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Henry A. Giroux, editor

QUEER YOUTH CULTURES

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CHAPTER 8

QUEER READINGS OF
POPULAR CULTURE

SEARCHING [TO] OUT THE SUBTEXT

Mark Lipton

Queer youth are imaginative and dynamic readers of popular culture. The negotiated meanings queer youth make of these cultural forms reveal a great deal about the queer imagination and its relationships to sexual desire and political resistance. This chapter identifies the reading practices of queer youth to describe the means and motives of their engagement with popular culture. Richard Dyer explains, "Because, as gays, we grew up isolated not only from our heterosexual peers but also from each other, we turned to the mass media for information and ideas about ourselves" (1). As queer youth participate with popular media, they question and investigate the various modes by which desire and identity are produced; queer reading practices help young people explore the links between pleasure and power, between the body and subject, in the formation of a queer identity.

This chapter first tells my story about an emergent queer reading practice. Then, I discuss research I conducted with queer youth about popular media. They had a lot to say. For various reasons, everyone spoke at length about the queer content and context of their quotidian practices with media. Media make up a significant amount of their

leisure time that is often spent in pursuit of pleasure and affirmation, and, as such, media function as a tool that gives queer youth agency to construct complicated, non-heteronormative identities. When queer youth actively engage with popular culture, the engagement itself reveals the inner workings of the queer imagination and the process of GLBTIQ world-making. I employ the term "queer youth" to highlight the anti-essentialist approach the people I spoke with applied to their own lives. Queer theory challenges and breaks apart conventional categories of male and female and by extension the paradigm of heterosexual homo identities that proliferate in popular culture. Queer youth actively reconstruct the ontology of conventional categories through queer reading practices that are both interactive and resistant, both participatory and distinct.

JUGHEAD WEARS A HARA: *NON COMPOS MENTIS*

As a teenaged queer, I engaged in a negotiated reading practice with Archie comics. The characters in this comic series are made up of a group of high school students, including one particular character named Jughead. After some consideration, I realized that to me, Jughead—Forsythe "Jughead" P. Jones—is gay. There are so many stories to retell that illuminate my reading of Jughead as queer. His habit of running in terror from big Ethel's advances suggests his distaste for aggressive women. In fact, I took Jughead to avoid sexual innuendo with all women. Despite his close friendship with both Veronica and Betty, he never put the moves on either. Eventually, I was reading comics to see how often Jughead would confess his hatred of girls. In "The Tender Trap" Jughead finds his best friend, Archie, in his bedclothes; Archie is not well and is unable to date Veronica for the next few days. Archie hatches his plan. To prevent his archrival, Reggie, from moving in on his girl, Archie plans to ask someone he trusts "to run interference." Jughead shrugs off the plan, for he can't think of a single trustworthy fellow Archie could ask. Archie winks at Jughead hinting there is one such guy. I know what's coming—as do all regular Archie readers. But what happens in the next few comic frames is worth citing here to make my point:

Jughead: Boy! What a three-cornered square he must be! He can't be Human! Is he really alive??

Archie: Sure! It's just that he doesn't flip over the gals!

Jughead: Yuk! Yuk! Besides being *non compos mentis*, this guy must also have holes in his head! Who is he, Arch?

Archie: You!

Jughead: Well, look for someone else to trust! I'm not taking anybody's girl to anyplace for anybody at anytime!

Archie: Jughead! You've got to keep my date with Veronica for me!!

Jughead: No! No! Girls are nothing but trouble.

There are three issues I want to address by referring to "The Tender Trap." First, this is an example of the exact moment that provided me with reading pleasure. It's what I read for, if you will. According to Jughead, "Girls are nothing but trouble." Michel de Certeau's metaphor of reading as "poaching" is particularly apt: my reading "insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation" (xxi). I have reclaimed Archie comics for myself, Jughead as my own. And, exactly what is Jughead doing in the bedroom of the nearly naked Archie? My subtext implicitly acknowledges Jughead's love of Archie. Here, my reading satisfies the notion of "queerness," in Alexander Dory's term, "as a mass culture reception practice" (2). Hurray! Finally there was someone like me in my everyday practice of life. He was fictitious, animated, a cartoon—but you can't have everything. The pleasure of Jughead was only the beginning of a queer reception practice that, for decades, has me searching and seeking a subtext.

