



Arnberg, B. (2020). *Queer campus climate: An ethnographic fantasia*. Routledge.

Queering Campus Climate: A Review of Benjamin Arnberg's *Queer Campus Climate: An Ethnographic Fantasia*

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Abstract: A review of Arnberg's *Queer Campus Climate: An Ethnographic Fantasia* seeks to educate higher education administrators and educators about the challenges and barriers queer men face navigating a hostile campus climate in the deep south. Arnberg's storytelling provides an immersive experience of the unique lives of queer men in higher education and the campus climate's role in their identity development. The fantasia illustrates various issues queer men navigate including queer performance as a means of adaptation, providing safe spaces that allows authenticity, suicide and mental health problems, and barriers to developing community and support systems. Awareness of issues impacting queer men intends to encourage action among administrators to implement campus climate assessments and take meaningful action toward addressing issues of discrimination, prejudice, and inequity on their campus.

Keywords: campus climate, identity development, inclusion, queer men, queer performance.

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Benjamin Arnberg's ethnography, *Queer Campus Climate: An Ethnographic Fantasia*, seeks to share the stories and experiences of queer men related to campus climate located at an institution in the southeast United States. Published by Routledge, the fantasia consists of nine chapters, each embodying a central theme illustrated through a participant's personal experience navigating the world as a queer man. The book provides authentic narratives from a marginalized community free of political censorship and misrepresentation. From their experiences, Arnberg (2020) exposed the importance of understanding the influence campus climate has on the psychosocial development of queer men. These men shared their lived experiences in an environment that disregarded their queer identities and impeded their opportunity to create supportive communities despite reports of institutional inclusion. As a result, their lives provide insight into the role campuses play in development of identities, and the importance climate plays in the mental health of their students.

Arnberg depicted the ethnography formatted as an opera illustrated with scenes to better understand the participants' experiences, and used footnotes to elaborate on researcher observations, demonstrate supporting studies, and provide context. The intentional scene setting, musical references, and writing format aligns with the participants' characteristics and personalities as a means to articulate these queer men's robust experiences. Some may criticize the opera depiction as melodramatic². However, the structured narratives provide insight to the challenges these men faced on a campus that openly denied support or safety for this marginalized community.

The post-qualitative research strategy of storytelling through an opera format used art to immerse the audience in the participants' lives and culture while humanizing their personal experiences (Rousell, 2019; St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2020). Rousell (2019) argued that depicting research through art detracts from the social science significance because the work attempts to function as art, philosophy, and social science. St. Pierre (2020) counterpoint suggests that the meaning of the work justifies the research structure. Arnberg rationalized the post-qualitative research methodology because just as queer lives do not conform to traditional standards, neither should the research structure. Creswell and Poth (2018) further supported the reasoning for researcher's writing style, as art provides an authentic means of portraying culture.

Arnberg indicated that the unique nature of all queer men's experiences justified not imposing researcher interpretations to prevent misunderstanding of language and meaning. Arnberg dedicated a chapter to each participant, allowing their story to showcase their unique identity. However, from these experiences, commonalities arose, and comparisons among participants provided insight into the development of queer identities in a campus setting. These shared experiences define the culture confirming the ethnographic methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretation of those experiences is necessary to the transformative process of understanding the influence campus climate has on queer men. Each chapter provided a theme that highlighted similar challenges queer men faced as they developed their queer identity in a hostile campus climate. Though Arnberg intended to exclude researcher interpretation, the themes emerged from the stories, furthering the narrative of the influence campus climate has on queer men's development.

² Arnberg (2020) referenced a hypercritical supervisor, Circe, who's role on campus reinforced the toxic environment for students of minority race, ethnicity, and sexual orientations. Circe critiqued Arnberg as melodramatic as a means to delegitimize his attempts at addressing issues with campus climate and as a =microaggression towards Arnberg's sexual orientation and identity expression. This footnote serves as a satire of Circe's critics and a homage to Arnberg's creative storytelling.

