Abstract

The South is seen as a region “behind” the rest of the United States. While the South has its own particular challenges, it has been home to important queer activism and organizations. A failure to address the efforts of queer organizations and the diversity within those efforts erases the hard work being done in the South. Southerners on New Ground is a queer liberation organization based in Atlanta Georgia and the Youth Organizing Institute is an organization based in North Carolina that works to empower youth to resist homophobia and racism as well as other forms of oppression. I will explore how queer organizations engaged in community organizing and activism in the South, challenge the idea of a socially and politically conservative Southern context. I predict that these organizations are particularly attuned to the intersections of different types of oppression which allows them to build solidarity and support for different movements. The history of anti-racist movements in the South have likely influenced other types of organizing in the Southern context. This intersectional work disrupts conceptions the South as a place that is entirely socially and politically conservative.
Introduction

Feminist researcher Susan Freeman has pointed out a gap in scholarly attention to the concentration of queer communities existing outside cities such as New York or San Francisco where large queer populations are recognized; therefore, Freeman urges researchers to consider the specific contexts may have shaped queer political communities and activism (2000, p. 173). Queer community organizations and activism in the Southern context is one such location demanding further exploration. For the purposes of this study, the South is comprised of the former slave-owning states and the states that were a part of the Confederacy. The South has often been perceived as “backward,” “exceptional,” the “other, or as different from or behind the rest of the country (Griffin 2006). These perceptions of the South fail to address the history of resistance and activism of queer individuals in the South. While these perceptions may be oversimplified, the South certainly has its own challenges, particularly for queer folks. Despite, and perhaps because of these challenges, queer folks have found ways to resist oppression in the South. The question I propose is how do queer/LGBTQ organizations engaged in community organizing and activism in the South challenge the idea of a socially and politically conservative Southern context?

Background

Research has shown that states with inclusive non-discrimination policies, access to LGBT organizations, and low or no identification with a religion are associated with lower levels of minority stress and more positive perceptions of environment (Oswald & Lazarevic 2011, Riggle et al. 2010, van Dam 2014). Meeting the terms of this research in the South may prove challenging. None of the Southern states have non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation or gender identity (Movement Advancement Project 2016). In fact, Arkansas,
Tennessee and North Carolina have laws preventing the passage of local non-discrimination laws (Movement Advancement Project 2016). Mary-Ann Van Dam’s survey of lesbians across the United States and Canada found that women in the Southern United States showed lower rates of disclosure of their sexual identities, which is indicative of higher levels of minority stress (2014).

In their study of an LGBT organization in a rural Southern town, Kristina Drumheller and Bekki McQuay found that conservative “Bible Belt” attitudes as well as lack of funding were barriers to running an LGBT organization (2010). Additionally, Bernadette Barton argues that Evangelical fundamentalism in the South contributes to a religious environment that enforces compulsory heterosexuality (2011). Despite the specific challenges of the South, queer folks have ways to resist and thrive.

Until the 1990s, research on Southern queer activities was relatively slim. In *Men Like That*, John Howard addresses the gap in Southern queer research. He focuses on the period between 1945 and 1985 in Mississippi, and utilized oral histories to understand the changing, complex Southern context through a queer lens (1999). In *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson also draws on oral histories, but focuses on black gay men in the South. Johnson studies how black gay men have negotiated their identities in a Southern context, and argues that their existence within such context challenges the idea of the South as a hostile location (1999).

Additionally, Georgia and North Carolina have a particularly rich history of lesbian feminist organizations. In North Carolina, the feminist and lesbian journals, respectively, *Feminary, and Sinister Wisdom*, allowed lesbian women to voice their own experiences of lesbian identity in a Southern context during the 1970s and 1980s (Enszer 2015). In Atlanta, the lesbian bookstore Charis Books and More became instrumental in the formation of lesbian
community in the 1970s (Chesnut et al. 2009). As early as Lillian Smith, Southern feminists have been active in anti-racist movements alongside lesbian feminist authors, such as Mab Segrest to address the intersections of race, gender and queerness (Segrest 1985). Across the country, contemporary queer activists have been making connections between intersecting forms of oppression. For example, Veronica Terriquez (2015) has studied queer youth leaders in the immigrant rights movement. Queer folks have been involved in labor rights movements as well as anti-racist movements around the country, including the South (Kelly & Lubitow 2014, Bibler 2011, Mark Johnson 2017).

