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"People Aren't Afraid Anymore, But It's Hard to Find Books": Reading Practices That Inform the Personal and Social Identities of Self-Identified Lesbian and Queer Young Women

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of Self-Identified Lesbian and Queer Young Women**

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The quote embedded in the title of this paper, “People aren’t afraid anymore, but it’s hard to find books,” comes from one of the participants in my dissertation study which was designed to explore the practices associated with voluntary reading in the lives of young women who claimed alternative sexual identities and sexual orientations. Nicky was 18 years old and self-identified as lesbian and queer. She was in her final year at a Catholic secondary school in southern Ontario where she proudly and openly declared her alternative sexuality, despite incidences of harassment and ridicule. Like the other young women who participated in this research, Nicky talked about reading as an everyday activity that encompassed both an escape from and an engagement with the world that was very much bound by the specific context of her public and personal expressions of sexual identity. The central theme of my study comprises finding, borrowing, buying, reading, sharing and talking about texts, especially those that fall into the genre of lesbian and literature. I sought to explore the place of reading in the lives of lesbian or queer young women, not as an examination of the construction or composition of postmodern lesbian, queer or bisexual identities or subjectivities, but rather, as an investigation into the power of reading, the act of reading itself, to change lives. However, underlying assumptions about sexuality in this study are defined by an indeterminate view of identity drawn from

postmodernist critique, queer theory and gay/lesbian studies (see Kitzinger 1987; Seidman and Richardson 2002; Sullivan 2003; Weeks 2000). This view of identity challenges the notion of a unitary, essentialist self and instead posits identity as fluid, non-binarist, performative and socially constructed. The loci of analysis in this study are the practices of reading and the lived experiences of engagement with mostly printed texts – in other words, what happens when people read.

As Kivel and Kleiber (2000) discuss in their study of leisure activities in the context of identity formation of lesbian and gay youth, the bulk of research about lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer youth has focused on “coming-out” issues (Herdt and Boxer 1993; Hetrick and Martin 1987; 1988) and pathological issues such as suicide, substance abuse and unsafe sex (Kourany 1987; Remafedi 1999). Non-mainstream youth sexual identity has also been researched in a longstanding developmental tradition (Cass 1979; Coleman 1989; Savin-Williams and Rodriguez 1993; Schneider 1989; Troiden 1998). I was less concerned with the effects of recognizing and establishing a lesbian or queer identity and more interested in the “effects” of reading on the maintenance or ongoing negotiation of declared identities.

BACKGROUND: STUDIES OF READING AND READERS

[We] need more scholarship on how young people make sense of and interact with one another around their sexual orientations and identities as well as on how their reading and writing practices might support or constrain their developing identities as sexual beings (Moje and MuQaribu 2003).

As the excerpt quoted above suggests, there has been little research to date that considers the relationships between reading practices and the cultural and social contexts in which youth negotiate alternative sexualities. Below, I provide an overview of five related and overlapping areas of reading research that influenced this study.

Critical literacy studies

While there has been remarkably little research into the literacy practices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer young people, critical literacy studies, or those studies of reading and writing that begin with a core respect for the literacy choices, preferences and habits of young people, provided a useful framework for this study. Researchers often look at out-of-school or unsanctioned literacy practices that disrupt normative, mainstream and stereotypical representations of students and adolescents (Christian-Smith 1993; Lankshear and McLaren 1993). For example, Elizabeth Moje spent three years with five gang-connected youth to study how they used unsanctioned literacy practices such as writing graffiti (a complex system of graphic and alphabetic symbols) and music lyrics to “claim a space, construct an identity, and take a social position in their worlds” (2000, 651). Other researchers look at the role of popular forms of texts to examine the ways in which the literacy practices associated with them situate the young people who read them in both school and out-of-school contexts. In attempts to expand what counts as reading and writing, studies have looked at comics, manga, television based fanfictions, electronic and paper zines, web sites, gaming, music and movies (Alvermann and Heron 2001; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003; Finders 2000; Mackey 2002).

