

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Senior Theses, Projects, and Awards

Student Scholarship

---

Fall 2013

### Critical Politics in a Neoliberal Institution: Gay and Lesbian Organizing at Swarthmore College, 1988-1993

Ali Roseberry-Polier , '14

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/theses>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Roseberry-Polier, Ali , '14, "Critical Politics in a Neoliberal Institution: Gay and Lesbian Organizing at Swarthmore College, 1988-1993" (2013). *Senior Theses, Projects, and Awards*. 469.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/theses/469>

Please note: the theses in this collection are undergraduate senior theses completed by senior undergraduate students who have received a bachelor's degree.

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses, Projects, and Awards by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

**Critical Politics in a Neoliberal Institution:  
Gay and Lesbian Organizing at Swarthmore College, 1988-1993**

**Abstract:** This paper studies gay and lesbian organizing at Swarthmore as part of national trends of neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and queer politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Students in this period achieved numerous concrete gains and institutional resources, particularly the establishment of an annual gay and lesbian studies conference and the Intercultural Center. In the process, they entered into new coalitions with each other, changing the way that students conceptualized identity and engaged with the school. Change was limited due to Swarthmore's corporate priorities and the challenges of achieving cultural transformation, but the process of organizing marked a valuable way of relating to the school and envisioning justice.

In the spring of 2013, the Swarthmore College campus saw a surge of student activism after certain students repeatedly peed on the door of the Intercultural Center. At the time, the attacks and the responses felt like part of a pattern that I had observed over my three years as a student here. The previous spring, students had been upset about graffitied death threats and verbal slurs towards queer students; the year before queer students had been physically assaulted on campus—and these instances were only the more obvious manifestations of attitudes and behaviors that many of us know to be pervasive. These three years and these events are not anomalous. Rather, the last several decades of Swarthmore's history are filled with ruptures, moments when campus feels filled with tension, typically in response to an assault on students with marginalized identities. Homophobic or racist graffiti, borderline violent counter-protests to gay and lesbian events, and physical assaults on group bulletin boards or spaces, such as meeting rooms or the Intercultural Center, pop up in the College newspaper with notable regularity. Students visibly respond, but the matter seems to disappear from view within weeks. Simply reading through individual newspaper articles covering these events, it could be easy to imagine firstly that organizing is something that happens in little spurts around big ruptures, and secondly

that little actually changes—hence the recurrence of similar events and grievances over the span of several decades.

Yet it would be a false oversimplification to say that everything is “the same” from one generation of students to the next and from one decade to the next. Swarthmore exists in the world that surrounds it and it is not immune to the changes that happen there. Furthermore, organizing does not happen in brief spurts; rather, students are continually organizing towards a more accepting campus. The period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s saw a great deal of change nationally in the arena of gay and lesbian organizing, discourses around multiculturalism, and the rise of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory as new ways of examining sexuality. These changes were apparent on Swarthmore’s campus, as gay and lesbian students began organizing for gay and lesbian studies, entering coalitions with other marginalized groups, and pushing towards institutional support for a diverse group of students, with notable success over a five-year period. This shift raises the questions: how did Swarthmore’s gay and lesbian organizers become politically engaged and active, demanding and achieving structural change from Swarthmore in coalition with other groups? Why did a change in campus culture not accompany these structural changes, such that similar ruptures occur with similar regularity now as they did decades ago?<sup>1</sup>

Swarthmore College, and institutions of higher education more generally, are often places where change happens slowly due to heavy bureaucracy, a desire to appease all students, and conservative trustees. Furthermore, with the growth of neoliberalism, higher education has increasingly become commodified, meaning that colleges are influenced more by market forces than their social justice values and making it hard to institute changes that lack clear financial or

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the term “structural” to refer to the structures of the institution, such as academic departments, programs like the Intercultural Center or Sager Symposium, and administrative policies. “Cultural” refers to campus attitudes and behaviors from students, faculty, and staff and the environment for people at the school.

reputational benefits. Yet despite what has been described as a “glacial” rate of change, Swarthmore has occasionally experienced rapid transformation. The years between 1988 and 1992 witnessed numerous structural changes in the arena of diversity and inclusion: in 1988, an alumnus set up a fund that the school used for an annual conference on gay and lesbian issues; in 1990, the school started having diversity workshops for all incoming students; in 1992, it established an intercultural center. The structural changes certainly brought about some cultural changes; people coming to the school in 1994 or 1995 described it as more accepting than those coming five years previously did, and discussions about issues of diversity and inclusion became more prevalent. However, discriminatory attitudes did not go away, even if they became less public or vitriolic. Racist and homophobic graffiti continued, as did attacks on queer students and the recently established Intercultural Center. In this paper, I will demonstrate both the ways that the institution of Swarthmore changed so dramatically in a few years and how it is that campus culture, influenced by cultural attitudes nationally, changed much more slowly. At the core of my analysis will be an examination of student issues and student organizations as one lens for understanding the institution as a whole. Swarthmore was part of a national debate in these years around neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and queer politics. These intellectual and political developments affected campuses in that they raised questions of what the purpose of a university is, whom it is supposed to serve, how learning happens, and what inclusion means. Swarthmore was struggling with the different answers to these questions, as students grappled with these questions both in the school as a whole and within their different activist organizations. While students were able to start organizations and institutions that provided resources for marginalized students and achieved certain curricular changes, Swarthmore as a whole remains an oppressive institution. The nature of being a neoliberal school as well as the challenges of having complete

student turnover every four years pose fundamental obstacles to transforming Swarthmore into an equitable or just environment. However, the process of organizing towards and achieving institutional change allowed students to reconceptualize the school's purpose and actively intervene in its structures, itself a potentially transformative process.

The 1980s and 1990s were a time of various social transformations in the United States that had ramifications for gay and lesbian individuals and organizing as well as ramifications for colleges and universities. The presidencies of Reagan and Bush heralded an expansion of neoliberalism, particularly a focus on the free market and a reconceptualization of the individual as a consumer. This notion of individualism came into conflict with emerging notions of multiculturalism, which called for the inclusion of marginalized racial and ethnic groups in previously white institutions and for social justice. In the same [era](#), the AIDS crisis reshaped gay and lesbian organizing and politics. Around 1990, this organizing radicalized, as can be seen in the emergence of a queer politics arguing against assimilation and for a more fundamental social restructuring.<sup>2</sup> This particular way of thinking about identity (and in particular, the identity of sexual minority groups) largely rejected theories of multiculturalism that advocated inclusion in preexisting systems. Neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and queer politics are three analytical frameworks that have salience for studying the late 1980s and early 1990s as the ideologies grew and came into conflict with each other in new ways. These frameworks are particularly useful for studying universities and the experiences of gay and lesbian students who attended them.

[Although](#) these three frameworks came into sharp conflict with each other [during the late 1980s and early 1990s](#), neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and gay and lesbian politics were not

---

<sup>2</sup> The terminology of “gay and lesbian” as opposed to “queer” was shifting rapidly in this time period, as queer politics and queer theory emerged around 1990. In this paper, I will use “gay and lesbian” when it is the term that people at the time used and when it is descriptive of the form of organizing in question. “Queer” refers to the changes in this organizing, particularly places where people explicitly embraced queer politics or queer theory. It is also a term I use to encompass issues of sexuality across a span of time.

new developments. Rather, each has a rich history in the late twentieth century university, political sphere, economy, and social movements. Historian Marc Stein traces the gay and lesbian movement from the 1950s to 1990, examining homophile activism in the 1950s and 1960s, gay liberation and lesbian feminism from 1969-1973, activism during the conservatism of the late 1970s, and AIDS activism in the 1980s, and concluding with an examination of LGBT and queer movements in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> He explains the importance of this history, saying, “The U.S. gay and lesbian movement of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s laid the foundation for transformative social, cultural, and political developments in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first.”<sup>4</sup> Earlier organizing had been torn between identity- and issue-based organizing and between the goals of rights or liberation; these tensions continued into the 1990s, particularly as queer politics began adopting more liberatory rhetoric and moving away from single identity politics. The activism in the period that I am studying is both deeply rooted in the organizing of the previous four decades and was a moment of transformation as LGBT and queer politics started to replace the earlier gay and lesbian organizing, marking a more coalitional turn in the movement.<sup>5</sup> Many of the goals and targets remained similar before and after 1990, but at this moment, the movement became more visible and radical, turning to direct action and aiming for liberation rather than assimilation. Some gays and lesbians began embracing and reclaiming the term queer both to reject of assimilation and to be more inclusive than the movement had been previously. The movement also began responding to critiques from queer people of color regarding their exclusion from the movement and attempted to adopt a more coalitional, multi-issue approach.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012) 12.

<sup>4</sup> Stein, 182.

<sup>5</sup> Stein, 182.

<sup>6</sup> Stein, 184-187.

Gay and lesbian organizing on college campuses was one manifestation of these national trends. While it changed greatly in the late 1980s and early 1990s with new conceptualizations of multiculturalism and queerness, this organizing cannot be understood outside the context of what groups had been doing up to that point. The first officially chartered campus gay rights group started at Columbia University in 1967, and soon other schools started chapters as well. Historian Brett Beemyn narrates the evolution of the Student Homophile League at Cornell University.<sup>7</sup> The group served as an activist organization with connections to other radical campus groups and also as a space for socializing. After the Stonewall riots in 1969, the group rejected assimilationism, instead partnering with other student groups that had system-level critiques of the modern-day U.S. and changing their name to the Gay Liberation Front. Although this group was more radical than other gay and lesbian student groups of the time, it represented the start of a new trend in gay and lesbian campus activism during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as students began to move away from assimilationism and began critiquing larger systems of oppression.

The neoliberal turn in the U.S. happened largely concurrently with the rise of the gay and lesbian movement. While neoliberalism has its roots in the 1930s, it came to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century in ways that profoundly shaped higher education and political engagement. Henry Giroux explains neoliberalism as an exclusive focus on the market alongside an attack on democracy and anything lacking a commodified value; citizenship becomes conflated with consumerism, challenging projects of democracy or social justice.<sup>8</sup> Neoliberalism threatens equity for people with marginalized identities, because “Within the discourse of neoliberalism, democracy becomes synonymous with free markets, while issues of equality,

---

<sup>7</sup> Brett Beemyn, “The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Groups,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12.2 (2003) 205-223.

