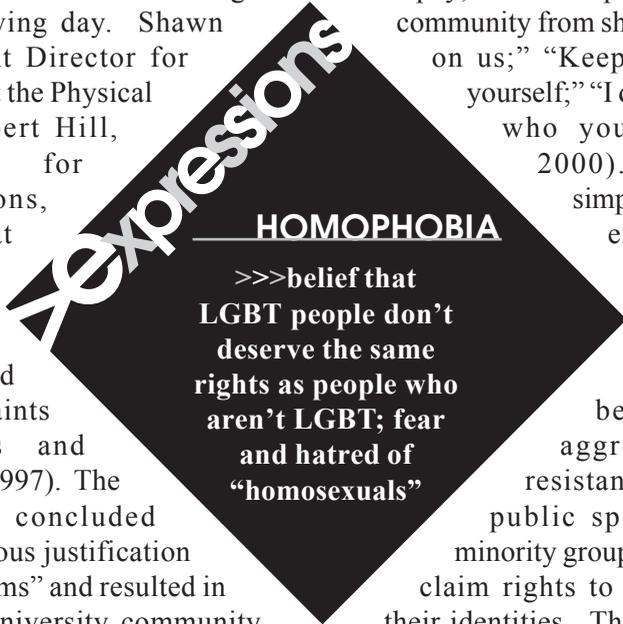
This section examines two different sets of incidents both involving the representation of alternative sexualities on the concrete sidewalks that crisscross the SU campus quad. The first involves an institutional response in the form of cleaning, or hosing away, pro-gay messages chalked on the quad by LGBT members of the SU community during the Coming Out Week celebrations in October 1997.² The second is a more direct conflict expressed in the form of anti-gay messages that were written on the quad in response to the chalked pro-gay messages during Coming Out Week in October 2000.

“SU erases chalkings: Physical Plant hoses Coming Out Week messages on Quad” reads the headline of an article in the October 8, 1997 issue of the *Daily Orange* (Akin & Barton, 1997, p. 1). During Coming Out Week in October

1997, gay-pride messages such as “I’m a dyke” and “There is a fag in Newhouse” were erased by SU Physical Plant after they allegedly received complaints from students and faculty regarding the “offensive” nature of these messages. Several members of the SU community suggested that cleaning of gay-pride chalkings was unnecessary censorship that would only perpetuate homophobia on campus. Despite this, Physical Plant erased Coming Out Week chalkings again the following day. Shawn Adam, Assistant Director for Administration at the Physical Plant, and Robert Hill, Vice-President for Public Relations, both agreed that the ‘hosings’ were justified on the pretext that they had received complaints from students and faculty (Barton, 1997). The whole incident concluded under an ambiguous justification of “policy problems” and resulted in a letter to the University community from Barry Wells, the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Student Relations of the University, apologizing for the confusion and reaffirming the

University’s commitment to diversity. The University’s use of a regulatory apparatus, the Physical Plant, in this ‘hosing’ incident needs to be understood as an attempt by the University to create and sustain a particular kind of order in its visible landscape—an order that is inordinately heteronormative and anti-gay.

Three years later, in October 2000, anti-gay chalkings on the quad read: “We’re mad and will be silent no more;” “Be gay and pay;” “Stand up and stop the gay community from shoving their beliefs on us;” “Keep the gay shit to yourself;” “I don’t need to know who you fuck” (Blum, 2000). Aside from simply being messages expressing hatred and violence, these words chalked on the quad also need to be understood as aggressive acts of resistance to the use of public space by a social minority group who attempted to claim rights to publicly express their identities. These writings were a response to the prideful Coming Out Week chalkings, inviting the SU campus community to come out, celebrate with, and be a part of SU’s queer community.



In the year 2000-2003, the University Senate Committee on Budget and Fiscal Affairs allocated a budget of \$90,000 to the LGBT Resource Center. Despite these praiseworthy developments, the SU landscape continues to embody and privilege heteronormative social relations.

**“Too aggressive and political”:
Sexuality and the cultural
landscape of SU**

The quad is not the only space to which access is governed by generally accepted heteronormative cultural norms within the SU community. Heterosexual privilege pervades all aspects of everyday life on the SU campus. It is precisely for this reason that the undergraduate LGBT student group on campus was criticized for being “too aggressive and political” by some members of both the straight and LGBT community (Akin, 1998). Pride Union, the undergraduate LGBT group, has to constantly balance between acting as a safe space for undergraduates and being an aggressive LGBT activist group. If sexuality and everyday life did not intersect constantly in complicated ways, Pride Union wouldn’t have to manage such a formidable task. Those who criticized Pride Union for being “too aggressive and political” are disturbed by the group’s sexual transgressions on the SU cultural landscape.