Studies of Girls and Women Reading

In many ways, Janice Radway's (1991/1984) study of adult female readers of romance novels ignited the spark for this inquiry. Rather than theorizing the social effects of reading from the "top down," Radway's ethnography provided a synthesis of empirical evidence, theories of capitalist cultural production, and feminist research methodologies, building her theory from what readers actually said and from what she was able to witness and observe.

Other studies also concerned with the politics of reading examine the limited agency of young female readers of popular romances to resist discourses of femininity and patriarchy (e.g., Cherland 1994; Christian-Smith 1990, 1993; Finders 1997). Some researchers grant more agency to readers, questioning processes of interpellation and the assumption that ideologies are unproblematically read "off" of texts (e.g., Moss 1993). Angela McRobbie (1991; 1997) analyzed the interplay of pleasure, consumption, and market economies in her analysis of girls' popular magazines, playing out the relationship between oppressive ideologies and productive agency. In a fine-grained analysis of teen fashion and beauty magazines and their young female readers, informed by feminist sociological perspectives and grounded in empirical research, Dawn Currie (1999) examines the reproduction and construction of gendered subjectivities. Currie (1999, 281) comes to a similar conclusion as Radway and Cherland, claiming "the structure of everyday life organizes girls' agency around traditionally feminine activities such as reading and away from non-traditional activities, including politics and sports." It is striking that in all these studies of girls and women reading there is little speculation that at least some of the readers might resist or assimilate ideologies from the standpoint of alternative sexual identities. Therefore, while these studies contribute in important ways to our understanding of how gender

operates in reading relationships, they say almost nothing about sexual identity and orientation. I have been able to locate only one substantive study that uses empirical data of first-hand accounts of the reading practices of lesbian (and gay male) youth: Kivel and Kleiber's (2000) research into the influence of leisure contexts on personal and social identities. One of the four themes that emerged from their grounded theory approach was the role of books, comics and magazines, along with visual mass media, sports and music. The authors write that their participants "discussed reading in terms of gathering information about lesbian and gay issues, and they also used reading to find characters with whom they could identify generally and in terms of their sexual identity" (Kivel and Kleiber 2000, 222).

Studies of the "Experience" of Reading

Some researchers conceptualize reading as an "event" or an "experience," a "phenomenon" in the lives of readers. Lynn Pearce (1997) explores the affective relationships that adult female readers created with what she calls the textual other. Dennis Sumara (1996) uses a hermeneutical approach in his attempt to uncover the shared, negotiated construction of meanings that emerge through reflexive engagement with texts and with other readers. Sumara uses his own experiences of reading and re-reading literary fiction to put forward a theory of reading that emphasizes its creative and transformative properties: the confluence of text, reader and context creates something new, takes on new properties in a dynamic process of meaning production that holds the capacity to change both readers and the world. Sumara acknowledges an intellectual debt to Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading first put forward nearly sixty years earlier (1995/1938). Rosenblatt continued to explore the transactional relationship between the reader and the text, theorizing the creation of something "new," what she calls an "evocation," a

“poem,” “an event in the life of a reader” (Rosenblatt 1994/1978, 16). The idea that our encounters with texts signify a powerful relationship, constitute an event, or experience that we can then recall and describe to others underpins my approach to reading and readers in this study.

Reading as Everyday Life Practice

Another key influence on the initial and ongoing conceptualization of this project is the work of the French cultural theorist and historian, Michel de Certeau, in particular the 1984 English edition of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (see Rothbauer 2005b). Two key ideas from Certeau’s text frame this project: everyday life is constituted of the tactics of individuals and groups in response to the strategies of official institutions; and in order to uncover these strategies and tactics we must look closely at how people operate as they go about the informal, routine, mundane activities of everyday life. Certeau conceived of reading as an exemplar of everyday life. He singles it out for its capacity to permit readers to wander through an imposed system – that of the text, but also the circuit of writing, publishing, distribution and reception of texts that is itself enmeshed in still larger systems (Certeau 1984, 155-156). Informed by my reading of Certeau, I conceived of reading as a tactic that offered the possibilities to lesbian, queer and bisexual young women for resistance to the dominant, heterosexist discourses of mainstream society.