<sup>8</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics,” *College Literature* 32.1 (Winter 2005) 2.

racial justice, and freedom are stripped of any substantive meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Neoliberalism heralded a triumphing of the individual over the collective and a focus on the consumption of commodities.

Neoliberalism’s influence extended to higher education, where degrees were increasingly seen as products. Wesley Shumar uses the concept of commodification to put the history of the university into conversation with the development of capitalism and neoliberalism in the late twentieth century U.S.<sup>10</sup> While he notes that there were faculty members critiquing commodification in higher education at the beginning of the century, he traces the true start of the neoliberal bent in universities to the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> There was a boom in higher education in the 1960s that “suggested the novel idea that higher education is a business like any other business, an industry supplying a product.”<sup>12</sup> This boom led to a bust [after](#) 1973 because of decreased enrollment and federal funding. Universities responded by adopting various policies for crisis management and looking for ways to market schools; this marked the emergence of the concept of students-as-consumers. Concurrently, President Nixon’s Secretary of Education decided to make higher education more career-oriented, further cementing notions of universities as a product.<sup>13</sup> These changes had a long-lasting and wide-ranging impact, such that higher education in the late-twentieth century cannot be understood outside the context of commodification.

Henry Giroux, Susan Searls Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, and Sophia McClennen each [investigated](#) the impact of neoliberalism on institutions of higher education in the following decades. Giroux focused his analysis on the early 1980s, when Reagan’s ideology heralded the importance of the market above all else.<sup>14</sup> Writing with Stanley Aronowitz, Giroux argues that

---

<sup>9</sup> Giroux, [“Terror of Neoliberalism”](#) 9.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley Shumar, *College for Sale*, (London: Falmer Press, 1997) 61.

<sup>11</sup> Shumar, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Shumar, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Shumar, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Giroux, [“Terror of Neoliberalism”](#) 11.



educational reform under Presidents Reagan and Bush “refashioned [education] around the principles of the marketplace and the logic of rampant individualism.”<sup>15</sup> Such transformations meant turning away from language of equity and democracy towards a focus on individualism and the student-as-consumer. In a later book, Henry and Susan Searls Giroux argue that this reform led to the commercialization and corporatization of universities, which has fundamentally changed the nature of higher education, as schools become focused on training students and acquiring money and prestige, rather than being a place where students can develop their identities, gain critical thinking skills, and prepare to be active and informed participants in a democratic system.<sup>16</sup>

Fred Bernard applies theories of neoliberalism in the university to a particular campus, Oberlin College, analyzing what the corporate turn entails and how universities brand themselves as a product with certain attributes. In this context, social justice values become a selling point more than they are a part of the institution’s educational and social project. Bernard reveals the ways schools advertise themselves, saying that they “must emphasize what is unique about the liberal arts experience and turn it into a brand.”<sup>17</sup> One example he provides is the money Oberlin has spent to cultivate its environmental justice reputation; this money is not spent to make Oberlin environmentally just, but rather to make it appear to be so for potential consumers of the Oberlin “product.” “Social justice” becomes about prestige, not about justice. He concludes by examining students as consumers rather than political activists; students “buy into” the

---

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education Still Under Siege* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1993) 1.

<sup>16</sup> Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education: Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 249-285.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Bernard, “The Neoliberal Arts College: Welcome to the Amenities Arms Race,” *The Wilder Voice* 6.10 (Winter 2010). Web.

university's corporate image and promote it rather than fighting the problems they see and challenging the institution to do better.

Neoliberalism as an ideology and practice on campuses comes into conflict with multiculturalism and conceptualizations of the university as a place of social justice. Henry and Susan Searls Giroux argue that the market cannot handle issues of equity and justice. They call for a different way of conceptualizing the university, saying, "Higher education is about more than job preparation and consciousness-raising; it is also about imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention into public life."<sup>18</sup> They go on to offer particular models of how universities can do this, saying that studies of cultural difference, power, and privilege must be central to curricula. They discuss multiculturalism as a way of disrupting traditional practices and values and rewriting scripts of domination and privilege.<sup>19</sup>

Achieving these multicultural ideals is a challenge, however, as neoliberal institutions co-opt multicultural principles to brand themselves as more socially just. The term and concept of multiculturalism emerged in the 1970s and entered higher education in the 1980s as a method of addressing racial difference and inequality in academic institutions.<sup>20</sup> Although the concept has its roots in ensuring just and equitable education for all, many critique the way that universities have co-opted it, such that multiculturalism becomes one more way for the university to market itself rather than a path towards social justice. College ranking systems make "diversity" a point of competition among schools, something that can improve their rankings.<sup>21</sup> Diversity is seen as a resource for the institution and [a skill set](#) for the students that have historically benefited from higher learning institutions [rather than an educational principle or social value](#) intended to

---

<sup>18</sup> Giroux and Giroux, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Giroux and Giroux, 197.

<sup>20</sup> Bonnie Urciuoli, "Producing Multiculturalism in Higher Education: Who's Producing What for Whom?," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 12.3 (1999): 287.

<sup>21</sup> Urciuoli, 288.

benefit historically marginalized and excluded students.<sup>22</sup> One of the central interventions of critical race theory, emerging concurrently with multiculturalism, is the notion of “interest convergence,” that “what is true for subordination of minorities is also true for the relief of it: civil rights *gains* for communities of color coincide with the dictates of white self-interest.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, institutions will allow for the rights of minorities, but only when it serves their own interests. Writing more recently, anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli concludes that the discourse around multiculturalism in higher education is “about as capitalist as one can get,” and that administrative concerns on the matter are entirely market-based, not centered in social justice.<sup>24</sup> Such a version of multiculturalism—liberal multiculturalism—allows more individuals access to oppressive institutions without challenging their underlying oppression; this version of multiculturalism differs greatly from its original conceptualization as a radical intervention into oppressive spaces.

Though much of the literature on multiculturalism focuses on race and ethnicity, some authors have used a multicultural framework to talk about gay and lesbian inclusion (or lack thereof) in the university. For instance, Robert Rhoads [uses multiculturalism to analyze gay and lesbian student organizing in the 1990s](#). His interpretation of “multicultural” sets him apart from other scholars examining student activism in the 1990s, who conceived of multicultural protest as only addressing race and ethnicity. Rhoads argues that the recent rise in protest on college campuses is an instance of students of marginalized identities, including sexuality, reconceptualizing their potential inclusion in the social and academic life of the college.<sup>25</sup> At

---

<sup>22</sup> Urciuoli, 290-291.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 18.

<sup>24</sup> Urciuoli, 296.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Rhoads, “Student Protest and Multicultural Reform: Making Sense of Campus Unrest in the 1990s,” *Journal of Higher Education* 69.6 (1998): 624.

some schools, such as Swarthmore, gay and lesbian students worked with other marginalized students towards campus reform.

As the 1980s came to a close, the tension between neoliberalism and multiculturalism remained salient, structuring student engagement on university campuses. As schools became increasingly dedicated to branding themselves, it became harder to maintain a genuine commitment to social justice, since diversity became an asset rather than a core value. Marginalized students in this period protested the administrative neglect to their concerns, advocating multiculturalism as one way to become a more inclusive institution. Gay and lesbian students were a part of this trend, as gay and lesbian organizing nationally became more radical and visible. The next section will address how the conflicts between neoliberalism and multiculturalism manifested on Swarthmore's campus.

As a school whose students come from a wide range of backgrounds and as an institution in conversation and competition with similar institutions around the country, Swarthmore was always an active player in these national debates. One way that new theories of multiculturalism were visible on campus was in the change in language in student publications. In particular, multiculturalism, diversity, and political correctness became buzzwords on campus starting in around 1989. Sometimes, students used the terms as something important to achieve—"we need to be diverse"—whereas other times it was used more derisively—"political correctness stifles dialogue"—but the concepts were undeniably regular topics of conversation and a part of students' self-perception—"politically correct" became a stereotype of Swarthmore and Swarthmore students. An article in the student paper, *The Phoenix*, in the spring of 1990 explained, "Swarthmore has over the past two semesters begun to evaluate how the school accommodates difference on campus, with 'diversity' nearing the status of a campus

buzzword.”<sup>26</sup> As buzzwords, none of these words had a clear, agreed-upon definition. For instance, a set of workshops on diversity “revolved around several dimensions of diversity, including but not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic class, handicap and sexual orientation”<sup>27</sup> while other documents only mentioned race, and various forms of diversity were often excluded from articles, demands, and public conversations over the coming years.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the presence of this new terminology reflected a change in campus culture towards a greater focus on these issues.

As “diversity” rose to buzzword status during the 1989-1990 school year, it was accompanied by increased student agitation to actually make the school more diverse. The previous spring, students submitted a list of demands to “creat[e] a truly diverse and open community,”<sup>29</sup> and the prior fall, the *Phoenix* published various letters to the editor on how to achieve greater diversity. These letters demanded fundamental changes to the college through curricular reform and increased workshops.<sup>30</sup> Students put together an intensive 2-day workshop over winter break for 100 interested students called “Exploring a World of Difference.”<sup>31</sup> These events and articles demonstrate that diversity was a ubiquitous topic of conversation and that various groups of students sought “solutions” to the perceived issue. The documents allude to administrative concern as well, portraying these as issues that “the College” as a whole was trying to address.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Parke Wilde, “Dialogue on Diversity in Curriculum Grows.” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 12 April 1990: 6.

<sup>27</sup> Nick Jesdanun, “Students Explore Diversity Issues,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 26 January 1990: 2.

<sup>28</sup> Staff Editorial. “Swarthmore Must Make Diversity a Priority,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 September 1991: 2.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Carter, Gloria Martinez, Nien-he Hsieh, Volker Schachenmayr, Frances Poodry, and Sameer Ashar. “Coalition of Students Draws Up Plan for Diversity.” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 8 May 1989: 5.

