

## Pinker Shades of Crimson: Queer Resources at Harvard and Beyond by Ryan Thoreson

I've got my fair share of complaints about Boston. As you start senior year, you'll have a list, too. I've walked from Tufts to Harvard in the pouring rain at 2am, because public transportation closes down at midnight. The guy in the Pit who shouts verses from the Book of Revelations has personally singled me out for damnation. I've searched in vain for a grocery store in Harvard Square, and shaved years off my life by resigning myself to eating taquitos from 7-11. I pay taxes to Mitt Romney.

But for all its faults, Boston's a decent place to be young, socially conscious, and queer-friendly – not necessarily because it's cornered the market on activism, culture, or nightlife, but because it's got a little bit of something for everyone. You don't necessarily have to venture outside the Yard to find a niche that you can call your own, because Harvard has plenty of diverse communities of its own. Still, there's no reason to pass up on what Boston's got to offer – and if you know where to find genderqueer slam poets, volunteer at a legal information hotline, and eat a Monkey Wrench, you'll probably find that Boston seems infinitely more inviting.

Within the confines of Harvard Yard, the largest queer extracurricular organization is the **Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and Supporters' Alliance (BGLTSA)**, which offers a jam-packed slate of community, political, and social activities throughout the year. The calendar changes to reflect the interests of the BGLTSA's membership, but watch for the introductory meeting, Queer Thanksgiving, the Trans Day of Remembrance, the fall, winter, and spring dances, the Papodopolous Lecture, and Gaypril, a month of heightened visibility on campus. To really get plugged into the campus community, join the high-traffic Open List, which acts as a venue for the community to interact via email. If you want to share an article, start a debate, or solicit opinions, that's the place to do it. (If you want to get dangerously close to committing libel, that's been done too.) If you're primarily interested in weekly updates from the BGLTSA itself, the low-traffic Announce List is a lighter (and way less amusing) alternative.

**Girlsplot** is Harvard's group for queer women and their supporters; in the past, the group has organized dinners, discussions, and a queer women's film series that ranged from nuanced, insightful films about women in love to low-budget flicks about lesbian vampires. Still, Girlsplot is also famous for its room parties, where there's a decent chance that you'll make out with someone who goes to school in rural Massachusetts but seems determined to spend the night in Cambridge. **BOND, or Building on Diversity**, officially seeks to provide safe, non-judgmental social space, which unofficially translates into dark, gin-scented pre-games and the occasional pizza-and-beer soiree. The **Queer Asian Forum (QAF)** grew from a popular Facebook group into an actual group with actual people, and those actual people have organized well-attended discussions and film screenings that range from issues of queer Asian identity to broader issues of race, sexuality, and grappling with multiple identities. If you're interested in trans activism, a group of Harvard students, staff, faculty, and alums known as the **Transgender Task**

**Force (TTF)** are a great way to get involved with policy issues on campus. Last year, TTF successfully lobbied the University to include gender identity in its nondiscrimination code, and set off a wave of similar decisions at institutions across the country. As the University tackles the responsibility that comes along with that decision, though, there's still plenty of work to be done. Everyone should also read **Trannies Talk Back (TTB)**, a series of essays published by trans students at Harvard. If you're looking for coverage of all things queer, Quench, in its incarnations as a blog and zine, is one of the most fantastically irreverent publications on campus.

As a first-year, you can get involved in the groups that already exist, start your own organization, or act as an advocate for queer issues in other campus communities. Regardless, you'll inevitably hear criticism that different queer organizations on campus are too reactionary, too complacent, too involved in queer life, too removed from reality, too political, too social, only draw very concerned students when those students happen to be very single and undersexed, are too focused on differences, and don't take differences seriously enough. I'd venture that each of those assessments resonates with somebody at any given time. You can either consider that a scathing critique of existing organizations, or you can shrug it off as a testament to the diversity of queer communities on campus, but whatever you do, don't let the shortcomings of existing organizations keep you from getting involved. It's college, organizations change completely over the course of four years. And if you don't get involved, there's a good chance that awful people who are worse than you in every respect will take charge, and then everybody loses.