LIS and Studies of Reading

In recent years several calls have been made for LIS researchers and educators to pay more attention to readers and reading. Wayne Wiegand (1997, 1999, 2003) has led the advocacy in this field with his persuasive arguments that both libraries and reading are neglected areas of research

within LIS due, in part, to disciplinary blind spots and tunnel vision that continue to privilege the management of information systems. While there has been a general lack of empirical research on the relationships between readers, texts and contexts, especially as concerns young people, an ongoing analysis by Catherine Ross (1991, 1995, 1999) of nearly two hundred interviews with adult avid readers played a critical role in this project. Ross privileges what readers say about reading and, by looking at the uses they make of what they read, she expands the notions of what counts as information in the context of readers' everyday lives. Ross (1999) presents six common claims that readers make about the power of reading:

1. an awakening or new perspectives;
2. models for identity;
3. reassurance, comfort, confirmation of self-worth, strength;
4. a connection with others and an awareness of not being alone;
5. courage to make a change;
6. and acceptance.

These categories offered a framework by which to consider the possible ways of thinking about the role that reading might play in the lives of young women negotiating alternative sexualities. Ross's more general claim, that for avid readers reading is a preferred way of finding out about the world, directed me to seek access to lesbian, bisexual and queer young women who also saw themselves as readers. I wanted to know more about how and if reading "transformed" their lives, to know if their unique context for reading conformed to what Ross describes as an assimilation of the text to how they see themselves:

When the right match is made between reader and story, readers use the text to create a story about themselves. They read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them (1999, 349).

Summary of Contributions from Reading Studies

The conceptual influences presented in this overview about what reading is and can be, and how readers read, and what the relationship is between readers, texts and contexts illustrate a certain set of assumptions about reading that underpin this inquiry. These are summarized as:

- reading is an active process of making meaning;
- reading constitutes an event or experience in the lives of readers;
- reading offers a source of representations about certain experiences of human life;
- reading is a socially and culturally situated set of practices;
- reading carries a potentially transformative capacity to change lives.

Beginning with this set of assumptions about reading and the assumptions about identity, discussed earlier, I designed a study to examine the voluntary reading practices of young women negotiating non-mainstream sexualities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the dearth of empirical research into the cultural practices of lesbian, bisexual and queer young women (and all youth claiming alternative sexualities), I conducted a qualitative, interpretivist inquiry. My aim was to gain, from readers' perspectives, a broad sense of the role that reading might play in their lives as they negotiated alternative sexualities. My preliminary

research questions, listed below, were designed to open the field to different avenues of inquiry based on an emergent understanding of the central theme.

1. What is the experience of finding yourself (or not) in the texts that you read?
2. What do reading experiences contribute to the lives of lesbian, queer and bisexual young women in the context of their self-declared alternative sexualities?
3. What kinds of texts do these readers read?
4. What are the roles of libraries and bookstores in the reading choices and reading practices of lesbian, bisexual and queer young women?
5. Who are the mediating people and agencies that connect readers to texts?

Interpretivist Qualitative Inquiry

Throughout this study I was guided by the tenets of qualitative and interpretive approaches to the study of human experience with a particular influence from studies that explore how people interpret their lives and make meaning of their experiences (see Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000; van Manen 1990). Following from interpretivist methodologies, this study of reading has five dominant characteristics:

- an emphasis on the immediate practices of reading amongst my participants, rather than retrospective abstractions (van Manen 1990, 30-31);
- writing as a dialectic process between field texts constructed through data collection and the narrative texts that convey the researcher's present understandings (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 71; van Manen 1990, 127);
- understanding of phenomena and experiences is expressed and shared through language (Gadamer 1989, 382; Heron 1981, 23-27; Rowan 1981, 133);

- activities related to reading are bound by socio-historical contexts that partially shape its practice, its constitution and its meanings (Mackey 2002);
- research design is emergent as the study took its direction from the ongoing reading and analysis of what others (including my participants) had to say about the practice of reading (Heron 1981, 30; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 208).