<sup>30</sup> “On All Fronts, Students Demand More Attention for Diversity,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 22 September 1989: 3. [Three letters to the editor]

<sup>31</sup> Nick Jesdanun, “Students Explore Diversity Issues,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 26 January 1990: 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Carter, Martinez, Hsieh, Schachenmayr, Poodry, and Ashar: 5.

The spring of 1991 was a turning point in terms of administrative attention to issues of diversity. That semester, the school selected Al Bloom to be the next college president, a candidate whose self-proclaimed focus was diversity and “the celebration of difference.” Bloom stated that nothing was more important than ensuring that students of different cultures, races, and sexual orientations were adequately represented at the college.<sup>33</sup> Bloom envisioned a multicultural university, and included sexual diversity in this vision. He replaced a president whom students did not consider to be an activist or engaged with the student body; the outgoing president had recently rejected a preliminary proposal for an intercultural center, saying that it would not be a good use of funds and would isolate students from each other.<sup>34</sup> According to Vice President Maurice Eldridge the Board of Managers (responsible for selecting the president of the College) wanted the next president to address diversity, and “to really move that forward as an aim of the College and as a part of the identity of the whole community.”<sup>35</sup> While this period was not the first in which the administration addressed diversity, the ongoing presence of these conversations speaks to the inadequacy of the solutions put forward and the failure to achieve meaningful diversity.<sup>36</sup> These shortcomings cannot be understood without understanding the neoliberal context. Although Swarthmore administrators were often dedicated to social justice as well as to the school’s reputation, market-based concerns by necessity trumped equity-based ones.

As the scholarship on neoliberalism and multiculturalism in higher education shows, the college was trying to cultivate an image of itself as a diverse campus in part because of political

---

<sup>33</sup> Eliana Miller and Carolyn McConnell, “Alfred Bloom Nominated President: Candidate Stresses Diversity,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 20 February 1991: 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Seth Brenzel, personal interview, 18 November 2013; John Crosby, “Students Present Center to Board of Managers,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 8 March 1990: 1, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Eldridge, personal interview, 26 November 2013.

<sup>36</sup> See David Uhlman, “Separatism vs. Community: College Enters Critical Period,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 18 September 1981, 3 for one example of such a conversation and the administrative response. The language around “critical period” is one that seems to be recurring.

and cultural forces rewarding a visible commitment to diversity. While administrators may have been truly committed to diversity and social justice, this commitment is inseparable from the cultural and economic pressures on Swarthmore mandating diversity as a marketing point, and the neoliberal mandate often trumped social justice values. The institutional conversations about diversity were partially a branding effort, leading to regular student disappointment. In a satire piece written the week that the Intercultural Center (IC) eventually opened, two students jested, “It only took us 125 years to co-opt the phrase ‘multi-cultural.’”<sup>37</sup> This statement speaks to some students’ skepticism about the College’s intentions in embracing multiculturalism and the belief that Swarthmore, as a neoliberal institution, was co-opting a radical value to advance its own agenda.

However, many students, particularly those with more privileged identities, bought into the socially just, diverse image of Swarthmore, adopting it as a given rather than as a goal. As part of this branding, students began to incorporate “politically correct” (“PC”) as a Swarthmore stereotype. “Politically correct” was frequently discussed in the pages of the *Phoenix*, where it was typically described derisively, as something that stifled dialogue. One opinion piece that surveyed students about what they thought “PC” was got a range of answers, from “a system of language that stems from the theory of multiculturalism” to “a joke,” “being so worried about stepping on people’s toes that one doesn’t walk,” “obnoxious,” “radicalism and closed-mindedness,” “constraining,” and “ridiculous.”<sup>38</sup> The idea that political correctness is something restrictive imposed by a few angry self-righteous people was fairly pervasive, being voiced in

---

<sup>37</sup> Elise Richer and Becca Crager “Appealing Apparel From Hell,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] April 10 1992: 4.

<sup>38</sup> Zaineab Kahn, “‘Politically Correct’ Creates Confusion and Resentment,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 19 April 1991: 3.

various opinion pieces.<sup>39</sup> In part, these students were objecting to discussions of identity; PC dialogue is that which takes identity into consideration, something that many students felt to be unnecessary. Yet despite the fact that most students expressed a critical view of the concept, the pervasiveness of discussion about it demonstrates the hold that it had on Swarthmore's campus and the fact that many students, for one reason or another, felt a pressure to adopt PC language.

Marginalized students also critiqued the emerging emphasis on political correctness, but for different reasons; they felt that the PC trend made Swarthmore polite without making it accepting. The *Phoenix* published an article in the fall of 1990 titled "Swarthmore Racism: Subtle but Pervasive." The article described one student who found that "students at Swarthmore often use p.c. rhetoric as a way of keeping ideas of race at a shallow level" and quoted another who said, "Because of the p.c. language, people don't express what they really feel."<sup>40</sup> These students felt deep underlying problems that political correctness did not address. In other words, the students most likely to be seen as the promoters and enforcers of political correctness or the people it was supposed to benefit were by no means supporters of the movement. Gay and lesbian students fell into this category, stating that there was a lack of useful dialogue about sexuality on campus because students were too careful about being politically correct.<sup>41</sup>

Privileged and marginalized students alike critiqued political correctness for stifling dialogue, but while the former group rejected it because they objected to discussing identity at all, the latter group critiqued it for stopping more in-depth conversations about identity and difference. Swarthmore, in embracing political correctness, had adopted a posture of diversity

---

<sup>39</sup> For examples, see: Anonymous, "Parrish Signs Provoke Reflection and Realization," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 25 January 1991: 3; Seth Ovadia, "Group Identity Crisis," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 September 1991: 6; Dan Meyer, "Constructive Discussion Focuses On Arguments," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 1 March 1991: 4.

<sup>40</sup> Karama Neal, quoted in Carolyn McConnell, "Swarthmore Racism: Subtle but Pervasive," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 28 September 1990: 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Stephanie Hirsch, "College Struggles to Maintain Dialogue about Sexual Issues," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 October 1989: 10.



without becoming a truly accepting, inclusive, or diverse campus. Most students, it appears, were critical of political correctness, either because they felt it stifled their speech or because they felt it stifled meaningful discussions of equity and justice. The discussion about “political correctness” is significant because, like branding, political correctness is the outward appearance of social justice without the accompanying inward dedication to those values; PC language was an outward display of social justice values that prevented conversations about the underlying issues.

The conversation about political correctness was part of larger conversations about identity and its significance in social interactions; students at Swarthmore were divided between multicultural and neoliberal conceptions of individuals and identities. Many marginalized students wanted to talk about identity as part of a conversation about social justice and equity, while predominantly privileged students wanted identity to be unspoken and to see the world only in terms of individuals. The latter perspective is visible both from more privileged students and those who were hurt by inequality at Swarthmore and in the world but who ultimately wanted to be seen “as people.” Two letters to the editor from the spring of 1991 demonstrate this perspective clearly. In one, a student [spoke](#) to a debate that had been ongoing in the *Phoenix* for several weeks about a homophobic joke. The author [defended](#) it and [critiqued](#) the earlier letters that “creat[e] barriers among ourselves;” he [viewed](#) any mention of identity as a “barrier,” and [stated](#) that “I just don’t feel the need to put up barriers by separating everyone into their own little ‘groups.’” He [went](#) on to say that a previous letter’s author had “forced up a barrier that made me into white, male heterosexual that doesn’t understand him. I never felt that way before, and I don’t like it. That’s offensive to me as a person.”<sup>42</sup> The fact that he had “never felt that way

---

<sup>42</sup> Joe Leahy, “Homophobia and Heterosexism: Two Misunderstood Concepts,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 22 March 1991: 2.

before” demonstrates the ways in which some students felt able to ignore identity. A month later, in the midst of a different controversy, a woman wrote a letter saying that she was frustrated with sexism, but was most frustrated by the constant conversation about it; she expressed a desire to simply be a person without having to constantly talk about gender.<sup>43</sup> She saw the conversation as more limiting than the sexism itself. In these writers’ view, identity is something that is divisive if it is spoken, and the world would be better if everyone were treated as an individual instead. This idea is a fundamentally neoliberal one that holds that people can be treated as individuals independent of the social contexts and forces that shape them, and that “equality” can be achieved only by “looking past” identity. This belief understandably came into sharp conflict with the students who wanted Swarthmore to become a multicultural institution that addressed the inequality affecting people because of the identities that they hold. Notably, the students who wanted to use a framework of individuals rather than identity were often the quickest to defend Swarthmore as it already was. These students adopted the “politically correct Swattie” stereotype as a way of adopting the college’s branding of itself as socially just. Rather than pushing themselves and the school to do more, they took on the college’s rhetoric of social justice as something already achieved.

The pervasive nature of the debate over political correctness and diversity demonstrates the ways in which the rapid transformation around language of multiculturalism and inclusion on a national scale had manifested itself on Swarthmore’s campus. Swarthmore was simultaneously attempting to become more inclusive and attempting to foster its image as a diverse, socially just campus. While some students bought into Swarthmore’s image, other students took issue with the school’s empty commitments and the lack of serious dialogue around issues of diversity in

---

<sup>43</sup> Kelley Brooke Snyder, “Tiring Out A Woman,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 26 April 1991: 4.

the student body. The next section will focus on how student organizing evolved in reaction to the cultural shifts on campus and began challenging the school to do more.

