The Friction of Digital Queer Worldbuilding;

Queer women from Montreal and the intersections between sexuality and collective identity.

Samantha Richter

A Thesis

In the Department of

Sociology & Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthropology)

At Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2021

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: *Samantha Richter*

Entitled: The Friction of Digital Queer Worldbuilding: Queer women from Montreal and the intersections between sexuality and collective identity.

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

MA in Social and Cultural Anthropology

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair

Dr. Amy Swiffen

_____ Examiner

Prof. Oceane Jasor

_____ Examiner

Prof. Nayrouz Abu Hatoum

_____ Thesis Supervisor

Prof. Christine Jourdan

Approved by: _____

Graduate Program Director: *Prof. Kregg Hetherington*

_____

Dean: *Dr. Pascale Sicotte*

Abstract

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Author: Samantha Richter

Summary:

The online world and the 'real' world. In the last thirty years, the gap between the two has only blurred. Alongside this evolution is a generation of young women who have had their concept of sexual identity shaped by their interactions online. By applying ethnographic fieldwork in Montreal, this thesis examines the friction that exists between these young queer women, their concepts of self, and collective identity building both in Montreal and online. The research accomplishes this through observation of group discussions, as well as one on one ethnographic interviews. Montrealers' feelings about their sexuality is often complicated by the tension between personal feelings and group doctrine. Due to heteronormativity, these young queer women have been left without a strong cultural foundation to build their sexual identity onto, seeking out a sense of belonging and community. That sense of belonging is often unavailable or lacking offline for several reasons. This leads young queer women to seek online community. Yet the nuances of human sexuality and gender often leave women worried that they do not fit a certain mold of queerness within these online communities. Despite this, young queer women report these spaces as vital to their understanding of themselves. Through an analysis of queer worldbuilding and imagined communities, this thesis challenge more traditional modes of understanding community by analyzing how online space interacts with participants' sense of community.

Acknowledgments

I first want to thank my participants, for being willing to share your stories with me. Every time that I felt I was losing sight of my project, re-reading your stories reminded me of why I wanted to do this project in the first place. Each one of you had so much to say and I value the time I got to spend with everyone. I learned so much during my research and I feel like I really grew, not only as a researcher but as a person.

Next I want to thank my supervisor Christine Jourdan. Without your constant patience and kind words, I do not think I would have ever made it through this process. You were able to talk me through all my insecurities and made completing this project possible. I also want to recognize Nayrouz Abu Hatoum and Oceane Jasor for their help. You both gave me new perspectives into my work and propelled it forward. Without you, my writing would have been less nuanced and less thoughtful.

Thank you to my friends who listened to me rant and rave on late nights when I was doing what felt like the millionth edit. For being able to pull me from my work and keep me laughing through this whole process. Thank you to Chelsea for always poking your head into my office space and taking me to Picks when I had been staring at a screen for twelve hours. Most of all thank you to my good friend Toryn. You read so many versions of my thesis and gave me such good advice that you are practically owed a co-author credit. You kept me going and were always there with a word of wisdom or a tarot card reading to calm my worried mind. I am proud to call you my grad school senpai.

I also want to thank my grad school cohort. You are all such vibrant, intelligent, and wonderful human beings. There was never a dull moment in the classroom with everyone. You all had such nuanced and varied points of view. I feel that I learned so much from you all that I will carry with me. Once the plague dies down, I hope we can all sit down at McKibbins again.

Finally I want to thank my family for being so supportive and understanding through this whole process. When I decided to go out on a limb and apply for grad school in another country, you were all so accepting of my decisions. You supported me emotionally and financially through this process and never questioned my choices. Getting to study and live in Montreal was a dream come true, thank you for making it possible.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

From the very beginning of my life, I was fascinated with the internet. As a child of the 1990s growing up in the United States, I had access to the internet from a young age. The bulky desktop that sat in my parents' room seemed almost magical. When my parents grew tired of my incessant questions, they would sit me down at the computer and tell me to try a quick Google search. The internet held the answer to any inquiry my young mind could think up.

A childhood spent with Google evolved into teenage years spent with online message boards and comment sections. I spent hours posting my writing and artwork online and discussing it with any other teenager I could get to pay attention to me. By highschool, I had amassed a whole social circle of friends online. These were people that I had never met in person, yet I shared my deepest thoughts and feelings with them. We would talk via Skype, an instant messaging app, for hours at a time about any topic. These topics could range from what one did at school that day all the way to deep personal discussions that I only uttered to my closest friends.

As many of my friends were moving through adolescence and coming to terms with their sexuality or gender, those two topics were ripe for many discussions. Hours of our school nights were spent going back and forth about our sexual feelings or trying to understand terminology for different kinds of sexualities and genders. Sometimes these discussions would take the form of heated debates, where we argued the 'right' way to be. Other times we operated as sound boards for each other, allowing the other person to vocalize their feelings in a space free of judgement or consequences. Through these conversations, we were enacting what Garner & Warner (1998) would refer to as 'queer worldbuilding'. Queer worldbuilding is the task of imagining what a queer life looks like in a heteronormative society. In a heteronormative society, heterosexual and cisgender are treated as the default normal settings. Any deviation from heteronormativity is treated as deviant or wrong. Due to heteronormativity, queer youth are not handed a cultural script on how to 'be queer'.

Queer worldbuilding involves trying to find some sort of script through trial and error. This process is not just an individual exercise but a collective one that is ongoing. Just like myself and my friends, participants reach an understanding of a queer world by investigating it together. This type of investigation often takes place by challenging established societal norms, being given a safe space to explore what those challenges mean, and having a like minded support group to develop one's ideas. If queer identity is visualized as a large quilt, then queer worldbuilding is the practice of a quilting bee. Participants all bring what questions and ideas they might have, and in the process of queer worldbuilding work together to weave a grand picture.

While this kind of queer worldbuilding has been going on for decades, the digital age adds a new dimension to it. Boellstorff observed the cultural creation that exists online during his research in Second Life (2008). In his book on the subject, Boellstorff argues that online space is not simply an extension of the 'real' world, but rather a space that can exist with its own rich cultural context. Trying to understand the cultural impact of online worlds is especially necessary in today's world. As new developments such as smartphones and virtual reality continually blur the lines between online and offline space. Newer investigations into online space and how its users navigate between online and offline space is necessary to understand the constantly changing dynamic.

Part of that changing dynamic is the ways that the internet allows for new tools into collective identity creation. Scholars such as Butler, Cohen, and Brubaker have all argued for some variation of collective identity creation. Butler especially heightens this idea in her performativity theory. In said theory, she states that one's gender is not a fixed state but rather an evolving performance dependent on input from others. While Butler's work focuses primarily on gender, the theory maps well onto sexuality as well. Throughout my thesis, I will argue that online space not only contains collective identity creation, but that such spaces thrive in performativity and collective identity creation as key components of their world.

Performativity not only exists online, one could call the online world hyper-performative. While offline, a person is constantly on display, the same is not true for online space. Participants' performance online is highly curated; the user selects specific images and information to be presented. Even the information that is presented can be edited and tweaked to show the most desirable vision of oneself that participants want to be observed. This is important to keep in mind, as it shapes how participants imagine identity and community building online.

Who gets to be a part of a community or what can even be defined as a community is a sticky topic, especially when discussing a concept like 'queer community'. Anderson's theory of imagined communities (1991) defines communities broadly. In his discussion on the topic, he stresses that community is achieved through a sense of camaraderie and an imagined group identity. He emphasizes that imagined communities are possible across whole nations between people who have never met in person due to widespread media. As I will show in my chapter on the history of queer communities online, said communities are the latest evolution of such imagined communities.

Yet ask any of the women I interviewed, especially those women of color, and that idea of a shared camaraderie is not so simple. Later academics such as Amit (2010) also question if any shared sense of belonging is even possible through media. Throughout my thesis, I will confront how community is complicated by online space. I will discuss how the women I interviewed imagined community for themselves and those they interacted with online. Within that discussion I will also confront the ways that a conception of community often carries the tension of in group and out group. This tension will be evident as participants grapple with how they imagine community and what they think being a member of 'the queer community' entails.

All of these ideas that I have brought up above are key to my research question: how do young queer women in Montreal define their sexuality, and what role does the internet play in that process? An answer to this question will be obscured by opaque language and fuzzy concepts. Many times in my writing I will be tempted to reach for simple answers, to find some catharsis to end this research with. However, anthropology as a discipline is antithetical to easy answers, it thrives best in the weeds of human complexity. In my thesis, I hope to explore how to consider a question that has no definite answer. How can I and my participants reach any sort of satisfactory answer when the question is marked with such opaqueness? How do queer participants and researchers cope with a queer world that is not one picture, but a million shards scattered and broken?

In my research I will tackle this opaqueness by interrogating the ways it fits into the many facets of my work. The themes of the chapters will be as follows.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this section I explore my first stumbling steps into ethnographic research. The purpose of which is to show how my project evolved to match the complexity of my topic. The methodology section also goes into greater detail about the demographic decisions that I made as limits in my project. Finally it lays out the different methods that I used to conduct my research, as well as the final results of such methods.

Chapter 3: Historical context

This chapter focuses on the history of queer worldbuilding through media. In this chapter, I explore the evolution of queer publications in Canada and the United States from the beginning of the 20th century. This section focuses on the through line of collectivization from underground newspapers to modern internet forums and chat sites.

Chapter 4: Who gets to be queer

This chapter asks the question 'who gets to be queer' to get at the deeper problems within identity building and gatekeeping. This section asks how do participants understand their sexuality and how that understanding fits into their concept of queer. Mainly it asks how one's personal perception of their identity fits into their understanding of queer as a whole. Throughout the chapter, participants face their complicated feelings surrounding queer worldbuilding.

Chapter 5: Collective Identity

In the final main chapter, I use Amit's theory of community to explore the ways that participants confront the idea of community in online space. This is achieved by breaking down the three core tenets of her argument: sense of belonging, joint commitment, and forms of association. While using Amit's theory as a road map, I complicate her understanding of community by applying it to the experiences of my participants. This chapter will show the many advantages and pitfalls of collective identity, as that concept both unites and alienates participants.

Conclusion

I will conclude my thesis by bringing all of my previous chapters together to answer my research question. That being the question; how do young queer women define their sexuality, and what role does the internet play in that process? My main point that I will conclude with is that collective queer worldbuilding, while messy and incomplete, is the main tool to which young women facilitate identity building. The internet highlights this effect by breaking down barriers to entry and expanding the concept of community. Unique attributes of the internet allows for an expansion of queer worldbuilding.

Chapter 2. An Evolving Methodology: Learning to Listen

Introduction

During my research, I was based in Montreal. I conducted my research in a period of around 4 to 5 months, starting in August of 2019 and ending in January of 2020. This is the period where I was doing day to day fieldwork and meticulous note taking. However, I find it important to acknowledge that I was also a student in the city of Montreal before and after this period. Even though I was not doing explicit fieldwork outside of that scope, it is impossible to not have the 2+ years I spent in the city color my work. I did not so much 'enter' the field in the traditional sense as I inhabited a space and then had to develop the tools to view it as an anthropologist. The lines between home and field site were blurred for me. In a similar sense, the lines between online and offline life can be equally blurry.

The digital world and the 'real' world: this type of language indicates these two spaces as separate planes of existence that may be tangentially related to one another but rarely intersect. A person 'logs on' to 'cyberspace' and exists in a 'digital world' before returning to the 'real' world. Even describing being online as a space or a world belies the idea that one is exiting this reality and entering a new one. Even though some of these terms, like cyberspace, have become outdated, the ideas surrounding them are still present in current internet user vernacular. For instance, calling someone 'extremely online' is a somewhat derogatory phrase for someone who is too wrapped up in online discourse and has lost sight of what is perceived as reality.

When creating a methodology to study online culture, a discussion on this supposed binary is necessary. How a researcher imagines online space shapes the methodology of said research. In the case of my project, I wanted to learn how young queer cisgender women use online space to explore their sexuality. In my own research, I imagine the internet as a shared phenomena rather than a separate world. By doing so, I focus on the internet as an experience that participants all encountered, rather than a separate cleanly divided world.

The purpose of this is to zero in on what similar factors might have driven participants to seek out these experiences. While focusing on a specific website would have simplified my process, it would have also given me a foregone conclusion. I did not want to assume what websites were influential for participants. Nor did I want to turn my project into a data analysis of a certain website. Rather than focus on the internet itself, I wanted to know what influence the internet had on the women I spoke to. How did they feel about the internet? How had their time on the internet potentially shaped them and their worldview?

Throughout this section, I will explore what steps I took to study those questions. Methodology is often a dance of trying to anticipate the best tools ahead of time. For this reason, it is typically planned with incomplete information about what actually being in the field will entail. In the theme of exploring the messy work of ethnography, I wanted to use my methodology chapter to discuss the evolution of said methodology.

Demographics

As a graduate student, I thought I knew what doing research looked like. At least, I thought that I had a sound idea of what it looked like, with only the smaller minutiae to figure

out once I was in the field. I would soon learn that the process was much more complicated than I had anticipated. The first complication with my research was in deciding how to define the demographic that my research would focus on, this demographic being young queer women who currently reside in Montreal and who were active internet users. Many factors went into choosing that focus. I will now clarify my reasoning for my choices, what limiting factors were used, and what issues I encountered during this process.

Age

First: the issue of age. I define 'young' in my demographic as women roughly between the ages of 18 and 30. This decision was made because I wanted to speak to women who had grown up with internet access from a young age. Due to the relative youth of the internet, my participants would have been part of the first generation to potentially grow up with internet access. For this reason, I asked them about how they used the internet in the past and how they used it now. Since sexual exploration generally begins for many in their teenage years, it felt important to acknowledge that. While I had initially worried that such an age group would be clearly established in their sexual identity, the opposite was true. Some of my participants were still coming to terms with their sexuality into their mid and late twenties. This stresses the need for such an age range since, due to factors like repression and stigmitization, most queer upbringings do not follow the expected adolescent timelines.

With this larger age range leaning towards the older side of the spectrum, it is important to keep in mind queer temporality. Many scholars, such as Freeman (2007), Thomas (2007), and Taylor (2010), have written about how queer people are often untethered from traditional rituals of life such as marriage or having children. This delay in life developments means that often queer people are still coming to terms with their sexuality into their twenties. Warner (1991) states that due to the normative state of heterosexuality, queer youth often experience a delayed formation of their sexuality that might not come until much later in life. Kus & Saunders (1985) explain this in detail when describing the "coming out" process. They outline the process as non-linear and often delayed. This is especially true for queer women as Rich (1980) explains in her theory on compulsive heterosexuality.

Compulsive heterosexuality states that women are especially inclined to conform to male desire. This means that any exploration of sapphic feelings is often pressed down, as women feel a duty to court male attention. As I will go into further details in later chapters, my participants also felt a familial duty to get married and have children. Due to all of these factors, it is not uncommon for queer women to still be having sexual awakenings into their thirties and fourties.

To account for this, it was necessary to allow for a wider age range. I had initially thought that if there was a significant difference in the experiences between younger and older participants, that might help me to consider how online space had evolved in that time span. In the end, the women that I spoke to tended to be on the younger end of the spectrum with the median age of the 12 interviews being 24.8 years old. It must be acknowledged that his could

have been skewed by my reliance on university organizations for recruitment as well as online Facebook groups. I will discuss this point further in my analysis section.

Gender

In my research I only interviewed cisgender women and I prioritized their narratives in my notes when doing participant observation. Cisgender is defined as a person whose gender corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth. Lovelock (2017), Fahs (2009), and Butler (1990) as well as many other scholars all discuss how gender and sexuality are entwined. It is impossible to have a discussion about one's sexuality without also delving into gender as well. This is because one's gender typically informs how one views their sexuality. During my interviews, I emphasized this by asking questions by focusing on how women's upbringing and childhoods affected their sense of self. That is not to say that transgender women's voices couldn't be included in such a discussion. It is only to say that the discussions likely would have deviated from those same discussions happening with cisgender women.

The decision to focus on cisgender women was a limitation that I had to make for the scope of my project. With the small size of my research project, it would have been impossible to include transgender as well as cisgender perspectives of sexuality without trivializing one or the other. However, I recognise that trans women have often been excluded from discourse on female sexuality. They are a marginalized group, that often faces exclusion from 'women only spaces. For this reason, I want to acknowledge that I made a deliberate methodological choice of not including the experiences of trans women in the scope of my sample, and that it was not an oversight.

Sexuality

Third: the issue of sexuality. Many complications arose with how to define non-heterosexual sexuality. The name used for this minority group has faced many evolutions from the clinical use of "homosexual" by physicians, to the homophile and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, to the reclamation of slurs such as "queer", "dyke", and "faggot". Even the more commonly used acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) carries its own issue of being too restricting. That it does not fully encompass all possible non normative genders and sexualities.

Many queer people and activists criticize the acronym LGBT as far too exclusive. Some have tried to rectify this by lengthening the acronym to be more inclusive such as LGBT+, LGBTQ (the same acronym with Queer added in), LGBTQIA (adding on Intersex and Asexual), and other variations or acronyms. Even then, the growing acronym still does not seem to cover the full spectrum of possibilities and people will argue about what should be included or not. For instance, some Canadian organizations have added a numeral '2' to the acronym. This is in an effort to include the indigenous Two Spirit identity. Yet some indigenous people would argue that

indigenous gender and sexuality is its own category that should not be lumped into a non-indigenous categorization.

Foucault (1976) argues that such labeling of sexuality is used to categorize and divide people. In his discussion of biopower, Foucault argues against such rigid classification of sexuality. He states that by assigning a label to sexuality, people are driven into categories which then regulate what sexuality looks like. He argues that this classification is really about control and power. By strictly categorizing what is homosexuality and what is heterosexuality, the 'deviant' are easier to spot. To prove his point, he points out that such categorization did not exist until the early 20th century.

Warner (1991) would credit Foucault and Rich (1980)'s work in sexuality as the bedrock for his work in queer theory. Queer theory developed as a way for discussions of sexuality to move beyond strict categorization. In fact, Warner argues that the power in queer is in its vagueness. That by trying to define it, one only lessens its power. 'Queer', as a reclaimed word, came to be the academic word of choice when trying to reach a more nuanced understanding of sexuality. Queer becomes a push back against binary labels while also acknowledging the subversive nature inherent to any non-normative gender or sexuality. Queer is not simply a stand in for gay or LGBT, but rather a deliberate choice that challenges the notion of a homosexual and heterosexual binary.

For these reasons, I chose to use the word queer in my research. Queer was also the word I chose most often when having conversations with my participants. I understand queer as an umbrella term that covers all sexuality and genders that are considered non-normative by general society. However, such a definition leads to a need for further discussions about who exactly fits under that umbrella and how queer is utilized by participants. For now, I will leave this as my definition but will investigate it further during my chapter on the subject.

Finding the Field

Digital Field Sites

When considering how to lay out the boundaries of my field site, I drew from the multi-field site approach described by Hine (2015). In Hine's book, she recommends casting a wide net for viable sites. She explains that the nature of the internet means that field sites are more fluid than how the field is traditionally conceptualized in anthropology. This fluidity is because people do not inhabit a website the same way they do a village. Participation is often hard to gauge, as users do not have to show themselves to be present. Users might be 'lurkers', meaning that they go through the contents of a website without interacting with anyone. In some cases they might also deliberately lie or cover up their identity. This might be because they find it fun to do so. It can also be because they are looking at something they do not want others to know about. Regardless of reason, it makes the job of the anthropologist that much more difficult

It is also not unusual for participants to go to several different websites day to day. It is not uncommon for young people to have at least a Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr,

YouTube, and TikTok account. To say nothing of the multiple smaller websites that participants might be involved with. To make matters worse, oftentimes these different accounts are under different usernames for each website. This increases the difficulty of trying to see what any individual is doing online. Unless someone happens to use their full legal name for every website they look at, following users down the rabbit hole can be quite difficult.

In order to prevent the white rabbit from escaping my grasp, I did not strictly define my field before setting out. Instead, in the spirit of Hine's research, I anticipated finding what my field was during the process of research. Hine (2015) accomplished this by contacting participants to meet in person. She wanted to better understand why individuals used a specific site. While my own research was broader than one specific site, I thought a similar approach might benefit me.

My first goal was to map out what "the field" in a digital space meant to me. I thought I could do that by letting the people I wanted to research find my field for me. In Hine's research, she interacted with participants by buying and selling used items on a website, then meeting offline with the other person for the exchange, discussing their experiences with said website. I surmised that a similar approach would work for my project. Part of my inquiry was about whether online space was just a medium for planning offline events. I wondered if users were actually interacting online or if such spaces were utilized as giant bulletin boards.

For these reasons, I began my early research with a mixed offline/online approach. Initially I chose to find events that were published online advertising queer events. By doing so, I hoped to be able to find where queer women tended to congregate online. That way I would get a bigger picture of how people were meeting in online space. I was also curious what kind of environments were provided offline in Montreal. I wanted to gain a further understanding of how online communities may differ from the queer spaces provided in person.

In contrast to Hine, Boellstorff (2008) approaches the digital field from within. His research into the online multiplayer game places the research field site as Second Life itself. Boellstorff via his avatar met with, and found participants by playing the game. In fact, he argues that treating the game otherwise cheapens the place it holds in peoples lives. Boellstorff states in his book that he wanted to understand Second Life on its own terms, as a separate culture with its own rules and social mores. While Boellstorff's approach could be enlightening, it also highlights a distinction that I wanted to make from other ethnographers.

The work of Boellstorff and others such as Kitzie (2019) and Lovelock (2017) tends to focus on one corner of the internet or one website. By doing so, the researcher learns as much if not more about the website itself as they do the people using it. However, my interest was more solely in the users, what aspects about certain sites interested them. Choosing a specific website for my project would have meant assuming such a website held significance for participants; I did not want to start my research with such an assumption.

Defining the Scope

While I did not want to focus on a singular website, I still needed a plan to find participants. My original plan was to find people who fit my demographic in person and then follow them down the digital rabbit hole. I had planned to recruit these women via organized events for queer women in Montreal. I would then have them describe to me what their internet habits entailed, who they had online discussions with, and what conversations they were having. During these events, I would then ask individuals to friend me on social media accounts or write down any other website that they mentioned so that I could view it for myself. I had hoped to be able to compare what I was told in person with what I observed online. I would also attend the local queer student organization meetings for recruitment and to observe any relevant discussions.

This initial plan was too limited and fell apart for several reasons. The first reason simply being, when I had tried to recruit in person, I struggled to find places of recruitment. There were no longer any operational lesbian bars in Montreal that I knew of. Even if there had been, the loud music and dancing that usually takes place in such venues would have made a meaningful conversation almost impossible. The lack of permanent offline spaces meant that I was limited to more spur of the moment events. These social events were usually advertised on Facebook or Twitter. They were also usually one time occurrences, that I was lucky to hear about through word of mouth. Much of my early research was spent scanning online for hours to find any events that were possibly relevant. Even when I found events to attend, a lot of the events were either performances or dance parties. Neither option facilitated much room for talking. I was becoming intimately aware of the frustration of finding places to meet other queer people that my own participants would later describe to me.