And whether you're there to make posters for a rally, find a book for a class, or watch Trick on VHS, everyone has access to the **Resource Center (RC)**, located in Thayer Basement, which has a lending library of books, magazines, videos, and DVDs and is staffed by student volunteers on weekdays from 11am to 5pm. It's usually got food and safer-sex supplies, too, and functions as a well-utilized lounge where queer and heterosexual students congregate, watch DVDs, and try to do work. Generally, the RC is where papers and problem sets go to die, but it's so awesome that nobody really cares.

You can also join **First-Year Group**, where queer and questioning first-year students meet every week in a safe, confidential setting to connect and get acclimated to Harvard. If you're not quite sure where you fit into the campus scene or just want to get connected to the other queer and questioning people in your class, it's probably your best bet. You can ask your proctor for details, or check the BGLTSA's website for information on the first meeting. Whether you're a first-year or not, you can also access **Contact**, a peer counseling group that specializes in gender and sexuality issues, by calling, dropping by the office, or applying to get trained as a peer counselor and help with the work they do.

The upperclass houses also host their own events, courtesy of the **BGLT Tutors** in each of the twelve residences. In recent years, Mather has had a queer women's film series, Mather and Dunster have done must-attend morning-after brunches on Sundays, Currier has hosted Queer Eye screenings, Eliot has had a Queer Tea, and Lowell has had pre-professional dinners, guest speakers like Wicked author Gregory Maguire, L Word screenings, and history brunches. (And history brunches, by the way, are much, much better than they sound. If you've ever wanted to kick back with an omelet and watch old

German films about star-crossed lesbians in boarding schools, well, welcome to Harvard.) For the most part, nobody explains where places like the Junior Common Room (JCR) or the Senior Common Room (SCR) are located in each house, which is especially frustrating when it's winter and you're totally lost. You'll learn pretty quickly, but if you're ever unsure, just drop an email to the organizer of the event, check each house's website for a map of the building. If you can't find the building itself, Harvard's website has a map feature with the entire campus at your fingertips.

Overall, students across campus are doing a lot with gender and sexuality issues, but there are some things that undergraduates can't provide – which is good, because you don't want to get hormones, Prozac, or HIV-testing from the same people who you party with, as a general rule. Unless that person is Sara Kimmel, who heads up mental health services at **University Health Services (UHS)** and the **Bureau of Study Counsel (“the Bureau”)** on Linden Street. She won't actually party with you (apparently, the medical profession is big on “boundaries”), but she's incredibly approachable, and a great person to contact about queer health – and transgender health, especially – if you've got questions you're not comfortable bringing to UHS. Depending on their primary care physician, students have reported different experiences at UHS, ranging from “wow, she asked about my ‘partners’” to “seriously, trust me, the swelling is not pregnancy-related.” I'm not even responsible enough to remember whether I'm allergic to any medications, so I'm not going to tell you how to live your life. If you find that you're unhappy with your doctor at UHS, though, you should feel comfortable switching to a different one; Dr. Churchill, Dr. Osher, and Dr. Wang have gotten pretty high praise for their sensitivity to queer students in the past. You can schedule appointments with your doctor to get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If you're sexually active, you can access UHS's anonymous or confidential HIV testing services. Confidential testing is usually done by your primary care physician over the course of two appointments, is covered by your insurance, and the results can be released to employers and insurers under certain circumstances. Anonymous testing is administered orally by a trained counselor, costs \$10 (although you won't be turned away if you're unable to pay for the test), and you'll be asked to supply a code to identify yourself instead of your name. You can schedule anonymous testing by calling the Surgical Specialties Department at (617) 495-2139. It's all on UHS's website, but the less you have to navigate that, the better.

Once you've gotten the hang of Harvard, though, there's plenty to do off-campus – and though extracurricular groups occasionally host outings, there's no reason why you can't get busy on your own. If you're into high-octane coffee, vegan snacks, and shamelessly flirting with baristas who are walking sex, try **Diesel**, a queer women's café near Tufts University in Davis Square. If you plan to stay and study, come early, because seating is scarce on weekends. (They push the garage theme; the Monkey Wrench is one of their better sandwiches, and the front of the café is a glass-paned, fully functional garage door that's hoisted open on warm days.) **The Milky Way Café** is supposed to be another prime locale in **Jamaica Plain**, a neighborhood that boasts impressive progressive and queer women's communities. It's a bit of a schlep, but might be worth it. **The South End** – on the Orange Line, within walking distance of the Back Bay stop – has blocks of cafes, specialty stores, and upscale restaurants, primarily geared at gay men. If you're itching for corporate coffee, the **Starbucks** on Tremont Street is probably the gayest in Boston, but

honestly, you can do better – **Francesca's** doesn't have a whole lot of seating, but it serves sandwiches, salads, and trademark drinks like the Sex on the Counter, the caffeinated, non-alcoholic equivalent of a Sex on the Beach. And if you're interested in actually having sex on a counter, **Good Vibrations** in Boston probably stocks any and everything sex-related that strikes your fancy.