Research Methods

My strong desire to “give voice” to lesbian and queer young women necessitated a research approach that enabled a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the experience of reading as presented by participants themselves. I was committed to understanding reading practices working from what readers had to say about reading, rather than imposing an *a priori* theory of reading with concomitant hypotheses that would then need to be proved or refuted. Interviewing was judged to be the most suitable method to explore the sensitive topic of nonmainstream sexualities among young women and to investigate its relationship to the everyday practices of voluntary reading. Between November 2001 and February 2003, I conducted flexibly structured, in-depth, conversational interviews (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003, 141-142) with seventeen young women between the ages of 18 and 23 years of age, all of whom also self-identified as lesbian or queer. Interview data was complemented by a writing exercise completed by four participants and through the use of research diaries and field notes.

Access

A full discussion of the methods and challenges of gaining access to participants is not possible here, but I used a variety of methods and sites to gain access to participants including social agencies serving lesbian and gay youth, libraries, bookstores, listservs and electronic mailing lists, friends and acquaintances. Given the impossibility of constructing a sample that is representative of lesbian and queer women in general, I deployed purposive sampling strategies (Morse 2004, 884-885) in the hopes of gaining access to a number of young women who saw themselves as readers and who claimed alternative sexual identities. I conducted eighteen interviews, seventeen of which were used as data for this study. All participants were living in Ontario at the time of their interview and interviews took place in or near the cities of London and Toronto. Sampling ceased with the diminishing yield of analytical insights and theoretical yield (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 12; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 201; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Data Analysis

Following guidelines for interpretivist human inquiry, data analysis was largely a matter of textual reflection. I conducted multiple readings of the data, and constructed multiple iterations of the narrative text (van Manen 1990; Watson 2001). Interpretation was guided by open-coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and involved qualitative procedures such as active listening and thinking about what is being said during interviews; immersion in the data in order to come to some initial interpretations that then drove subsequent data collection and interpretations; and data reduction and data transformation (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 76-82).

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS Part One: READING

When I began this study, I imagined that I would research reading as escape, a taken-for-granted way of talking about the role that reading plays in our lives. I was interested in two aspects of reading as a mode of escape: escape from social milieus and the escape to secret worlds that might be created through the sustained engagement with textual materials. Given the evidence in the vast research record on the difficulties of coming of age while claiming an alternative sexuality, it seemed reasonable to wonder if reading might provide relief from these pressures for my participants, especially since reading can be a safe, anonymous and non-risky way to find out about what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. However, the metaphor of reading as escape does not adequately account for the role that reading plays in the lives of my participants. Although most participants disclosed difficult circumstances in their lives related to their expressions of their sexual identities, they were not looking for ways to escape their lives. Reading provided comfort, and it provided a kind of relief from the busy conditions of their lives, but there was little correspondence between the notion of escape and the negotiation of identity.

Most participants wanted books that informed their perspectives on their present and future understanding of what it meant to claim a lesbian, bisexual or queer identity. They wanted to read materials that expanded their understanding of their social worlds and their possible movements through it. And rather than providing an escapist pleasure, reading offered my participants an opportunity to engage with the larger world. The following brief interview excerpt from Sue functions as an exemplar to illustrate that reading was often grounded in the “actual” world:

Well, I never think of myself as reading to escape because I know that whatever I'm reading I'm going to encounter something that is very much a part of the world. Like even if it's from, you know, the 1200s, there's going to be something in it that relates.

Reading for Possibility

Reading was a way to find out what was possible as one moved forward in life with declarations of lesbian and queer identities. Participants expressed a desire for new and different stories of lesbian experience, stories that both resonated with their own experiences and those that provided a kind of blueprint for the future. Like other young women in this study Nicky wanted much more than to be entertained and distracted:

I don't want to read about homophobia, I'd rather not because it's not the biggest issue in my life...I understand that it's probably important for someone who is having a lot of trouble with coming out and doesn't have any sort of supports and is looking for that. But for me I was just like this is the same story. This is my story already...Show me the possibilities! Show me that someone can be gay and lesbian and be in love and do the things other people do in books, because I couldn't relate to straight characters in books. I wanted something that was me and showed me the possibilities that were available to me.