Something else I had not accounted for was people's sense of privacy to their online interactions and social media accounts. Many I spoke to in public were happy to talk about certain websites in general or funny jokes that I had seen on a particular website. However, when I asked them to show me what websites they used or asked to follow them on their social media accounts, their tunes quickly changed. Some of the women I tried to recruit acted as if I had asked to read their diary. They would look visibly nervous and tell me how they were not comfortable with me doing that.

This will be a point to note in later chapters, when I discuss the ways that offline and online lives intersect. However, at the time this reaction confused me. Most of the accounts I was asking to view are public. Furthermore, most social media accounts display a person's full name and have pictures of them on it. Unless the person has put their accounts under false names, most of them can be found with a quick Google search. Despite the availability of such accounts, many of the women I spoke with responded with some variation of "I don't really share that with people in real life." As a researcher, I had to respect their privacy and not dig further. However, that perception of privacy even on public websites will resurface later and so is important to note. At that time, it was an obstacle I had to find a way to overcome.

Another issue was trying to discern how individuals' online lives compared to their offline ones. I tried to ask questions such as "how many hours a day would you estimate you spend online?" or "what part of the day are you most often online?", yet many could not neatly

divide their online/offline lives and seemed confused when asked to delineate them. Many of the responses I received were tongue-in-cheek. The women would say “oh it’s my life” or “I practically live there” and give a little laugh. When these women had smartphones with internet capabilities in their pockets at all times, this division between offline and online did not really exist. At least, not in the same way it did when one was limited to a desktop computer at home or an internet cafe. People’s lives weren’t clearly divided between offline and online worlds as they might have previously been.

Beyond the Binary

To move forward, I had to reconsider how online space interacted with people's lives. Describing the two as a strict binary did not work and my project had to be reformed to represent that reality. This more fluid concept of online space had been discussed in depth by Hines and other academics such as Horst & Miller (2012). In both these texts, the authors argue for a reimagining of the field beyond the boundaries of say a village and instead of as an interconnectedness of people beyond physical space. While I had been exposed to these ideas already and agreed with them, I had neglected to fully integrate the concept into my methodology until that point.

To reflect these observations, I had to decide on leaving my idea of the field vague. This does not mean that the women I spoke to were void of a cultural context. They were all students, primarily anglophones, who had been brought up for at least most of their lives in North America and who currently lived in Montreal. All those caveats carry with them cultural context.

What I mean by my idea of “the field” being vague is that it lacked a boundary that I could point at. I had no village or homeland where the internet resided and to name one particular website to pursue felt like a partial truth. To focus on one website would center my findings on that website instead of the people who use it. To broaden my idea of the field, I also had to broaden my approach.

Recruitment

Once I had determined that my original plan for recruitment mentioned above was no longer viable, I rethought my strategy. While the events I had gone to in person were overall unfruitful in finding participants, Queer Concordia and Queer McGill proved the exception to this rule. QueerConcordia and Queer McGill were student groups that students from said universities could attend. They function as resource centers and safe spaces for students. The organizations also held regular events that students would attend. Since the student events were often advertised as mixers, participants were much more friendly and conversational than in my other experiences. Many attended these events for the purpose of finding other students to become friends with. In fact, due to the nature of the gatherings, many brought up the topics I wanted to learn more about completely organically. The event organizers themselves were also

friendly to me and were comfortable with me attending events as long as I was respectful to the other participants.

To further my recruitment efforts, I put up flyers requesting research participants (see recruitment poster in appendix). During the design of these flyers, I struggled with the exact wording to succinctly describe the demographic that I was looking to study. This was especially an issue when trying to decide on how to phrase the term “cisgender women.” There was some concern from those I consulted with that the phrasing was too opaque for the average person. The term cisgender is not used as much as transgender, so there was some worry that cisgender women might not know that this term applied to them.

Due to these concerns, I had decided to use the phrase “cisgender woman or woman socialized from birth” on the recruitment flyer. This phrasing was still imperfect. One could argue that people who were assigned female at birth, such as trans men or nonbinary people, might also fit under “socialized from birth”. As I mentioned before in my demographic section, finding language to describe certain genders and sexualities that is both inclusive while not insensitive is an evolving conflict.

While I had some slight misgivings about the phrasing it was, in my mind, the most sensitive way to phrase it. Once I had finalized the flyer, it was then approved by both my supervisor and the Concordia ethics board. Afterwards, I had sent this same flyer to both Queer McGill and Queer Concordia who had not objected to it at all. In fact, they both approved of it to be posted on their Facebook pages with that same wording. At this point, I had assumed that the wording was a non-issue and pressed on.

In addition to the student organization, I also posted that same flyer on a Facebook group for queer people in Montreal. This was a group that often advertised different events that were going on in the city. Sometimes members would announce that they were going to a club or an event that evening to prompt others to join them. Others would ask for financial support or advice on finding a job. I had never posted anything into the group myself, but had attended a couple of events advertised within it. The people I had met in person from the group seemed friendly and very supportive of my project. For these reasons, I had thought it would be a perfect place to post my recruitment flyer.

Normally, I would have spoken to the group administrators about posting my flyer. However, it was common for others to post their inquiries straight to the group without prior permission, so I assumed I could do the same without issue. I posted a copy of my flyer along with a short explanation of my research project. The first few responses I received were positive. Mostly people asking how they could get in touch with me or what their participation would entail. However, the comments quickly turned from supportive to highly critical.

Despite my confidence, my call for participants was quickly met with criticism on this Facebook group. Many commented asking the group moderators to take it down. Others derided myself and my research as transphobic. This was because the recruitment poster stated that I was specifically looking for cisgender women for my research. Some users argued that if my research did not include transwomen, then it was inherently transphobic and divisive.To add insult to

injury, I specified that I was looking for ‘women who had been socialized as women from birth’. Without meaning to, I had used harmful language that echoed transmisogynistic rhetoric.

Initially, I tried to apologize for any unintended harm and explain my decisions for not including trans women in my study. However, members of the group were unsatisfied with my answers and comments soon flooded in too quickly for me to respond to them all. The mildly critical comments quickly turned more and more vitriolic as members began responding to each other and getting more upset that my post had not been taken down yet. Before the situation could get worse, the moderators of the group quickly deleted the entire thread.

After the post was deleted, I received a private message from the moderators explaining to me that my post had been deleted for violating the groups guidelines and warning me not to do it again. I apologized to them for causing the other members distress. I also explained to the moderators that research projects must limit their demographics. I had excluded trans women as a matter of research limitations, not bigotry. They accepted my apology and allowed me to continue to be on the Facebook group as a member but banned me from any further recruitment attempts because they thought that any project that did not include trans women, regardless of intentions, was exclusionary. Their community guidelines explicitly stated that any exclusionary content was not allowed in the group.

This early blunder cut me off from a lot of potential participants but taught me a valuable lesson. It reminded me of my potential for harm as a researcher if I were not more careful with the way I conducted myself. The incident also made me consider the power of words in these communities. My word choice had to be very deliberate and careful. Being too blasé with words could result in a misunderstanding, especially online.

After this miss step, I used a version of the flyer that omitted the phrase and replaced the digital versions that were on the Queer Concordia and QueerMcGill Facebook pages. The edited flyer, which is the version included in my appendix, was also put up in buildings on the Concordia University Downtown campus and the McGill University campus. Through these edited flyers, both offline and online, I was able to obtain seven of my twelve participants.

Participant Observation

Due to the nature of my research, participant observation was more difficult to organize than I had anticipated. Trying to do participant observation online held several complications of its own. The largest of this is what Schudson & Van Anders (2019) discuss in their work in online communities as ‘invisible audiences’. What might more colloquially be known as lurkers. These are people who participate in the space just as much as the more vocal participants but do not leave any veritable proof that they are a part of the interactions. This means that for any one person that leaves a comment or posts something, there could be dozens more who silently watch. They can be a part of the discussion, they might forward discussions to other friends or discuss it in person with others on their side of the screen. Yet, as far as other users can tell, they do not exist at all, unless they break that silence and leave a comment or make a post. As a third-party observer, it is difficult to get a vantage point of how many people are even viewing a

certain conversation or interaction. Oftentimes, websites will only reveal metrics of who is watching something if it is happening on one's own account.

This also means it is difficult to be a fly on the wall in such spaces. In more traditional anthropology, one can simply exist in a space. You can sit in the back of the room at a meeting or listen along to a concert or dance with locals while, for the most part, blending into the background of their lives. You can become a part of the scenery in a way that participants do not find unusual when you appear and start speaking to them. In contrast, online you are either a participant or nonexistent. There is no observing without being a vocal participant in some way.

Due to this issue, most of my observations took place during recruiting. As part of my recruitment process, I attended multiple events with Queer Concordia and other organizations in Montreal. At the suggestion of some of the women I spoke with, I found events to attend through looking up keywords such as "queer" or "LGBT" in Facebook events. During these events, if there was a speaker or a presentation, I would take notes during it. If I spoke with other attendees, I would usually put my notes away and try to recount the interaction once I left.

While I did not enter these spaces intending to do participant observation, they were nonetheless valuable observations. It was not uncommon for the people I spoke with to mirror sentiments I later heard during my interviews. Often when I told them what I was recruiting participants for, even if they were not interested in a one-on-one interview, they would share with me their opinions on the subject. Due to the frankness of the people that I spoke with, these interactions were also helpful as a way to workshop my interview guide and figure out what questions would yield the best results.

Interviews

Development

Before beginning my research, I had conducted preliminary research on the site www.forum.emptyclosets.com. This preliminary research was to help myself form a draft of my interview questions. I chose this website because it purported itself as one of the largest websites for young people looking to come out of the closet. I assumed the conversations on this website would center largely around formation of identity, which would make it ideal for giving me an idea of what discussions were already happening.

After observing forum.emptyclosets.com, I noticed that the discussions on the website largely fell into two sections. The first section being practical advice such as how to "know" what one's sexual identity was and the second section being emotional support such as talking about unsupportive parents or mental health issues. Originally, my plan was to base my questions off the more practical information. I was interested in how individuals learned certain terminology or how they applied that information to define their sexuality.

In the end, the question guide contained around 20 questions. The questions focused on participant's usage and how they came to understand their sexuality. I also spent a time during my interviews asking participants about their childhood experiences with the internet and how

they thought that affected them. This was necessary as many participants began to have access to the internet from a young age. The aforementioned interview guide is available in its entirety in the appendix.

During my research, I was able to conduct 12 interviews with each interview ranging between 90 to 150 minutes depending on the length of responses to questions. These interviews varied in length so much because they were only semi-structured. Some of my participants were very animated and struggled to stay on topic. I often encouraged this behavior because some were so eager to speak; the other topics they brought up often enriched the information I gathered. In the shorter interviews, participants were more reserved or were afraid of giving me information that they thought was irrelevant to my research. It was not uncommon for my participants to apologize for sharing something they thought was a "waste" of my time.

Shifting Focus

Originally, I had planned to focus on the thought process that participants went through in their online interactions. I wanted to understand how participants decided to take part in online space. The easiest way to do that seemed to be to have them give me a step by step guide. I wanted them to take me through going to a website, to how they made decisions on what to discuss or post, and how others reacted to those contributions. I wanted to try and understand how each woman I interviewed came to be on those websites and how they used them.

By understanding what topics online appealed to women and how they engaged with those topics, I thought I would be able to understand the appeal of being online for these women. I assumed that there was some core element that made certain websites appealing. I thought understanding what that appeal was would be integral to understanding my participants.

Originally I had planned to create a road map of how each woman found online spaces. I would try to discover which websites they used frequently and what they posted on said websites. I would then use those road maps to make an analysis of where participants spent their time overall. In practice though, participants were not that exact in their decision making process. The most they could tell me about was websites they frequented or they could vaguely describe the process. Any straightforward questions surrounding a thought process was met with shrugs and confusion. Participants simply did not think that hard about their online interactions. At least not deliberately.

While initially frustrating, this early setback with my interviews lead me to the realization that will be central for my thesis. When discussing with my interviewees the appeal of websites, participants were more interested in discussions about the relationships they formed than the websites direct effects on them. Questions about how they used a website were usually met with a simple shrug. In contrast when I asked about the people they interacted with online, participants became visibly animated and invested in the conversation. This meant that I had to reframe my questions to get further into the details my participants were eager to talk about.

In my initial questions, I had focused too much on the individual. When I had imagined how participants used online space, it was purely individualistic. I had overlooked the effect that

online friendships might have on internet usage. Many of the women I spoke with had made friends online with people from different cities or countries. Some had friendships lasting multiple years while others had eventually moved in with these friends or started relationships with them. These were not just people who existed in the same space as them. They were emotionally important relationships that often had lasting effects on participants. These relationships were not limited to one off individuals either. Participants also made

a lot of comments about the communities that they had been a part of online. While many could not really tell me what they themselves posted, they could remember in vivid detail interactions they had with others or community events they had been a part of. My initial overemphasis on the individual aspect of identity formation neglected a very important part of what made these online spaces important to these women. This was a breakthrough in my research and led me to include more questions that focused on the collective aspects of online space. The group dynamic of online space was pivotal to participants' understanding of themselves.

Interview Structure

As I stated before, my main data stems from 12 ethnographic interviews taking place between September and December of 2019. These 12 interviews took place in person and were recorded with permission for later referral. The decision to have all interviews take place in person was partially a technical one. I worried about the possibility that one of my interviews might be corrupted or recorded incorrectly, losing me valuable data. I also felt that due to the intimate nature of the interview, doing so over a webcam might stilt the conversation.

Throughout my interviews, I strove to put my participants safety and privacy first. I knew we would be discussing sensitive topics such as coming out, familial relationships, and mental health. I wanted to provide the participants a space that did not feel too public to be having these sorts of conversations. That said, I also worried that if we were in *too* private of an area, the interviewee would feel pressured to divulge information. Yet when given the option of a cafe or a private office almost all shrugged and told me to pick. When participants did request the private office space, many did so out of concern of the background noise being too loud for my recorder. Participants seemed more concerned with what would assist me as a researcher rather than any personal comfort.

After these interviews, I would attempt to compensate my participants in small ways. Rather than directly pay them, I would compensate them by paying for their drink at the cafe we were in or by bringing drinks and pastries to the office where I did my interviews. This was a small way to compensate them for their time, especially since I did not have the funds to compensate them further than that. To my surprise, all my participants were caught off guard by this gesture and some even insisted on paying for themselves instead. Rather than being viewed as a researcher who was potentially benefiting from their labor, many treated me as a fellow student who needed assistance with a school project. This was one of the accidental benefits of recruiting from a student population.

Transcription

Once I completed all my semi-structured interviews, I began the process of transcribing and creating a code for analysis. With the aid of a speech-to-text program, I created a full transcription of each interview. While creating the transcriptions, I looked back on the notes I took during the interview itself. This was to make sure there was no additional context or visual cues that I wanted to preserve. I then listened to all of the interviews again, making additional notes to aid in the coding process.

At this point I began to recognize some patterns in the material, so I created a spreadsheet before listening to all my transcriptions again. With this spreadsheet, found in the appendix, I made a new column for each topic that my participants spoke about and marked them off. This way, I could better assess what main topics my participants were discussing and what overlap there was. Once I knew for certain what the main topics of each interview was, I began to ask myself how each of these topics were relevant to my research question.

With both my research question and the discussion topics in mind, I formulated 8 questions that would be used to further analyze my materials. These questions were used as a classification system when going through my transcripts. Any time I noticed something noteworthy in my interviews, I would ask myself which of the following questions it fell under. The data piece would then be classified under one of the questions so that patterns between interviews could begin to appear. The questions created for analysis are the following:

- *Internet Usage:* What are participants using the internet for?
- *Online Impact:* How much do participants think the internet influenced them?
- *Community:* How do participants find and interact with communities, offline and online?
- *Identity:* How do participants explain or understand their own identity? What metaphors or terminology do they use?
- *Performativity**:*** What does it mean to “look gay”? What do participants say about “looking or acting gay”?
- *Queer:* How do participants feel about the word? Do they refer to themselves or identify as queer?
- *Coming Out of the Closet:* What were participants' experiences with telling others about their sexuality? What does ‘coming out of the closet’ mean to participants?
- *Family:* Does their family know about their sexuality/how did they react to being told about their child’s sexuality?

Name	Age	Sexuality (self reported)	Where from?	Lived in Montreal	Recruited from	Education	Ethnicity/Race
Eva	25	Bisexual	Victoria, BC	1 month	Queer Concordia event	2nd year undergrad in Spanish & French	European/ Caucasian
Karina	28	Queer/Lesbian	Pennsylvania /Upstate NY	3 years	Queer Montreal Facebook Group	PhD student in Neuroscience	Latino/Mixed Race (Latino & White)
Sarah	24	Bisexual ("it's complicated")	South Central New Hampshire	4 years	Gender & Society student	2nd year undergrad in Anthropology & Creative Writing	White
Katie	25	Bisexual/Queer	Ottawa	3 years	Friend of Karina	PhD student in Neuroscience	White (Polish refugees)
Jane	18	Pansexual/Bisexual	Toronto	3 months	Queer McGill Facebook Group	1st year undergrad in General Arts	White
Penelope	20	Queer/Pan/Bi/Demi sexual	Montreal	Life	Flyer	1st year undergrad in Sociology	Mixed Race/Chinese & Greek
Mia	22	Queer	Washington D.C.	3 months	Flyer	MA student in Communications	Haitian/Black Carribean
Ariel	23	Bisexual	Montreal	Life	Flyer	2nd year undergrad in History & English	Southeast Asian/Filipino Chinese
Edith	22	Queer	Montreal	Life	Flyer	Undergrad in Animation	Caucasian/ French
Nina	20	Bisexual (still a bit uncertain)	Immigrated from Iran at 7, then lived in BC	2 months	Flyer	1st year undergrad in Political Science	Irani/Middle Eastern

Georgina	32	Bisexual	Alberta	6 years	Queer Concordia event	Undergrad in Psychology	Métis/Acadian
Chloe	27	Bisexual	Montreal	Life	Friend	MA student in Sociology	Black/ Guyanese/ Nigerian

Table a: Demographics of participants

Analysis

With the previous questions in mind, I went back through my interview transcriptions to catalogue participant responses. This was the basis for further analysis and pattern forming. The table above contains the demographic information that I acquired at the beginning of my participant interviews. The participants are listed in chronological order from date of interview. During the process of creating demographic tables and using pattern recognizing techniques, interesting parallels began to appear. There were additional patterns of demographics that I had not noticed during the recruitment process.

For instance, of my 12 participants, all were students with ⅔ being undergrad students and the other ⅓ being graduate students. This could be skewed because I advertised largely on campus and through student-led organizations. It might also simply be because the age group that I was looking at is also the age at which many people attend university. Either way, this is noteworthy because of the potential bias in studying university students. Part of my analysis entails analyzing what language and concepts do participants use to understand their sexuality. A university education, particularly a liberal arts education, might have influenced their vocabulary and their understanding of sexuality.

Another interesting pattern was the age distribution. The initial age range I was anticipating was between 18 to 30. As I said before, this was to speak with women who had grown up with internet access from a young age. I had worried that by relying on university students, my age demographic would skew young. However, I was surprised to learn that my age range instead skewed to the mid-twenties. In fact, the median age is almost 25 years old. This might have been a side effect of speaking with university students in Quebec. Due to the CEGEP system in Quebec, students do not attend university until they are at least 21. This means that unless they come from a different province or country, which supersedes this requirement, students tend to be a bit older than neighboring provinces or the United States. This age skew might also be because I spoke with graduate as well as undergraduate students.

Another factor that proved noteworthy was asking participants about their place of origin. Place of origin was not a question that I had originally intended to pose. Yet after my first few interviews, I was surprised that many of the women I spoke to had moved to Montreal from elsewhere. While this itself is not surprising in a large metropolitan area like Montreal, I still thought it important to note where each participant originated. Of my participants, 4 were

Montrealers, 4 moved from other parts of Canada, three came from the US, and one immigrated from another country. Furthermore, 9 of my participants mentioned having at least one foreign-born parent.

While these numbers may be unsurprising for a metropolitan area, it is noteworthy in my study. As my research involves community, it is important to grapple with participant's sense of belonging to communities. For some participants, part of their drive to move to Montreal was due to the city's progressive and inclusive reputation. For a similar reason, ethnic background also played a role in how participants imagined community. Some participants spoke about how their immigrant background shaped their identity, including clashing values with their immigrant parents' expectations. These discussions about background and community will come to the foreground in my chapter on collective identity building, so I wanted to highlight them here.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the language choices involved in describing non-normative sexualities. This was clearly present when I asked the 12 women whom I interviewed what specific labels they used to describe their sexuality. All of the women were asked how they identified, and were encouraged to give more than one answer if they felt one specific label did not quite fit them. Of those 12 women, 9 said they were bisexual, 5 said queer, two said pansexual, one said lesbian, and one said asexual. One will notice that these numbers do not add up to 12: that is because several participants used more than one label for themselves. This shows the flexibility in which participants would often use these labels.

The label of choice was often situational as well. "If I'm around straight people I just say bisexual," was a response I heard from several of my participants. Even if they felt that label truly did not "fit" them the way another label might, they said they were willing to do that if it meant sparing themselves from a long conversation about sexuality. As this can often be a very fraught issue in queer spaces, I did not challenge them on any specific label usage. As I will explore further in my chapter called "Who gets to be Queer?", the issue can get quite heated at times.

These frictions in label choice are not unique to internet discourse. In fact, discussions on word choice have been pivotal to queer spaces at least as far back as the early 20th century. Modern online discourse can be seen as the latest inheritor in a rich history of queer worldbuilding. This history has taken place through the pages of underground newspapers, homemade zines, and secret mailing lists. Despite the danger of stigmatization, financial ruin, and even jail time, queer people have been having similar discussions on the topic of sexuality for a long time. As I will argue in my next chapter, online discourse owes its existence to these earlier groups and carries on the legacy of such groups. By providing historic context, I hope to show that online discourse is not a new phenomenon that sprouted fully formed from the brow of Zeus. Queer worldbuilding is an on going process that the internet plays a small part in.

Ethnographic vignette: Katie

The detail I remember most about my time with Katie was her nonchalant attitude about her life and her past. Though only a few years older than me, she seemed to have a worldly wisdom about her. When she spoke about her past, growing up in a deeply conservative Polish community in Ottawa, I expected the conversation to turn heavy. However, during our conversation Katie was all smiles and dry jokes. “I’ve had a lot of therapy”, she informed me with a wry smile. That was how Katie approached most subjects we discussed, with a dry bemusement at the subject. Even when we spoke at length about her work, she kept her humor. Katie is a PhD student at McGill University. Her research is in Neuroscience, specifically in looking at the effects of trauma on the brain. She explained to me the process of caring for mice, traumatizing them, and then executing the animals so that she could examine their bodies. Katie told me about the effects that one’s mental health could have on one’s body. How depression or anxiety could seep into one’s gut bacteria. That stayed with me the most, as we talked more about the homophobia and sexual harassment that Katie had endured in her past. I kept wondering, as I reflected on the trauma that we both carried with us due to our pasts. I wondered what our guts might say, if Katie cut us both open.