After hours, there's not a whole lot that caters to the queer community on a nightly basis – most clubs have a weekly gay or lesbian night, and it's a matter of finding your favorite and planning your life around that. If you're 19+, the best night is probably Thursdays at the **Embassy/Modern**, which routinely devolves into a crush of sweaty people and the Top 40. For queer women, there's **Pink** and **Tribe**; **Avalon** and **Axis** on Lansdowne Street tends to cater to gay men. In the past, **ManRay** in Central Square was a staple for fantastically sketchy parties on Wednesdays, and **Aria** in the Theatre District was uber-trendy on Thursdays, but ManRay finally closed after struggling to stay afloat for years, and Aria has lost a lot (like, almost all) of its clientele to Embassy/Modern. If you send an email a day or two in advance, you can usually get on the guest list and pay reduced admission. Whatever you do, always bring a state-issued ID – even at clubs that are 19+, the bouncers are pretty strict. For the most up-to-date information on admission, age restrictions, and schedules, check each club's website. And if you're not necessarily in the mood for clubbing, **GenderCrash** features a lineup of incredible open-mic performances on the first Thursday of every month, and the BGLTSA usually sends a sizeable contingent. In downtown Boston, **Club Café** has karaoke, and even though the bar is 21+, the super-cheap Thanksgiving buffet at the adjoining **209** is a must-try if you're spending the holiday with the family instead of, um, your family.

It's not quite Ibiza, but it's easy enough to find a place in Boston to shake your ass and/or watch yourself. Still, there's something admirable about giving back, too. You can check out regular volunteer opportunities at a variety of organizations, or seek out groups that organize projects on an ad hoc basis. **Fenway** is widely regarded as a hotbed for work on queer health, although the **Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project (GMDVP)** and the **Network/La Red** have also done outreach on sexual health and violence, too. The **Boston Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY)** and the **Gay/Lesbian/Straight Education Network (GLSEN)** might have opportunities to get involved in queer youth issues, if you're committed to making a difference in that arena. If you're ready to become a militant homosexual, there are plenty of political action groups – like **MassEquality**, the **Queer Asian Pacific Alliance (QAPA)**, and the **Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MTPC)** – that offer opportunities to get involved. And if you just want to help out, Community Servings uses volunteers to help make meals for people living with HIV/AIDS and **Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD)** trains volunteers twice a year to work on its Legal Information Hotline. Whether you're involved in queer activities at Harvard or not, Boston's got some of the best NGOs and service providers in the US, so if you're interested in activism, community organizing, fundraising, human rights, government, law, medicine, lobbying, public service, or anything else that's remotely related to caring about other people, you're in a good place to get pretty phenomenal experience.

Obviously, being queer doesn't mean that that has to define you and the things you're interested in, and being straight doesn't preclude you from getting involved with gender and sexuality issues. Nonetheless, Harvard's queer community is vibrant because it's a diverse group of students advancing a diverse set of needs, and together, that group makes its presence felt. It's rare to find a group that takes care of its members in the same way that the queer community strives to do; students staff their own Resource Center, counsel their peers, fight political battles on behalf of one another, and arrange social events that tend to kick ass. I think that's rare, and I think it becomes infinitely more meaningful when you get beyond the divisions that exist and try to contribute whatever you've got. You can say a lot of unkind things about Harvard – and trust me, you will – but you can't claim that there's a shortage of opportunities to make a difference.

For more information on Harvard's groups, check out:

**BGLTSA:** <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/queer>

**GirlsSpot:** <http://www.xanga.com/girlspot>

**BOND:** <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/bond>

**TTF:** <http://hcs.harvard.edu/queer/ttf/activism.html>

**Quench:** <http://www.quenchzine.blogspot.com>

**Contact:** <http://www.digitas.harvard.edu/~contact>