Nicky's quote gives a more immediate sense of the four dimensions of the theme of reading for possibility, summarized below:

An orientation towards the future: Readers were looking for flexible trajectories for their future lives. They looked forward with yearning and trepidation to what follows their coming out

phases. They wanted and want answers to their questions about “what comes next” as seen in Nicky’s comments below:

... I’d like to see a story like a relationship story about lesbians you know and preferably one where they are already past the coming out stage. And so they meet you know and I would like to see it end badly. I know that sounds bad, but I would like to see it. It sounds horrible, but then I can, then if I was breaking up with someone I’d have a book to go to...that could speak to me.

Participants in this study had few pictures of what it meant to live healthy, happy productive lives as out lesbian, bisexual and queer women. One place they looked for them was in fictional narratives.

A rejection of the standard coming out narratives: Readers were looking for accounts of lesbian and queer experience that were at least as complex as their own lives. They were not satisfied with narratives of disclosure that depicted a stereotypical sequence and pattern of the life course of lesbian and gay characters: an unhappy childhood, a strong sense of feeling different, a debilitating concern with being gay, and problems with guilt, shame, fear and suicidal feelings (see Kong, Mahoney and Plummer 2002, 242-243). Such “classic” novels of lesbian experience as *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown (1973) and *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928) were singled out for negative commentary by many participants. However the young women in this study did not reject the standard coming out tales out of hand as they were often the only materials they could find that spoke to them at all. Kathy expresses her dissatisfaction with what she sees as the standard plot line of lesbian narratives:

...The story's always like, they meet one night, they have sex and they fall in love. And also there's always the element that one of the main characters also has issues with her sexuality... I don't know, it kind of portrays that les—like gays can't really be in love or that it's not right because everybody always questions it.

A desire to read about “being lesbian,” “being queer,” “being bisexual”: Participants voiced questions about identity roles; questions about gender constructions and deconstructions, and questions about sex and love. Readers were looking for models of identity, examples of behaviour that reflected possibilities for their own lives. Participants talked about reading as a way to center their own experiences with their non-mainstream sexualities by showing them that there are others such as themselves, others who feel and act in similar ways, and others who give them permission to act as they do. Reading about the experiences and characteristics of textual women who provide models of identity gives readers “tools” with which to define themselves as they engage with the larger world. Stella explains:

...you can connect yourself to characters in different books. And especially at a young age where you can find definitions of people you'd like to be, what you want to do with your life, by reading through another character's head. And relate or not relate and sort of decide the definitions.

A connection with the “textual other”: Claiming, enacting and imagining possibilities for their lives as out and proud queer young women are activities that are privileged by most of my participants in their talk about reading. Sustained engagements with materials that represent lesbian and queer experience are often described as connections or relationships with what Lynne Pearce has theorized as the “textual other.” The textual other “is whoever, or whatever,

becomes the focus of [the reader's] dialogic connection in the process of reading, and is not restricted to humanistically conceived characters/subjects in the text" (Pearce 1997: 29). The identification with the main character in lesbian or queer narratives is perhaps the most accessible relationship available to 'ordinary' readers or non-academic readers like the readers in this study. The connection with the textual other imbues readers with a sense of what is possible in their own lives.

Reading for Community

Reading as escape and reading for possibilities explore the more solitary, personal and individual effects of reading in the lives of my participants. Reading for community reflects more outward looking and outward reaching aspects of reading and identity. Participants expressed a desire to engage with the world on two distinct grounds: local communities and ideological spaces.

Recognition of and participation in specific, local communities of other young women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or queer underpins much of the interview data. Reading is seen as a vehicle of access to community and to a related sense of social connectedness. The function of reading in this context has less to do with what is within the pages of chosen reading materials and more to do with the social significance of these texts. It has less to do with relationships with textual others than with making connections with other actual readers. These connections lead to a second reading ground: the creation of ideological space that permits the open expression and exploration of lesbian and queer identities. Ideological space is opened and created by the everyday practice of reading including conversations with other readers and/or other women about reading. Value is assigned to certain genres and texts based on a criterion of "space" for lesbian, bisexual and queer issues and concerns. Reading provides a ground for exploring the

implications of lesbian and queer sexualities and offers the empowering opportunity for feelings of solidarity. The everyday practice of reading allows for a public recognition of self and self-understanding that can then be shared with others.