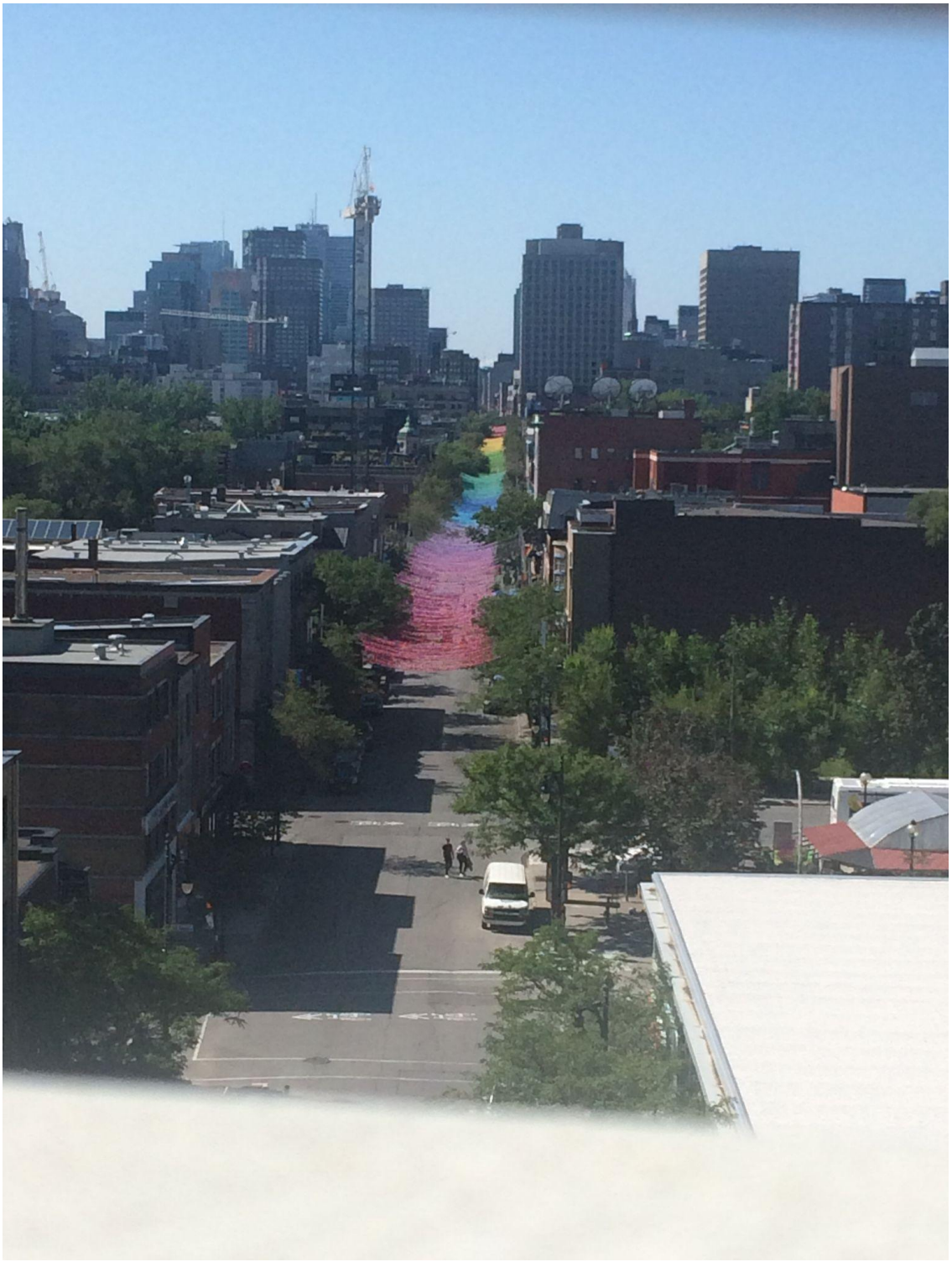

Photo 1: Image of Montreal Gay Village taken from Jacques Cartier Bridge, August 2019. Source: Photo by author

Chapter 3. Historical Context: Queer Spaces Online

Introduction

It was a warm August evening in Montreal's Gay Village. The small green space called Place Émilie-Gamelin at the end of the street was full of people soaking up the sun. A terrace with a small restaurant, butterfly garden, and wooden pallet benches gave pedestrians a place to lounge in the air of the tragically short Montreal Summer. Next to the usual fare there was also an outdoor stage that had been set up just for the evening's event. As a crowd began to gather, the drag queen hosting the event introduced Joe Negrelli. Joe was a "Stonewall veteran" who had come to Montreal to tell us his story. After the introduction, a sweet elderly man with a thick New Yawk accent came forward. He thanked the crowd for the warm welcome and apologized for not knowing enough French to translate for the crowd. The eager audience settled in as he began to tell his story. As he spoke, the cast seemed enchanted by a spell that I worried I might break by accidentally making too much noise.

Joe recounted his memory of how the Stonewall rebellion unraveled one fateful night in 1969. The crowd waited on bated breath as he explained the persecution he had faced in his own community. He told the audience how it was not uncommon for the police to prowl the gay village in New York City, looking for any "fairy" that they could beat up or arrest. Those living or visiting the area had to always look over their shoulder. If they were arrested for homosexuality or cross dressing, their picture would be published in the newspaper the next day. Being exposed as a homosexual would mean most likely being fired from their jobs and abandoned by friends and family. Joe explained how all of this led to what is now known as the Stonewall Rebellion or Stonewall Riot.

The Stonewall Rebellion was an incident where a crowd of queer people inside the Stonewall Inn snapped when police decided to raid the gay bar. Rather than go quietly, patrons decided to fight back against police. Physically attacking the police, as the legends of the night claim, throwing beer bottles and bricks. The crowd grew in size as more joined the fight, pulling the arrested from the back of police wagons along with pushing the police back. Due to the ferocity of those who had gathered to defend their friends and their home, the police were eventually forced to retreat. Joe's words were full of elation and laughter as he spoke about how those at Stonewall had taken back the streets for "our people". He was gleeful at the fact that "a bunch of twinks" had terrified the cops. The more he spoke, the more full that small outdoor park got. It filled up every available space and spilled out onto the streets around it, all listening intently.

After Joe finished, audience members were then encouraged to come forward and share any stories that they wanted to. People readily came forward, each with a story of loss and triumph from generations of queer people. It read as a timeline of "we fought, we won, and we must keep fighting" as stories of getting beat up by the cops turned into stories of enduring the AIDS plague, which turned into stories of transwomen's deaths and indigenous women's disappearances. Strangers wept and hugged each other. Each person was told that they were loved and that every person listening felt their pain. I struggled to focus on taking notes at all as the emotionality of the crowd overwhelmed me. I was overcome with a feeling somewhere between grief and hope, this twisted knot in my stomach that I could not place. And as each

person told their story above a sea of glitter and rainbows, it was like a secret whisper over the crowd “we are here, we will not disappear, and we will not be forgotten”

I had never met Joe before that night. We existed in very different contexts, with him being an adolescent of the 1960s and myself being an adolescent of the 2010s. Yet when he shared his story with the crowd that night, he called everyone there his family. His audience had been Canadians, largely too young to have been alive during Stonewall. Yet, he spoke about Stonewall as the night the streets of the Gay Village in New York City had been taken back for “our people”. When Joe told his story, it felt like I regained a piece of myself that I did not know I had lost. That collective feeling of history resonates throughout my research and later discussions. The power of knowing one's history is in knowing oneself.

What history is written and who gets included in that history is a loaded topic. Those who are at the margins of a society are often sidelined or completely left out of history. It is common for queer people to be highly encouraged to seek out and memorize the history of the queer people who came before them. This is because, until recently, such history often went undocumented or was even suppressed. What history there is to find is often in bits of pieces, little scraps of paper or oral stories from those who experienced the past first hand. Learning one’s history is treated as a radical act, an attempt to reclaim something that has been stolen.

This craving for history is especially true at Pride. Pride started as the Gay Liberation parade, an event which celebrated the resistance at the Stonewall Inn. As Joe reminded us, the Stonewall Inn was an underground gay bar in New York City that was violently raided in 1969 by police. This event is often touted as the first shot of the modern gay civil rights movement, with countries all over the world starting their own Pride celebrations. While it is questionable how much true influence this event had over international politics, it’s mythic status in queer spaces is important to note. People who were there that night in 1969 are often called ‘Stonewall veterans’ or ‘Stonewall elders’. Those who were there, like Joe, are treated with great reverence by younger generations of queer people who credit Stonewall elders for laying the foundation for those who came after them.

Stories that are told at Pride and other such events function as both an oral history and as a group mythology. Anderson’s (1991) theory on imagined communities argues that large groups can feel a sense of community through shared experiences or a shared model of what it ‘means’ to be a member of the group. When I sat in that audience and listened along with the crowd, Joe stressed how “we” had won, how “we” had taken back the streets for “our” people. As everyone in that crowd shared their stories, there were calls for group action and solidarity. These were not the individual stories of a collection of strangers, but rather the collective stories of a group of people who all perceived themselves as sharing the same past, the same stories.

This need to share and preserve history was prevalent throughout my research. History was treated as the chains that kept the idea of a queer community together as a whole. During the events I attended in Montreal, my research would often come up during small talk. People my own age were often thrilled by the work I was doing, even if they were not personally interested in being involved. However, the older people I spoke with, the ones who had navigated queer life first in the 90s, 80s, and earlier, seemed ambivalent about it. They supported the work that I was doing but were afraid that by highlighting online space I would be ignoring the work that they and others had done pre-internet to create space offline. A common refrain I would hear was “well, that’s great but, do you know your history?”

Analyzing a queer history is difficult because of how blurry that concept can be. Firstly, the concept of queerness is a rather modern one. Even the terms “homosexual” or “heterosexual” did not exist until the modern age and originated in the Western sphere. Both terms came into existence roughly around the turn of the century in academia, Krafft-Ebing, R. V., & Chaddock, C. G. (1892). However, according to the online etymology dictionary, the terms only became more colloquially used starting in the 1930s. This means that trying to analyze anything before that is often speculation or educated guessing on the part of the researcher. Academics are forced to either ignore any same sex attraction that historic figures had or only vaguely allude to them without assigning modern terminology to those figures. Discussions on historic figures' sexuality can become a contentious issue amongst historians. Even after the point where modern terminology came into usage, the topic can still be muddy.

The second issue, as I mentioned before, is that queer history is often not well documented. Before the 70s, any mentions of non-normative sexualities or genders were typically kept as closed family secrets. Even after that point, most historic information was gathered through oral history and community-run archival efforts. For this reason, trying to find exact details can be difficult if not impossible. Any shred of history that can be told is incomplete or difficult to find sources for besides word of mouth. The documentary *Before Stonewall* Schiller & Rosenberg, (1984) attempts to document this time period and is forced to rely on oral histories and whatever small amounts of media they can find on the subject.

Any history of the internet is similarly fractured. Anything that is put on the internet can be easily deleted, either by users or the moderators of the website. While deleted information may be archived within the site’s data, this archive is shaky at best. The website could crash, or the owner of the website could decide to not pay anymore for it to stay up. If this happens, the only trace of the website's existence is what little individual users might have catalogued while the website was active. Efforts like ‘The Wayback Machine’ have tried to mend this tide a bit. They have done so by creating programs to scan and document websites; even then, not every individual element from every website on the internet can be saved.

Even if users had the foresight to document these websites themselves, it is possible that such information might not be accessible. Many data storage receptacles, such as VHS or floppy disks, have become obsolete. The instruments used to read their data are no longer produced. Even if said instruments can be found, it is also possible that the information stored on them might be damaged or corrupted. Many of these storage devices can have their tapes damaged, disks scratched, or data demagnetized to the point that their contents are no longer accessible.

The niche nature of both online groups in general and queer groups both offline and online also adds to this problem. Due to the stigmatization or even criminalization of their existence, queer people have often operated from the shadows. Many websites appeal to specific interests that are only found if the user seeks them out or knows where to look. This means that these spaces are often created for their specific users and their specific needs. Any thought of documenting or preserving what goes on there would either put the group in jeopardy or seem unnecessary due to the niche nature of said group. This is not to say that no one did try to document anything that went on, but rather for the reasons I have listed above said documentation was often sparse and limited.

Cowan & Rault (2018) also make similar points in their article, which comments on the ethical balance between research and participants. They argue that when conducting research with queer people in digital space, often those spaces are designed for their users and not for

outsiders. Therefore, participants are trying not to be found out by the larger world. This means that such content might be even more difficult to find. It might be hidden behind passwords or private chats, or deleted all together to keep from creating a paper trail. Evidence of such communication then is not simply lost to the hands of time but actively concealed. This is even true in social media accounts. It is common for people to create multiple accounts, sometimes with false identities, so that they might interact with people or topics online that might be too revealing to their offline friends and family members.

This was the case for some of my participants like Katie. In her case, her surrounding was not just ignorant of queer people but actively homophobic. Katie recounted to me how when Canada decided to legalize same sex marriages, her parents and their local Polish community demonstrated against the measure. For people like Katie, any trace of their participation in queer spaces needed to be deleted or hidden at all costs, lest someone find it. She was not the only one either. Ariel admitted to having extra accounts that family members did not know about under false names. These were in attempts to hide any queer content from prying family members. While these situations are understandable and are a safety precaution, they also speak loudly of how complicated attempts at historical archival work can be online. Layers of misdirection by hundreds and thousands of online users are enacted for the purpose of anonymity.

Throughout this chapter I will document how queer people came together, to imagine a community together through story and conversation. The examples that I mention will show the way that imagined communities have prevailed despite their divided nature. These communities and their stories are made of a million fragments, little pieces left behind of what were once vibrant Libraries of Alexandria for those who had access to them. Both the internet and queer identity have an illusory nature that can make them difficult to categorize or discuss. By showing this history, the internet becomes not a wholly new phenomena but rather the latest addition to a chain of queer worldbuilding. This topic will be important in this chapter and also the following chapters. Throughout my discussions with participants in later chapters, the heavy air of history sat over us. Participants saw themselves as not individual queer people, but rather the latest chain in an imagined community of queer people. To recognize and analyze that history will provide deeper context to the rest of my analysis.

A brief overview of historic queer community

To try and create an historic LGBT record in Canada or otherwise, especially pre-1960, is a matter of putting together bits and pieces and inferring information in many places. Once colonization began in North America, any gender or sexuality that did not fit the binary that Europeans brought over was either eradicated or erased from the record. Therefore, trying to find these histories is not only difficult but sometimes impossible. What information is available is typically oral history, which might even lessen its value in the eyes of many historians or archivists.

Furthermore, while Canadians and Americans are separated by a border, the histories of their struggles and attempts to form organizations often overlap. Throughout my research on the topic, I would find Canadian chapters of US-founded organizations or Canadian underground newspapers with US readers. This was especially the case during the AIDS crisis as

organizations from either side of the border worked together to fight the disease, spread information, and push their governments into action. Due to the unifying struggle the faced, queer groups on both side of the border usually stayed in touch and collaborated with each other. This especially the case for major cities like Toronto and New York City, who often shared information or political organizing efforts.

This shared history continues into the present day with my participants. Many of the women that I spoke to during my research had immigrated from the US for school or because their partners were Canadian. It also was not uncommon for participants to have at least one parent who was from the US. Of the women I interviewed, three out of 12 were from the US with one more having a father from the US. For this reason, I weave the two countries' histories together not because I think that they are the same but rather because those histories are too intertwined and so it would be impossible to talk about the individual history of one without mentioning the other.

That intertwined history continues into online space. There is no "American" or "Canadian" internet, the two interact and mingle with each other often. Most of the large websites that Canadians use are US companies with US servers. This adds to the decentralized nature of online space. One could be talking to someone who lives down the street or someone who lives in another country. Unless someone has explicitly decided to include their country of origin, it is difficult to know just from looking at another user. With that being said, it is important to point out that a language barrier still exists. Due to the heavy influence of American software and website development, large parts of the internet are dominated by anglophones. English is often treated as the lingua franca of the internet. Yet even this is not an impenetrable barrier for some users. Due to ever evolving translation software, simple conversations with people who do not even speak the same language are even possible now. This means that young people who spend a large amount of their time online are experiencing a much larger scale of influences than would have been possible pre-internet. The internet is helping to blur the lines of cultural barriers.

All of this is to say that the United States and Canada have a long history of interwoven media. The groups that were able to communicate in the past relied on each other as allies in the same fight. That fight is to raise awareness and understanding of others like them. The hope was that by informing others they would be able to find other queer people and make them know that they were not online. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, these groups used scrappy newspapers, homemade magazines, and eventually online media to build a bridge to each other. As Nina put it during her interview;"To see them living their lives and not just seeing them as a label but as a whole person… really helped me define who I am,"

It would be easy for me to say that the internet itself is a revolutionary product that allows for this kind of discovery. However, the internet is not the originator of these concepts. It is the latest in a long history of group efforts for queer people to find each other, to inform each other, and to support each other. By looking through that history, online queer spaces is contextualized not as an idea sprung from the brow of Zeus but rather as the latest in an evolution going back over a century. By focusing on the 20th century, a through line to the modern era is evident.

Early 20th Century: "Les Mouches Fantastiques"

Long before the internet, these conversations were happening through poetry, art, photography, and essays, all quietly shared from person to person or through secret mailing lists. These types of texts are commonly known as underground newspapers or 'zines', from 'magazine'. Todd & Watson (2006) These zines are typically amateur and homemade productions, something made as an act of creation amongst friends or small groups. Zines are not strictly a product of queer worlds, but the latter have thrived with this art form. Zines have a long history in queer spaces, documenting the feelings of those who participated in them. Their low bar to entry and DIY aesthetic meant that anyone with a typewriter could make one. Their underground nature also allowed them to share such material at times when it would be illegal or risqué to do so in a traditional periodical.

The first of these historic texts to discuss is "Les Mouches Fantastiques" by poet Elsa Gidlow and journalist Roswell George Mills. Gidlow herself would recount the story of this groundbreaking newspaper in her autobiography *Elsa: I Come With My Songs* (Gidlow, 1986). Both authors knew how groundbreaking this newspaper was, and acted as editors as well as submitting their own work to the paper. This early periodical was founded in 1918 in Montreal and was the first of its kind that is known in all of North America. Despite its unusual title, "Les Mouches Fantastiques" was popular with readers in both the US and Canada, with at least one reader as far south as Havana, Cuba. While it only lasted around two years, stopping its production when Gidlow left Montreal for New York City, "Les Mouches Fantastiques" has an unquestionable place in the history of queer periodicals. Within its pages were some of the first published instances of sapphic poetry in all of North America.

Les Mouches Fantastiques

A BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION DEVOTED TO THE ARTS

ELSIE GIDLOW and ROSWELL GEORGE MILLS, Editors
27 McGill College Avenue, Montreal, Que., Canada

VOL. II MARCH 1920 NO. 1

LATE AUTUMN AFTERNOON

TO REGINA.

Grey, fingered with flickering threads of light;
Silence, broken by restless quavers of music.
Greyness, music, a fragile peace;
A playing thought of slumber.
And on my lips faintly disturbing fingers,
And at my heart, Love's hand, like a child's hand,
Stirring me half awake.

—ELSIE GIDLOW

EDITORIAL

LES MOUCHES FANTASTIQUES recommences, after a meditative silence, as an unprejudiced publication devoted to art and artists modern and not modern, young and old, and to life as it is related to art and artists.

Art is not apart from life, but intimately and vitally conjoined with it. If, in fact, the words "art" and "life" were not so persistently misused by so many of those employing them, one could say without fear of misinterpretation, Life is art, art is life; but it seems that only life's more vulgar manifestations are accepted as veritable life and that art is commonly visualized as unreality, an extraneous growth that life would be infinitely more comfortable without, (perhaps it would be more comfortable!); or else as some delicately woven thing remote from life and irreconciliably divided from it. Wheras, in truth, art and life are interwoven.

They who assert that only the vulgarities of life are its realities, its crudities truth, its commonplaces beauty, have yet to discover the sanguinary, unsatisfied pulse that leaps in the covered depths of life's breast like a seeking youth-passion. But evidently they are incapable of discovery. They can never be beauty's pilgrims.

Hundreds of thousands live and speak as though art were all silver and scent and impossibility, and life a melange of labor, propagation and eating. With what have they covered their eyes and ears? With what have they stifled and choked the great songs of their being? Someone may reply to this by telling me that humanity is becoming more utilitarian and, consequently, utilitarianism is the great and revered god. I know this. I know that utilitarianism is a requisite and good foundation. But it is only a foundation. What of the structure? There are those who labor at the structure, serene-faced, with laughter in their souls; those who work feverdly in devil-driven abandonment; and those who play yet, curiously, add by their play much to the beauty. But below all these is the mass that toils at the foundation. Perhaps it is best that it should know nothing of the structure—and yet!

Even while realizing that devotedness to art is for the few, I sometimes wonder if it would not add a shade of greatness and refinement to the many if they had only a little appreciation for and understanding of life's noblest self expression.—E. A. G.

Photo 2: Les Mouches Fantastiques, First known example of a queer newspaper in North America. Image sourced from Centre des mémoires montréalaises

This short-lived paper would be a predecessor of what was to come in many ways. Gidlow and Mills created the work to share with others: poems and stories containing same-sex romances that would have been hard to find otherwise. This type of amateur queer story telling is alive and well today in the online spaces my participants visited. Like a flurry of bats, queer people find each other to this day by echoing into the darkness. They only find their way by following the echoes of others. “Les Mouches Fantastiques" arguably serves as a bedrock for that development.

Penelope, one of my participants, recounted to me how her and her friends would spend afternoons working on and writing stories to publish online. They were able to create an audience around their works through this medium and have correspondences with readers in the comment sections of the websites. She told me how important it was for her to have that space to share stories with others. Penelope said that having a place to share stories online made her feel like she was a part of a larger community. Eva, Chloe, Jane, and Ariel all said that reading such stories was one of the ways that they were exposed to queer culture. These stories were easily accessible to anyone who had a computer with an internet connection.

The ability to publish and read stories online was pivotal to many of my participants. This was especially true for sites like fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Ao3. Said websites were designed for young inexperienced writers to submit their stories for anyone to read. The process of submitting one’s writing on these websites is incredibly simple: one only needs to upload a typed document and click a button to submit. These amateur stories could often have large and far-reaching audiences, with some getting views in the hundreds of thousands. These numbers dwarfed the amount of people who could have read “Les Mouches Fantastiques”.