Marginalized students were constantly organizing in reaction to campus attitudes and the challenges that they faced; such organizing was a central part of campus life and Swarthmore education for many gay and lesbian students. While the *Phoenix* can provide some sense of the events that unfolded as well as what campus buzzwords were, it is harder to understand from the periodical record, focused on discrete events, what student organizing was like or how campus attitudes manifested on a daily basis for gay and lesbian students. Therefore, it is important to examine the documents (fliers, meeting notes, proposals) of groups and use oral history to detail the documents' significance. David Reichard explains the shortcomings of official documents in telling queer history because of the frequent and intentional absence of sufficient evidence from the archives. Building on the arguments of Ann Cvetkovich and José Muñoz regarding queerness and archival documentation, Reichard further argues for the inherent impossibility of capturing queerness through official documents. Thus, he finds the need to examine the "ephemera" of student groups in order to understand the experiences of students. These documents by themselves are insufficient, however, given how many documents are lost (institutions do not typically expend energy or resources to archive this material) and how challenging it is to piece together a narrative from the occasional flier. Reichard argues, "oral histories can transform such 'visual traces' of 1970s queer student histories into more substantive evidence of the social and political climate in which such students lived, went to school, and organized [...] lead[ing] to a much deeper understanding of gay and lesbian student experiences on campus than would be possible with only ephemera to consult."<sup>44</sup> Using Reichard's argument, this paper will rely on a

---

<sup>44</sup>David A. Reichard, "Animating Ephemera through Oral History: Interpreting Visual Traces of California Gay College Student Organizing from the 1970s." *Oral History Review* 39.1 (2012): 39.

combination of *Phoenix* articles, group records, and oral history to analyze the experiences of gay and lesbian students. In doing so, I am engaging with accounts that are often contradictory and reflect the weaknesses of individual memory, and I am omitting various accounts—in particular, those of gay and lesbian students who were not open about their sexuality at the time or who were not involved with the groups on campus. Nevertheless, this methodology allows me to understand what was happening from the perspectives of some of the people involved.

The *Phoenix* differs from many official records that ignore issues of sexuality; one important divergence is in its attention to the experiences of gay and lesbian students. One example of this is a features piece in the fall of 1989 with numerous articles about gay and lesbian life. The spread is significant firstly because the *Phoenix* editors thought that it was newsworthy, showing the growing discussions around sexuality on campus; it came shortly after a similar spread on race, demonstrating the increased conversations about diversity more broadly in these years. Students interviewed spoke to the challenges of coming out or being open about their sexuality and the small presence of openly gay and lesbian students on campus. The articles depicted the gay and lesbian population as being largely invisible; one student said that there was a “vanishingly small community,” but that “while he could count on his hand the ‘out men’, [...] ‘there is a huge invisible community.’”<sup>45</sup> Those who were more visibly out described feeling that their identity was constantly politicized; one said that she felt like she was “living a campaign” while another felt that “every time I kiss my girlfriend in public I’m making a political statement.”<sup>46</sup> This perspective clearly differs from students who did not think that identity is

---

<sup>45</sup> Charles Eliason, quoted in Stephanie Hirsch, “Even at a Liberal School, Coming Out is Difficult,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 October 1989: 1.

<sup>46</sup> Gina Siesing, quoted in Stephanie Hirsch, “Sexual Minorities Feel Mixed about the College,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 October 1989: 11; Bee Bell, quoted in Chris Welser, “AS IS Aims to Provide Comfortable Community for Sexual Minorities,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 October 1989: 11.

important; for gay and lesbian students, identity was an unavoidable and politically relevant part of daily life.

Visibility was a big issue, as was finding support for a marginalized and often unacknowledged identity. The gay and lesbian student group at the time, [AS IS](#) (Alternative Sexualities Integrated at Swarthmore), was in part a resource group throughout this time period, and started providing a daily hotline staffed by students in the fall of 1989 as a way of supporting students who were not out.<sup>47</sup> This group had existed since [at least](#) the mid-1970s, but underwent many changes [during the era of this study](#), moving from serving a primarily social function to taking more action to change Swarthmore culturally and structurally.<sup>48</sup> In the 1989-1990 school year, AS IS hosted private parties for gay and lesbian students and had an open forum on LGB issues at Swarthmore with 40-50 students attending and what organizers described as a “very enthusiastic” reception.<sup>49</sup> A document that the AS IS interns wrote about their activities for [that](#) year and the following one mentioned the Sager Symposium in March and their involvement in the effort to establish an Intercultural Center. However, most of the document is focused on social events, suggesting that this was its main purpose. The fall of 1990 was similar, with no mention of the IC. Affairs began to change that spring, when the group started taking more action, something that was enabled by the close personal bonds they had been developing in their earlier work. They changed their name to Action Les-B-Gay, a decision that reflected their desire

---

<sup>47</sup> Chris Welser, “AS IS Aims to Provide Comfortable Community for Sexual Minorities,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 6 October 1989: 11.

<sup>48</sup> These changes were reflected in regular name changes. While it is hard to always know exactly when the group changed its name, it was called Alternative Sexualities Integrated at Swarthmore (AS IS) by the spring of 1989 and changed its name to Action Les-B-Gay in the spring of 1991. By 1993, it was the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Alliance (LBGA) and became the Swarthmore Queer Union (SQU) in 1995. The Gay and Lesbian Union (GLU) seems to be the umbrella name given to all groups, also encompassing discussion groups (that lack documentation) that existed alongside the more visible groups. Together, these groups served support, social, and activist roles. In this paper, the name I use will change to reflect the accurate name for the moment in question.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Koosed and David Papanikolas, “Gay & Lesbian Students Union Minutes & Commentary,” August 1990 and May 1991, Swarthmore College Intercultural Center.

to take more direct action and to eschew the derogatory implications of “alternative sexualities” and the connotation of “loosing one’s own identity” that students felt went along with the word “integrated.”<sup>50</sup> Instead, students wanted to become more visible; one alum that was involved in the group at the time spoke about wanting to have a bigger campus profile and the belief that “visibility could promote positive social change.”<sup>51</sup> The increased focus on action and visibility was part of a national transformation in gay politics; the philosophies of ACT-UP and Queer Nation (for example) demonstrate the increasing belief among gay and lesbian activists that change would come only through visible direct action, in opposition to the intentional silence regarding AIDS and gay and lesbian identities during the previous eight years of Reagan’s presidency. Action Les-B-Gay’s emphasis on pride and a rejection of assimilation was also a part of the emerging national queer politics. National developments in gay organizing were taking hold on Swarthmore’s campus.

The new incarnation of the student group took on projects ranging from new student enrollment to involvement in starting the Intercultural Center. That semester, students worked with the dean of admissions to increase LGB enrollment. Although the dean was not receptive to the idea of having a pamphlet on gay life at Swarthmore, he suggested other ways that they could reach prospective students, such as publishing events in the *Phoenix*, which the group started doing. Students also met with the relevant administrator about the fact that, in agreement with Pennsylvania state law, the student handbook listed sodomy as sexual abuse/assault. It seems that this had not been a problem in past years, and the administrator agreed that the provision should be removed. While this is a simple action, it reveals the ways that students were beginning to assert their rights and challenge the policies of the institution. That same semester, students

---

<sup>50</sup> Jon Raymond, “G/L/B Group Changes Its Name and Agenda,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 28 March 1991: 6; Koosed and Papanikolas.

<sup>51</sup> Seth Brenzel, personal interview, 18 November 2013.

(including two from Action Les-B-Gay) wrote a formal proposal for the Intercultural Center that was accepted pending the acquisition of available space.

While Action Les-B-Gay became more visible and active during this time, it also maintained an important support and social role for its members, not all of whom were willing or able to be visible in their sexual identity. In their proposal for the IC, the group stated a need for a back door so that members could enter without being publicly identified, speaking to the continued student need for privacy and a safer space for discussion about gay identity.<sup>52</sup> While this year was one in which Action Les-B-Gay achieved various demands and had a strong membership—attendance was about 15-20 at the start of the year—there was tension by the spring, and possibly throughout the year. The group’s account of second semester ends by describing the “severe lack of communication + participation within the gay community this semester” which led to a facilitated discussion with a dean about ways to move forward.<sup>53</sup> It is uncertain how these discussions concluded, but the fragmentation within “the gay community” is significant. Sharing an identity is not enough to unite a group of people, and as students came together in new ways, they discovered the challenges within this type of organizing.

To contextualize the written and oral accounts of gay and lesbian students’ experiences in this moment, it is important to [track](#) the ruptures on campus, largely acts of vandalism and verbal slurs. It is useful to start this narrative before the time period I am studying to show the ways in which the events of these years were not exceptional but fit into a larger narrative arc of Swarthmore’s queer history. Articles from the *Phoenix* in the early 1980s document various hostile attitudes and behaviors. In one instance, students publicly burned a pair of blue jeans in response to a protest advocating acceptance of gays and lesbians that used blue jeans as a symbol

---

<sup>52</sup> Proposal for an Intercultural Center, circa February 1991, Swarthmore College Intercultural Center.

<sup>53</sup> Koosed and Papanikolas.

of gay identity. One student subsequently defended his action by saying that he did not want deviant sexualities glamorized on campus.<sup>54</sup> On other occasions, students vandalized the gay and lesbian group board with homophobic graffiti and a fraternity harassed and expelled a student for being gay.<sup>55</sup> These instances are just a few examples of a trend of open discrimination towards gay and lesbian students [during the 1980s](#). Such instances continued throughout the time period that I am studying. Alumni Jennifer Koosed '93, an Action Les-B-Gay leader, remembers that fairly “nasty” and “verbally violent” events occurred at least once a semester throughout her time at Swarthmore, from 1989 to 1993. While such events were not constant, they were always a possibility; Koosed remarked, “it wasn’t a daily thing at all. I think that we all felt fairly comfortable on campus. But you never knew when something would just come out of nowhere and it usually came pretty hard and fast and it was usually very verbally violent.”<sup>56</sup>

Such verbal attacks can be seen through written slurs as well. Lauren Stokes has written a history of queer chalkings on campus from the mid 1980s to the early 2000s where she charts both pro-gay and homophobic graffiti. These messages reflect similar attitudes to the less anonymous debates—some students used this medium to demand acceptance and declare pride, while others reacted hatefully to these statements. The tradition of expressing political views or advertising events through writing in chalk on campus walkways seems to have started in 1986, when students wrote pro-lesbian messages around campus with chalk. Other students responded by writing, “kill the fags” and wrote a KKK logo on the door of the GLU meeting room. Stokes does not find evidence of pro-gay graffiti for the next eight years, but there is evidence of regular homophobic vandalism in bathroom stalls, study carrels, and the public phone directory.

---

<sup>54</sup> David Uhlmann, “Jean Burning Incident Alarms Campus,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 24 April 1981: 1.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Blackburn, “Untitled,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 19 September 1980: 5; *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 4 December 1981: 1-3. [Series of articles]

<sup>56</sup> Jennifer Koosed, personal interview, 10 November 2013.