The second issue is the importance of Jughead's denial. "He can't be Human!" My identification with Jughead's closet provided me with a psychological role model. The queer worldview Jughead taught me about was defined by the closet. Clearly, the Juggie doth protest too much. Knowing that I didn't have a best friend from whom I needed to hide my feelings, I took a somewhat different approach to my denial—I was quiet. I needed to deny my sexuality from the entire world, including myself. My refusal was silence. For Michel Foucault, there is not one but many silences, "and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (27). My silence was the result of the inner fantasy space created through my lonely readings. Lonely, because as an adolescent I thought I was totally alone—single-handed, if you will, in my desire for same-sex relations. Nonetheless, my silent reading of Jughead, wanting Jughead, made me feel good. But it

was a silent practice, the creation not just of a fantasy space, but a safe space—a dark closet. If I identified with Jughead's sexuality because of his repeated refusal, my situated place as an adolescent warned me that others would see through my charade if I were to protest as often, so I learned to hide.

The need for this hiding was emphasized by Jughead's tendency toward self-hating homophobia—*non compos mentis*. This homophobia is my third issue. Jughead's *non compos mentis* contributed to the intense insecurity I felt about defining my identity in normative terms. Despite finding myself in popular culture, it was still within a homophobic context. I had all the more reason to hide my sexual desires—from others, and myself—for the subtle messages of queerness in Jughead warned me of a mental instability. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick articulates, "*Closetedness* itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (4). Silence hid my insecurity and fear of the antilocutional attacks, discrimination, if not violence I might endure as a result of my desires. Shhh . . . best to be silent. The darker my closet, the more I hid, the more I hated myself. I soon agreed, I believed, I was not mentally competent. De Certeau distinguishes between "believing and making people believe" (177) and his argument posits the dangers of assuming "that the objects believed are the same as the act of believing" (184). As I learned to believe in my poaching practice, that Jughead was queer, the resultant behaviors had me concerned with making other people believe. Negotiating my readings of Archie comics gave me a sense of identity and pleasure, taught me to deny this identity through silence, and exploited my closeted identity in ways that reinforced homophobic discourse. Like Jughead, I had fallen into "The Tender Trap" of queer identity.

HIDE AND SEEK

In hindsight, I recognize the contradictions of how my reading practice gave me a sense of identity and yet the messages in popular culture taught me to deny this identity. Here was my life, a game of hide and seek. Hide my sexuality and seek my sexual identity in my practice of everyday life. Hide and seek was more than a game, it was my closeted survival strategy. Yet, it was also my parlance into homosociality. When I discovered this guy in my class with a Jughead T-shirt, it was my first official opportunity to come out of the closet, to emerge from hiding with Jughead holding my hand. And I was safe. Eventually, Jughead's

internalized homophobia was exactly why I read queerness. To combat the darkness of the closet, it was important for me to struggle for power through the practice of "outing" popular culture as queer. My reading practice was a political act, not just a means of reinforcing the closet, but as my way out as I learned to use my voice to demand attention, respect, and equality. Thank you Forsythe "Jughead" P. Jones.

In beginning this study, I hoped to determine if other queer youth read texts in a similar way, and explored the influences of media at individual and collective levels of engagement. In thinking about my experiences, I wanted to generate data about how cultural identities are produced and to hear the stories of other queer youth. My study is ethnographic in nature as I am interested in the specific social contexts and subjective dimensions of queer reading practices. Consequently, I interviewed twenty-four "out individuals between the ages of 18 and 23. The majority of their discussions focused on film and television, yet others discussed poetry, literature, celebrity, gossip, comic books, cartoons, and music. This project recognizes the importance of reading as a complex social event that is interpretive and distinctive. With this in mind, I look at a queer youth culture to see if this social group acquired a set of learned cultural codes that influences reading practices.