Mid-20th Century: The Daughters of Bilitis

Another notable moment in the evolution of queer periodicals was the formation of a group of women called “The Daughters of Bilitis”, thereafter DOB. As Tobin & Wicker (1975) state in their book on the group, the DOB was founded in California during the 1950s. The group named themselves after the Greek character of Bilitis, who was associated with Sappho in her poetry. This group was one of the earliest known lesbian organizations in North America. The group was initially founded social group for a lesbian couple who wanted to find other lesbian friends in the California area. However, the group's initiative soon changed when they decided to begin publishing an underground newspaper on lesbianism. This paper titled “The Ladder”, as you can see in the picture on the next page, had a mission statement of being an educational resource for women.

purpose of the *Daughters of* BILITIS

A WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROMOTING THE INTEGRATION OF THE HOMOSEXUAL INTO SOCIETY BY:

1. Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications--this to be accomplished by establishing and maintaining as complete a library as possible of both fiction and non-fiction literature on the sex deviant theme; by sponsoring public discussions on pertinent subjects to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions; by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society.

2. Education of the public at large through acceptance first of the individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices; through public discussion meetings aforementioned; through dissemination of educational literature on the homosexual theme.

3. Participation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.

4. Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal of changes to provide an equitable handling of cases involving this minority group, and promotion of these changes through due process of law in the state legislatures.

the Ladder

November 1965
Volume 10 Number 2

Published monthly by the Daughters of Bilitis, Inc., a non-profit corporation, 3470 Mission Street, San Francisco, California.

CONTENTS

Front cover: "Portrait of Jean" (see "Interview with Jean", page 15). Photo by courtesy of SANDY.

Back cover sketch by M. G.

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Photo 3: Excerpt from 1965 edition of The Ladder with mission statement included. Image sourced from the Library of Berkeley University online archives.

“The Ladder” was established in 1956 by the DOB with the specific purpose of informing women about what they called the lesbian lifestyle. While it was the first of its kind for lesbians in the United States, it was soon followed by other publications. The idea of a lesbian publication soon became more popular, despiret the danger of reading such material.“The Ladder” came at a time where such material was considered deviant and could have resulted in institutionalization or arrest. Even having one's name on the mailing list was a risk, yet that did not deter chapters of DOB forming throughout the country and a readership as well. In fact, rather than be deterred, the organization would see further radicalization of its movement from the changing readership and civil rights movements that were evolving at the time.

In her book on the history of the group, Gallo (2006) details how the group changed with the changing of the times. In the mid-1960s, members of DOB began to believe that their issues as queer women were not being addressed by the homophile movement, with many thinking they shared more in common with heterosexual women than with homosexual men. This tension between the politics of gay women and gay men would be very present throughout the 1970s discourse.

In the early 1970s, the Los Angeles chapter of DOB decided to break off from the organization with their own newspaper. This newspaper, titled “Lesbian Tide”, also discussed lesbianism but with the new addition of 70s era feminism and politics mixed into their discussions. It also advertised counseling for its readers, such as the Alcoholism Center for Women, and sex therapy workshops. Similar zines began to appear in Canada in the 1970s as mainstream feminism began to consider lesbianism an act of rebellion in a patriarchal society. These feminist who called themselves separatists thought that a lesbian lifestyle was the only way for women to be truly free of male oppression. Feminist zines which explictly discussed lesbianism began appearing in Toronto (1972) and Montreal (1973) with other cities soon following.

Late 20th Century: Gay Liberation and the AIDs crisis

This radicalization of discourse within these periodicals reflected the radicalization that was beginning to happen in the United States and Canada at that time. The Gay Liberation movement had begun in 1969 with Stonewall and was only revving up fervor into the 1970s. During this time, sexuality was quickly evolving from a personal preference to a political stance. Coming out of the closet, revealing oneself to be gay, became a rallying cry at protests and in political campaigns. The discourse popularized in this time period even ripples into modern politics and queer discourse.

Throughout my fieldwork, the conversation of outing oneself was a constant discussion. It was hard to talk about sexuality without it coming up at least once. When I asked participants about it in my interviews, there were a lot of conflicting feelings. “I want to say [coming out] is important,” Ariel told me, “but it’s kind of hard when I’m so deep in the closet when it comes to family”. Chloe also spoke strongly about the issue. “People who are closeted get a lot of shit for no reason… those who are open, they have the privilege to be open. Not everyone has that privilege.”

These conversations are important to note because they echo the discourse that has been happening in queer spaces from early zines to Facebook groups. This friction between coming

out of the closet as a personal choice vs. as a necessary political act lies at the heart of queer discourse. The internet creates an interesting midpoint of this dynamic. The option to remain anonymous on the internet makes it possible to be both out and closeted.

In online space, frank conversations and displays of sexuality are available even for those who would endanger themselves if they outed themselves offline. This blurring of the binary between out and closeted was reflected in my interviews, as many of the women had a difficult time strictly describing themselves as out or closeted. For many it was a question of who specifically knew and who should know.

In the 80s and 90s with the onslaught of AIDS, outing oneself became even more politicised. In his memoir, activist Cleve Jones claimed that this was when LGBT people came together again as one community after a decade of in-fighting. Jones (2017) states that before this period, lesbian and gay men were largely divided from each other in their gathers. Lesbian publications at the beginning of this era were primarily separatists, with the idea that lesbians should live their lives separate from men, including gay men. However, as gay newspapers began to fill up with obituaries, gay men were becoming sick and dying too quickly to take care of each other. Queer women stepped in to fill caretaker and leadership roles that had been previously filled by men.

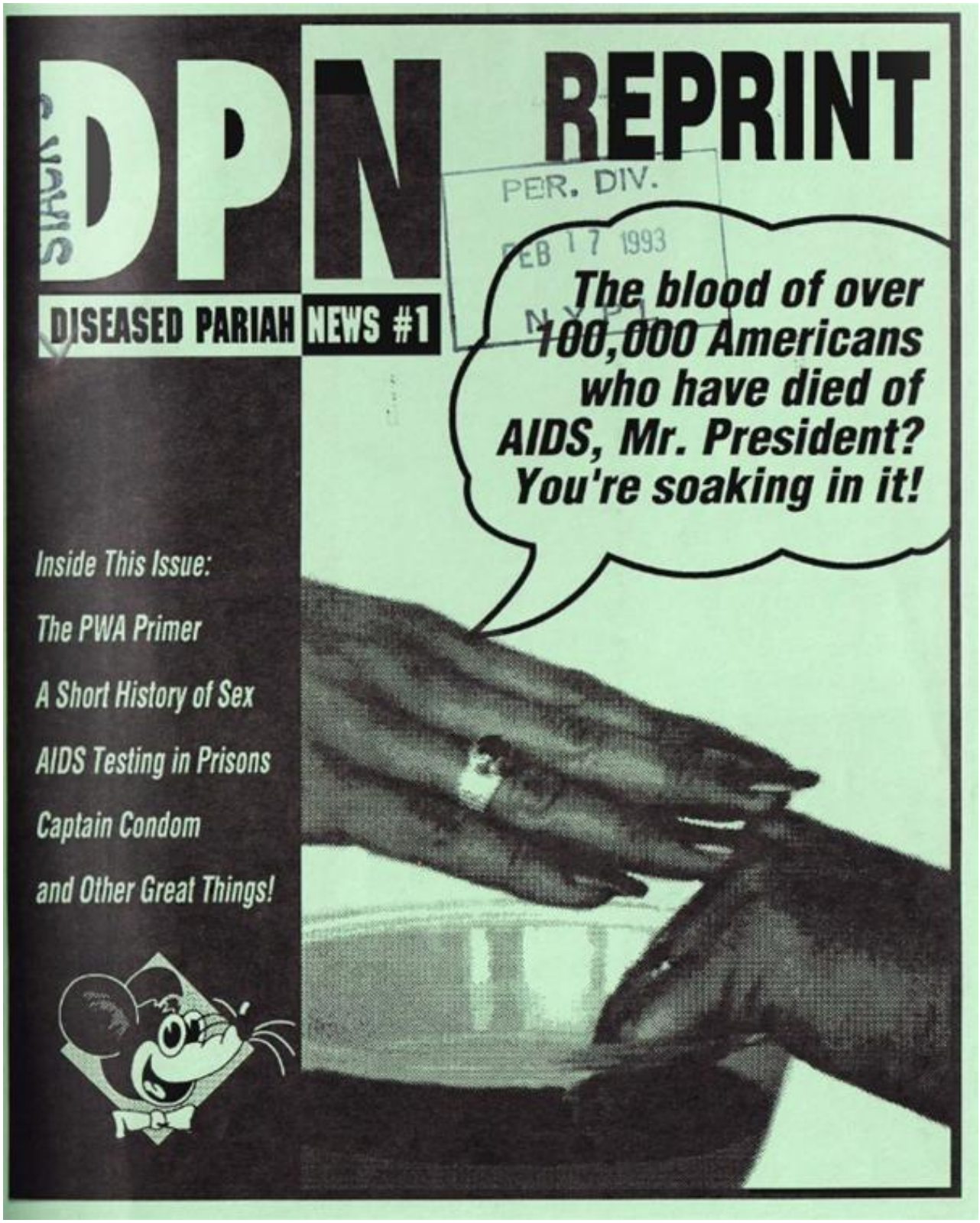


Photo 4: Cover of Diseased Pariah zine, 1993. A periodical popular during the AIDS crisis. Image sourced from the Internet Archive online archive.

While these groups were beginning to work together, they were growing increasingly distrusting of government health organizations and their handling of the AIDS crisis. This led to collective information gathering and efforts to contain the spread France (2017). Most of this information was shared through gay newspapers and zines, as well as in person meetings. ACT UP, a group formed at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services in NYC, sent out dozens of pamphlets informing people within the community about the newest drug trials or protest gathering. AIDS ACTION NOW formed in Toronto the following year with a similar goal.

This crisis also further urged the need to document and leave behind something for the next generation. Many worried at the time that queer people in general would be all but wiped out by the disease. In response to this crisis community-run archives, such as the Archives Gaies du Quebec or the Arquives in Toronto, were founded. In the about pages for their organizations, both cite the need to document queer life that arose in the 80s and 90s as a driving force for their creation. Unfortunately this fear of disappearing is not only a worry of past generations, but also present during my interviews as we shall see in the next chapter.

When I reached the end of my time with participants, I would ask them a few questions about the interview itself. These questions were generally to check in with participants emotionally but also to gain some insight into what had drawn them to my project so I could emphasize that in my further recruitment. As is often the case with ethnography, the most thick data is often not in the big questions one asks but in the small moments one experiences by chance. When I asked what drew them to participate, one type of response surprised me.

A few of my participants said they wanted to be a part of my research as a sort of historic record. “We have to tell our stories,” was something I heard from multiple people. That is where all these elements, the historic periodicals as well as online groups, intertwine. By viewing the historic context, one can see that the ephemeral nature of queer necessitates what Berlant & Warner (1998) call “queer worldbuilding”. To be queer necessitates finding a world to exist in, finding a new kinship, finding a new vocabulary to describe yourself. Those acts of creation are possible via the spaces that queer people have created for themselves first in print and now digitally.

All these varying decades have a few key things in common that are reflected in the modern era. All these publications were the collaborative effort of multiple queer people working together. While some were headed by editorial teams, many allowed readers to contribute art and writing to them. These periodicals often functioned as a town square, as a place to share joy and sadness and to ask questions. All these points are still present in the online form.

The influence and draw of online queer communities

Groups online organized by and catering to queer women began to develop as soon as there was such a thing as cyberspace. Chaplin (2014) discusses the advent of online communities for lesbian women in France. Chaplin states that these lesbian women were some of the first to tap into the potential community space that existed via online communication and that these online spaces allowed for a connection between Paris and the provincial queer women that had not existed before. In fact, the women were so ahead of the curve that they were not on what we would now consider ‘the internet’. Rather, they were using the minitel, a sort of proto-internet that existed in France during the 1980s.

These proto-online groups first began when a few out lesbians living in Brittany struggled to find a lesbian community. The idea for the site was to serve as outreach for women who loved women and wanted to be informed on the subject. Just as in the Daughters of Bilitis case, the purpose of the website was to create a community and to inform closeted women about being a lesbian. Despite being on different sides of the Atlantic, and decades apart, the two groups served a similar purpose. This shows the great need for such types of groups to facilitate queer worldbuilding.

Both the internet and its forebearers have shined the way for queer people to be able to find one another and create queer worlds to a greater extent than would have been possible otherwise. The internet has not only continued the legacy of the groups but has in fact expanded it by levels of magnitude. The obvious answer to why this is might simply be a level of scope. The internet allows participants greater access to each other than they would have had before. However it is worth noting and discussing how the atmosphere of online space uniquely facilitates queer worldbuilding. What aspects of the online world specifically appeals to queer people?

Coping in the Closet

A study into the lives of queer people online by McKenna & Bargh (1998) considers how so called invisible minorities might be drawn to online space. In their work on researching marginalized peoples' participation in online groups, they focus on invisible characteristics. By invisible, the marginalized status of participants is not plainly obvious unless participants specifically disclose it. This includes sexual and ideological identities in their research. This brings up the question about why divulging such an identity would be necessary if it can easily be hidden.

To this point, McKenna & Bargh (1998) bring up the sense of guilt that comes with hiding an invisible aspect of oneself. That participants often felt they were somehow lying to their friends and family by not divulging such information. Participating in online spaces, they argue, is then a way to alleviate that guilt and build a support network where the participant can be honest. It also shields the participant from the backlash that might come from divulging their secret in person.

This sentiment resonates with what my participants shared with me. Many lamented that they had not told certain family members or friends. "I didn't feel out until I told my mom," Eva admitted. Even when they would tell me that there was nothing wrong with not revealing their sexuality to others, they would also feel conflicted about not revealing it to people they met.

Many of my participants cited using the internet as a sort of coping mechanism. This could take many different forms. For some, it was through creating friends over instant messengers (IMs) or forum sites. Forum websites, like minecraftforum.net, are structured as several organized conversation topics with ongoing discussion threads while IMs are private messages between specific users. Others were more interested in consuming and producing art which could be viewed and shared on websites such as DeviantArt or Fanfiction.net. For others still, it was 'scrolling through tags' on social media sites like Facebook or Instagram. These types of websites allow for users to put hashtags, tags for short, on their posts which detail the contents of said post. These tags can then be searched for within the website.

Whatever preference that participants had, they sought out online space because it provided them with a sense of belonging that they felt they were lacking otherwise. This need to seek out others and communicate with them via whatever media is available has echoed throughout at least the 20th century to today. It is not simply the desire to quench one's loneliness. It is the need to see and interact with another to know that you are real. To know that it is possible to exist, one must first know that others exist.

Seeing Oneself

The women I spoke with liked to be able to see others like themselves, and so sometimes would simply search for 'queer' or 'gay' in strangers' tags. Seeing themselves reflected in others when they looked at their pictures would reassure them. YouTube also served a similar purpose for these women. The video sharing website allows for people in different parts of the world to record themselves and put it online for anyone to watch. This means that rather than media dominated by celebrities or models, a lot of the people who put up videos are average people.

Videos can range in topics from the mundane to recent pop culture to serious confessional style videos. Vlogging, one of the most popular styles of video on the site, is often barebones in its production. It is not unusual for a video to simply consist of a person sitting on their bed and talking directly into the camera. With this type of amateur production, the person watching does not feel as if they are watching an actor perform. While both can elicit powerful emotions, a YouTube video often has an implied sincerity in a way film does not.

Lovelock (2017) analyzes that connection which young people are making through YouTube videos. He explores how these videos serve to help participants process their emotions in real time, in a way they could not alone. The author argues that they are processing these feelings as they try to create a strategy for coming to terms with who they are during a highly contradictory point in queer history. Currently, non-heterosexual identities are becoming more mainstream but are still often misrepresented or othered from heteronormative behavior. This means that while young people today might be more aware of queer identities than queer people of the past, they still lack the cultural infrastructure to navigate those ideas.

Lovelock's research seems to show a collectivisation of the coming out process, where individuals come together to process these feelings. Therefore, revealing one's sexuality and performing that sexuality in online spaces is an important factor in the formation of queer identity and the coming out process for many modern youths. The result of this is a space that provides for an exploration of sexuality that does not exist outside the internet. This idea is furthered by others such as Taylor & Snowdon (2014), Hanckel & Morris (2014), Fraser (2010) and Fox & Ralston (2016). All these articles reiterate the idea that by having places online to safely and covertly discuss their sexuality, young people are gaining a more nuanced understanding of sexuality beyond heteronormativity.

Some of my participants admitted to using coming out videos as well. For some, it was a way to put words to what they were feeling. Others said it was simply a way to make them feel less alone. While Lovelock's work focuses on coming out videos, that was not the only genre of video participants were interested in. There was a wide array of topics that interested the women, but most of all they said they liked to watch stuff made by queer creators. Some found it

comforting to watch other queer people live their lives through YouTube, the same way some would seek out pictures of other queer people on Instagram.

Jacobson & Donatone also found that online groups can serve a similar function to in-person group therapy. Participants can bring up the topic of sexuality in a non-judgmental space as they would at in-person therapy. The online format can also be comforting as it is a media that the individuals are already familiar and at ease with. It also allows them to deal with issues that they might not think are "big" enough for them to book a therapy session for. Online groups are also free, which gets around the financial barrier that might inhibit youth from seeking out in-person therapy. The anonymity of the internet also allows for youth to explore these ideas without involving their families, which might have prevented them from doing so offline.

At the end of each of my interviews, I asked my participants what made them want to be interviewed by me. I admit, I was mostly just curious. Many of them did not know me that well. For many of my participants, I had shared one or two conversations at Queer Concordia or a bar or in a private messenger before conducting their interviews. What compelled them to talk about something so personal to someone who was ostensibly a stranger? Many of them had even admitted to me that they had never spoken about this topic in person, except maybe to their closest friends and loved ones. When I asked this question, Nina's answer stuck out the most to me. "Because you are trying to tell our stories", she told me, " and if we don't tell our stories, who will?" That answer stuck with me, as I re-read my fieldnotes. Getting to talk and share stories with other queer people is so cathartic because they feel like *our* stories. Through talking to one another, speaking about our desires and relationships and feelings, we are not simply individual stories but rather a collective chain. A hundred thousand little worker bees all coming together to make one little hive. In this vain attempt to keep the sands of time from washing us all away.

Gathering Information

As Jacobson & Donatone (2009) argues, these online spaces are not only comforting, but also informational. The authors state that today's queer youth often are more confident in themselves. This confidence might come from a fuller understanding of sexuality and terminology through their use of online media. The internet provides a greater amount of information on the topic than was previously available. It would make sense that having the vocabulary to discuss difficult issues they were facing made them more likely to engage with others and broaden their horizons. A more expansive vocabulary allows for a way to put words to feelings, and to normalize those feelings as something common because there is a word for it.

The women I spoke with and interviewed were far from uninformed on the topic of queer sexuality. They relied on discussions with friends or online media to give them the language to speak about their sexuality. Some just outright looked up certain terms. "I distinctly remember," Katie told me, "I heard the word [lesbian]...and then I looked it up [on Google] and I was like 'Oh, that's allowed?'" This was not uncommon to hear, as many of the women I interviewed mentioned relying on Google or online databases to answer their questions on terminology. For questions that might be more complicated or had less straightforward answers, participants could

safely as online friends or post onto group forums. Online space allowed for participants to be curious and explore in a way akin to the safe space of therapy.

As I will go into depth on in later chapters, the presence of queer space online does not mean that participants were specifically searching for such spaces. Such a statement would mean that participants were already fully realized in their sexuality, even before going online. That is not the case I am trying to make. In fact, I would argue the opposite. Often, participants stumbled upon queer spaces online by chance. Many of them happened to be a part of a friend group online that exposed them to others questioning their sexuality. This exposure left space for participants to be curious and ask questions. In the safety of established friend groups and corners of the internet, participants felt the ability to have difficult and long conversations that might have been less available for them otherwise. What shines through each of these examples is the tools they add to a questioning person's arsenal. Media provides the language, community, and experience needed for a person to explore their sexuality. However, in the next chapter I will illustrate how that same support can sometimes backfire.

An aspect that Anderson (1991) raises when it comes to imagined communities, is the sense of shared identity. That group members create an idea of what it means to be part of that group. With that being said, what happens when one's idea of self conflicts with the imagined communities'? How does one cope with one's own feelings while also keeping in good standing with the group? In my next chapter, I will investigate how participants come to understand the word queer and their own sexualities within the scope of queer. I will also discuss how individual's understandings of queer can often come into conflict with other members.

Ethnographic vignette: Chloe

Chloe was probably the participant I spent the most time with. Her laidback attitude and sunny demeanor made her easy to talk to. She was the kind of person I felt I could speak with bluntly to, without fear of accidentally upsetting her. It made our conversations very frank but not in a bad way. Many details of Chloe's life tumbled out of her, as if I had asked her the time. Chloe talked to me about her complicated feelings about her background. As the daughter of immigrants from Guyana and Nigeria, she felt separate from her parents, but as a black woman and anglophone Montrealer she often felt she did not really belong in Montreal at times either. Chloe told me about how proud she was to be raised by a single mother, who had separated from her father when she was young. How that father was never really a part of her life, and she felt distant from him. Though we were very different, in many ways I felt similar to Chloe. We both were open books, eager to share, eager to have someone to sit with and talk to. When I think of Chloe, I still remember that hot August night spent sitting in Jardin Gamelin. Talking about everything we could think of until we had to run to catch the last metro train.

Photo 5: Public art on the outskirts of the Gay Village in Montreal, Canada. August 2020. Image taken by author

Chapter 4. Who gets to be Queer?

Introduction

"You can't have any discussion about queerness without transwomen", I was told by one Facebook user. "Any research on queer sexuality that doesn't include us is empty and useless" she commented. This is one of the pieces of critique that I received after posting a recruitment poster on a Facebook group. Many members in the group were upset that I was recruiting specifically cisgender women. This is because historically transwomen have been left out of spaces created for women who are attracted to other women. Many lesbian spaces outright ban non-AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) individuals from participating. In the eyes of those I had upset, they felt I was not just excluding transwomen just from my research; I was also excluding them from my concept of womanhood and queerness. Despite my attempts to clear up this misunderstanding, to them I was just another gatekeeper to queerness.

This story is just a microcosm of the discussions that were often taking place during my research between those who are somewhere on the spectrum of non-heterosexual or non-cisgender. Whatever name you use for this group of people, be that LGBT, queer, gay, etc there always belies the question; who gets to be part of the team? This may be a result of what Anderson (1991) talks about in his theory of imagined communities. In imagined communities, large swaths of people can come to believe they are part of one unified collective despite having not previously met or existing across entire nations. These people are unified through an idea of what it means to be a member. They have a somewhat shared vision of what a member looks like. So then how does one decide whether or not they are queer? Who gets to make that decision? And how do groups decide who does and does not 'count' as queer?