Exploring Queer Identity and Campus Climate

Queer men face challenges presenting their authentic selves when navigating a social climate that discriminates, excludes, and is inherently heteronormative (Arnberg, 2020; Waling & Roffee, 2017). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other queer (LGBT+) individuals engage in queer performance to align with societal norms from fear of punishment (Kimball et al., 2018). Expression, behavior, appearance, and language are all factors associated with performance. (Gooding et al., 2022; Kimball et al., 2018; Waling & Roffee, 2017). As queer men find their identity in college, they are faced with the need to perform to fit the societal expectations of them influenced by their environmental climate and impact their development and self-discovery. As a queer man who has lived in the southeast, I have faced challenges navigating higher education institutions that restrict queer identities. My experiences of navigating microaggressions, discrimination, and adjusting my identity expression out of fear of physical, emotional, and occupational repercussions align with similar queer men's experiences Arnberg outlined in his research. Queer erasure in education limits representation, shames queer identities and encourages prejudice while incorporating queer intersectional identities in pedagogy benefits all students' understanding of equity and social justice and addresses issues of queer erasure (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020; Duarte, 2020). Arnberg's theatrical depiction of these queer stories emphasized the concept that queer men must engage in performance.

Challenges of performance not only extent to heteronormality spaces but also navigating inclusion in queer communities (Waling & Roffee, 2017). As queer men develop their identities, they face balancing heterosexual and queer performance and judgement by both communities. Arnberg (2020) reflected on participant Jasper's interview, "Jasper's narrative here indicates a condition in which gay men, lacking opportunity for healthy LGBT identity development through student affairs, perform a toxic masculinity and also punish their peers who are out, largely in order to protect their own closeted identities" (p. 145). Without appropriate support and opportunity, queer men endure societal pressure from heteronormative and queer communities.

How queer men are perceived by society and navigate the world is influenced by their understanding of their identity (Arnberg, 2020; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Johnson & Quayle, 2017). The intersectionality of an individual's identity recognizes that people are the sum of their identities (Crenshaw, 2018). Recognizing how gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and sexual orientation intertwine influences an individual's sense of self. Arnberg identified higher education institutes as sites for queer identity development and recognized that further research is needed to understand this phenomenon. As more is understood about queer identity development in the higher education setting, institutional administrators must be prepared to provide support during this time of growth and self-discovery and safe spaces for students to be their authentic selves.

A specific theme the author brought to light and gave voice to queer men was the discussion of suicide and mental health. Along with supporting evidence, Arnberg (2020) shared his struggles with depression and suicide, "Perhaps the most insidious component of depression, especially depression built upon feelings of queer shame, was its ability to convince me that death was a better option than life" (p. 137). Sexual orientation and gender identity minority individuals are at higher risk for depression and suicide influenced by interpersonal and environmental factors related to microaggressions and bullying (Ramchand et al., 2022; Woodford et al., 2018). Queer individuals are three to six times more at risk of depression and suicide compared to heterosexual individuals (Ramchand et al., 2022). However, there are differences in populations related to the intersectionality of their identity. Queer individuals are ostracized and live in fear of heteronormative expectations, harassment, and discrimination which informs how they navigate

social norms and mask through queer performance (Kimball et al., 2018). Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination increase the risk of mental health problems (Ramchand et al., 2022). Recognizing these challenges queer individuals face puts greater emphasis on campuses to provide safe spaces and address issues of prejudice and inequity.

McRae and Cooper's (1998) quantitative research demonstrated a growth of open representation of LGBT+ organizations and support resources at southeastern institutions; however, this data is not representative of the campus environment queer students are objected to on these campuses. Arnberg acknowledged that a challenge queer men faced was inclusion on campus. Barriers include a lack of queer spaces, queer representation, and having space for authenticity as these men developed their identities. Inclusive spaces are essential for students' perception of safety and sense of belonging (Parker, 2021). Though southeastern institutions have evolved to meet student needs in the last twenty years, safety and queer community are still prevalent issues that have gone unaddressed (Arnberg, 2020; McRae & Cooper, 1998). Arnberg (2020) spoke to the queer men's safety in heteronormative spaces as he described a scene at a local bar in the college town, "...I looked through the opening of the roof onto the dance floor below. Two men. Dead center. Lips locked. Hands on bums. 'They'll be dead soon, I thought'" (p. 185). Arnberg elaborated that a participant in the study had experienced assault in the same bar previously. The scene depicts the reality that queer individuals experience issue of assault related to their identity. Queer spaces provide opportunity for authenticity and development of community (Gooding et al., 2022). Parker (2021) recognized that students' perception of campus climate is related to their sense of belonging. Arnberg's research emphasized the need for campuses to evaluate their inclusive initiatives to assess if queer men develop a sense of belonging at southeastern institutions.