I employ a queer youth hermeneutic code as I try to understand this culture's interpretive reading practices. Hermeneutics is the act of and study of interpretation, leading to an understanding of the significance of human actions. Hermeneutics assumes that cultural products are texts (in a broad sense) that must be interpreted; the primary aim of analysis is understanding, not explanation. As such, a hermeneutic approach refers to a relatively open, loose, and often unconscious system of implicit interpretive practices (see, for example, Guiraud). The text is recognized as something woven, and readers join authors as the weavers. That is, the emphasis is on the text as an open and perhaps even unfinished process in which the reader has some (specific) work to do. By asking queer youth to identify the codes and conventions within media representations to which they attend, I was able to describe queer youth reading practices and how these practices help in understanding the formation of identity in queer youth culture.

In this chapter, I rely on the voices of my participants to explain how a queer reading practice works and the pleasure and power of their readings. Following strict research protocols, the names in this chapter have been changed to protect the identity of my participants. The bulk of this research was completed in 1990. Some of the examples, then,

should reflect the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. I end this chapter with some short reflections in the years since I undertook this research. About ten years later I repeated a less formal study with a younger group of high school students enrolled at Harvey Milk High School in New York City. I am not only interested in how queer youth readers comprehend various texts, but in shifts in the queer imagination that may have resulted in a decade where queer representations have become more commonplace.

THE PRODUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITIES:

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Unequivocally, the queer youth that I interviewed decode texts against the mainstream, heterosexual grain. The practice of queer identity production occurs in three important ways. Some directly sought to alter the intended meaning of a text as a result of their personal agendas—to bend interpretation from a heteronormative reading. These readers could find homosocial/sexual content present in almost any text. A second group of youth engaged in more specific practices of negotiation—with a specific text, a specific character, like my experience with Jughead. It seems these readers use both conscious and unconscious processes to fabricate an imagined text, a queer world, as a result of their (often isolated) sexuality. And a third approach to negotiation placed the reader in the role of detective. These readers insist their queer reading is directly embedded within the text by the author and their job is to find the hidden messages—meant only for them. Certainly many queer youth negotiate meanings in such ways that accommodate all of these approaches. Nonetheless, these differences are significant in determining the particulars of queer reading habits, the queer imagination, and the implications for queer youth culture.

Among the people I interviewed, the degree of involvement with the text is what marked their interpretations.

If I read a superhero comic, like Spiderman, I would always see him as being a fag. I don't know why. Now I couldn't see Superman, but I could see Spiderman because he was more human than most comic characters. The way he moved, he was quite flexible and I could sort of envision him as real. Yeah, I would eroticize him, in that sense, but I was also a huge fan. (Tom, age 22)

For example the T-shirt that I am wearing is an example of what you're talking about, you know, the "Brady Girls." How many girls of my age didn't have a crush on Marsha or Jan when they were growing up? And not just thinking that she was in love with some guy in high school and just always inserting yourself in the role of that guy, imagining that it was you. This [T-shirt] is a symbol of the whole process that you're talking about. (Christine, age 22)

Christine illustrates her involvement with *The Brady Bunch* by wearing a T-shirt, and continually discussing her involvement with the show. She justifies her serious dedication to Marcia and Jan by explaining the necessity for her interpretation. Tom is a "huge fan" of Spiderman. These examples describe the imagined text, where Marcia Brady and Spiderman function as the textual element, if not fetish object, that initiates a serious commitment to the process of negotiation.

PLEASURE, LEISURE, AND AFFIRMATION

Everyone I interviewed indicated the pleasure they derived from their interpretations, from their practice of reading—a practice of leisure. Simply put, most entertainment media texts are written with the intention of being enjoyed. However that need is perceived, it is important to acknowledge the experience of pleasure as integral to the process of reading.