What is the power of a word? Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? If you spend any amount of time in queer spaces, especially online, you quickly learn the power of words. Even by calling them "queer spaces", I am orienting myself to one side in one of dozens of debates about what exactly a non-heterosexual sexuality should be called. When starting to write my thesis, I have had to deliberate on how exactly to refer to the people I am trying to discuss. Especially since such discussions can quickly devolve into vocabulary lists, with each description carrying its own caveats and baggage. While I primarily default to using queer, even that comes with its own difficulties. Despite the commonality of the word queer in academia, the use of queer or any other alternative to describe this group of people often generates internal discussion. The word can be quite divisive when used colloquially.

The nuanced discussions about how to define and interpret one's sexuality seem to be even further complicated by the emergence of the internet. The internet gave young people questioning their sexuality and/or gender the ability to peer beyond their immediate social circles. It also gave participants a larger access to databases of information to answer their questions. This meant that participants' vocabulary and understanding of the subject was often more informed than might have been possible in past generations. A larger access to academic texts also means that discussions about queer theory exist outside of purely academic settings, open to the interpretation of the public. This can be a double edged sword at times, with academic language being misconstrued and popularized with a different meaning than its original text. Individuals might come across academic language stripped of its academic meaning, having

gone through a game of telephone to arrive at sometimes an entirely new interpretation. This means that words such as queer carry both the baggage of academia and how they have been interpreted online.

In the case of queer, Gamson & Warner (1994) argue for queer as an alternative to more categorical ways of describing sexualities. In the intro of the text, they mention Foucault (1978)'s work as a foundation for queer theory. Foucault's work on biopower states that by describing sexuality within terms like "homosexual", individuals are then forced into specific boxes of what homosexuality is. Rather than giving queer a specific definition, Gamson & Warner (1994) argue for queer as a departure from such classification. The authors use "queer" as a sort of catch all term for all non-heterosexual sexualities and non-cisgender genders. The idea behind leaving queer vaguely defined is that a lack of strict borders to queerness will then allow it to encompass all nuance that exists within sexuality and gender. However, this same vagueness can be a detriment to the word queer as much of a strength in day-to-day conversation.

Queer as a vaguely defined, all-encompassing concept seems to be the end of the discussion. A person is either heterosexual and cisgender, or they are some degree of queer. Thus queer is not really defined by what it is, but rather by what it is not. This goes back to what Cohen (1994) talks about in his discussion of the boundaries of identity. Sometimes it is easier for members of a group to identify their group not by who they are but who they are not. Yet as my participant's stories will show, even that question is not so easy. Who is 'allowed' to be queer is a subject that is often hotly debated. Such conversations can quickly get heated and devolve into a discussion of "you can't sit with us" attitudes.

These attitudes are not helped by the continued presence of heteronormativity, which brings pressure from the other end of the spectrum of this debate. While the United States and Canada have both advanced somewhat in civil rights for queer people; the growing acceptance has not done away with heteronormativity. Rather than queer breaking down mainstream ideas surrounding sexuality and gender, it has mostly been absorbed into the larger culture. Queer has been cherry picked for the parts most stomachable and safe for a heterosexual and cisgender audience.

With a degree of tolerance by the mainstream, greater visibility brings its own problems. With any character in popular culture, an archetype emerges: a model of a specific brand of homosexual sexuality that is not too radical or 'weird' for the general public. While many early proponents of queer theory, like Gamson & Warner, argue that queer can go beyond the limitations of heteronormativity, other scholars argue that rather than being a radical force, queerness has been integrated into the status quo. Some scholars argue that along with heteronormativity, there is now a homonormativity.

Scholars such as Duggan (2003) and Rubin (1993) state that a larger visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities in the West has not brought about a reconceptualization of the ideas around sexuality but rather the assimilation of those sexualities into a heteronormative mold. In the early 2000s, Duggan (2003) coined the term 'homonormativity' to describe this phenomenon. Homonormativity, evolving from heteronormativity, states that homosexuality is being brought into the status quo to create an 'acceptable' form of homosexuality. As Rubin (1993) puts it, non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people are put through a "sex hierarchy" with only conditional allowances for certain people. This means that conversations about sexuality often hinge on who is 'allowed' to claim ownership. It also means that those who fall under more

‘acceptable’ degrees of queerness might find themselves at odds with those deemed more ‘deviant’ or ‘unacceptable’.

Rather than try to place a definitive bow on this discussion, I wish to add to it through the observations of myself and the words of my participants. By taking an ethnographic and descriptivist approach to queerness, I want to explore how to navigate an idea which resists strict definitions and boundaries. Throughout my time in Montreal, conversations, both online and offline, steered to discussions of who ‘counted’ as queer. In many cases, the topic was treated almost as an icebreaker conversation. Someone would bring up some new group they had encountered and ask the others if they thought such people ‘qualified’ as queer. Other people in the conversation would throw in their two cents on the matter. Discussions about terminology or definitions were littered alongside conversations of what classes people were taking or what music they liked. As I will explore more in my chapter on collective identity, such discussions are a uniting aspect of queer identity. It is not enough to have a personal conception of one’s sexuality, sexuality is constantly in the process of being interpreted collectively. Recognizing that collective energy and exploring what it means to my participants is vital to their interpretations of queerness.

The depth of these conversations contributed to my research question: how do young queer cisgender women living in Montreal define and understand their sexuality? What role does the internet play in that understanding? Yet to begin and try to answer that question, an examination of the word queer is also necessary. No word met such praise and conflicted feelings during my research than the word queer. Throughout this chapter, I will explore my conversations with participants during semi-structured interviews, how their responses to my questions exposed their feelings surrounding the word queer, and what being some variation of queer means to them. In exploring those conversations, I would like to ask what my participants think it means to ‘be’ queer? Who gets to ‘be’ queer?

Participants’ experiences with queerness

Setting the Scene

As the heat of the Summer was replaced with the chill of Autumn, I began to meet with my participants. From late September through early November of 2019, I met with 12 participants in varying locations to conduct interviews. With each of my participants, I would initially offer to let them choose somewhere they felt comfortable having an intimate conversation. However, almost all the women let me have final say on where we met, since many were concerned about how loud a meeting location might be. In the end, I met my participants at cafes for the first couple of interviews. The rest took place in a communal office space at Concordia University that I shared with my colleagues in my program.

When I first began my interviews, I was very aware of the delicate subject I would be traversing. While discussions of queerness and identity were common in the spaces I frequented, that did not make them any less personal. I had seen firsthand interlocutors change from jovial to sobbing within a single conversation on the topic. For my first interview I wanted to test out my

questions on someone who I knew had no problem sharing with me. For this reason, I chose Eva for my first interview.

I had met Eva through an in-person emotional support group run by Queer Concordia. The group acted as a sort of impromptu group therapy session for students. Participants could talk about their week or anything that was bothering them. While discussions surrounding sexuality and gender were encouraged, it was just as possible for participants to discuss the weather or an exam they had coming up. Eva and I were both regulars at these meetings and sometimes chatted afterwards or walked each other to the nearby metro stop. When I vented to the others one meeting that I was stressed out about how to recruit people for interviews, Eva volunteered.

In some ways my discussion with Eva would set the more lighthearted tone for how I would approach my interviews going forward. She was upbeat, one could say bubbly, and took most of the questions on the chin. Lots of giggling can be heard on the recording, as she took even the more serious questions with a pinch of humor. During the other interviews that followed, I tried to keep up this lighter tone with participants when possible. Making my participants laugh and joke with me seemed to be the easiest way to get them to talk. I wanted to represent myself not as a researcher, but as a fellow queer woman they could feel comfortable talking about these issues with.

Labels

To begin each interview, I started out by asking a series of demographic questions. The questions were supposed to be straightforward and not difficult. When asked about name, age, religion, education, and how long they had lived in Montreal, participants gave short, to-the-point answers. However, two questions generated more discussion and insight. These were the questions on ethnicity and sexual identity. These two subjects had something in common: markers of personhood that can carry great significance to a participant, but that also rely on murky and hard to define boundaries. This is reflected in the responses from my participants.

When I asked Eva what she would call herself, she said bisexual. When I followed up by asking her if she had used any other labels for herself, she pushed back by saying “I will essentially use queer a lot... At least from the people I have been around, it would be less common to hear a specific sexual label, like lesbian, gay, than it would be to hear queer.” While Eva used bisexual for simplicity, she did not feel beholden to it as a permanent fixture in her identity. Throughout her interview, she switched between gay and queer at any point. Calling herself “so gay” even though she felt attraction to men. The elasticity and overlapping of labels points to how labels for sexuality are not simply a matter of personal feelings. The are a tool of community building and communication; a tool that can be versatile depending on who one is in the company of.

This same versatility in sexual identity was also present in my second interview with a woman named Karina. As we sat in a noisy Tim Hortons right across from the McGill University campus, Karina answered the question of what label she used for herself with a nonchalant attitude. “Queer mostly,” she told me as she sipped coffee from her reusable mug, “Sometimes lesbian, queer, gay. Not pansexual or bisexual”. When I asked her what situation might cause her to delineate, she stated that it was about context and how “political” she wanted to be in her

speech. In this way, Karina exemplifies what I highlighted before. The choice of label going beyond simply reflecting some inner individual and unchangeable 'truth'.

"People understand bisexual, it's a practical political term", another woman named Jane told me as we sat outside of the Concordia University's Hall building. She felt that other words that might apply better to her, like pansexual, also carry with it a stigma. "Every time you want to come out as pan, you have to explain that there's more than two genders," Jane told me. A woman named Mia echoed this sentiment by saying "I did think I was pansexual for a while, but then I felt like it's kind of an out-there label". This is not uncommon to hear when discussing pansexuality. Pansexual is a label that refers to a lack of gender preference, an attraction to all genders. While the word has a nuanced difference from bisexuality, it is similar enough that it is not uncommon for pansexuals and bisexuals to use the two labels interchangeably. This shows that for people like Mia, the choice of which word to use is not simply a personal one. It is a deliberate choice based on other's understanding and perception of a label as well.

Even those outside of the pansexual/bisexual spectrum approached their orientation with an elastic attitude to specific labels. Another woman named Edith told me that she would "normally use queer, but to make it simpler I always say lesbian." Rather than a sexual orientation being some core part of their essence that was rigidly defined and enforced, participants experienced their sexuality as something dependent on the context of who was asking the question. Sexuality is being given this fluidity that can change based on context, rather than as a rigid idea with one right answer.

This idea of context played heavily in my participants' responses. Each of them would state what labels they used, often with some sort of caveat or further explanation baked into their answer. Ahmed (2006) plays with this idea of context when talking about "queer phenomenology". In her book on the concept, she argues that sexuality is all context, that sexuality is not some inner truth that a person must reach but rather a fluid concept that shapes and morphs as circumstances cause it to be redefined. Ahmed (2006)'s point about sexual orientation is that it literally 'orients' oneself. To restate the point that Karina and others have made, it is all about how one interprets the current situation. It is a phenomenon that can change from moment to moment, participants being able to read in real time what orientation is best in any particular situation.

Tauchert (2002) cites a similar idea in her discussion of 'fuzzy gender'. While her work concerns gender more than sexuality, much of it is applicable to the kinds of experiences my participants noted. She argues that the idea of gender as purely a social construct ignores the moments that exist between performances. Of the attachment to an identity that participants feel even when they are alone or not necessarily 'performing' their identity for someone else. Tauchert argues that participants who find themselves somewhere in between two poles of a binary are often classified as 'confused' or still in the process of figuring out their identity. However, to Tauchert it is that inherent fuzziness, those shades of gray between binary ideas which is itself a valid form of expression and often a much more varied conceptualization of identity rather than strict adherence to gender or sexuality as pure social conditioning. Many of my participants expressed similar feelings.

These ideas of context came up a lot in my discussion with Nina. Nina is an Iranian who immigrated to Canada when she was seven. During her interview, we talked a lot about how it felt for her to return to Iran to visit family. This was an especially difficult conversation for Nina, as she knows that she could be arrested if it was found out that she was bisexual. She told me

how that part of her gets “tucked away” when she is in Iran. How it does not exist for her in the same way that it does when she is in Canada. Similarly, when I asked Jane how she would feel if she had to move back in with her parents, she told me that if she was put back in that environment she would “turn straight” as she would no longer exist in a context where she could be queer. In these ways it is clear, queerness exists as a constant interpretation between participants and their environments. Constantly interpreting and reinterpreting that idea of queerness within the moment to moment phenomenon that participants find themselves existing in.

With that being said, in the examples I have mentioned above one could argue that these women’s sexualities are simply being repressed. I will not spend time delineating on the validity of that argument. The point that I am trying to make is that a participant’s understanding and presentation of their sexuality is not simply a singular unwavering truth that each person comes to know after reaching a personal nirvana. It is instead the byproduct of the context that they exist in and how other people within that context shape their reality.

In the case of Sarah, her reality is shaped not only by the company she keeps, but by the expectations she feels comes with her idea of queerness. When I spoke with Sarah for my third interview, that additional context lessened her confidence in her answer compared to my two previous participants. When asked about her sexual identity, she first half jokingly answered that it “was a complicated question.” I assured her that she could take her time answering the question. She then said that she was bisexual but quickly added “but I’ve never been in a relationship with a woman.” Experience with a woman, sexually or romantically, was a mile marker that many of the women I spoke with brought up. There seemed to be concerns that not having a girlfriend or not having “been with a woman” somehow undermined participants' claims to queerness. In the case of Edith, she said that after she “finally” got a girlfriend, she stopped feeling like she had to “prove” her sexuality to others. Edith had said that when she first realized she was gay, she was “obnoxious” about it, because she felt that she had to “prove” her sexuality by “looking gay as possible”. For participants like Edith, attaining a girlfriend was a smoking gun. It was inarguable proof that one was ‘truly’ queer, proof that Edith could show to others and had bragging rights for.

The issue of physical intimacy being a marker of ‘true’ queerness was especially visceral to my participants because most of them failed to fit in a strict heterosexual/homosexual binary. Bisexuals and others who are attracted to multiple genders often face additional pressure about their sexuality within queer spaces because of their refusal to, supposedly, ‘pick a side’. Bisexual women are often stigmatized as straight women who just pretend to be attracted to other women to titillate straight men. Therefore, having romantic or sexual experience with a woman is not simply a personal milestone but a badge of membership. There is even language within queer space that stigimitizes ever being with a man. The term ‘gold star lesbian’ is used to refer to a woman who has never had sex with a man and only had sex with women. This language is not only divisive, it can also be transphobic and narrow minded. Some lesbians categorize ‘sleeping with a man’ as any sex that is penetrative, regardless of the gender of the person doing the penetrating.

The role of sex in queer identity building can also effect women on the other end of the spectrum like Penelope. When asked what she would define her sexuality as, she said she was still figuring it out, but she was “probably” asexual and demisexual. When I asked her if she could tell me what those terms meant for her, Penelope clarified. She said that for her, attraction

was something she felt she could only have with someone she was very close to and something she had only felt rarely. “Like we never find any celebrities attractive or anything,” she told me, “since you have no personal connection to them, it’s hard to feel any attraction to them whether that be sexual or romantic.” Sexual attraction for her was not something that she felt for just anyone. It was only a feeling that developed rarely. Penelope told me that the only people she had ever felt sexually attracted to were those she was already in intimate friendships with. In an environment where who one has sex with is seen as ‘proof’ of ones sexuality, lacking that drive can feel invalidating.

When I asked Penelope which other labels she might have considered for herself, she brought up the stigmas that were attached to asexuality and demisexuality. “[People] just say that you haven’t met the right person or that you’re just a prude”. Penelope said that was a hurdle she had to overcome when trying to find the words to describe herself. Lack of romantic or sexual experience to ‘count’ as queer in the eyes of other people was a huge issue for many of my participants. These ideas of a litmus quest for queer can come from cisgender heterosexuals, but in the case of asexuality it is just as likely to come from other queer people. Anyone outside of the straight/gay binary can find themselves facing stigmatization from both sides.

If I had to put a finger on one feeling that rang throughout these conversations; it would probably be frustration. Not at me, but at the seeming impossibility of giving a satisfying answer to a question that participants felt they should have a clear and precise answer to. When I asked Mia when she thought her identity ‘clicked’ for her, the answer was telling. “I guess I’m still waiting to hear that satisfying click myself...like you’re trying to put together a piece of furniture and you’re like ‘ok, here’s the leg in the slot right?’ But you want to hear that satisfying click.” That need for a satisfying click seemed to resonate with my participants. For many the answer they had reached was queer, partially because they did not have a better word to grasp at what they wanted to say. Many seemed resigned that queer was probably the closest they would get to articulating their feelings.

In the responses I received from this seemingly simple question, tensions were beginning to appear. These tensions seemed to be between imagining queer as a fluid concept that allows for multiple sexualities and imaging queer as a sort of state that can only be reached once someone has achieved a certain perceived milestone. In other words: a tension between self-perception and outside perception. Even my participants who felt fully confident in their sexuality spoke about how that sexuality came into conflict with how others thought that sexuality ‘should’ work.

These perceptions were being fed by offline family and friends but also by the digital spaces that participants inhabited. As I mentioned in my methodology section, online space has moved beyond a clear division of what is offline and what is online. Those who use the internet regularly have it in their pockets at all times, and with that availability comes an onslaught of opinions. Whether it be through forums, private messengers, or social media, participants are bombarded with opinions at every turn. With that constant bombardment comes a constant interpreting and reinterpreting of what it means to be queer.

Internet Usage and Impact

“I just wish it was easier to find people”, I admitted to the woman I had been chatting to for the last 30 minutes. I was attending another mixer that QueerConcordia was throwing. I had been attending a lot of their little get-togethers, enough that I was recognized as a friendly face

by many of the other regulars. Their club room was inviting, a cozy little room that looked as if it had been plucked out of someone's home. Old couches and bookshelves lined the small space, sitting opposite a large window that overlooked the side of Concordia University's Hall building. I had been trying to recruit people, trying to be friendly with people but it was hard since I felt like I was some kind of double agent. I had been attending QueerConcordia's events partially to gain a rapport as a researcher, but also because I was new to the city and genuinely wanted friends. The two objectives, while not opposing, seemed to clash with each other. How was I to befriend anyone if they had to worry that any conversation we had might end up in a published paper? Was it unethical for me to become genuine friends with those I was supposed to be observing? Such a dilemma meant that I often spent my time at QueerConcordia events talking about my research. In a way that felt most transparent. Part of me worried if I did not constantly remind members of who I was, then I was somehow deceiving them.

"I feel like there's a secret club or something that I don't know about where y'all hang out", I joked. Part of the dilemma of wanting to find queer people, online or offline, is trying to spot them in the first place. "Well where have you looked? You found us, so it can't be that hard", the woman I was speaking with encouraged. "Well, I just happened to find out about QueerConcordia because it was recommended to me on Facebook" I admitted sheepishly. "Oh, Facebook is terrible for trying to find people", another woman commented, over hearing our conversation. "Who do you follow on Instagram? That's how I find events to meet people", she informed me as she flipped out her phone. "Oh you use Instagram? I think it's easier to find stuff that's happening on Twitter, if you know who to follow", the woman I had been conversing with added and pulled her phone from her pocket as well so that they could compare notes. The rest of the mixer was spent with each person taking turns scrolling on their phone, finding a club or event or website they were looking for and then showing it to me. I nodded enthusiastically and tried to keep pace as I was shown everything from a queer book club to a queer Jewish faith group. While most of them were based in Montreal, many were open to members from across Canada or the world.

What I was given was a peak at the rich world of online space that participants were a part of. Spaces that were too vast to try and map completely. It also was a display of the acrobatic way that young people interact with online and offline space. Rather than two separate realms, users dance between them and use one to inform the other. Between discussions of different groups, the women I was speaking to sometimes paused to respond to a Facebook message or ask a question to another person in the room. This shows the impact that internet usage has on those who are actively a part of it. Creating a transitional area between offline and online space where both conversations can happen simultaneously. Due to evolution in technology, modern users have moved beyond the days of 'cyberspace' where one would log onto the online world only via their desktop computers.

The flexibility with which participants flexed their internet muscles shows the breadth of information they readily have access to. From the beginning, it was clear that many of my participants had not only thought long and hard about their own sexuality but had acquired a nuanced vocabulary to express their ideas with. I was curious to learn where this language came from, since I had hypothesized that the internet played a role in giving my participants a language to talk about gender and sexuality. The next question on my list was: "how often would you say you use the internet?" This was again supposed to be a simple question but, as my interviews quickly taught me, simple questions often gave the most interesting results.

"Wow, I didn't expect to feel so attacked when I came to this interview… I think I low key might have an internet addiction," Chloe jokingly told me during our interview. When I asked if she could give me a ballpark figure of the number of hours she spent online, she just laughed more. The laughter seemed to be out of the realization of just how much her life was online. Every time she tried to think of an answer for me, she just erupted into more laughter, as if the realization about the amount of time she was spending online was only hitting her as she was trying to answer my question. She was not the only one to respond in such a way. In fact, none of the women I spoke with could give me that ballpark figure.

The topic of addiction and seeming embarrassment at their level of internet usage was common amongst my participants. Edith spoke about her level of internet usage when she was younger. She recounted the story of one day when her parents, fed up with how much time she spent online, physically pried her from her computer chair to force her to spend time outside. Edith admitted that she spent so much time online in her youth partially to get away from her parents' divorce and other emotional issues at home. "Like, when I look back at it, it was mostly not to be in my life. So I created a life on the internet… I had connections, I had friends." Online, Edith had a large friend group who supported her and gave her attention. They were also the first people she began to talk openly about sexuality with during her teenage years.

Though most did not describe their life online as an addiction, Edith was hardly alone in being heavily invested online. Being online was not just a hobby or delegated to one part of the day like it had been in the past. Being online was a state of being that one constantly had access to, never truly being offline. This interconnectedness allows for a deepening of relationships, especially for young people. Online users have an almost constant tether to their relationships in a way that pre-internet young people did not."I actually met my partner online", Katie admitted to me, "which was really nice, because we already knew each other really well when we started dating". Katie went on to say that "a big part of my social circle in my adolescence was my [online friend group], I actually have a few friends that I still talk to from there." For Katie, from an early age being online was not simply a way to entertain herself, it took up a large portion of her life. She spent hours on message boards playing with the virtual pet characters. In that time, she was also able to learn about things that a conservative background would not allow for, like rock and roll and bisexuality. Ariel also spent quite a lot of time online. In fact her first girlfriend was a long distance relationship that they maintained through the interview. Although Ariel did not go into specifics about the relationship, she did say that she spent most of her time outside of school online at the time. That she was constantly messaging her girlfriend, whom she had only met in person once.

While many of my participants had grown up on the internet from an early age, Sarah was the exception to that. She explained that she went to an alternative school, where students were highly encouraged to play outside and minimize time using technology. Sarah had little exposure to the internet until she reached high school. Sarah brought up her time in the circus communities of Vermont and Montreal several times throughout the interview. Many of her friends from the circus community were bisexual, and when I asked how she had come to realize she was bisexual, she had said it was through said friends. While Sarah's experiences proved unique amongst my participants, they highlight a key point throughout my research: that queer exists as a contextual idea, ever evolving as it encounters new individuals and new participants. Thus, one's idea of what it means to be queer is a ripple effect of those interactions.

