

Queerly Imagined: Women Claiming Public Space

This project explores how queer women have written themselves into public space—despite widespread oppression and marginalization—through magazines, archives, and bookstores. I focus on the time period of 1970 to the present day, tracing the changes that have occurred across the decades as the queer community has both gained broader acceptance (marriage equality) and has been presented with new challenges (anti-trans legislation at the state level). My primary research question asks what roles writing has played in enabling lesbians to form cultural identities and to claim public space for those identities.

I am using two sites of research to address my research question: The lesbian periodical *Off Our Backs* (1970-2008) and the feminist, lesbian-owned bookstore Womencrafts. I have chosen these sites because they (1) offer a breadth of approaches to feminist education and visibility (2) cater to a lesbian-identified audience and engage broadly with feminist causes (3) exist or did exist (in the case of *Off Our Backs*) for multiple decades, demonstrating community buy-in.

I bring my rhetoric and composition disciplinary training to this study by exploring the particular role that writing has played in the literacy practices described above. Scholars such as Jonathan Alexander have argued that sexuality represents a critical aspect of our literate practice. He contends in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* that “Understanding sex and sexuality as not just biological or ‘personal’ practices but as literacy events can offer us access to understanding the norms, values, and pressures that circle around them and that thus affect and shape our lives at fundamental levels” (61). Alexander points to how queerness has its own set of discursive practices, nomenclature, ways of understanding the world; in other words, queerness consists of a series of “literacy events.” With this perspective in mind, my project seeks to define and uncover the literacy events that have constituted being a lesbian at given points during the past 50 years in lesbian magazines, archival work, and the running of a prominent feminist bookstore.

From a methodological perspective, this project will both employ imagination as a methodology and examine how women across my three sites of study employed imagination as a method for going about their pedagogical and activist work. Feminist scholar Jacqueline Jones Royster has theorized “critical imagination” as a methodology for developing feminist rhetorical histories when archival material and documentation are limited. This project’s title “queerly imagined” refers to the idea that because queer histories are often difficult to pin down (due to partial records, among other reasons), researchers must fill in the gaps with their own informed conclusions. Writing from his perspective as an archivist, Franklin A. Robinson wonders, “How does one convince potential donors that ephemeral things such as advertisements, newsletters, unused drink tickets from the local gay bar, or personal photographs of the 1971 Pride Parade are, indeed, historical?” (196). Because of the partial nature of queer archives, imagination is often required to fully capture the richness of the lives represented. I also use the term “imagined” in the project title to refer to *how* women across my sites have engaged in work. While struggling to combat stereotypes, form coalitions, and counter discriminatory practices, these women showed determination to *imagine* other realities. In the current day, imagination continues to play an important role in queerness: a striving for possibilities that do not yet exist in tangible form. With this project, I will emphasize imagination as both a method used by queer-identifying women and as a feminist and queer methodology that researchers can employ.

Plan

Site one: Lesbian magazines (*Off Our Backs*)

Lesbian/feminist magazines such as *Off Our Backs*, *Lavender Woman*, and *Amazon Quarterly* have played an important but little-acknowledged role in the construction of queerness for women. They have functioned rhetorically to educate women about what it has meant, at any particular moment in time, to be queer. These magazines have represented one of the few places that women had, aside from bars, to build community, exchange ideas, and talk about how to further the cause of equality for themselves and other marginalized identities. In her work on queer epistolary exchange, Pamela VanHaitsma argues that “An unfortunate effect of [the] long-term coupling of rhetorical education and civic engagement is the methodological marginalization of questions about other potential pedagogical purposes, especially those concerned with romantic and sexual life” (7). By what means of education does a queer person learn the cultural, discursive, sexual practices of being queer? Might we consider this kind of rhetorical education a form of civic engagement (participation in the life of the “city”), considering that queer people’s safety and fulfillment depends in large part on finding each other and coexisting peacefully with straight folks? In this sense, writing about queer identities in forums such as magazines represents a method of claiming public space; otherwise, only heterosexual literacy practices are centered.

Considered the longest running radical feminist news journal (1970-2008), *Off Our Backs* (OOB) was widely-read in the lesbian community during its publication. Through my partial review to-date of the collection, it is clear that the women of *Off Our Backs* showed a keen interest in the following: the experiences of lesbians internationally; safe access to abortion and birth control; labor organizing; racial justice for multiply marginalized women; equitable parenting practices. These topics not only represent a snapshot of what it meant to be a lesbian at that time, but they also hold significant importance for the current day. These women were engaging in the kind of intersectional work that we strive for today (in organizations such as Black Lives Matter, which was founded by queer women).