Bulletin boards and restrooms are just some of the other elements of the visible landscape that are frequent sites of LGBT-supportive and non-supportive conflicts at SU. Bulletin boards, especially in residence halls, are sites where such a conflict can be witnessed on almost a daily basis. In fact, a majority of the bias-related incidents reported to the Dean of Student’s office involve derogatory remarks regarding the perceived sexual orientation of the victims, written on the visible spaces of bulletin boards and whiteboards on individual students’ rooms. Once again, heteronormativity is not restricted to the realm of popular culture, manifested in such everyday conflicts, but is embodied in the institutional regulatory practices as well. The following incident involving the vandalism of gay pride posters provides evidence in this regard. Akin (1998) notes, “gay pride posters were ripped down by members of the Office of Residence Life because they depicted scenes of half-naked underwear models and girls kissing girls” (p. 3). Another student notes, “the simple act of putting up ‘safe space’ stickers [. . .] has brought her grief” (Flynn, 2002, p. 25).³ The student continues, “[m]onths ago a group of men saw the sticker on her bedroom window late at night and began banging on her window, yelling and screaming derogatory slurs at her” (Flynn, 2002, p. 25). As recent as fall 2003,

Coming Out Week posters were torn down from buildings all over campus upon complaints from some members of the SU community regarding the provocative nature of these posters (Kaechele, 2003). Much like the quad, bulletin boards are also sites within the visible landscape where heteronormative relations at SU become institutionalized through cultural norms (for instance, through hate messages) as well as policy-based practices (for instance, the removal of Coming Out Week posters by the University).

Creating progressive political spaces

In a letter addressed to the SU community, dated February 14, 2003, SU's Team Against Bias noted that, in Fall 2003, almost 73% of bias-related incidents reported to the Office of the Dean of Students were based on actual, or perceived, sexual orientation or gender identity. In a report by the University's Ad Hoc Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns, dated May 2001, the authors note that a survey of the campus community (students, faculty, staff, and administrators) showed that LGBT respondents were less likely to view the representations of LGBT community as neutral than non-LGBT respondents. While LGBT persons at SU perceived queer representations in campus



VOICES

I think a real issue on campus is that people who don't identify as LGBT feel that LGBT issues have absolutely no relationship to them.

>SU undergraduate student

media (*Daily Orange* and *Syracuse Record*) as negative, other SU community members perceived them as neutral. Finally, the report also suggested that LGBT students considered the University to be far less committed to making the campus safe for LGBT persons than non-LGBT respondents. What I have been arguing in this paper is that the visible landscape has much to do with these divergent perceptions and understandings of the LGBT community here at SU. By briefly exploring sexual politics on visible spaces of the campus, I hope to have elucidated some of the mechanisms by which the campus landscape becomes a product of heteronormative social relations within the SU community, and shown that

such a landscape becomes an inhospitable space for those who do not conform to its assumptions.

Contemporary institutional practices, inasmuch as they embody popular cultural norms, will continue to reproduce a landscape that is more welcoming to straight rather than LGBT students unless a concerted effort is made to make visible those aspects of the landscape that question its heterosexual assumptions. Although the struggles over space, as witnessed in the quad incidents, reveal a dark period in SU history, these incidents were also a defining moment for a recognition and institutionalization of more progressive sexual politics by our administration. Recent increased visibility of the queer community in the campus media, and the establishment of the LGBT Resource Center and the University Senate

Committee on LGBT Concerns are some crucial steps in the creation of spaces that allow for the articulation of alternative sexualities. Indeed, these steps are also associated with an increased visibility of the LGBT community in campus media and on campus at large. These are certainly progressive transformations in SU's institutional and cultural landscape. But much remains to be done and a critical engagement with the landscape can be a primary step in this direction. As educators, it is our responsibility to shed light upon the assumptions subsumed within the visible landscape. Through classroom discussions as well personal conversations with students, we must not only point out these assumptions but also be active in making sure that they are violated so that *concrete* safe spaces can be created on the campus.

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>>ENDNOTES

- 1 > For a definition and discussion of the concept of heteronormativity, see the essay by Susan Adams in this volume.
- 2 > Coming Out Week is a week of events aimed at creating awareness of LGBT issues and is hosted on the SU campus in the early part of the Fall semester every year.

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- 3 > Safe Space stickers are a part of the Safe Space Campaign started in 1997, sponsored by the Rainbow Alliance, Pride Union and Open Doors. A Safe Space symbol is not an indicator of sexuality but provides the assurance that a non-hostile environment will be provided to anyone regardless of his or her sexuality (Horseman 1997).