Participants made this connection themselves as well when I directly asked them the impact they thought the internet had on their lives. When I asked Chloe how her understanding of her sexuality might have been different without the internet, she had this to say.“I can’t even imagine myself without the internet. I would have ended up maybe never understanding how beautiful it is to be queer and how beautifully varied and diverse it can be to be queer.” Chloe told me how “I found myself online”. She not only felt that the internet had been helpful in coming to terms with her sexuality, she could not imagine coming to that sexuality in the same way without the force of that influence.

While I self-selected for participants who were involved in online spaces, the depth of their feelings is what really stood out to me. I had expected that participants would feel positively about the internet. That ultimately they would have positive feedback about their time online. What is noteworthy is that my participants did not simply feel positive about their time online, they felt it integral to their personhood. Participants felt that they would be different people if it were not for the way online spaces had shaped them. This shows that participants were not just mindlessly browsing online as they might have claimed. Participants were actively shaping their world through queer worldbuilding, whether they recognized it as such or not. Through their actions online, they were carving out an imagining of queer that themselves and their online friends could fit inside of.

“I feel it would have probably been a lot harder without the internet. Because before there was ever an in-person community for me, there was a virtual community,” as Eva put it. For many of my participants, the internet functioned as a type of looking glass where they could see a sliver of themselves represented in others. Eva spoke gleefully about the hours she had spent online, discussing the latest tv shows and books with her friends on Tumblr. “So much content on Tumblr is directed towards queer people”, she told me, “it’s just very fun”. As I covered in my historic context chapter, so much of queer identity is found in reflecting that identity. Queer people who want to understand themselves search for anything that can show a sliver of that reflection. The communal aspect of that idea will come up more in my chapter on collective identity. The question this chapter asks is what happens if a person finds a queer world where the reflection does not quite match up. Or people have different ideas of what the reflection really looks like.

Queer Self-Perception and Performing Queerness

“So, what do you guys think about he/him lesbians?”, one of the members of QueerConcordia said, as a conversation starter. I had just attended an event for QueerConcordia, and a couple members had decided to grab lunch together nearby. “What do you mean? How can you use he/him pronouns and identify as a lesbian? Lesbians are women attracted to women so that doesn’t make any sense” another woman retorted. “I don’t know, but it’s all over gay Twitter. People are arguing over whether he/him lesbians are a real thing or not”, the first woman responded. “Well I just don’t understand people like that, why do they have to use such confusing words. Like, if they just want to call themselves queer they can. Calling yourself a he/him lesbian just confuses people.” I nodded along in the conversation and added “Maybe I just don’t know the full context, but I don’t think I get it”. Generally my attitude was to try and keep an open mind about these issues, but I genuinely did not understand how someone could

use he/him pronouns and also identify as a lesbian. The two ideas seemed incompatible but I did not know enough about the situation to give a strong opinion one way or another. “I don’t think there’s anything to get”, the first woman added, “some people just want to be part of the club and come up with these weird identities to be included”

An idea that I have tried to stress throughout this chapter is that to be able to imagine a queer world, one must participate in queer worldbuilding and creating an idea of queer with other people. That to truly have an understanding of queer, one must see and interact with other queer people to make that reality. In my attempts to describe this, I do not want to perpetuate the idea that these women are confused or somehow uncertain in their sexuality. While that might be the case for some, that is not the point I want to make. The point is that to be queer is to have an incomplete idea of what it means to be queer. To constantly be checking and re-evaluating one’s idea of queerness against those of one’s peers. To be queer is not just an act of being, it is an act of constant interpretation and conversation. Of building an idea of imagined community that is never set in stone due to the fuzzy language of queer.

As Mia so eloquently put it in her interview, “what does it mean to be attracted to somebody?” She did not seem entirely certain of the answer to that question. While she confidently affirmed herself as bisexual when asked, ther was also some hesitancy around what it means to be attracted to someone. This feeling was only complicated further by her past experiences. Mia told me the story of how she had been ‘dating’ a boy in her high school class. She was not even sure if she had liked the boy, but everyone had assumed they were dating. Due to this presumption, she just went along with it. However, when her strict mother found out about it, she was livid and said that she should not be dating at her age. The experience left Mia only more confused. “In my youth, I never felt like I had the space to explore my sexuality,” she told me. Mia did not have that opportunity when she was younger to discover what sexuality meant for her, because she did not have the space for it. It was only when she was older and at university that she began to interact with people who gave her the words to do so. Even then, she said that she struggles with the idea because she still is unsure where those boundaries lie and where she fits within those boundaries.

For Georgina, those boundaries were even blurrier as her perception of queerness carried with it a further tension. “How do you feel about it? Do you think that BDSM belongs in the queer community?” Georgina asked me during her interview on a chilly October afternoon. Her question about BDSM (which stands for bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism) was not one that I had anticipated when I had asked her to do an interview. I had met her at a Queer Concordia event and had been hoping to hear her experiences as a bisexual woman. While she answered my questions about bisexuality she was interested just as much, if not more, in talking about her experiences in the BDSM community. During these parts of the conversation, I had smiled and nodded along with the hopes of getting her back to the “real” topic at hand. She spoke at length about the stigma she felt she endured about being in the BDSM community. Georgina also talked about how she felt being a part of BDSM felt as much a part of her sexuality as being bisexual was.

When Georgina asked me such a question, I did not really know how to answer her. I did not want to express my personal feelings on the matter. Throughout my childhood growing up in Texas, I had heard same sex attraction being treated as a fetish. That such things were perverted and too sexual for anyone to speak of. I remembered seeing a close friend of mine and her girlfriend holding hands, only to be told by another student’s mother that they should “leave their

perversions to the bedroom". To classify a fetish like BDSM as queer felt like a step backwards. It seemed like classifying such things as queer was to confirm all of those negative stereotypes I had grown up hearing. That same sex attraction was simply another type of fetish. I recognize that this was a personal bias, that I was probably being unfair to Georgina and others like her but I could not help myself. Even though I felt that way, I struggled with saying as much to Georgina. Partially because as an anthropologist I wanted to hear her out. I wanted to be the picture of the sympathetic ethnographer; someone who calmly listened along seemingly unaffected by what their participants were telling them.

I also felt conflicted because who was I to say that BDSM practitioners do not "count" as queer? Was it really my place to cast judgement and say whether or not Georgina belonged anymore than I did. Even so, Georgina seemed to want an answer from me so I tried to give an even handed one. I gave her an answer about how I could see some similarities between queer people and practitioners of BDSM. That they both shared a struggle to be taken seriously and not be stigmatized by outsiders. She nodded and said "yeah, but do *you* think they belong in the community?" I struggled for an answer that would sound satisfying to her but would not be a lie. I mumbled out "well, it's probably not my place to decide that" and quickly moved on to the next part of the interview. Georgina did not push the issue after that but did not seem satisfied with my answer either.

As I struggled to move on to the next question, I felt my face growing hot and a gnawing in my stomach. I was not sure what the feeling even was. Shame? Embarrassment, perhaps? Despite my dodging of her question, Georgina did not seem to hold it against me, and answered the rest of my questions politely. Yet, I left that interview feeling mortified that I had reacted in that way. I knew what it felt like to be invalidated by the people who were supposed to be your comrades. How could I do that to someone else, when I prided myself on being open minded? I had nothing against Georgina personally, in fact I quite enjoyed her company. As I thought about the question more, I realized that I disagreed with Georgina but also was embarrassed for disagreeing with Georgina. Typically my default state when who 'belonged' in the word queer was to give a blanket statement that if one said they were queer, then I would accept them as queer no questions asked. If I felt that someone was an edge case, I generally would say something like "well that's not my place to judge" and just move on from the topic. What Georgina was asking me to confront was my actual feelings on the subject. Georgina wanted me to move beyond giving a simple noncommittal answer. Asking me to do so left me uncomfortable and wondering how I might answer that question if faced with it again.

My discomfort with BDSM being considered queer was not because I personally saw anything wrong with the practice. Rather, I worried about the optics of allowing BDSM into the club as it were. Even then I was reluctant to say that to my interlocutor. I felt that as a queer person, I needed to accept others no matter what. To disapprove of Georgina was to be a "gatekeeper": a person within queer spaces who keeps others out through some arbitrary logic or rule system that said person has devised. Gatekeepers try and decide who is and is not 'allowed' to be queer. That was not the type of person that I wanted to be, but it was the person I was acting like. Although I am far from the only one to make such judgements. As I observed, long discussions about who does and does not 'count' as queer are common place online. Participants go back and forth debating certain terms or identities and their place inside queer. All while touting queer as an umbrella term that is more accepting than definitions like gay. Similarly, places like Montreal Pride and QueerConcordia promote inclusivity and acceptance. They state

that ‘everyone is welcome’. Yet in those same spaces I was witness to conversations where queer people wondered why a certain group they did not feel was acceptable was ‘allowed’ into the space.

This means that performativity for queer people can often be a double-edged sword. In queer worldbuilding, participants band together to try and imagine what a queer world might look like. However, that idea of queer worldbuilding presumes that some kind of consensus can be reached, and that all will be equally welcome. This means that some more marginalized people within queer spaces can feel further marginalized by their own people. This is especially the case because most queer people grow up without any role models to form an idea of what queerness looks like. Queerness lacks the same kind of social framework that heteronormativity gives heterosexuals. Which means they often must rely on an image of what queer is via what they bits and pieces they are able to find through the grapevine. The discussions of who gets to be queer, as divisive as they may be at times, are necessary because they are the only way that a queer framework can be created. Even so, this puts a lot of stress on queer young people to create every indicator that they are queer to prove their allegiance. In this way, queerness becomes not only about who you are but what you look like. If you want to be in the club, then you have to look the part. Some of my participants, like Penelope and Edith, admitted that they often scrolled through the gay and queer tags of social media sites. Doing so gave them a sense of affirmation, a mirror for them to see a piece of themselves. However, doing so also meant that when they did not see themselves reflected, they might come to question their own ‘right’ to claim queerness.

Queer Aesthetics

Throughout my interview with Edith, she continually returnined to this point about the visual aspect in queer worldbuilding: to not only know that other queer people exist, but to model oneself after that idea of queerness. “You have to see other people like you to develop yourself… and yes, that’s easier to do by the internet,” Edith said to me. She was not alone in this sentiment. “Going on Autostraddle, I could talk to people and read articles and be like ‘ah yes, this is how other queer people live their lives,” Eva said. It has a bit of a ‘monkey see, monkey do’ vibe to it but for participants like Edith and Eva being able to see what other queer lives could look like broadened their horizons.

Queerness as an aesthetic that can be used to signal to other queer people is a topic with a long history. Having subtle clues to tip off only certain people was and is often vital for those who live in situations where openly proclaiming one's sexuality is dangerous. Members of an invisible minority group may remain safe if they can keep under the radar. However, they still risk exposure if their look or mannerisms fall into what is codified as stereotypically gay. This complicates visual presentation for queer people. If they wish to find others like them, they need to have some outward marker of queerness while worrying about being *too* obvious in a way that might tip off heterosexual cisgender people. This lead to earlier systems where men might wear an earring or tie a bandanna to themselves to tip others off. While these systems are mostly outdated, they have not gone away completely

This also might explain another reason that online queer spaces would appeal to my participants. It is much easier to identify oneself as a queer person online. On most accounts a person can outright state their pronouns and sexuality at the top of their page. This leaves the

topic not up for debate as it would be in person. A user can also ‘block’ or ‘mute’ homophobic responses on many websites, meaning that it is possible to ignore homophobia online in a way that it is not possible in person. Yet, even in safer situations, this need to signal one's group affiliation still exists. Edith mentioned ‘looking gay’ quite a bit throughout her interview. While others did not express the sentiment so blatantly, they did share concerns that they did not ‘look the part.’ In this queer is not simply a feeling, it is also an aesthetic.

“You dress differently, when I see you out”, Chloe noted to me one time when we met before an event we were attending together. “Do I? I guess I had not realized”. Though I was not completely oblivious, after all I had dressed up for the occasion. Specifically I had wanted to put on my ‘gayest’ outfit. In the past, I had been mistaken for straight at some of the events I went to. I wanted to blend in, to feel like I belonged there as much as any other Montrealer. “Well I’m trying to up my gay game, that’s the vibe I’m going for”, I jokingly told Chloe. She laughed, but encouraged me by saying, “well I think it’s working, it’s definitely a different vibe”. I thanked her but after looking down at the outfit I had on, I realized there was nothing particularly special about it. It was the kind of thing most women might wear on an outing with a friend; makeup, a short yellow sundress, and strappy sandals. The only thing out of place was the copious amount of body glitter and double venus necklace around my neck. Maybe Chloe was just humoring me, so I figured I would press on the issue a bit. “What do you think makes someone look gay or not?” I asked her. “Hmm, well I don’t think it’s any one thing. There’s not like a uniform or anything. But I can usually tell. People have like a vibe to them or a way that they hold themselves and act. I can’t put my finger on it but I know it when I see it.” I nodded in agreement. I definitely felt like I could tell for some people, although maybe that was just wishful thinking.

If I was asked exactly what a queer aesthetic might look like, I am not sure I could give a satisfying answer. As Chloe said, I know it when I see it but having to outright describe it is harder to do. Despite this vagueness, that did not stop myself and my participants from creating an idea of what queer could look like. For Edith it was important, especially before she had been in a relationship with a woman, that she look the part of a gay woman. “I used to dress gay. I was so proud of it” Edith told me. For Edith, when she finally realized she was queer it felt like a badge of honor that she needed to show off. Being able to present as queer was very important to her. She felt that if she was not constantly making it apparent that she was queer through her aesthetic, she was not fully embracing her sexuality. While I could not get any specifics out of her about what it meant to look gay to her, she did give me some idea. Edith said that she would look up gay and queer accounts online for inspiration. She said that she would often look at what other people were wearing or acting like to inform her own aesthetic. Any time she felt that she was not living up to her ideal of queerness or that she was alone in her struggles, she would go onto Instagram and see queer women living their happy lives for comfort. Edith said that for her it was so important to just see other queer women, even if she was not interacting with them directly. By seeing that they even existed, by being able to see what a queer life could look like she felt at ease.

Of course, it is not always that simple for everyone. For people like Ariel, it was harder to see a version of a queer life that looked like hers. “I feel like being Asian plus the bisexuality makes it a lot harder to come out. It’s a combination of the two that kind of doubles the stress on there” Ariel said. She felt that being Asian made it harder for her to fit the ‘ideal’ of what a queer person looked like. Ariel said that many expected her sexuality to fit neatly in the box of the

sexually submissive Asian woman. “I’d say that it’s harder, when you don’t specifically have ‘the look.’”. For Ariel, the aesthetics of queer could function as a double edged sword. On the hand, like Edith, Ariel wanted to look the part. She wanted to be able to dress and live in such a way that would make her identifiably queer. Yet at the same time, Ariel felt that the intersection between her sexuality and her race made the attainment of that ideal much more difficult if not impossible.

Ariel wanted to be able to be out and proud just like Edith but because of the intersections between race and sexuality, she struggled to reach that same point. Ariel told me about how she felt like people had already decided what being Asian and bisexual looked like for her. That she did not have much agency in how she was perceived by others. This was especially frustrating for Ariel because she did not want to fit into that mold that she was being expected into. Ariel felt that many women she tried to date expected her to fit into the submissive Asian woman stereotype. That she was not allowed to be bold and loud in her relationships in the way that she wanted to. The situation made her feel more frustrated about her sexuality because it made her feel like she would only be accepted by people if she fit into the visual that had been created for her.

Karina felt similarly about the subject of looking a certain way to come across as queer. “I assume that I look straight to most people. I assume that I look white to a lot of people, which are notable privileges. I recognize that the experiences I have are not the same as someone who is more obviously racialized or queer,” Karina told me. To Karina, these were simply facts that she had accepted. She knew that other people would make assumptions about her based on what she looked like. When I asked her if that upset her she shrugged it off. She said that people were going to make assumptions about her and that she could not control what they thought. She was just aware that that was how she would be perceived, based on experiences she had had in the past. Just as Karina felt invisible as a biracial woman, she also felt invisible being a queer woman. In both aspects, because she did not fit the aesthetic of what people expected for those categories Karina was resigned to always being misidentified.

In these ways, the queer aesthetic can be an issue of great pain or comfort for some women. While participants like Edith found the idea comforting and affirming, others like Ariel found this search for a queer aesthetic more alienating. It is important to note the role that intersecting factors play as well. The aesthetics for someone who is young, white, cisgender, skinny, and conventionally attractive are going to be different than for someone who does not check all those boxes. As Ariel pointed out, part of the reason that she felt she did not have ‘the look’ was because she did not easily fit into a racist stereotype of what her sexuality should be.

Another intersecting factor in this is gender. While no one outright described what this ideal queer woman would look like, many of the stereotypes of what a queer woman was presumed to be painted a picture. This returns to this idea of homonormality: where only an ideal and stereotypical archetype of what a queer woman looks and acts like is allowed. While this mold might be challenged in queer space, it still exists and influences what the ideal is. From my participants’ perspective, the ideal of a queer woman is tied to ideas of whiteness and femininity. Participants who felt they were lacking in those categories were more likely to worry about counting as queer. As if not adhereing to this ideal somehow made them less queer than those who more easily fit into those stereotypes.

“From a stereotypical point of view, I don’t look gay. I don’t sound gay. I don’t act gay. But I feel like people act differently when they know I’m not straight… Should I make it more

apparent? Or should I keep it low?" Edith told me during her interview. While Edith had prided herself on looking the part when she first came out, she now worried she did not quite fit the mold. That she was somehow less queer because she was not emphasizing her queerness in her aesthetic. It was a sentiment reflected by many of the women I spoke with. There seemed to be a friction between wanting to be able to proudly proclaim oneself as queer and worrying that they did not fit this mold of queer that they felt they were supposed to. That not adhering close enough to said mold somehow invalidated their feelings. The creation of an idea of queerness is often built through the bits and pieces available to queer people: following an echo of an echo trying to find some piece that rings true. This is especially the case for participants who did not have any kind of queer role models in their adolescense.

When I asked Karina about whether she had any queer people in her life growing up, she told me about the 'basketball lesbians' at her high school. These teenage girls were more 'masculine' or 'butch' presenting. They played a sport, wore athletic clothing, and had girlfriends who were more stereotypically feminine. She said that these 'basketball lesbians' were her only perception of what a queer woman could look like at the time, adding that she suspected their more 'femme' girlfriends weren't 'really' gay. At the time she thought that was what it meant to be gay and so she could not imagine herself as such. She said that she felt she had nothing in common with 'basketball lesbians' and so at the time she could not have imagined herself as queer, because the idea of femininity and sexuality were so linked in her mind.

The performance of femininity is something that is heavily tied to female sexuality, no more blatantly than in the categories of 'butch' and 'femme'. It is a common in queer spaces to have butch women stereotyped as manly, domineering, or sometimes violent. They have short hair and wear pants. Femme women, on the other hand, are often portrayed as hyperfeminine: doe eyed, soft spoken, and unable to do much for themselves for fear of breaking a nail. Full faces of makeup, florals, and fluffy dresses. This is not to categorize anyone in particular, as no one fits so neatly in these categories. They are more a spectrum of gender expression that are common in queer women.

The variations of this can be seen on the futch scale. This is a graph of the scale ranging from high femme to stone butch. It was posted online to further explain this sliding scale but was quickly picked up as a meme by queer women online. The futch scale has been used to jokingly rate everything from drinks to cartoon characters on a scale of femme to butch. What this humorous meme format shows is the way that femininity and masculinity play a role in how queer women imagine their sexuality. Queer aesthetics and gender expressions are an extension on trying to understand oneself. While that might take serious or silly forms, it is still indicative of queer worldbuilding.

Of the women I spoke to, the only one who outright mentioned butch and femme by name was Chloe. Yet those concepts were still present in the descriptions of the stereotypically gay woman. As Ariel put it, "you say lesbian, they think 'oh you have to be a butch woman with an undercut'. Even Chloe, who said she dressed in a masculine fashion for a woman called herself 'soft butch'. "When I think of an actual butch, I think like the women who wear Birkenstocks and cargo shorts and are tree huggers," Chloe clarified for me. For many of my participants, there seemed to be a need to distance themselves from this masculine idea. Many of the women seemed to have complicated feelings around both masculinity and men in general.