Another theme Arnberg identified as central to queer men's experiences was the development of support systems through social networks and mentorships. Social networks serve as means to develop queer identity and community (Arnberg, 2020; Pitcher & Simmons, 2020). Connecting with other queer men and developing kinship assists with survival and having queer spaces. Despite indications that queer men's experiences were unique, the significances of mentorship and representation emerged as a monumental factor that influenced students' perception of campus climate (Arnberg, 2020). Queer students desire LGBT+ mentors but lack the connection or representation (McRae & Cooper, 1998; Sarna et al., 2021). Mentors provide support in relatable issues of queer identity, navigating homophobia environments, and developing queer social networks (Sarna et al., 2021).

Queer Education

Representation matters, and ensuring curricular content incorporates examples of individuals of different race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability helps students to feel seen and relate to the content (Camangian, 2021). Education on queer topics and integration of queer representation in the curriculum improved the wellbeing of students by promoting inclusion and addressing prejudice (Snapp et al., 2015). Creating dialogue around issues of heteropatriarchy, toxic masculinity, and misogyny allows students to reflect critically and grow personally (Camangian, 2021). Additionally, providing social opportunities for individuals to learn about gender expression and nonconforming provided insight into understanding experiences of marginalized communities (Edwards, 2010). Implementing queer curriculum, creating queer spaces, and addressing incidents of prejudice are ways campuses can address climate issues to create a more inclusive space for queer individuals.

Campus climate assessments help inform administrators to identify and advise necessary change (Bowling et al., 2019). Where administrators failed the participants of Arnberg's study was utilizing the campus climate assessment to make effective change. Overall tolerance of LGBT+ identities nationally shows disparities in campus climate assessments, reflecting a more hostile environment attributed to outdated policies, faculty, staff, and administrators (Arnberg, 2020). Higher education institutions develop an inclusive environment by creating a campus climate that fosters a sense of belonging for all students (Parker, 2021). According to Arnberg (2020), "Inclusion is not a linear achievement. It is cyclical and fragile" (p. 86). Inclusion is an ongoing process that requires assessment and reevaluation.

Recommendations

The significance of Arnberg's research provided an understanding of the lived experiences of queer men in a southern higher education institution and how campus climate influences their psychosocial experiences. The men's stories are real examples of challenges queer men face, which provide deeper insight to a marginalized population. Despite outward perceptions of inclusion and positive campus climate, hearing from marginalized population enlightens unseen hardships and challenges masked in the generalization of student experiences. The study also contributes to post-qualitative research by supporting that research methodology does not need structure because all experiences have meaning (St. Pierre, 2020). Additionally, the unique writing style of the work provides an example that research can exist through storytelling.

An inclusive campus is not indicative of an environmental climate that supports the development of queer identities. *Queer Campus Climate: An Ethnographic Fantasia*, provided institutional administrators insight into challenges that face queer men in higher education while encouraging the evaluation of campus climate. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are values higher education institutions are thought to embody, but Arnberg's research serves as a canary, warning educators to assess if they are creating a supportive environment that aligns with those ideals. As a queer southern man in an educator role, I connect with these men and understand their lived experiences because I lived them as well. Their stories reassured me that I was not alone in my struggle to establish my queer identity in an environment rooted in homophobia. I encourage others to immerse themselves in Arnberg's fantasia to find similar connections or at least understand the prejudicial education environment's impact on queer identity development so you can become agents of change in creating a supportive campus climate.

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Notes on Contributor

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