Students at the time felt that these regular instances were not random, and were instead evidence of homophobia and misogyny entrenched within the Swarthmore student body. Such speech continued past the period I am studying—for instance, someone spray painted “fuck homos” on Parrish Hall in 1996, vandalized a SQU banner in 1998, and wrote messages such as “die, faggots, die” on SQU posters in 2001.<sup>57</sup> It is impossible to know exactly how frequently such events occurred or how these attitudes manifested in daily interactions. However, it is worth noting the long trajectory of such occurrences—homophobic chalkings and verbal slurs continue on campus today—to demonstrate how the years in question fit into a larger narrative. There were certainly various changes in the time in question—perhaps most obviously, as the 1980s and 1990s progressed, people stopped being as open with discriminatory beliefs—but this does not mean that the attitudes went away. Rather, as various students articulated, these changes in part reflect the fact that students became more polite in an effort to be “politically correct.” Thus, gay and lesbian students in the time period I am studying were regularly reminded of the ongoing and pervasive homophobia on campus while those around them pretended that it did not exist because of the “politically correct” image that Swarthmore had cultivated for itself. The pervasiveness of discriminatory attitudes speaks to the fact that structural changes did not necessarily bring about cultural ones; although this was a period of great change, many forms of violence persisted.

Another place where intolerant attitudes manifested themselves was in a recurring debate over the merits of groups that were “closed”—limited to students with particular historically marginalized identities. Critics objected to the concept of closed groups because they did not believe that they benefited the entire student body and regularly challenged their right to funds.

---

<sup>57</sup> Lauren Stokes, “What is the history of queer chalkings on campus?” *The Daily Gazette* [Swarthmore, PA], 10 November 2006: Web.

The last iteration of the funding controversy that I have found was in the fall of 1988, when students debated a proposal regarding whether the Student Activities Fund (SAF), funded by student fees, should fund closed groups. Although the issue had been resolved numerous times over the previous decade, its recurrence demonstrates that the ideologies motivating the debate remained salient.<sup>58</sup> At its core, this debate was between those who believed that equity and justice demanded cultural groups for marginalized students and those who felt that money they considered to be “theirs” should not fund something in which they could not partake; like many disputes at the time, this one stemmed from the conflict between multicultural and neoliberal ideology. For students in the former group, equity meant actively creating structures to support marginalized students; as an opinion piece stated,

It is utterly ironic that the current SAF proposal expresses a desire for ‘equality’ and ‘inclusion’ as its ultimate aim. At a predominantly-white institution, where the ideas, values and beliefs of middle-class America pervade all aspects of student life, is it too little to ask that some students be allowed to express their own cultural identity and not dismiss it as ‘racist’ or ‘biased?’ There is an implicit argument in the current proposal that any culture can be improved with assimilation with the majority—that’s called ‘intolerance.’<sup>59</sup>

This group of students [believed](#) that inclusion demanded acceptance and celebration of differing cultural heritages rather than an erasure of difference, a tenet of multiculturalism. Other students, however, did not want their money to fund activities in which they could not participate. This represents a neoliberal approach to education, holding that “consumers” should be able to feel the direct benefit of their “purchase” through membership in any group they choose—choice being a particularly neoliberal concept. These students construe benefit narrowly. The benefit of the community from such organizations is insufficient; they, as individuals, must be able to benefit from the option of membership in any group. While these attitudes did not go away, the

---

<sup>58</sup> “SAF Dispute—a closed chapter in SC agenda,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 14 October 1988: 2.

<sup>59</sup> “SAF Proposal Intolerant,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 7 October 1988: 2.

immediate issue of funding was resolved in 1988. The resolution of this issue partially allowed for the increased role of closed groups on campus, particularly through the founding of the IC.

Swarthmore's gay and lesbian organizing evolved rapidly in these years, becoming more active, visible, and anti-assimilationist. This organizing sought in part to address the forms of violence that students experienced on campus; students began seeking institutional change to address the injustices that they encountered. In doing so, they came into conflict with neoliberal ideologies within the student body holding that Swarthmore was already socially just and that discussions of identity were unnecessary.

As students at Swarthmore began to organize around institutional change, gay and lesbian studies began to emerge on a national scale as one way that students and faculty imagined inclusion in the academy. While the historiography on gay and lesbian studies and on gay and lesbian activism is often separate, academic and social changes were closely intertwined, with many campus activists pushing for curricular change. Historian John D'Emilio [argues](#) that gay studies is only possible with vigilant organizing and that gay studies is itself a form of political engagement, making "studies" and "activism" inseparable developments.<sup>60</sup> Alisa Klinger expands on this point, discussing the student organizing that led to the formation of LGB studies at UC Berkeley. She argues that organizing must happen alongside academic developments because "a lesbian, gay, and bisexual studies program will not satisfy all our institutional needs. While seeking academic legitimation, lesbian, gay, and bisexual campus activists must also

---

<sup>60</sup> [John D'Emilio, \*Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University\*, \(Routledge: New York and London, 1992\) 97,172.](#)

endeavor to secure [various] benefits.”<sup>61</sup> [These academics and activists maintain that](#) inclusion in the curriculum and inclusion in all other areas of campus life are inseparable.

Numerous publications in the early 1990s demonstrate both the emergence of gay and lesbian studies and the debates within the field. Henry Minton published an anthology on Gay and Lesbian studies in 1992, as did [Henry Abelove, et al. in 1993](#) and Linda Garber in 1994. These books examined the rise of the discipline in the academy over the previous few years and made comparisons to Black Studies, Women’s Studies, and Ethnic Studies, suggesting that these thinkers were using a similar framework to conceptualize the academic inclusion of gays and lesbians. However, within these publications, many scholars were challenging a multicultural framework, looking for ways to more fundamentally restructure institutions of learning and inclusion within them. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* was created in 1993 with the purpose of examining this new field with an explicitly queer focus; the first issue references the developments in this field in recent years and the need for a new journal to address them properly with an explicitly interdisciplinary and intersectional focus.<sup>62</sup> *GLQ*’s articles over the following years demonstrate many of the debates within the emerging field as scholars attempted to figure out the best way to address inequity in academia.

Although the idea of including gay and lesbian experiences under a multicultural framework gained a lot of traction, it was not without critics, especially with the rise of queer politics and queer theory. Peggy Pagenhart, writing in 1994, critiques the multicultural framework for not examining marginalization and power sufficiently. She calls for a focus on marginalization instead, saying that it is necessary to understand the structural nature of

---

<sup>61</sup> Alisa Klinger, “Moving the Pink Agenda into the Ivory Tower: The ‘Berkeley Guide’ to Institutionalizing Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies,” in *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects*. Linda Garber, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994): 193.

<sup>62</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw and David M. Halperin. “From the Editors,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 1.1 (1993): iv.

oppression in the U.S., which she does not believe multiculturalism successfully does. She also believes that queerness cannot be properly included into a multicultural framework, which emphasizes one facet of identity (race, gender, ethnicity) rather than examining how they work together.<sup>63</sup> Queer theory, which was emerging at around this time, builds on the idea that it is necessary to actively dismantle preexisting models of understanding. Deborah Britzman, writing in 1995 about queer pedagogy, calls for disrupting “systems of normalcy.”<sup>64</sup> She worries that merely adding marginalized voices cannot succeed in challenging normalizing structures, and will only reinforce the idea of the heterosexual subject in opposition to the gay or lesbian other.<sup>65</sup> A queer pedagogy is about more than merely including a wider range of voices—it is about disrupting the systems that have excluded them historically. Michael Warner argued that a queer identity cannot fit into a multicultural framework. He advocated a shift towards a new understanding of identity that resists normalcy and does not imply that sexual identity structures communities in the way that racial or ethnic identity does.<sup>66</sup> These thinkers were part of a larger intellectual movement that challenged many previous conceptions of liberal multiculturalism and the ways that conceptions of inclusion could be co-opted in a neoliberal setting. In particular, queer theory is indebted to critical race theory, which in turn built upon radical feminism, in calling for an intersectional analysis and a critique of the underlying systems of oppression.

At Swarthmore, the conversation about gay and lesbian studies started in earnest in 1988, when alumni Richard Sager established a fund that a committee of faculty, staff, students, and alumni decided to spend on an annual conference on gay and lesbian issues. By having

---

<sup>63</sup> Peggy Pagenhart, “‘The Very House of Difference’: Toward a More Queerly Defined Multiculturalism,” in Linda Garber: 181.

<sup>64</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight,” *Educational Theory* 45.2 (1995):153.

<sup>65</sup> Britzman, 198.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) vii-xxxii.

conversations about these issues in an academic setting and academic format, the symposium marked the beginning of gay and lesbian studies at Swarthmore. Since the site of gay and lesbian studies was a conference planned by a group of community members, rather than a formalized academic program, the connection between academics and organizing at Swarthmore was particularly strong. One former committee chair reflected, “The Sager Committee was functioning as an activist committee;” another expanded on its role on campus, saying that the symposium “helped people point to queer studies as both an intellectual and an activist hub.”<sup>67</sup> This was particularly true because of the projects that the committee took on in addition to planning the conference. Although the non-discrimination policy of the college had included sexuality for a few years, it did not offer health benefits for same sex partners. The committee began advocating that this change in 1991. They also wanted to address the shortage of out gay and lesbian faculty at Swarthmore, and put together a list of candidates for the Lang professorship of social change, an annual visiting professorship. One of their nominees, Sue- Ellen Case, was hired for the 1993-1994 school year, which was a significant victory both because she was an out lesbian and because she was the first person designated to teach queer studies courses at Swarthmore.<sup>68</sup> These activist goals were closely related to the formal goal of the committee, to support gay and lesbian studies at Swarthmore. By offering benefits and making Swarthmore a more gay-friendly environment, the committee made it easier for gay and lesbian faculty to work at Swarthmore and sought ways to fit gay and lesbian studies into the formalized curriculum. Thus, their curricular work led to some cultural changes, making Swarthmore an easier place to be openly gay or lesbian, which in turn increased the number of visible faculty (and students) at the school. In making demands for curricular change and

---

<sup>67</sup> Allen Kuharski, personal interview, 30 October 2013; Nora Johnson, personal interview, 22 November 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Allen Kuharski.

institutional support, the committee was one part of the national movement of gay and lesbian studies programs that were deeply rooted in campus organizing.