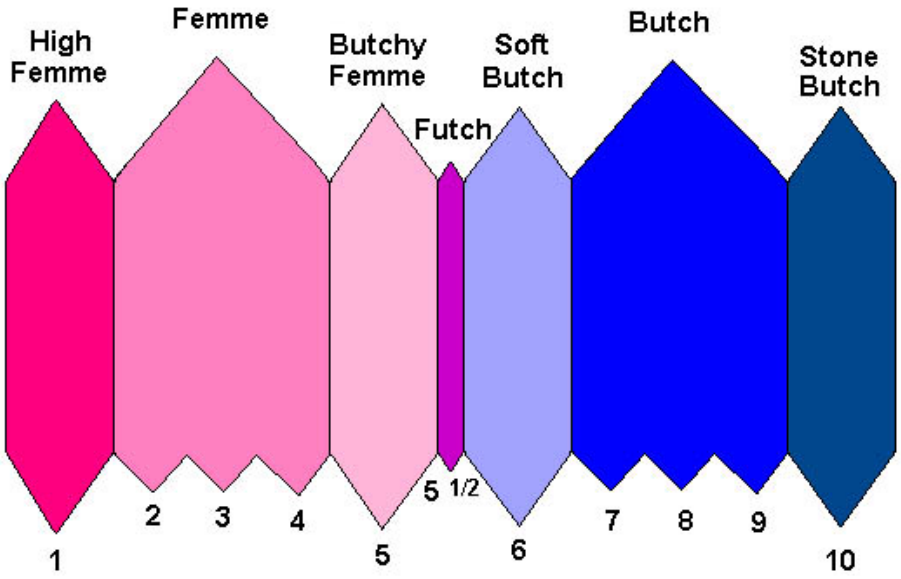
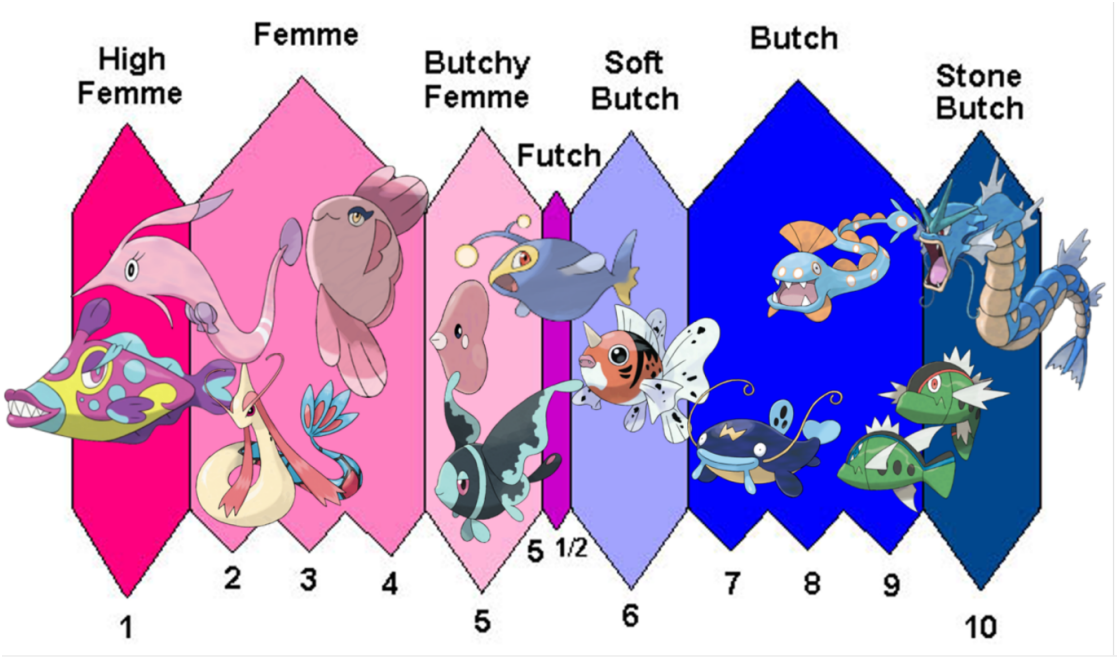


Photo 6: Futch Scale posted by Tumblr user gynandromorph on September 8th, 2015.



whackermanjunior:

> fish pokemon butch-femme scale featuring the new friend

Photo 7: Water Pokemon Futch Scale by Tumblr user Whackermanjunior, 2016

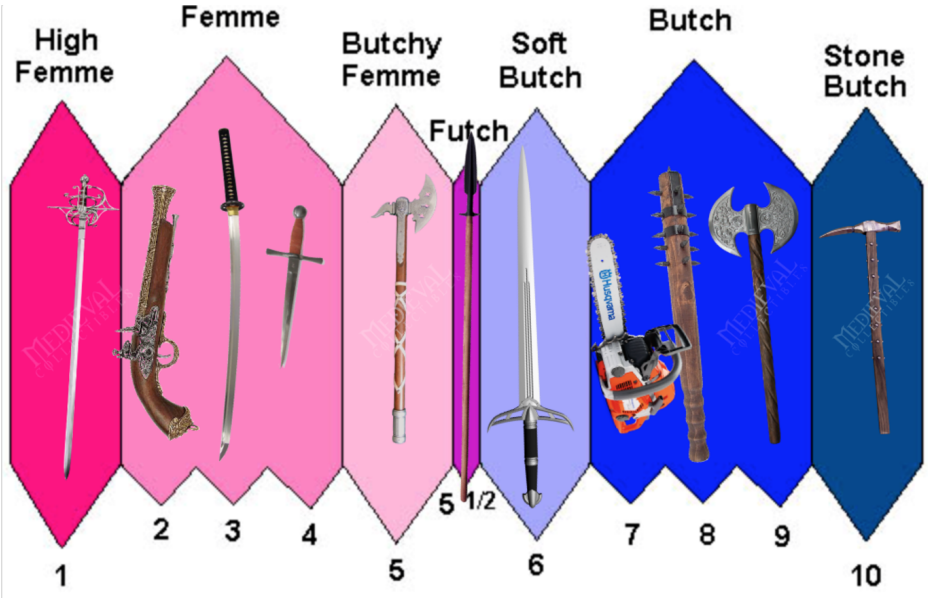


Photo 8: Old Timey Weapons Futch Scale by Tumblr user Biggest-gaudiest-patronuses, 2018

Men and Queer Women

Men themselves also seemed to be a point of contention for participants. I had anticipated that the women I spoke with would have complicated feelings about their sexuality. For many, I had imagined, coming to terms with their attraction to women would be complicated. For many it was: as Mia put it, "I had a lot of internalized homophobia about being attracted to women." Another issue for the women who felt attraction to multiple genders was their seeming need to justify and distance their attraction to men. It made the question of whether or not they thought they 'counted' as queer more complicated.

Katie, who was in a committed long-term relationship with a man, spoke about her complicated history with men and her sexuality. She stated that she had received sexual abuse from men she had been in relationships with in the past, especially because she was bisexaul. "The sexual violence I experienced was justified by men saying 'well you're bi, so you're hypersexual.'" She said that being bisexual made it harder for men to take her seriously and that she often felt taken advantage of in relationships. Katie was working on her PhD in neuroscience, studying the effects of trauma and depression on the brain. She explained to me that bisexual women are often more likely to have experienced mental health issues and sexual trauma. Katie said that online resources and online communities like Tumblr are where she first learned to deal with the fallout of her abuse.

While not all had this level of trauma from their relationships with men, many felt ambivalent about that relationship. Chloe told me how she struggled with the thought of if she should even call herself bisexual. "I am attracted to men, but it's hard because men so continuously disappoint me," she told me. "But straight women let men treat them badly, so maybe I do like men," Chloe joked with a laugh. It is clear to read what she was saying, even

when coated in sarcasm. While she could not deny being attracted to some men, she felt that her past experiences with men had been so fraught that it made her reluctant to pursue men.

This ambivalence towards men might be due to the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality in women. When I spoke with Mia about what she called herself she mentioned this compulsion to not completely dismiss men as an option. “I was straight until I was queer,” Mia told me, “the term lesbian… I don’t feel I could fully commit to that term.” She felt that by calling herself queer, she was able to classify herself as being attracted to women but it also “left a door” open to men. “Maybe it’s some form of internalized homophobia,” she pondered out loud, “but I just feel like leaving that door open for guys right now, I need to leave that door open… I am still coming to terms with my sexuality… but right now to keep my mental health in check I call myself queer and right now queer is enough for me.” Mia seemed to be working through her feelings as we talked.

For Mia and my other participants, a queer sexuality came with many contradictions. Participants spoke about how they both felt comforted and shut out of queer spaces. Many felt a sense of camaraderie by seeing other openly out queer people online. However, this same feeling could quickly turn to doubt if that picture did not resonate with them. Participants' understanding of queerness was ever evolving and changing, based on their experiences and the contexts in which they lived their lives. These ideas were also often informed by the spaces online that participants spent large amounts of time on, especially in their youth. How this tension is to be resolved I cannot really say. The women I spoke with were aware of it, and it was something that frustrated them greatly. Mostly they seemed resigned to the fact that due to their more marginalized statuses within queer spaces, they would inevitably be pushed to the sidelines or belittled.

This question of ‘who gets to be queer’ returns again when trying to understand group dynamics and how groups of people come to understand a ‘queer community’. Who is and who is not perceived as queer effects who is considered part of the community. This not only effects individual members but the overall understanding of non normative sexualities. After all if queer sexuality is the biproduct of queer worldbuilding, then the strength of that idea is build upon the ability of queer people to come together to form an idea of what that means. In the next chapter, I will focus on collective identity and how an understanding of what it means to be queer is shaped by the idea of what it means to be a community.

Ethnographic vignette: Ariel

Bubbly and a bit blunt, behind Ariels thick bangs and glasses hid a warm personality. Although Ariel and I only met over a few quick online instant messages and her in person interview, we got along well. We bonded over our teenage love for anime and manga, trading stories about certain theories we liked. Ariel had spent much of her teenage years online finding others to talk about the Japanese cartoons and comic books with. In fact, she told me that she had met her first girlfriend through an anime convention. The two had exchanged information and kept a long distance relationship over the internet. Ariel felt much more connected to her online friends than her family who had immigrated from the Philippines and China. She told me how she had only recently found out that she had a gay cousin who know one in the family talked about. Once he had come out to the family they had disavowed him. He was never spoken about. Ariel pondered what her life might have been like, had he been in her life. She wondered what her life might have been like without her online friends. She said that she would like to think she would be the same, but she said that so much of who she was was a factor of who she spent time around, so she was not sure.

Photo 9: Photo taken of Montreal & Jacques Cartier bridge from Parc Jean-Drapeau. August 2020, taken by author

While pre-planning for my research in Montreal, I had to contend with how viable it might be. Many had told me about how incredibly welcoming and progressive Montreal was, how they could not see the use for online media when the city itself has such a large and historic gay village. In said gay village, I was told, all were welcome and could get all the sense of community they needed. “Perhaps,” I thought, “Montreal is just so accepting that none of my participants feel a need to go online the way I did growing up in Texas.” With this in mind, I decided to go to the Gay Village, the part of the city I assumed was the heart of all gay life in Montreal. Maybe by going to this supposed heart I would find a thriving group of queer women to speak to and my hypothesis would be proven wrong.

I excitedly threw on my combat boots and body glitter before taking the bus to Snowdon. From there, I jumped on to the metro and headed to The Village. During the 45 minute metro ride, I had plenty of time to fantasize what I might find there. As I approached, I felt myself full to the brim with anticipation. After having lived my whole life in a small town in Texas, getting to visit a gay village in a metropolitan area seemed like a holy pilgrimage. In many texts I had read on the gay liberation movement, gay villages were often the local safe haven. They served as a place where one could find and be supported by fellow members of the queer community. Going to such a place felt like visiting my homeland or seeing a holy relic. I had imagined that being in such a place would fill me with a sense of belonging that I had been craving since my adolescence.

Once I stepped foot out of the metro and onto the street, I was immediately greeted with rainbows in every direction. In fact the main street of East St. Catherine itself was marked out from above by a canopy of plastic rainbow balls. The Beaudry metro stop entrance emptied out into the street. Said street had been blocked off for pedestrians. People were walking in every direction, although I quickly noted that the crowds streaming around me seemed overwhelmingly male. Strips of chic restaurants and bars showed the Village's tourist-friendly side while a prevalence of exotic massage parlors and other such shops demonstrated its storied past. I strolled down the main street and the side streets looking into every shop window in great anticipation, waiting for the feeling of belonging and holiness to wash over me. Yet the longer I spent strolling along the street, looking into the overpriced restaurants and cafes, I was mostly left with one impression of the place… disappointment.

Everywhere I looked on main street, there was barbershops and male strip clubs as well as leather shops and a bar streaming images of homoerotic men on every wall of the space. Not only that, but many of the bars had names that were puns for different names for gay men. If I had to describe the Village in one word, it would be male. In some cases, the aesthetics and signage of businesses felt one step removed from having a “keep girls out” sign on the doors. I do not describe it this way to disparage the men who happily occupied these businesses. I was happy for the men who could enjoy those spaces but as I strolled through the rainbow-colored streets I began to wonder: “where am I supposed to go?”

As I searched for a welcoming space for myself and other queer women, the closest place I could find was the feminist bookstore that had been shoved in a tiny shop up a side street. It was made even more reclusive by the fact that the infamous Montreal street construction blocked all but a narrow pathway to the bookshop. The only reason I had found it was thanks to some flyers they had posted right outside the metro stop. As I entered, the noisy machinery outside the

building made the place less inviting. As I looked around the bookshop, I constantly had to contort myself so that other browsing women could move past me to get to a shelf. It was so small that it could barely have more than two customers in it at a time without them running into each other. This bookstore was not exactly a space to meet other women besides a short 'bonjour/hi'. While I was initially excited to find such a space, I could not help feeling that myself and the other women in the Village had been shoved into a cramped corner. I had gone to the village to "find my people" but I left there feeling more like one of the tourists passing through on the streets rather than a real member of this space.

I was dismayed to learn that not only was the Village primarily for men but also that there were no places left in the village that sold themselves to women. According to Burnett (2013), the last lesbian bar had closed shop a few years prior in 2013. Further conversations with women who had lived in Montreal for years only confirmed this further. Female colleagues in my program called the Village a "boys club" that serviced only white, upper-class, gay, cis men. There seemed to be a bit of disdain for The Village in fact, with some of the women I talked to curling up their lips and rolling their eyes at The Village. Perhaps I had spoken too soon. Perhaps there was more need for an online queer community here than I had realized.

When the Village began to look like it would not be a useful site of recruitment, I began to worry where else I could go to meet young queer women. By chance, I was scrolling through Facebook one day when I got recommended a meet-and-greet event hosted by Queer Concordia. I asked several of the people there how they had found out about the event and where they went to find a sense of community. I was expecting that there would be some bar or cafe that they all went to. Surely there was somewhere in the Village I had just missed, right? Yet the last of my hopes were dashed as I sat with the others on a broken-in couch and talked over pizza. Many of them derided the Village openly, saying that it was 'becoming too hetero' or 'too commercialized'. I was told that if I wanted to find other queer friends or events, my best options were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media websites. I was told to *forget* about the Village.

The members of QueerConcordia were not the only ones to talk disparingly about the Gay Village. When the topic came up with Edith, she did not mince her words. "There's a lot of problems with The Village. It's like the gay mafia.", Edith told me, "Mostly gay white men who run that place. Have you seen a lot of lesbian places that you can go or feel accepted?" I shook my head that I had not seen any such places. "There are so many places that you cannot even go as a girl. They lock you out." To Edith the village was not simply lacking places for queer women, it felt openly hostile to her. It seemed like there was nowhere for queer women to go.

One night when walking back with Chloe from an event we had attended at the Montreal casino, we broached the subject of The Gay Village to her. I asked why there was seemingly no space for queer women in The Village. Chloe stated that not only was it that there simply were more male centric businesses or that those happened to be the ones to thrive, but that the system itself was rigged against places for queer women. "The only reason those businesses in The Village exist is because they have the capital to support each other. White gay men pitch their money together to get those businesses open and to keep them running. But women and people of color, we don't have enough money or power to do that." Chloe felt like because she was black and a woman, there was no place for her in The Village. Which greatly frustrated her since she, along with many of my participants, desperately clung to this idea of being part of a community. Of desperately wanting to find a place to be surrounded by others like them. It

seemed like the places available in Montreal left us all wanting for more. That there was something missing from our lives, even in such a large expansive city.

As is evident, I was not alone in searching for some sort of feeling of belonging, whether that be virtual or in person. Community is a theme that often comes up when talking about gender and sexuality. It was evident throughout my time in the field. Whenever I mentioned that I was studying the 'queer community' to other queer people that I knew, they would nod thoughtfully and say, "that's so important." Community was this highly coveted ideal that many aspired for but also felt was lacking in their lives. In my fieldwork and my experiences reading queer media, queer people often treat the need for community as if it were a necessity, the same way that someone might need water or sunshine. With all this being said, it has to be asked what do these people mean by community? How does one define community and what role, if any, does it actually play in my participants' lives? Throughout this chapter, I want to explore the idea of community. To consider how collective identity making and imagined communities contribute to my participants' ideas around their sexuality.

Defining Community

The most classic idea of community in the social sciences is very stationary. For early 20th century anthropologists, community could be synonymous with 'village' or 'peoples'. The more modern concept of community which imagined it as a fluid system would come after the post-structuralist turn with later authors such as Brubaker & Cooper (2000) and Cohen (1993). Their ideas would investigate the ways in which people could interact and be a part of different communities rather than one sole community that encompassed an entire group with no noted deviations. This evolution in thought was also driven by queer and feminist scholars such as Warner (1991) and Butler (1990). Their work would challenge strict categorization and question the ways that identity is informed by the group. This question of 'what is community?' must first be addressed before going further.

In Vered Amit's article *Community as "Good to Think With"; The Productiveness of Strategic Ambiguities*, she discusses the ways in which the prevalence of the term 'community' and its lacking a strong definition assists social scientists. She argues against striving for a strict definition of community, which she says will lead down a structuralist road of using the term purely for categorization. Instead, Amit (2010) proposes using 'community' as an investigative tool, where the commonly recurring themes of community can be used to further understand a group. These three themes that Amit establishes, which she calls "intersecting points", are affect or belonging, joint commitment and forms of association.

Amit explains these three concepts as being intertwined but not dependent on each other. These three ideas loosely form a basis for how to imagine community. However, the author stresses that these three ideas are not systematic categories but rather tools of investigation. This means that while the tenets she lays out are frameworks for understanding community, they are not classification tools. In fact when discussing the tenet of belonging, Amit states that a sense of belonging is not as simple as an in or out mentality. Rather belonging is based on people interpreting what it means to be in a community with incomplete knowledge. What that sense of belonging means to them might be different than what it means to other members. As I will note

in my own fieldwork below, belonging is often at a tension. Participants may question if they qualify to belong or what belonging means.

Similarly, joint commitment is about the ties that community members form due to some stated or implied shared interest. This may be something concrete, like a school club, or something far vaguer. Throughout my section on joint commitment, I will investigate the many ways my participants navigate an idea of community through shared interests or hobbies.

Finally, there are forms of association, which are the points at which joint commitment and feelings of belonging intersect to create community. Amit describes forms of association as analyzing the myriad of ways that community is built and shaped; whether by scale, duration, level of formality, medium of interaction, etc. In my section on forms of association, I will further investigate this idea by considering how the medium of online space affects and sometimes hinders belonging and joint commitment. By utilizing Amit's three investigative tools, I will illustrate the capacity for community and collective identity building online.

By the end of this chapter, I do not expect that it will be definitively known as the 'queer community' can really be considered a community. In my opinion it is not useful to argue about the exact specifications of what is and is not a community. Rather I am using community to further investigate the ways that participants imagine themselves and those they interact with as a community. By doing so, participants create queer worlds between them and others like them. This is all in an effort to reach a greater understanding of themselves and what a queer life in a heteronormative society looks like. For this reason, it is important to investigate their understanding of a 'queer community'.

Belonging

The first question to ask of queer community online with Amit's lens might simply be why the internet? Or rather, why do participants choose to spend their time online rather than in-person? The situation is not simply that binary and it would be dangerous to assert that those with a heavy online presence lack any kind of in-person social relationships. In fact, many of my participants had relationships that moved between online and offline space. To understand what the women in my study gained from being online, I asked them about their childhood, their family backgrounds, and their friendships (both offline and online) to see why online spaces might appeal to them.

The question was complicated for many, especially those who had primarily positive relationships with the people in their offline lives. While some, like Jane and Katie, mentioned outright hostile or abusive relationships this was not the experience for most of my participants. Many felt that their loved ones were well meaning or cared for them, but even so they felt they lacked an understanding. Many felt alienated from those in their lives. This might have lead them to feel a greater need to search out communities online. By lacking a sense of belonging in their offline lives, they went searching for it with their peers online.

Family

Many of my participants seemed to lack that sense of belonging in their family structures. Katie spoke to me at length about her childhood which she often called traumatic. When I showed concern for her well-being, she reassured me. “Don’t worry,” she said with a laugh, “I’ve had lots of therapy.” As I met Katie in a cozy cafe on a rainy October day, she told me about her strict upbringing in a Polish Catholic community in Ottawa. Katie told me how she felt traumatized and isolated by the world she had grown up in, a world where even pieces of media like Harry Potter were taboo.

Katie felt that she was divided from her ‘old world’ parents who had immigrated from Poland in the 1980s. She told me how she felt that the fact she was born in Canada while her older brother had lived in Poland also put them at odds. Katie said that while she had always felt a bit at odds with her family, that was only heightened once she had access to the internet. Once she could truly realize how conservative and repressive her family structure was, she spent more and more of her time online. While she had begun to use the internet to play games, she quickly was exposed to another world that she assumed she probably would not have otherwise. “I’ve seen how my brother is. He’s 8 years older than me, and he grew up without the internet or access to anyone outside of our little Polish community” Katie said to me, “If I hadn’t had the internet...well I can’t say for certain but I probably would be like him and still be in that community. Even though I felt like I never belonged, I probably wouldn’t have had a reason to leave otherwise”.

Katie was not the only one to feel isolated from her family's values. Many of the women that I spoke with felt a divide between themselves and their family that made them reluctant to have an open dialogue with them about their emotions or their sexuality. This is not to say that all or the majority were openly homophobic but that, for whatever reason, they felt that a divide existed between them and family members. “I know that my family will still accept me and love me,” Penelope told me, “but I’m still scared that it will make things different.” I tried to ask her ‘what would be different?’, ‘what would change if she spoke with her family about her sexuality?’, but she could not give me an answer. She seemed perplexed by her own reluctance and just re-stated that it was too scary for her to do.

For Penelope, being treated differently was just as worrying as a negative reaction. This is because to be a part of a family is to have a sense of belonging within the group. While family might not be outright hostile to participants, there is still that worry that revealing oneself as non-heteronormative means othering oneself. Stating that you are something different than those around you assumed puts an emphasis on how you are different from the rest of the group. This is to say nothing of those who have to be worried about purely negative or blatantly homophobic reactions. To be queer is to be different and to weaken the bonds of belonging. This means that having family finding out is a scary prospect no matter what. It might make participants want to limit the chances of their families ever finding out. When it comes to adolescents, especially those with tight knit familial groups or strict parents, there are very few places one can go or people one can meet that are not known to one’s parents. The one big exception to that of course, is online space.

Another issue that strains that sense of belonging is the strain that comes from being the child of immigrants. Some of the women I spoke with talked about their relationships to their family as daughters of immigrants. There was a general feeling that their families had patriarchal

and outdated expectations for them. “My father comes from a very patriarchal family… we’re essentially supposed to be serving our husbands once we get married… there’s a lot of hierarchical gender bullshit going on that side of the family because it’s very Nigerian,” Chloe told me. Ariel told me that all her female cousins in the Philippines already had children. She hated how her mother would compare her to them and complain about not having any grandchildren to brag about to her sisters. Mia felt similarly, saying that while she felt her parents meant well she did not think they had the same worldview as her. “My parents [pause] they want me to be happy, but they have a very different idea of what happy looks like. They grew up in Haiti and I grew up in America and so we’re from two different worlds. We think differently. Which isn’t their fault, but sometimes I don’t think they understand that.” The general frustration with family seemed to be that they were being upheld to standards that clashed with their upbringing in Canada and the United States. This clash of ideas left participants exacerbated the feelings of separation from family members. That their families, even the well meaning or loving ones, were incapable of understanding them. This lack of feeling they belonged would only heighten a need to find that sense of belonging elsewhere. This might help to explain why participants sought out online space.

In these instances, it would also be important to note the role that gender plays in these expectations. Gendered expectations only further the distance between these young women and their families. In Adrienne Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality, (cisgender) women’s entire concept of their sexuality is linked to men, patriarchal expectations of marriage, and children. My participants often spoke about how they felt torn about any attraction they had to men because it felt as much obligation as it did personal preference. Even if they were romantically or physically attracted to women, they still felt the obligation to get married and have children. They worried that if they told their friends and family that they were bisexual or attracted to multiple genders, they would just be pressured into relationships with men and be assumed as straight. This also added to participant’s fears about not truly ‘counting’ as queer that I spoke about in the last chapter. Women like Ariel worried that if they would eventually be expected to marry a man, could they truly call themselves queer to begin with?