If I pretend she's a dyke, then I can accept that this character might be a real person, instead of just accepting their heterosexuality and accepting that they're just a character. So I think it [my approach to reading] has added a sense of belief in what I'm ingesting. It's certainly much more interesting and much more entertaining which I think is very important. Like it's important to me to have that kind of stimulus in my life. Something that's entertaining. Janet or Sabrina as straight was less fun than when I believed she was a dyke. So it satisfied that. (Gabby, age 18)

For Gabby, the level of delight is increased, not only in the final analysis, but also in the act of reading. By playing with the text, an individual can have fun with the end result as well as in the act of creating that

result. In addition, pleasure is not only derived from the actual act of interpretive reading but also from sharing this experience. As Susan (age 22) describes, "I get a real kick out of it, it is real fun and I wish she was gay and I tell other people, and we all get a laugh out of it, and we share bits of information." Pleasure for queer youth is derived in two ways: by playing with the text—the act of negotiation—and by sharing the altered text with others.

Sharing this process of reading has positive implications for the community because it requires interaction as a queer community, exploring shared experiences and potentially forming groups that can support queer youth. Jessica (age 18) demonstrates this affirmation when she said:

I would think on my own, of my past, of how I would relate to one particular woman in a book or in a TV show. And as I came out and met more queer women, we would talk about Sabrina [*Charlie's Angels*] and all the other women we believed to be gay. We would compare notes and they loved the fact that I had a crush on Sabrina because they felt the same way. It was something we all had in common and it was something that we ALL know, we all thought that she was a dyke.

As Jessica was coming out of the closet she shared her knowledge of the character Sabrina Duncan on *Charlie's Angels* with other queer women. Her sharing offered a sense of acceptance. This "comparing notes" is a method of breaking out of the isolation that queer youth experience before they come out. Sharing enjoyable experiences is an especially positive and empowering vehicle for change. Unfortunately, not all of the youth engaged in this activity of sharing. Some of them saw their interpretation as something private, for whatever reason, and thought of their reading as a secret. As George (age 23) said, "I never had a real problem with it, except obviously it's a secret. I probably have never told anyone except you, actually." The idea of having a secret is extremely prevalent among queer people. It was "obvious" to this individual that his reading was a secret because he is so easily capable of keeping such queer-related information to himself. It would be helpful for other queer youth to know that it is possible to share this information with others. Both pleasure and group affirmation can empower the individual, to be accepted by others, to end feelings of isolation.

THE DILEMMA OF DESIRE

Desire is a complex and unstable part of queer youth interactions with mass media. Media representations of queer youth are scarce. For the queer youth I spoke with, there were no stable representations of queer sex or queer love to emulate. At least in 1990, there was no gay American idol for us to worship. So, like in the silence of daily life, queer youth engage in the imaginative play of sexual acts with works of fiction. [Imagine Jughead naked.] It is common for an individual to desire a person or character in popular culture. But desire is not just a physical yearning for the unattainable. Frank articulates the dilemma of desire:

I was 12 and very much in the throes of puberty, and just needed an object, needed something to relate to in that way and since there weren't any other images available it didn't matter that these people were portrayed as straight. All I needed was an object to project desire upon [. . .]. I guess in a sense it's a desire either to be them or be with them.

Because of this dilemma, I classify desire within complex social and psychological relations. I see the physical wanting of others as a social desire. Social because it affects behavior patterns, and sets standards or goals of what individuals find attractive. In discussing Spiderman, Tom articulates his desire, "I always remember sitting around looking at Spiderman's butt. I like Spiderman's butt, I think he has a nice butt. You know what I mean?" Clearly, queer youth are looking for sexual outlets, a desire to be intimate with specific characters/people, or just to be intimate.

As Frank described his desire, he wasn't sure if he wanted to be with his object of desire, or be him. Desire is not just a sexual yearning, but can include other psychological elements as well. An individual may just want to see another character who they believe is queer. Stephen (age 19) describes his desire as a kind of identification, "Well I hoped he was gay because he was really sexy, but whenever some character has some sort of mysterious quality to them, when it is deliberately mysterious, you know, you think that this must be their secret." One method of dealing with the isolation of growing up queer, for these youth, was to create a group of friends from fiction. As Ronald (age 17) says, "I identified with characters around my own age, I was looking for friends

who could be gay. Being in school and not having any gay friends, it would make me feel better to have my gay TV friends." Messages in media and popular culture do not inform queer youth about the available choices. By decoding texts in this manner, queer youth can begin to learn how to answer these kinds of questions about desire. By having friends, even fictional ones, queer youth have a type of belonging. There is someone to identify with, giving the individual confidence and assurance.