It is important to call attention to this work in order to counter the overwhelmingly white male perspective that has dominated the gay rights movement since the 1970s. Even though the Stonewall Uprising in 1969 was led by multiply-marginalized folks such as Marsha P. Johnson, the gay rights movement that grew out of this era and gained significant traction in the 1990s and early 2000s centered the concerns and desires of upper/middle class white gay men, focusing on marriage as its centerpiece. After marriage equality became law, we saw a troubling rise in anti-gay legislation, much of it aimed at transgender individuals. While the mainstream gay rights movement positioned marriage as the defining issue in attaining equality, less organizing energy was devoted toward assuring that the most vulnerable members of the queer community could attain basic human rights such as bodily safety. Recovering the work that the women of *OOB* undertook for decades not only presents a more nuanced picture of the gay rights movement, it also can provide inspiration for how we might take up intersectional work in the present day (using the theoretical and technological tools that these women did not yet have access to).

Because I have already begun this portion of the larger project, this section of my research plan is the most developed. However, I have been limited in progressing further in my analysis of *OOB* magazine issues because the JStor archive is limited to a select number of copies, owned by private individuals, which were scanned and uploaded. In order to progress with this aspect of the project, I need to visit the full *OOB* archives at the University of Maryland. A research leave and travel funding (attached in a separate document) would enable me to do so.

Site two: Womencrafts bookstore (Provincetown, Massachusetts)

This site of research, while oriented around a bookstore and thus intimately related to the written word, will involve interviews with current and past proprietors of Womencrafts, community members, and visitors who frequent the store. A staple of the main shopping district in the gay destination of Provincetown, Massachusetts, Womencrafts has stood as a site of feminist and queer literacy. According to their website, Womencrafts is “Lesbian owned and operated since 1976, with a mission to promote the work of female artisans, authors, and musicians...The shop currently showcases over 100 female artists, 1,000 books, and finds its mission as politically and culturally necessary today as it was when it first opened in 1976.” Across the decades, Womencrafts has represented a queer claiming of public space by bringing feminist books and artists into the public consciousness; serving as a literal space for women to show affection toward one another; enabling the support of multiply-marginalized populations such as the transgender community through the sharing of resources. My interest in this site of research reaches across these scenarios in order to gain a better sense of how a community space oriented around writing has contributed to increased visibility and activism for queer women.

This portion of the project will encompass ethnographic methods such as interviews and on-site observations to document how the women who have frequented this space over the decades have imagined and brought into being a more pronounced lesbian presence via its patrons. Without a leave and research funding, I will not be able to include this site of research as part of the project. It will require sustained time on-site conducting ethnographic methods, for which there are no substitute methods. It would be a substantial loss to the project to not be able to examine in-depth Womencrafts’ multi-decade role as a major source of lesbian literacy practices.

Significance

This project holds significance because of (1) its focus on marginalized populations (DEIB) (2) engagement with theories and methodologies that highlight social inequities, such as intersectionality and queer methodologies and (3) represents an effort at recovering previously unknown or forgotten histories of the queer community. Lesbians have always encountered discrimination due to both sexism and homophobia, and researching their experiences as documented through their writing will illustrate how a multiply-marginalized population has created community, engaged in activism, and survived. Tapping into these histories will shed light on strategies that the community can continue to engage as the broader queer community fights for their eroding rights, particularly for gender non-conforming individuals. I also seek to

further develop queer methodological approaches, which is a growing focus area in Writing Studies.

As the queer community finds itself the current target of anti-LGBTQ legislative efforts, recovery work of the community's historical literacy practices is urgent. How has the community, particularly queer women, made sense of and resisted their marginalized status? How have they shared information on how to stay safe, find each other, cultivate joy? In the case of Womencrafts, how do they view their present day role in sustaining community among queer women? By focusing on a roughly 50-year time span, I will trace how the lesbian community, as evidenced in these sites of research, has developed literacy practices that are still relevant today as the community confronts a modern brand of homophobia that employs tropes such as "protecting children," "combating gender ideology," and "preventing grooming." How can we as a community apply what we have learned in past crises to today's manifestations of discrimination?