The legacy of Southern activism and queer recognition of intersecting forms of oppression continues in various organizations across the South. In Georgia, Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is a Queer liberation organization on the forefront of addressing intersectional issues such as xenophobia, classism, and racism. SONG has built its movement through “leadership development, intersectional analysis, and organizing” (About SONG). Additionally, The Youth Organizing Institute is was founded as way to train and support low income youths of color to oppose oppressive education policies in Wake county, North Carolina (Youth Organizing Institute History). The organization now emphasizes grassroots organizing for the rights LGBT and undocumented youth. Through an analysis of these organization’s websites I will answer the question: How do queer/LGBTQ organizations engaged in community organizing and activism in the South, challenge the idea of a socially and politically conservative Southern context?

Methods

I will do a discourse analysis on the Southerners on New Ground and the Youth Organizing Institute websites. Discourse analysis is used by feminists to analyze actions or
events by using rhetorical strategies to “accomplish actions, such as to persuade or to argue” (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014 47). Discourse analysis has been an important tool for feminist researchers for understanding language as function in the process of making meaning. Moreover, discourse analysis is useful for uncovering hidden oppressions, and subjugated knowledge. For these reasons, doing a discourse analysis on the websites of queer organizations in the South will bring attention to the efforts and resilience of queer organizers in the South which may have otherwise be overlooked.

The information I need is accessible on each of the organization’s websites. I will compare the history, vision, and mission statements of these two organizations. I will read through their reports as well as blog postings and news articles on their website about their activities. I will pay close attention to how these organizations create inclusive spaces and interact with other organizations (not limited to queer or LGBT organizations) to tackle systematic forms of oppression. I will pay careful attention to the language used by each organization and I will break down their emphasis on non-hierarchal leadership and tackling intersectional issues.

I will keep in mind the legacy of activism in the South and pay attention to how that is carried out in these organizations. I will take careful notes on my findings which I will compare with the existing literature I have found.

Expected Results

My hypothesis is that these organizations are particularly attuned to the intersections of different types of oppression which allows them to build solidarity and support for different movements. This intersectional work disrupts conceptions the South as a place that is entirely socially and politically conservative. It is possible that the history of racism and classism in the
South have necessitated more integrated forms of organizing. My research will address the gaps in research on queer Southern organizing. My research will culminate in a developed essay based on my findings which I will then present at the Undergraduate Research Symposium.

**Conclusion**

Despite the specific challenges faced by queer folks in the South, there is a history of queer organizing. Perhaps because of dominant narratives about the South as backward and therefore inhospitable for queer folks, there is a gap in the studies of queer organizations in the South. It is important to disrupt any belief or perception of the South as entirely conservative or in some way behind other regions, because such imaginations erase the experiences and influences of queer folks in the South. My research will address this important gap and bring attention to the important work being done by queer organizers in the South to challenge the socially and politically conservative region.
References


https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13178-014-0160-y

http://empoweryouthnc.org/about-youth-organizing-institute/history/
Budget

I plan to do this research for one month in the summer and would like to stay in Durham, North Carolina near Duke University which has excellent resources for Southern LGBTQ scholarship. I will spend two weeks doing my analysis of these two websites and researching queer organizations. I will spend two weeks writing my paper.

Housing Cost: $1,000

Transportation Cost:
  - Flight from Los Angeles to Nashville $200
  - Gas to drive from Nashville to Durham and driving within Durham $150

Food Cost $200