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

I see identity as something constructed for and by queer youth; they reach a point in their lives when they question the significance of their sexuality. When these youth were talking to me in 1990, there were few examples within popular culture to help them make these kinds of identity decisions. Nonetheless, after emerging from the closet, these youth were very articulate about their identification needs.

Because it's so rare that you can actually identify with someone who actually is a gay character that you kinda make it up or whatever. You know people really need role models, and gay people just don't have any, in TV and stuff, they just are never there. You know for gay men and lesbians, especially lesbians, because they are so invisible already. (Brian, age 22)

I can identify with their choice and their sexual preference. But it's more like when you have a common link or something it makes you feel strength. Yeah. Someone that reinforces you. Someone that revitalizes you, makes you feel stronger about yourself, or makes you believe in yourself. (Sayeda, age 21)

Queer people have trouble being active participants in mass popular culture because they are not included in society's view of the "mass." Yet, queer reading practices articulate queer positions in and about mass culture that reveal popular culture need not exclusively and inevitably express straightness. The queer imagination helps queer youth find strong moral guidance in a media world where queerness is absent. As Doty writes, "If mass culture remains by, for, and about straight culture, it will be so through our silences" (104). A queer reading practice helps queer youth empower themselves with the necessary tools for constructive

living. Queer reading practices provide the conditions for a range of possible identities and subject positions. Since popular cultural production is unable to provide queer youth with sufficient models for behavior, queer reading practices help queer youth negotiate these identity needs.

OCCUPYING THE FANTASY SPACE: QUEER WORLD-MAKING

An alternative worldview, one that is queer, begins with the construction of a safe fantasy space. My findings led me to believe that queer youth have more creative imaginations because they develop a keen ability to fantasize. As Maria (age 22) describes, "Sometimes the fantasy is the only thing you have. It's never bad to use your imagination, it's one of the greatest gifts we have and unfortunately people don't use it enough. Your imagination is a great escape sometimes, especially if the situation you are in doesn't allow for any kind of outlet. It helps you keep your sanity." To examine the implications of a queer imagination is to recognize queer world-making as a talent, honed out of a need to establish a safe space for the individual, but once this talent is developed it can be put to many uses.

Whenever I was watching television, there was always some fantasy scenario with me in it, in which I would get whatever cute guy I was really attracted to on the show. I fantasized because I think I was still constructing a place for myself. I mean I needed that and I wanted it and I think it was a normal thing to do. Because it wasn't there, I had to make it up. It went into pretty complex narratives, and I'd do this with all kinds of stuff, it would be like, with the *Six Million Dollar Man*, a total babe. My sisters used to really be into teen magazines for girls, you know, they used to have all these teen idol pictures. I used to steal the magazines and read them, but I would always read them in my way, right. I would always read them as appealing to me. My fantasies would sort of be played out, even though they were always written for girls. (Matthew, age 23)

It is particularly important for queer youth to engage in these fantasies. But what is also important is to let young people know these fantasies are acceptable forms of behavior. Before coming out of the closet, many queer youth experience guilt about their feelings—the beginnings of their queer world-making practice are often silent, hidden private

fantasies. By creating a fantasy space, queer youth have an environment where they are free to explore many possibilities. When one emerges from the closet, these feelings are no longer kept secret. Yet this practice continues to be valuable because it reinforces a queer worldview. Even after coming out, it is difficult to feel completely comfortable in a society where you know that a large part of the population wishes you did not exist. If queer youth are unable to express their sexuality on the street, in public, they should have the sense of freedom to do so in a private created space.

It is also important to recognize this is a created space, and not reality. Queer youth do not spend their days in delusion, waiting for Steve Austin (the *Six Million Dollar Man*) to sweep them off their feet. Most individuals engage in this activity fully aware that it is an imaginative engagement and not reality. Yet, this is an important practice because it allows queer youth to know how to make meaning for themselves in a society that holds so many prejudices against them. By creating a queer worldview, a safe fantasy space, queer youth can flee the prejudice surrounding them and feel comfortable. By their own accord, they are included as the "masses" and thus can participate as consumers of popular culture without feeling marginalized.

COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

Coming out of the closet, this action, is one of the main features of queer youth culture. All my participants talked at length about coming out. And this discourse is not just about an individual declaration, coming out is a complex social process that infuses new meanings with the conventional representations of queerness, like sexual deviance or Jughead's notion of non compos mentis. Of the youth I spoke with, it was clear that the construction of a queer worldview created through a negotiated reading practice supported the construction of identity. For some, negotiated readings helped with the coming out declaration; for others, this process intensified insecurity by defining identity in normative terms. To follow this logic, when I have to imagine a sexuality that isn't on the screen, my discourse reinforces my identity as absent, negative, wrong. But the general consensus was that coming out somehow changed the function of this practice, or the practice itself.

Because I needed it even more before I came out. When you are out you know a lot of gay people, and the more gay people you

meet, the more gay people you meet, you know. So you have at least local role models. But when you are in the closet, there's no one and you are always looking for other potential gay men. At least I was always looking for it. I remember when I first came out, for a year and a half my boyfriend and I would lie around talking about it for days and days: Who we thought was hot and who we thought was gay. He was saying that he always thought that Magnum P.I. was gay. Not the actor Tom Selleck, but his character Magnum. He wasn't married, over thirty years old. All those detectives on TV, they are all like 35-year-old bachelors, living with their roommate, uh huh. (Andrew, age 20)

These young people illustrate how the uses of queer readings change as a result of coming out. In silence, queer reading practices provide the necessary identity markers of queerness for creating agency. Once they had accepted their sexuality, it no longer held the same significance, and transformed from something that was necessary to something pleasurable—something personal to something political. After coming out, the need for fictitious role models is not as important because queer youth are finally getting an opportunity to meet and interact with real role models.

THE POLITICS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Media representations of queer culture are still essentialist, marking out the dichotomies between male and female, heterosexual versus homosexual. For Vito Russo, "the true nature of homosexuality haunted only the dim recesses of our celluloid consciousness" (6). This true nature usually depicts queers as insane, psychotic, or just plain evil. Our more positive media images, ones where we don't kill or get killed, usually represent us as asexual, anti-intellectual, or just plain boring. To deal with or combat these stereotypes queer youth employ a negotiated reading practice as a means of creating a positive vision of queer identity. In other words, through negotiated readings, queer youth begin to discover how they want texts to be written. This knowledge is politically empowering, leading many queer youth to demand what they want to see as a consumer of popular culture.

I think there's a lack of homosexual characters who are presented in a positive and uplifting, or not even positive and

uplifting but just represented on the screen or in the media in general. I guess it's a desire to have a voice. I know this sounds like pure shit, but it's a desire to have a voice, to feel that I'm being spoken for or even just represented. But that there's a voice up there that's representing, or at least trying to represent my own experience. I want to have a say in what's going on and I'm not willing to just accept the images that are represented in front of me as being the only possibility. I take it maybe beyond its limitations of what's there. I try to expand, try to just open it up to possible choices that exist for me that might not exist for the creators for that particular film or TV show. But I will be heard. (Karen, age 20)

Queer youth who have been empowered by a queer reading practice eventually learn to demand more tangible representations of the queer experience. As Karen put it, there is a need to have a "voice." But it goes beyond wanting someone to represent a queer experience. Positive representations of queer life confirm an individual's existence and provide empowerment, and freedom from oppression. But more, the process of interpreting texts introduces to queer youth the notion of taking control of the political climate to decide who is or can be queer.

The ability to control interpretation allows queer youth to create their own positive representations. As Kelly (age 21) describes, "I think that all texts are open to a kind of gay interpretation, only because they are so closed that I open them. I am not saying that they are made open. I make them open." By "making them open" Kelly displays her power and confidence as a queer woman. Her act of opening texts is a political action—an action against heterosexist society; an action that demands the creation of positive queer portrayals in the media. Queer youth often become infuriated by this lack of representation. By seeing this reading practice as political, queer youth can vent some of their frustrations about the lack of any images that reflect their real lives and identities. This reading practice helps queer youth recognize how they want to be represented, and how to find the strength to fight for that representation.