There are four dimensions of reading for community in this research:

A connection with local queer women writers: Readers expressed a celebrity/fandom binary when talking about well-known queer writers, many who lived in or around Toronto. But their relationship with writers was more profound than this: writers are accessible, desirable representations of “real” lesbian and queer lives and experiences. Knowledge of authors also constitutes a sign of status within local literary communities. There is a shift from the notion of reading as personal, as private and as an activity conducted in quiet solitude, to an idea of reading as embedded within a localized social milieu, within an actual community that is accessible to readers, and one that fosters affinity along lines of identity. Investing in a vibrant local literary community was another way to enact a public and shared understanding of what it meant to claim a lesbian or queer identity.

A connection with community members who are outside of specific reading practices:

Participants recognized and valued the guidance and support of people who acted as role models and gatekeepers to gay and lesbian culture: these are distinct from relationships that rise up around textual practices. But it is interesting to note that much of the mentoring and support that participants wanted was still provided through coming out narratives and other rite of passage stories though not necessarily in written, textual forms.

Book sharing and conversation about reading materials: Lending, borrowing, sharing books with friends and family functioned as a symbolic exchange of trust, compassion and care. Readers often assumed a mentoring position by introducing and sharing books with others. Books carried a symbolic aspect of identity itself as in the case of being seen reading a certain lesbian novels, a situation that could be empowering or risky depending on the observer (i.e., other women perceived to be gay, or your father who does not yet know that you are lesbian).

I think I would bring the books home [laughter]. It was all very passive aggressive. Yeah, I remember once my dad found...like I had just left out this collection ...of short stories—gay and lesbian science fiction short stories...he was like “is there something that you want to tell me?” I’m like “no” [laughs]. I can read what I like. (Anne)

I was reading *Tipping the Velvet* [by Sarah Waters 1998] and it has two women on the front cover—I was reading it, I’m sure she was a dyke sitting in front of me...she was going to get up to get off, she was like, “that’s a good book isn’t it?” I’m like, “yes it is,” and she got off, I’m like, “yeah! That was awesome!” Like the connection you know, such a cool connection...Also reading these books is like a connection to the other lesbians around me: “Have you read this book?” “Yeah! I’ve read this.” (Laurie)

A connection with other lesbian, queer and bisexual readers: Reading is a social activity that allows readers to make connections with other lesbian and queer women, either women with whom they were already familiar (friends and family members) or with women they met through book groups, reading circles or through spontaneous, anonymous encounters with strangers. The connections however tenuous, represent social manifestations of lesbian and queer culture: these

readers come together as lesbians, queer and bisexual women to talk about lesbian and queer texts. The collective reading practice creates an ideological space in which to explore, contest and enact lesbian and queer identities.

Reading provided a range of social possibilities. Reading for community represents my participants' desire to navigate in a larger social arena, to make connections with other people. Reading is a sign of participation in lesbian and queer culture. Of course, any idea of a unitary, stable or reified social structure such as "queer community" is a false construction, and as Shugar (1999) points out, any attempt to define it further reifies its boundaries. However, it is without question, that my participants sought to belong to some larger community of lesbian, queer, bisexual and trans people – they imagined that this kind of community existed, and their reading practices allowed them to think about themselves in relation to others in ways that encouraged feelings of social connectedness.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS Part Two: ACCESS

The Internet, public libraries and bookstores emerged as the dominant sites of access to gay and lesbian literature. The following section provides a sketch of the findings related to libraries and bookstores while a discussion of the Internet as a site of failed searches and unsanctioned reading is offered elsewhere (see Rothbauer 2005a).

Public Libraries

While remote use of library catalogues was by far the most common use of the library, the findings from this study support earlier research in LIS on use of collections by lesbian, gay and

bisexual people (for reviews see Joyce 2000; Rothbauer 2004). The existing research on all aspects of library and information service provision to lesbian and gays, including collections of materials with lesbian and gay content, positions the library as an important mediating agent in the lives of these users. Key findings from existing studies support six general claims:

1. libraries are a safe place to explore alternative sexual identities;
2. libraries have a responsibility to provide information about alternative sexualities to all patrons;
3. libraries play an unique role as information resources in the initial coming-out processes of lesbians and gays;
4. libraries could play stronger mediating roles between individual lesbian and gay patrons and larger queer communities;
5. library collections of lesbian and gay literature need to be improved in terms of depth, currency, scope and quality; and
6. libraries need to improve access to existing collections.