The conversations that the Sager Committee started were part of larger conversations about the curriculum at the time, addressing issues of sexuality as well as race and ethnicity. The college began to seriously engage with these issues in 1989, the year of the first Sager conference. That fall, the Council on Educational Policy (CEP), [the primary committee charged with shaping the College's curriculum](#), began addressing issues of curricular diversity and held a series of meetings and open forums in response to the demands that students had submitted at the end of the previous semester. Students at the first forum advocated creating new courses, changing content of existing courses, and instituting a diversity requirement to address the white male focus in the curriculum.<sup>69</sup> In the spring, there was a campus-wide gathering as part of the CEP's ongoing effort; those in attendance called on Swarthmore to devote more resources towards addressing identity in academia through interdisciplinary studies.<sup>70</sup> While the turnout was not overwhelmingly large, the fact that a committee that is traditionally strictly confidential opened conversation to the campus community reflected the fairly new belief that the curriculum was relevant to student life.

Students in this period were reconceptualizing inclusion in the academy, and looked to the curriculum as one potential site of transformation. Within these conversations about inclusion, particularly of gays and lesbians, was an academic and political discussion about how best to transform the university and a tension between multicultural and queer politics. Over the next few years, students entered into new coalitions that grappled with the same questions of

---

<sup>69</sup> Tony Foleno, "CEP Sponsors Forum to Address Concerns on Curriculum Diversity," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 20 October 1989: 1, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Tony Foleno, "Collection Focuses on Diversity in Curriculum," *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA], 30 March 1990: 1, 2.

how to be inclusive of different identities and how to achieve structural and cultural change within Swarthmore. The final section of this paper will address these new coalitions, the challenges that they faced, and the learning that happened within them.

The inclusion of sexuality in demands for institutional change was always tenuous. Sometimes sexuality was actively included, sometimes people spoke about marginalized or oppressed identities broadly, and sometimes the focus was almost exclusively on race and ethnicity. When sexuality was included in demands or proposals, it remained largely separate from issues of race or ethnicity, reflecting the traditionally single-issue focus of multicultural reform. This can be seen in the final project of students who took a course on “Women and Education” in the fall of 1992. They wrote a proposal for a seminar for all first-year students called “Critical Consciousness” in response to what they understood as the fragmentation within the Swarthmore community and the fact that many students never had to think about diversity. The proposal reflected the conversations over previous years regarding curricular reform, and addressed race, sexuality, and gender. However, it treated them as three separate issues, each of which had its own discussion and set of reading material, rather than as issues working together. The proposed course would not look at issues beyond a single-issue lens.<sup>71</sup> After sharing the document with student groups, the authors received feedback that spoke to the failure to address these issues in conjunction with one other; one student wrote, “it is imperative that issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class be linked together. I would like to see these issues, addressed as interlocking forms of power in our society, be linked by the overall framework of the course.”<sup>72</sup> It is not clear how this feedback was incorporated (and the course never came to

---

<sup>71</sup> Katie Bowman, Maika Watanabe, and Mara Willard, “Critical Consciousness: A Course on Swarthmore Community,” Swarthmore College Intercultural Center, SQU Binder 1.

<sup>72</sup> Ellen Chen, quoted in “Addendum to Critical Consciousness: A Course on Swarthmore Community,” Swarthmore College Intercultural Center, SQU Binder 1.



fruition), yet the student critiques speak to a larger issue, the challenge of addressing multiple issues and identities. Within a liberal multicultural framework, courses (and academic programs and departments) systematically emphasize one facet of identity, rather than looking at how they interlock and the systems of power that create inequality. This historic shortcoming of multiculturalism led to the queer critiques of this framework that were emerging nationally at the time, arguing that multicultural reforms had the same patterns of exclusion that academia has always held because of its focus on a single identity rather than larger structures.

On a national scale, queer activists were attempting to organize in stronger coalitions and incorporate a racial analysis into their work; as part of this organizing, they were also becoming more visible and active. This trend manifested on Swarthmore's campus as well, as, beginning in the late 1980s, students with different identities began entering into new coalitions to push for new representations of diversity on campus. At the end of the 1988-1989 school year, student representatives from the Swarthmore African-American Student Society (SASS), Hispanics Organized for Latino Awareness (HOLA), Swarthmore Asian Organization (SAO), AS IS, the Women's Center, and Student Council submitted a list of demands to address issues of racism and diversity at Swarthmore. Their proposal asked Swarthmore to institute a diversity requirement, attempt to hire and support more faculty of color, offer more library resources about marginalized identities, facilitate student and faculty research on these topics, and dedicate more resources to recruiting minority students. The document was published in the *Phoenix* but was most directly targeted at Swarthmore power holders, saying "These ideas come from the student body, but must be implemented by the administration, Board of Managers and faculty." The document reflected on the past year, when Swarthmore had been "struggl[ing] with issues of diversity and racism through [presentations, workshops, and gatherings]" and then explained

why these initiatives had fallen short.<sup>73</sup> The May 1989 letter can be understood as a breaking point at which students felt the need to intervene into what they saw as repeated administrative failings to adequately address diversity. Not coincidentally, the next year was a year of much change at Swarthmore. After publishing their demands, the students formed a Coalition for Diversity; over the following year, they put together workshops on sexual assault and diversity for the new student orientation in 1990, made a preliminary proposal for an intercultural center (which the administration rejected), and held the retreat on diversity over winter break. This coalition was the start of a new iteration of Swarthmore activism where new groups formed to instigate structural change.

A year and a half later, the campus erupted in a controversy that alumni remember as a catalyst in the struggle for the IC when students anonymously posted signs in Parrish hall, the administrative center of campus, next to portraits of former Swarthmore presidents asking “Who is this white man?” or on a mirror inquiring, “Is this mirror the only way you are represented on these walls?”<sup>74</sup> The signs provoked a huge response; while much of it came in the form of subsequent signs on the walls, some *Phoenix* articles and opinions spoke to the controversy that emerged, with some students defending the choice of portraits and portraying the controversy as an example of “reverse racism.”<sup>75</sup> Jennifer Koosed, who was involved in starting the IC, remembers the incident as significant because,

A lot of racism that a lot of people had no idea was present at Swarthmore was evident in those notes. [...] You have these moments where you realize that there was a lot more prejudice on campus than most people recognized, and it would come out in these anonymous and sometimes anonymous and violent ways. And

---

<sup>73</sup> Carter, Martinez, Hsieh, Schachenmayr, Poodry, and Ashar, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Carolyn McConnell, “Discussion Provoked by Parrish Signs,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 7 December 1990: 1, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Letter. “Parrish Signs Provoke Reflection and Realization,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 25 January 1991: 3

it made a lot of people think, we need to do something more than what we're doing.<sup>76</sup>

Although students and faculty had presented a preliminary proposal for an intercultural center the previous spring, alums I interviewed noted this controversy as the major turning point.

Koosed explained the realization: “clearly there was a lot of work still that needed to be done on campus and we were stronger if we worked together to accomplish all of the things that we had wanted to accomplish, especially coming out of all of those notes on campus.”<sup>77</sup>

The next semester, in the spring of 1991, students from HOLA, SAO, and Action Les-B-Gay made a lengthy formal proposal for the IC, documenting the need to address diversity on campus and for students from these groups to have their own space. The proposal stated that the IC could go a long way in addressing the problems of equity at Swarthmore, and saw the IC as something related to issues such as faculty hiring and policies, admissions, library resources, and curricular reform. The IC was something that was centrally about space; the proposal opened by saying, “The IC must be a space that exists not only physically, but also in the mind of the Swarthmore community.”<sup>78</sup> Alumni reference the importance of such space; as one recalls, “It was about claiming space. I remember the conversations we had about the Intercultural Center over and over and over again was about space, having a physical space, safe space.”<sup>79</sup> The IC would address the fact that Swarthmore as a whole did not feel like a safe space for marginalized students who, prior to the IC, had not had sufficient space of their own. The importance of queer space is evident beyond the scope of Swarthmore, as well; finding places for social interaction and possibility outside of (and subverting) normative spaces has been an importance objective for a while as, starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, gay individuals sought spaces for social

---

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Koosed.

<sup>77</sup> Jennifer Koosed.

<sup>78</sup> Proposal, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Seth Brenzel.

interaction and life outside more normative structures.<sup>80</sup> Having an explicitly and exclusive queer space at Swarthmore could serve a similar purpose of allowing for alternative forms of social interaction, but organizers also saw it as something with a wider impact. Beyond being a physical space to meet, the IC would affect the Swarthmore community as a whole through reshaping conversations about identity.

The creation process was not easy; beyond the administrative obstacles, students struggled with what intercultural and multicultural meant, what culture meant, and what it meant to include sexuality in such an alliance. According to Lucia Perillan '93, a lesbian and leader of HOLA, "There was definitely philosophical conversation, it's different to have something that's a cultural identity—*how* is it different, to have something that's culturally related, as opposed to sexual identity?"<sup>81</sup> Swarthmore was one of the first schools to include a gay and lesbian organization in their intercultural center, and there were various tensions resulting from this inclusion. In addition to the differences between cultural and sexual identities, the gay and lesbian organization brought in many white students, which alumni remember as being a site of tension, since "there was some concern that of course white people bring along with them their own ingrained prejudices and racism."<sup>82</sup> This concern speaks to the impossibility of fully eradicating racism; the IC could not be a perfectly safe space for its members, and while it brought people together, there remained large differences among the students there. While the tensions between groups may have been more obvious, Perillan remembers the challenges that all of the groups had figuring out what they had in common; she described one weekend where SAO had a big retreat and emerged struggling to identify any meaningful or all-encompassing

---

<sup>80</sup> Dianne Chisholm, "Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City." (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 10; D'Emilio 8.