WE ARE DETECTIVES: QUESTIONING INTENTIONALITY

More often than I expected, the young people I spoke with were quick to address the authors of the various texts and the question of intentionality. Many of the youth believe they are not reading against the grain,

but rather, picking up certain clues that are embedded in the text. One of the arguments presented recognizes the infiltration of arts communities by queer people. This belief asserts that these queer authors insert homosexual clues that only queer audience members would recognize.

I mean simply because so many of the producers are gay themselves. And I think in reality there is a lot of bargaining that goes on. I think a lot of people create these shows, and they know they can't put a gay or lesbian character on a show, especially at the time of *Three's Company*. But—they gave us Janet's short hair. See I think Janet was a dyke. That's why she was always looking for a man and never having a relationship that worked. She was a dyke, no wonder. People who were closeted in their own professions were sending messages to the rest of us that we're here and we're giving you what we can give you. (Sylvie, age 22)

This participant, looking back at the show *Three's Company*, believes that the authors intended the character Janet to be read as a lesbian. Another specific example is with the children's television show *Sesame Street*.

For me, Ernie and Bert are together. I just think that, only because their creator Jim Henson is a gay man and I'm sure when he created this little world, he must have had the intentions in his head, oh, I'm gonna create these two little cute guys and they're together maybe that reflected his relationship with somebody [. . .]. (Billy, age 19)

This is particularly interesting because the author's sexuality becomes something that is debatable. The notion that these authors intend their work to be recognized by queer audiences further empowers queer youth by placing them in a position of knowing something that mass audiences do not see.

Queer youth often describe their participation with popular culture as a kind of code cracking. The queer imagination shifts from a process of creative construction to an active process of finding the right clues. For many queer youth, the veracity of some popular culture only comes to light when their reading provides some glimpse into a queer world. Hollywood is, after all, full of queers. The youth I spoke with might be right in their assumptions that clues are embedded within the text for

them, as queer, to discover. Nonetheless, the reader as detective still asserts the importance of negotiated reading practices and the development of a queer imagination—detectives also rely on an interpretive reading strategy. Whether or not queer subtexts are embedded within texts, what is important is the notion of interpretive reading. Queer reading practices resist dominant social and political models of identity and representation as practiced by American media and popular culture.

WHO DO YOU THINK IS QUEER?

In 1998 I began to volunteer at the Harvey Milk High School in New York City—the high school celebrated as serving GLBTIQ youth. It had been almost ten years since I began this research and I had continued to canvass queer youth with the question “Who do you think is queer?” The proliferation of queer representations in popular culture today is radically different than those messages in the early 1990s. These students all watched *Will & Grace*. The celluloid closet (and the 1995 documentary inspired by Russo’s work) had been opened, cleaned out, and aired on public television. Later, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* were in production and these youth had advanced knowledge of what representations were about to be released into mainstream media. Popular culture had shifted significantly and I began to wonder what this meant to my notion of the queer imagination.

First and foremost, what I noticed about these students was that there was no need to hide. The safe environment, their high school, supported these youth. Though many of them had compelling stories to tell about their queer worlds, when I less formally asked these queer youth about their queer reading practices they were quick to respond with talk about the current icons of the queer world. We started looking at homo-normative texts, like *Out Magazine* and Rosie O’Donnell. But these imaginations had not waned from those I had studied a decade earlier. Here was the queer imagination, still at work. Queer youth continue to use popular culture to question and investigate the various modes by which desire and identity are produced.

Most texts produced in popular culture are heteronormative, and until this changes, queer youth will continue to employ their imaginations and engage in interpretive reading practices. Following Doty, “Queer readings aren’t ‘alternative’ readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or ‘reading too much into things’ readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been

in popular culture texts and their audiences all along” (16). Searching out or searching to out a queer subtext, queer readings have a range of functions from the personal to the political, from social relations to psychological desires. My participants and I aren’t reading too much into things. We just read. Thank you for reading.

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