The most significant factors affecting library use as reported by my participants remain consistent with findings from other studies as well:

- dissatisfaction with the scope of holdings available;
- negative perception about what they imagined was available: many imagined that the library would not have the kinds of reading materials that they wanted, and so, when their haphazard and random searches were unsuccessful my participants were not surprised;

- mystique of access: the primary method of locating materials was keyword searching along terms such as “lesbian” or “gay” but not one participant described her search query using any variants of the term “homosexual” (Rothbauer 2005b);
- limited utility of physical access through browsing activities or known item searches.

While almost all participants saw the public library as a potential site of access to lesbian and gay literature and for information about being gay, and they used it their attempts to locate reading materials, all of them expressed disappointment, dissatisfaction, frustration and failure with their searching. In terms of support for the dimensions of reading discussed earlier, libraries did little to foster a sense of social connectedness among participants, but they did, by circulating representations of lesbian and gay experience, however limited, provide support for the personal exploration of sexual identity and orientation.

Bookstores

Bookstores play a significant role in the reading accounts offered by my participants. When asked where they located their latest book with lesbian and gay content the readers in this study were likely to name the neighbourhood bookstore rather than the closest public library. Like libraries, bookstores also did not offer much ground for social connections to other readers or to larger communities of lesbians and gays, but participants did see bookstores as more reliable and useful sources of lesbian and gay literature. Participants were able to find books with lesbian and gay content by utilizing online inventory search tools created by bookstores like amazon.com (Rothbauer 2005b). Participants expected to find something at the bookstores they visited, an expectation that was rarely extended to the public library.

Dimensions of bookstore use include book buying on rare occasions and the more common activity of browsing known lesbian and gay sections. The young women in this study knew that certain bookstores had distinct and separate collections of lesbian and gay materials. They expressed dissatisfaction with what they could find at bookstores, but most felt sure that at least some books would be offered for sale. Participants did not extend similar expectations to libraries with labeled sections or known collections of materials. Keri has come to believe that libraries are simply not as reliable as bookstores regarding lesbian and gay literature. She emphatically declared, “I don’t remember finding *anything* at the library. Bookstores had some things, like Chapters.

Women’s and gay bookstores are obvious destinations for those searching for lesbian and gay materials, and the readers in this study made clear and unequivocal declarations of support for these kinds of stores as well as for independently owned and locally situated general booksellers. Financial support of independent booksellers, especially at women’s and gay bookstores, expressed a show of solidarity for women, gays and lesbians. Shopping was one way that participants demonstrated their disapproval of patriarchy, homophobia and heterosexism. The link to politics is explicit in their accounts and is illustrated below by Cole’s comments:

I often check out those sites [amazon.com and chapters.indigo.ca] but I don’t buy stuff from those sites. I try to buy from independent bookstores as much as I can—Toronto Women’s Bookstores specifically. They have a lot more stuff that I’m interested in...Toronto Women’s Bookstore is the one that I tend to go to, partly because it’s close—and it’s also like a feminist queer kind of thing.

Compared to a view of libraries as simple, static repositories of reading materials, the view of bookstores was often embedded in personal politics relating to identity or to larger social contexts for its enactment. Bookstore use is another way to publicly enact a lesbian or queer identity: the act of supporting local, lesbian and gay friendly stores could be seen as a political, consumer-oriented ritual that lends legitimacy and visibility to non-mainstream sexualities. There is a new body of research of cultural and social studies of marketing that provides support for the idea of politically motivated consumption among lesbian and gay individuals and groups (see Kates and Belk 2001; Penaloza 1996). The establishment of lesbian and gay space, represented in this study by specialty bookstores, committed shelf space and structured websites, offered sites of access to lesbian and gay literature, but also functioned as a solid ground from which participants could find reflection of lesbian and queer sexualities. This, in turn, provides an empowering legitimacy for the enactment of such identities.

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