<sup>81</sup> Lucia Perillan, personal interview, 27 November 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Koosed.

commonalities.<sup>83</sup> Culture is not something monolithic; intragroup differences can be as great as intergroup ones, something that students began to realize as they came together in new ways ostensibly because of their shared culture. Aaron Agne '93, an Action Les-B-Gay leader, reflected on some of these larger philosophical issues of interculturalism, saying “ideally the Intercultural Center has representation from a lot of different people, not just three groups that are also pretty self-identified. [...] It wasn't just three groups wanting space and resources, it was whether you were creating an institution that gave voice to the cultural issues and empowerment issues in general and not just those groups of people.”<sup>84</sup> This statement speaks to the challenges of multiculturalism to move beyond a focus on individual identities to examine the larger power structures at play.

One way that students addressed this challenge was in their choice to form an intercultural center, rather than a multicultural center. Although the structure of the center perpetuated many of the shortcomings of multiculturalism, students involved were clearly seeking a way to move past these shortcomings. Preliminary articles in the *Phoenix* in the spring of 1990 about the center referred to it as a “multicultural center,” but within a month, the language had shifted to “intercultural,” the language that students used in the preliminary proposal as well as the formal proposal the next year.<sup>85</sup> This language demonstrates the desire of students to focus on the intersections among identities rather than on a multitude of separate, individualized identities. Their inclusion of sexuality also reflected a move away from some forms of multiculturalism that only examine one type of identity. The task of overcoming an individual focus in the IC was a difficult one, however, especially since the groups had

---

<sup>83</sup> Lucia Perillan.

<sup>84</sup> Aaron Agne, personal interview, 27 November 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Jason Mezey, “Students Propose Cultural Center,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 16 February 1990: 1, 2; Jason Mezey, “Groups Set Goals for Cultural Center,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 23 February 1990: 3; John Crosby, “Students Present Center to Board of Managers,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 8 March 1990: 1, 2; “Proposal.”

previously been largely separate, and maintained separate meeting spaces within the IC once it was established.

The conflicts were not restricted to groups within the Intercultural Center; as various identity groups attempted to enter into new working relationships, tensions—spoken or unspoken—often emerged. These tensions did not always impede the groups from working together; for instance, Koosed remembers some tension with Black Cultural Center members who were concerned that the IC might take away limited resources, but the two groups maintained a functional relationship and would consult occasionally. By contrast, relations with the Women’s Center were weak. Koosed and Perillan both remembered the feeling that the Women’s Center was effectively only for white women; Koosed noted that, while she could not remember any particular racist incidents, the Women’s Center felt like a site of racism. She remembered a discomfort around sexuality coming from Women’s Center members, as well, saying that AS IS did not talk to the Women’s Center because the group seemed uncomfortable being associated with lesbians and lesbianism. Although alums did not pinpoint specific instances, feelings of discomfort are themselves a site of tension. These tensions often went unspoken, which itself was part of the problem. Students felt their identities and concerns were silenced in certain spaces; the lack of discussion about sexuality in the Women’s Center made lesbians feel excluded, demonstrating the increased importance given to explicit discussions of identity in this period. Even in the more coalitional spaces, identities were left out. One key example is the exclusion of Jewish students from various coalitions by not including Jewish studies in demands for curricular concerns and occasionally scheduling discussions over the Jewish holidays, making it hard for Jewish students to bring their concerns to organizing spaces. Some Jewish students protested this exclusion, writing letters to the *Phoenix* explaining the ways

in which Jewish concerns were ignored both by Swarthmore as a whole and by students organizing for multicultural reforms.<sup>86</sup> These tensions and conflicts reflected the frustration students felt as they sought a more inclusive movement and constantly found themselves in spaces organized around certain individual identities while excluding other marginalized students. Although they were protesting the exclusion within the larger institution of Swarthmore, they discovered that their own organizations often perpetuated this trend.

Tensions between the student groups that started the IC took a new form after it opened in the spring of 1992, and groups suddenly had to navigate sharing space. Agne explained, “There was so much dialogue just to make it happen, but then afterwards there was an awareness that [certain] hard conversations hadn’t happened.”<sup>87</sup> The same month that the Intercultural Center opened, members of Action Les-B-Gay wrote a letter to the other groups calling for a mediated discussion to address what they perceived as “competition and hostility” between the three groups, as well as concern with “group dynamics and the way in which [the Les-B-Gay interns], as women and lesbians, are not being taken seriously by all interns and faculty involved.” They wrote out of “concern for IC unity” and “for the good of the whole,” believing the group would benefit through addressing its differences and challenges.<sup>88</sup> A part of the underlying problem was a lack of trust between the groups as well as “questioning around issues of empowerment in terms of who was having what say and who was feeling empowered to do what.”<sup>89</sup> At stake in these conversations was the question of whether the IC and its member groups were adequately addressing and challenging the systems of oppression that they had

---

<sup>86</sup> Kevin Babitz and Karen Rosenberg, letter, “Jewish Perspective Excluded from Growing Multicultural Agenda,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 15 November 1991: 5; Sandy Falik, letter, “Jewish Minority Issues Ignored In Search For Diversity,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA]: 3.

<sup>87</sup> Aaron Agne.

<sup>88</sup> Action Les-B-Gay, letter “To IC folks,” 10 April 1992. Swarthmore Intercultural Center, Swarthmore PA.

<sup>89</sup> Aaron Agne.

come together to resist. In particular, students worried about the ways in which other group members brought in the prejudices that they had learned in the rest of their lives: what did it mean that straight students and men brought in homophobia and sexism, or that white students brought in racism? The difficult conversations and learning that students did within the IC was one part of the challenges in the institution of Swarthmore as a whole. Just as students always enter Swarthmore with the oppressive attitudes that they had learned elsewhere, students brought prejudices into the IC, something that the organization felt the need to address.

A central part of these struggles was the issue of how to understand the intersections of identities, and particularly how to include students who were marginalized in more than one way. While the IC reflected a desire on the part of the different groups to come together, they also desired to remain somewhat separate. The section of the proposal dedicated to asking for library space reflects the larger philosophy of the group at the time; the students explained, “Although SAO, HOLA, and Action-Les-B-Gay have no intention of combining their books into one collection, we would like to have a common library, with three separate sections.”<sup>90</sup> This desire reflects the intent to come together in a common space while remaining separate groups. While maintaining individuality is important, many issues and analyses are excluded when every book has to fit neatly into the Queer, Asian, or Latino section. Similarly, the structure of the IC, where larger analyses of marginalization, oppression, and intersectionality were not always at the forefront, excluded some potential members. Koosed remembers students feeling racism from Action Les-B-Gay and homophobia from the members of other groups, demonstrating the ways that the groups did not fully address multiple issues. This led to students feeling the need to choose one organizational affiliation over another; in particular, gay and lesbian students of color often felt torn between different groups and a pressure to choose one, both because of time

---

<sup>90</sup> Proposal, 12.



constraints (a structural problem itself) and social pressures on students with intersecting marginalized identities.<sup>91</sup> These challenges demonstrate another way in which the IC faced some of the same challenges that Swarthmore as a whole did; like the division of books into separate sections of the library or the division of students into separate group space, the division of issues into separate academic disciplines and studies excludes issues and identities. The IC was not able to free itself from the exclusive nature of Swarthmore even as it created a more inclusive space within it.

These conflicts demonstrate one of the underlying problems of multiculturalism: that identities do not fit neatly into clearly defined categories, and sexuality fits into this framework in particularly messy ways. Multiculturalism assigns a weight to culture that can erase intragroup differences and the ways that identities intersect, thus reinforcing the marginalization of those identities. It emphasizes one facet of identity rather than the intersections between them and the systems of power surrounding all identities. Although the IC attempted to have a more intersectional framework, its division into separate groups often erased the intersections of multiple identities. Furthermore, although the inclusion of Action Les-B-Gay was important, sexuality is not equivalent to ethnic and racial identities, a difference that needs to be acknowledged and discussed. The equation of sexuality with cultural identity can imply that gay and lesbian students do not have marginalized ethnic or racial identities as well, leading to tensions between different groups and an implicit whiteness in gay and lesbian organizations. Lastly, a focus on identity can preclude an examination of marginalization, leaving the structures that perpetuate it intact. These shortcomings led to the rise of critical theories such as queer theory at this time in an attempt to understand the ways that identities work together, reinforce each other, and are connected within larger systems of oppression. Students at Swarthmore,

---

<sup>91</sup> Lucia Perillan.

aware of these shortcomings, attempted to move beyond a multicultural framework through discussions of empowerment and marginalization, but the move towards more coalitional and intersectional organizing was difficult and ongoing.

These shortcomings do not erase the importance of the IC and the change that it represented. The IC was a huge victory for students who wanted Swarthmore to address issues of identity and inclusion; the College was making a statement, with a decent amount of funding attached, that identities were important and that it sought equity for marginalized students. While the IC may have been politically and economically imperative to the branding of Swarthmore as an institution committed to social justice, this does not diminish its importance to students. In particular, the student and faculty leadership in the IC made it more than merely an administrative attempt to cultivate its image; it was a student project and an attempt to shift campus culture. The administration and students saw the IC as something that would influence the entire school. As one student said at the opening ceremony, “[The IC] will become a major force on the Swarthmore campus.”<sup>92</sup> The significance of this event for gay and lesbian students is magnified when considering that it came so shortly after the start of the Sager Symposium, which dedicated several thousand dollars a year to gay and lesbian studies with an audience of gay and straight college community members.<sup>93</sup> As a result, marginalized students had a space and resources, and the college as a whole treated such issues with greater attention than they had previously. Swarthmore developed a reputation as being a gay-friendly campus, attracting more gay and lesbian faculty and students; for instance, in 1994, the College hired several openly gay and lesbian faculty who noted, “it was really a great place to come be a queer professor.”<sup>94</sup> This

---

<sup>92</sup> Rebecca France, quoted in Mark Kernighan, “Intercultural Center Officially Opens,” *The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA] 10 April 1992: 1, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Sager, personal interview, 25 November 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Nora Johnson, personal interview, 22 November 2013.

cultural change was due largely to structural changes over the previous five years that rapidly transformed Swarthmore into a more accepting place for gays and lesbians. In a cyclical pattern, the increasing numbers of gay faculty and students made Swarthmore a place where it was easier to be gay or queer and meant that there were more gays and lesbians coming to Swarthmore and demanding that it live up to its social justice rhetoric.

Together, the growth of gay and lesbian studies and the establishment of the IC demonstrated new administrative concern with gay and lesbian issues and a new way of thinking about the role of the university in educating and supporting students around issues of identity and marginalization. Although Swarthmore continued to be a neoliberal institution, these changes made it a significantly more equitable one. The students involved in these reforms, and, arguably, the school more broadly, learned a lot through the process of organizing for structural changes at Swarthmore. The ongoing conflicts demonstrate the difficult thinking and learning that students were doing as they attempted to figure out what identity was, how to transform their university, and how to engage in intersectional and coalitional organizing. The institution of Swarthmore often co-opts student organizing to further its own image as a socially just institution; after years of student organizing, often facing intense administrative opposition, the school touts the end result as evidence of what an inclusive and just institution it is, ignoring the student organizing that got them there. The official College timeline demonstrates this trend clearly; it mentions “student interest” and “formal planning” to make the Intercultural Center happen, making it sound as though the administration was supportive all along and erasing the difficult student organizing that went into creating the IC.<sup>95</sup> Student organizing, in this way, contributes to the brand of Swarthmore while being erased by that same brand. Yet student

---

<sup>95</sup> “A Swarthmore College Timeline.” *Swarthmore Sesquicentennial*, December 2013, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore PA, 20 December 2013 <<http://swat150.swarthmore.edu/swarthmore-timeline.htm>>

organizing is far more than a brand. It is the place where students learn about social justice through practice; it is a liberatory educational process. If, as Giroux and Giroux claim, higher education is about “imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention into public life,”<sup>96</sup> then these years, and the student organizing that happened then, are a place where the educational project of Swarthmore succeeded. Students actively took part in changing the world around them, intervening in the public life of Swarthmore to envision and create a more just future, both within and outside of the institution. They achieved concrete structural changes that had cultural implications for how gay and lesbian people experienced Swarthmore at that moment and in future years. These structural changes also led to some cultural ones, which directly stemmed from student organizing.

However, cultural changes did not map neatly onto structural ones. As the IC proposal made clear, “the IC is not the answer to the problems facing marginalized groups on campus. The problems the IC is designed to confront require a long term commitment to change and the IC must be organized to effect the series of gradual changes that will bring about a new consciousness needed at Swarthmore.”<sup>97</sup> The language around needing a “new consciousness” is particularly significant; the students starting the IC knew that the structural interventions would not transform the attitudes or behaviors of the campus. There is no simple solution for changing a culture. Reflecting on the past several decades at Swarthmore, alum and vice president Maurice Eldridge noted that, while cultural changes have occurred, “we’re still living in that world [we were living in before]. It may be more subtle and more underground, less intense, fewer people behaving that way, but it’s still there. There are problems to be solved. I don’t think they’re going to go away easily. We keep having to accept the fact that every year we have close to four

---

<sup>96</sup> Giroux and Giroux, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Proposal, 2.

hundred new people, so that's a part of just the way it is."<sup>98</sup> This statement points to the continuity of certain attitudes and behaviors through the present day, even if they manifest in different ways over time. He also makes clear that structural change alone cannot solve these problems because Swarthmore exists in a larger world whose prejudices are pervasive. Particularly given the annual turnover of one quarter of the student body, it is impossible to be immune to or separated from the attitudes and discourses of the outside world; instead, Swarthmore is actively influenced by and perpetuates larger national issues.

The ongoing cultural issues of marginalization and violence on Swarthmore's campus reveal why this history is so important. It is easy to lament each campus rupture when it occurs, but it is not possible to understand why they occur without understanding the history of such ruptures, the ways that student organizers have responded, the ways that the administration has responded, and why these responses have been inadequate. Similarly, it is easy to look at the ways that, each time a rupture occurs, the response is inadequate, but we need to understand the long legacy of inadequate solutions and the structural barriers to social justice in order to envision an alternative. Swarthmore is at best a liberal multicultural institution that aims to give everyone "a seat at the table" while ignoring imbalances of power. At worst, it is a neoliberal corporation interested solely in marketing its own brand to sell the commodity of higher education to student-consumers. Regardless of what you believe, Swarthmore has a long way to go to achieve true social justice. Certainly neoliberalism is a failure—it does not even purport to aim for social justice, as profit is the only measure of worth. The multicultural reforms, though achieving tangible and critical gains for marginalized students, have also not eradicated Swarthmore's shortcomings. Queer critiques of multicultural discourse, though imperfect, can offer some explanation of the current situation and possibilities for how to reconceptualize

---

<sup>98</sup> Maurice Eldridge.

inclusion. Traditionally, when people at Swarthmore talk about inclusion, equity, or justice, they talk about how to increase resources and support for individual people and groups with marginalized identities—all of which are important goals that have made for concrete improvements for marginalized students and the school as a whole. However, as the ongoing problems at Swarthmore show, the changes at Swarthmore have often focused on individual issues in a way that has prevented fundamental change in the way that Swarthmore operates. As the ongoing organizing has demonstrated, students continue to grapple with these issues and are seeking more transformative solutions. In recent years in particular, students have sought ways to move beyond identity-based organizing towards broader liberatory coalitions addressing the fundamental issues within Swarthmore. In order to build these coalitions most effectively, organizers need to look at differences within groups and among them, understand the ways that people hold multiple identities, and build inclusive organizations capable of addressing multiple issues. At the same time, we need to examine the underlying structural problems and address them in order to effectively challenge the systemic oppression at a place like Swarthmore. This organizing is difficult, but can also be a site of liberatory thought, a place where students can envision a more just future and embody the social justice ideals that Swarthmore proclaims to hold.

## Works Cited

### Secondary Sources:

- Abelove, Henry, Michele Aina Barale and David Halperin, eds. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Aronowitz, Stanley and Henry A. Giroux. *Education Still Under Siege*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1993. Print.
- Beemyn, Brett. "The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Groups." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12.2 (2003): 205-223. Proquest.
- Bernard, Fred. "The Neoliberal Arts College: Welcome to the Amenities Arms Race." *The Wilder Voice* 6.10 (Winter 2010). Web. 5 October 2013.
- Britzman, Deborah P. "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight." *Educational Theory* 45.2 (1995): 151-165. Web. 10 October 2013.
- Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Print.
- Chisholm, Dianne. *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Web. 15 December 2013.
- Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 2001. Print.
- D'Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. Routledge: New York and London, 1992.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn and David M. Halperin. "From the Editors." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993): iii-iv.
- Garber, Linda, ed. *Tilting The Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Giroux, Henry A. and Susan Searls Giroux. *Taking Back Higher Education: Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Web. 15 October 2013.
- Giroux, Henry A. "The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics." *College Literature* 32.1 (Winter 2005): 1-19. Web. 15 October 2013.
- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.
- Markowitz, Laura. "Beyond Pink and Blue: Move over, women's studies—there's a new way to think about gender and sexuality." *Swarthmore College Bulletin*. January 2010. Web. 30 September 2013.
- . "The Struggle for Women's Studies at Swarthmore." *Swarthmore College Bulletin*. January 2010. Web. 30 September 2013.
- McClellan, Sophia A. "Neoliberalism and the Crisis of Intellectual Engagement." *Works and Days* 26-27 (2008-2009): 459-470. Web. 15 October 2013.
- Minton, Henry L., ed. *Gay and Lesbian Studies*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1992. Print.
- Pinar, William., et al. *Queer Theory in Education*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1998.
- Reichard, David A. "Animating Ephemera through Oral History: Interpreting Visual Traces of California Gay College Student Organizing from the 1970s." *Oral History Review* 39.1 (2012): 37-60. Project MUSE. Web. 24 Sep. 2013.

- Rhoads, Robert. *Coming Out in College: The Struggle for a Queer Identity*. Bergin & Garvey: Westport and London, 1994.
- . "Student Protest and Multicultural Reform: Making Sense of Campus Unrest in the 1990s." *Journal of Higher Education* 69.6 (1998): 621-646. ProQuest.
- . *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Print.
- Rupp Leila, J. "What's Queer Got To Do With It?" *Reviews in American History* 38.2 (2010): 189-198. Project MUSE. Web. 24 Sep. 2013.
- Stein, Marc. *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. Taylor and Francis: Hoboken, 2012. Print.
- Shumar, Wesley. *College for Sale*. London: Falmer Press, 1997. Print.
- Stokes, Lauren. "Queer history of Swarthmore." *The Daily Gazette*. 22 March 2007. Web.
- . "What is the history of queer chalkings on campus?" *The Daily Gazette*. 10 November 2006. Web.
- Taylor, Catherine. "'Am I That Name?': Constructions and Misconstructions of Lesbian Studies." *Resources for Feminist Research* 32.1 (2007): 86-113. ProQuest. Web. 24 Sep. 2013.
- Tierney, William G. "Building Academic Communities of Difference: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals on Campus." *Change* 24.2 (1992): 40-46. ProQuest. Web.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie. "Producing Multiculturalism in Higher Education: Who's Producing What for Whom?" *Qualitative Studies in Education* 12.3 (1999): 287-298. Print.

### **Primary Sources:**

- Agne, Aaron. Personal interview. 27 November 2013.
- "A Swarthmore College Timeline." *Swarthmore Sesquicentennial*. Swarthmore College, December 2013. Web. 20 December 2013.
- Brenzel, Seth. Personal interview. 18 November 2013.
- Eldridge, Maurice. Personal interview. 26 November 2013.
- Hong, Kari. Personal interview. 21 November 2013.
- Intercultural Center documents, Swarthmore College.
- Johnson, Nora. Personal interview. 22 November 2013.
- Koosed, Jennifer. Personal interview. 10 November 2013.
- Kuharski, Allen. Personal interview. 30 October 2013.
- Perillan, Lucia. Personal interview. 27 November 2013.
- The Phoenix* [Swarthmore, PA]. 1980-1996. 29 October 2013.
- Rice-Maximin, Micheline. Personal interview. 29 October 2013.
- Sager Committee Archives 1988-1994. Friends Historical Library. Swarthmore, PA.
- Sager, Richard. Personal interview. 25 November 2013.
- Schmidt, Peter. Personal interview. 6 November 2013.