Participants spoke more positively of their experiences online, where they could often escape complicated feelings and obligations of the “real” world. In their youth they had found places online where they could find that sense of belonging. That sense of belonging usually began by finding a group that had some sort of shared interest with participants. After enough time passed, those bonds would develop into conversations where it’s users felt comfortable divulging personal feelings to one another. These conversations would eventually evolve to users talking about private issues, such as discussions on sexuality or issues at home.

Edith told me how she would spend most of her teenage years taking part of DeviantArt groups. DeviantArt is a website where users can post their drawings and others can comment on said drawings. The DeviantArt group functions as a way for artists who have a similar interest to all put their artwork in the same area and do group collaborations. In these DeviantArt groups, Edith would create characters that other members could buy for real money and then the characters would interact with each other. Edith told me how she would spend almost all her time in these groups. She admitted that for her it was a way to escape the complicated relationships she had with her family, especially her father. Through this online space, she was able to obtain a greater sense of belonging and being a part of a community than could be provided for her offline. In this online group, she found friends and a hobby that gave her that sense of belonging

and gave her a way to escape from the issues she was having at home. In this example, it is easy to see how Edith benefited from online space and what drew her to it. Online space provided for her something that she lacked in her offline life.

Heteronormative Expectations

Another factor that alienated participants from their offline communities was heteronormativity. Warner (1991) states that heterosexuality is seen as the default or normative state of being in certain cultures. To be clear, heteronormativity is not just outright homophobia. Cultural expectations and assumptions that are made about a person's sexuality also fall under heteronormativity. Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality share a lot of overlap, but both are important to note as they address slightly different, albeit related, issues. Heteronormativity is more about the socialization of all people to be heterosexual. This means that young people are often unaware of queerness or if they are aware they still see heterosexuality as the default. Therefore heteronormativity harms any ability for adolescents to have an idea of what a queer life could even look like. This is why queer worldbuilding is so vital, because for most if not all people it is the first time that they begin to imagine what a queer life might look like. Once they are introduced to queer worldbuilding, they can begin to imagine what a non-heterosexual sexuality would even be.

In that way, heteronormativity refers to the ways in which the 'default' state of heterosexuality affects and often harms those who live under heteronormativity. Compulsive heterosexuality, in comparison, speaks to the way that gendered expectations shape sexuality, especially for women. It is not so much about not knowing queer sexuality exists, as it is one's sexuality being predicated on satisfying men. Compulsive heterosexuality argues that cisgender women are trained to see themselves as beings for male consumption before anything else. This means that the goal in a female sexuality traditionally is to appease men above all else. This leaves little room for women to wonder about their own desires or to imagine sexual experiences beyond pleasing a man.

To clarify this point even further, during my conversation with Nina she spoke about how she felt this frustration with her own sexuality and the expectations put upon it. "There is still that expectation," Nina told me, "that unless you say you are otherwise, you are heterosexual." The 'default' state of heteronormativity, along with the gendered expectations of compulsive heterosexuality, would have alienated these women further from family and offline friendships. These connections come with obligations that participants felt they could not meet, even if they did not know why they felt a sense of alienation. Many said that they had already felt othered even before they had come to terms with their sexuality. This means that revealing one's sexuality to family comes with the additional guilt of feeling as if they've let others down or disappointed them with their sexuality. For women, sexuality is not a singular choice but rather something that forces like their family and society think that they have some say in.

Due to the cliché of the misunderstood child who runs to the internet for solace, I am cautious to describe my participants in that way. Many described offline friendships or good relationships with parents. What the internet provides in a sense of belonging that the offline world cannot lies in its size and flexibility. In the offline world, one is limited to whatever community happens to exist around them as a child. As can be seen in the case of someone like

Katie, that may mean children are given only one kind of person that they can be by their environment. Something that the internet can also provide for these kinds of people is simply a place to make mistakes and ask questions. While that aspect might change in the future, for the time being, that is the case. This means users can make mistakes, and if those mistakes ever end badly for them they can simply delete their account, create a new one, and try again. Or they can try a different website all together. That same kind of social faux pas committed in the offline world is much more likely to stick to them and have lasting consequences. This is another key aspect to a sense of belonging. One has more chances to find that sense of belonging and more chances to experiment, throw things at the wall, and see what sticks.

From Escape to Belonging

In discussing the lack of belonging offline, I want to establish the drive for these women to find a sense of belonging elsewhere. However, I do not want to establish a cliché narrative of the cruel and homophobic family who drove my participants into the welcoming arms of the online world. This narrative is simplistic: while overemphasizing the possible negative elements of one, it overemphasizes the positive elements of the others. With this analysis, I assert that some degree of alienation and othering by a heteronormative society possibly drove participants online. This could be partially because of unsupportive family and friends or despite them. The emphasis is not so much that family are hostile but that the internet provides for a sense of belonging that participants feel they are missing in their lives otherwise. However, this is only one potential factor.

To that point, some of my participants had family respond neutrally or even positively once they came out to them. Edith recounted to me her mother's reaction when she first revealed that she had a crush on a girl in her class. Edith's mother nonchalantly revealed that she herself, as well as Edith's older sister, were bisexual. She declared that Edith was 'probably bi' and then coolly continued the conversation as if nothing had happened. Edith said it was a non issue to her mother because her mom was bi. Although she felt a drive to online spaces because of her parent's divorce, her struggles with her sexuality did not seem to be part of that. While her relationship with her father was more strained, she felt that because of her relationship with her mother she had never really been afraid to tell her mother.

Edith was lucky enough to have an older queer person in her life who could relate to her when she was coming to terms with her sexuality. However, many of the women that I spoke with did not have a queer role model in their lives. This would provide another reason for them to seek out online space. As Goffman (1974) put it, identity is performance. Later scholars like Butler (1990) and Lovelock (2017) would emphasize this idea when discussing performativity in gender and sexuality. To be able to navigate a queer sexuality, participants would first need to see what a queer sexuality could look like.

This is the core idea in queer worldbuilding. Those who are trying to understand themselves need places to explore. Online queer spaces provide users a place to interact with openly queer people and provides participants a way to 'window shop' a sexuality. They could watch videos by queer people or read queer stories without risking being labeled as deviant by onlookers the way they might if they did the same in offline space. This means that curious and questioning young people could encounter these topics and explore them. They could even

practice these ideas by making their own art or acting out these concepts with others online. Users can wear different sexualities like costumes, feeling them out and getting an idea which fits them best before deciding on any particular one. This is especially critical as many users would most likely not have the space to play with sexualities offline. “You have to see other people like you to develop yourself,” Edith told me, “but then once you’re up there you choose whatever you want to do, but to dig in you have to see successful people like you, and yes it’s easier to do that on the internet.”

This sentiment from Edith is exemplary of the kind of work I’m talking about in queer worldbuilding. What makes the idea of online communities so important in participant’s minds is that sense of belonging that they are on some level or another seeking. This need may not be one that women can articulate well in themselves when they are first encountering it. Many of my participants were talking in hindsight, sometimes with years more experience. The important point is that this craving for a sense of belonging was very clear across many women I spoke to. Even if participants like Chloe, who said she knew from a young age that she was attracted to women, did not feel totally cemented in that identity. She said that she needed other queer women in her life to feel “normal”.

By applying performance theory to my subjects, it is easy to see the importance that an idea of community has on their own sexuality. Queer worldbuilding is not just a nice feature for some participants, it is vital to their sense of self. Without that space, online or otherwise, to practice in a queer mirror and see themselves reflected in it queer people are left feeling as if something is missing. Some semblance of belonging, some sense of community is necessary for participants to feel that their own feelings are valid. Through utilizing online space, individuals can discover and recreate performances of gender and sexuality to create a new normal for themselves and others around them.

This is exemplified in the famous *Paris is Burning* documentary (Livingston, 1990) when the members of the ball discuss ‘realness’. Realness is the idea that to create a vision of what a thriving queer person can look like, one must look and act the part. If one wants to imagine that a queer person of color could be a CEO, then players at the ball manifest that idea by dressing up as CEOs and business professionals. If other queer people can see what that might look like, then the idea of it becoming a reality is not as ridiculous. That is a simplified version of it at least, as it is a difficult idea to explain simply. Realness often gets to ‘passing’, the idea that if one dresses a certain way one can be perceived as belonging to the cisgender heterosexual group. Those who criticise the idea believe that realness is rooted in performing a white cisgender heterosexual fantasy in order to be let into the club of ‘normal’. However, realness is much more rooted in ‘authenticity’ than in conformity. It is not simply a costume but a way of being, of presenting oneself. Realness is in a sense anti-heteronormative. By showing what a queer version of a profession or aesthetic could look like, they are bringing to attention the status quo and breaking it at the same time.

The person who expresses the realness does so to exert their idea of what a thriving person can be despite societal expectations. In that way, by “living your truth”, one becomes that idea that they are pretending to be. By enacting a fantasy of what they could become, they are breathing that idea into reality. By becoming that which they wanted to be, that idea then exists because they made it exist. It is a way for queer people to be given agency in a world that otherwise dictates to them what to be. A sort of “fake it ‘til you make it” way of being. Therefore by acting as a sandbox for participants to experiment in, the internet allows for such ideas to

come to fruition in a way that they might struggle more with in a purely offline world. Online space does the same thing that ballrooms and underground newspapers once did; it generates the protective coating that allows for queer worlds to be built inside it.

Some of the women spoke about trying to create this authenticity in themselves. Just as with the balls and this idea of 'realness', young women are creating an idea of who they are, both through a sense of self and through a collective idea of queerness. In these ways, belonging and identity are intertwined. What identity means is read through a screening of belonging. A performance of a queer identity is given, critiqued, re-evaluated, and repeated. Therefore identity is not just this inner essence belonging to one person, but rather a collective action that is made together. With that being said, an analysis of community as *just* a sense of belonging is incomplete. As Amit puts it, her analysis of community is best understood at where her different points intersect.

Joint Commitment

Amit's analysis of joint commitment questions the viability of media to create community. She argues that communities must have group members hold some sort of obligation to each other or share a joint interest. At first glance, in answer to what joint commitment my participants have, it would seem obvious: everyone joined groups online *because* they were queer. However, this answer assumes that anyone who would use these online groups would be fully realized in their identity. The reality is that these spaces often play a role in identity formation and they are often more varied in subject matter than would first appear. Participants did not specifically go hunting for queer spaces to resonate with their queerness, rather they fond spaces online where they felt a sense of belonging and joint commitment. This then gave the conditions necessary for queer worldbuilding to occur. It may seem like a bit of a chicken and egg scenario but it is an important distinction to make. Participants finding places of camaraderie online that then became sites of queer worldbuilding means that it is not something specific about the website that caused said scenario. Instead, the spontaneous creation made by users coming together facilitated a community to form.

"Virtual pet communities?" I ask Katie as I sip my large mug of hot chocolate. "Yup," she responds with a sheepish grin and a bit of a laugh. She seems to know how ridiculous it sounds but I learned quickly with Katie that she was not afraid of being honest. "And what did you do on these," I pause as I read back from my notes, "virtual pet communities?" Her laughter grows at my bewilderment. When I had asked Katie where she had first found somewhere online to explore her sexuality, this is not what I had anticipated. My expectations were that participants would favor websites that had been purposefully cultivated for young teens who were questioning their sexuality. My hypothesis had speculated that there was some je ne sais pas essence that made specific websites most appealing for curious and questioning young people. During my preliminary research phase, I had looked at websites such as www.forum.emptyclosets.com . This website sold itself on being a place that young queer and questioning people could ask questions. Rather than being a general social media website, it's sole purpose was to give adolescents information and emotional support. While I was initially a bit confused and concerned about what I had gotten myself into, as Katie spoke more I began to understand her seemingly bewildering response.

Katie spoke at length about her childhood in a conservative Polish immigrant community in Ottawa, how her parents had forbidden her from reading books like Harry Potter and participated in anti-same sex marriage protests. I was a bit surprised that Katie had such a leap from her family's traditional views. I asked her if there was something specific about the forum that made her branch out from her close-knit familial community. She said it was the connections she had made inside the virtual pet group. I was a bit befuddled by it, so I pushed her a bit more on the subject. How were these conversations happening on this seemingly unrelated forum? It was hard for me to imagine that someone could have their mind completely changed in that way over something as silly sounding as a virtual pet game.

Katie responded that she had made close friends on the forum, even keeping in contact to this day with some of them. She said that she had spent many hours of her life with these people, where no topic was really off the table. Due to this, Katie ended up being introduced to a lot of topics for the first time in her young life. When some of her friends had told her they were queer, she was fascinated by that since she had no real previous exposure to queer people. They would have long conversations about the subject where she would ask them detailed questions in an area that she most likely would have been forbidden from knowing about otherwise. "Did you have anyone you knew who was queer in your life at that time?" I asked her. "No, I don't think so," she stated, "it wasn't something that I would have been allowed to know about." It was through these conversations in the pet forum as well as connections she made on sites like Tumblr, a blogging website, where Katie said she first felt a sense of community. When I asked her how her life might have been different had she not had those people online, she seemed to think they had had a radical force on her life. "I don't think I ever would have left [Ottawa]."

Katie shows how the power of having a group of friends who allow for queer worldbuilding is so important. While the virtual pet forum was most likely not built to serve such a purpose, it unquestionably did for someone like Katie. This means that while a website might be more or less suited to community building, it is the users themselves who decide any sites potential as a community builder. It also shows that such community building is typically facilitated by those who have a joint interest.

Collective Identity Building

We can see some parallels between Katie's narrative and the transition of coming out described in Kus & Saunders (1985) *Stages of Coming Out: An Ethnographic Approach.* The authors describe the different stages of the coming out process. One of the points that they make is about how many young people, once they have begun to get some inkling about their sexuality, will move to large cities to find other people like themselves. This makes sense to some degree. Larger cities have larger populations to find like minded individuals. Large cities like New York City and Montreal also have reputations for generally being more tolerant of queer people than small towns. Of the women I spoke to who were not from Montreal, some of them had purposefully moved to Montreal because it had that kind of reputation. I myself had also been enticed to Montreal partially because of the city's reputation and the presence of the Gay Village. Online space can then serve a similar position to cities. It's abundance of people and the probability that one can find someone like themselves increases online versus a person's offline life.

While Kus and Saunders' piece correctly points out how moving to a city or finding a community is vital to queer identity, it stops short of recognizing the influence that said process holds. Kus & Saunders (1985) imagines the process of coming out, or coming to terms with one's identity, as more of an individualistic process. They describe creating a sexual identity as mostly an internal process with outside forces playing a minimal influence beyond support. This individual mindset ignores the role that group dynamics play in identity. Later academics, such as Chaplin (2014), Berlant & Warner (1998), would come to recognize the collectivization of identity building. Coming to realize a sense of identity is process that only come to fruition once there are others around someone who they can explore, practice, and solidify that identity with. Throughout my fieldwork, the overall theme that I observed was the power of collectivization. The purpose of online space in participants' lives was as a conduit for collective identity building.

"I needed them [queer people] in my life," my participant Jane told me, "I needed to feel as normal as straight people… I needed to actually meet some people and have some gay moments and just identify so strongly with what was happening to realize that I was queer." When I asked her what she thought her life would be like if she had to live apart from other queer people, she told me that she felt that she would essentially "become straight". Her sense of who she was was so tied up in the collective that she could not imagine herself as queer when stripped of that. Jane did not simply feel that her queer identity was improved by her interaction with other queer people. It goes beyond a nice addition to a necessity. When I asked Jane what she thought might happen if she no longer had access to other queeer people she did not mince words. She said that if she had to go back to a heteronormative environment she would probable "turn straight", since her idea of her queerness was so tied into this collective idea of identity. Jane was not the only one to note the power others had in her idea of herself, but she was the one to put it in the most blunt terms. Collective negotiation of that ideal of herself made that vision of herself a reality.

Berlant & Warner (1998) described this sort of collective identity work as "queer world building." They define queer world building as "supporting forms of affective, erotic, & personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, & sustained through *collective* world building." I have discussed this concept in previous chapters, but I explain it here again to emphasize its role in the conceptualization of sexuality. It is also important to note when discussing a sense of belonging. Being able to see oneself in others and recreate what you see is pivotal to creating an idea of community. Queer community is not just something that is nice to have, it is vital to queer worldbuilding. In this way, group identity formation can be imagined as a quilting circle. Each member holds a piece and carefully works on their part. More experienced members might stop to advise the younger members or sit beside them to show how to do a certain stitch. All members participate in the quilt of identity to some degree or another and while the final quilt may belong to one person, such an effort would have been impossible without the group's expertise.

Performativity

This kind of group identity formation is also prevalent when discussing performativity. Goffman (1956) argues for identity as a series of performances that one gives, reinforced by the reactions of those you interact with. He states that when a person does a certain performance in a certain environment, they can anticipate what sort of reaction they will get. Butler (1990) also

supports the role that community plays in identity making in her performativity theory. Similar to queer worldbuilding, Butler argues that gender is negotiated by performing said gender in front of others. Gender is then decided by how 'effectively' that role is played, and the person then uses others' reactions to re-adjust their gender performance to be perceived better. While her work is focused on gender, later academics such as Fahs (2009) and Lovelock (2017) would apply that theory to sexuality. They would argue that sexuality and gender share similar expectations in needing to be perceived and then adjusted depending on others perceptions.

Performativity theory proposes that participants can try on an identity by acting it out, which then receives encouragement or discouragement from the group. This kind of behavior works in online space as well. Users can change their profile description to mention their sexuality or post pictures of themselves with a pride flag or discuss what it means to be a certain sexuality with other queer people. Other members of the space can inform or correct them on terminology. Participants may share memes about what a gay person looks or acts like or what interests they have. They can also watch videos of other queer people to see what they look, talk, and act like to replicate it.

The key difference in these two theories, as far as they apply to queer sexuality is the role that heteronormativity plays. Queer worldbuilding is necessary because there is no rule book to be followed per say. While heteronormativity provides heterosexual people cultural guidelines that they can adhere to, the same is not the case for non-normative sexualities. Thus a vision of what a queer life can even look like has to be discussed and negotiated. Participants may be unsure what a queer life could even look like in the first place. When it comes to performativity, if heterosexuality was a symphony, queer sexuality would be jazz. While similar components are there, queerness relies more on taking elements of heterosexuality and rearranging them.

The website that arguably exemplifies performativity the most is YouTube. The architecture of the video sharing website, which allows all users to post their own videos, encourages users creating their own performances which are then posted onto the website and judged. Each video comes with a thumbs and thumbs down voting system, along with a comment system that steers towards harsh. Users put up their videos, are criticized for their performance, and then post more videos based on that feedback. More than other websites, this emphasizes the role of community as the arbiters of acceptability.

Karina spoke about the influence that YouTube had played in her adolescence. "I started to be more interested in more queer content online, like queer YouTubers and queer blogs. Not so much for confirmation but like to access other queer people and trying to access a sense of community." Karina first came to be active on YouTube because of Tegan and Sara. Tegan and Sara are musicians who made their queerness part of the brand for their band. Along with music the duo would post video logs, or vlogs, about their everyday lives to YouTube. Karina said that Tegan and Sara were important to her because it was the first time that she got to see queer women just living their lives and being full people. Tegan and Sara were also the first time Karina was exposed to a larger queer community, as she interacted with other fans of the band in the comments of their videos and in fan groups on other sites.

Lovelock (2017) specifically focuses on this type of identity work taking place online on YouTube. He discusses the ways in YouTube videos were used to form a language around coming out. In coming out videos on YouTube, users would post a video revealing their sexuality. They would often go into detail about their personal journey and how they came to use certain words to describe their sexuality. Other people who watched the videos would often

contribute their own coming out stories in the comments below or ask questions about certain terminology. In this way, users were learning through performativity. Just as Goffman (1974) described, they were observing a performance of an identity in a safe space and then repeating that performance in a space where they could get feedback and approval. This behavior was mirrored in the discussions that I had with my participants. In fact, the women I spoke with would sometimes jokingly comment on how the internet taught them to "look gay" or "act gay".

A quick look through YouTube or Google and it is not difficult to find information on how to "look gay". These posts and videos focus on aesthetic as well as interests, mannerisms, or hobbies. While many rely on some level of stereotyping to get their point across, participants still found them useful. Penelope told me that she enjoyed queer content on YouTube, whether that was something as serious as a coming out video or simply a vlog that was made by someone who was openly queer. When I asked her how often she watched these kinds of videos, she jokingly responded with "typically whenever I'm having an identity crisis. So, like once a week."

Penelope's statement makes clear one goal of being online for people like her. The internet can be a sort of mirror for participants to look at for confirmation, especially if they are feeling self conscious about their self image. Penelope also brings something to the forefront, and that is the presence of a silent audience. For every person that is actively participating in discourse online, there are multitudes more who just passively observe the interactions without contributing anything to the conversation. This brings forth a unique quirk of imagining any kind of online "community". In an offline space, it is clear who is and is not in a room. Even if one were to silently observe the goings on, said person's presence in the room would still have some effect. Other participants would be aware of that person and would change their behavior to some degree to reflect that silent observer. If being part of a community is having a sense of belonging, how can one feel a sense of belonging with those they never really interact with? How can one call something a community when a percentage of those online are silent observers?

Silent Online "Community"

For some more structured groups, such as forums, the case for community online is easy to defend. Most forums are structured around one specific niche interest, such as a tv show or a video game. Users can interact on public message boards that are all centered around different aspects of this one niche. Forum spaces are usually cultivated by moderators and administrators who have a list of rules for membership. Each forum that lasts for long enough can even develop its own list of slang words and inside jokes. Some forums have lasted for years with prominent members becoming recognizable figures or practically mini celebrities in the group's lore.

In comparison, it is more questionable whether instances such as people who just watch the same YouTube videos really meet the threshold of community that Amit (2010) establishes. People who watch the same videos or both use Instagram might seem far too broad to define as a single community. My participants did admit to watching and interacting with queer media online. Yet, they also admitted interacting with other topics: books, movies, cartoons, educational content, news, and more. In this way, queer discourse could be seen as just another topic that users discuss online. What elevates any of these to the level of a community rather than just a discussion topic?

Schudson & Van Anders (2019) refer to online communities as “networked counter publics”: a mediated public that is consistent, consists of replicable forms of speech, has invisible audiences, and is searchable. These counter publics allow for a greater degree of flexibility than their offline equivalents would. Although most of my participants did not know each other, they did share similar points of speech and discourse. This might have simply been a side effect of all being present in Montreal, but it is also a point that Anderson (1991) raises. Shared media and shared ideas of a national consciousness are key to Adnerson’s idea of imagined communities. In a counter public, an online space can be imagined similar to a local supermarket or park. When one enters the supermarket, one does not interact and have a personal conversation with everyone in there. One does not share all the same interests as the person buying a fish or picking out fruit. All that being said, it would be hard to argue that everyone contributing to that atmosphere does not belong to the same community. The only difference in digital space is that the concept stretches across longer pieces of land. Offline space also lacks the silent observer.

Schudson and Van Anders (2019) highlight a ‘silent observer’. Many of the women I spoke with mentioned how they would often go onto their favorite websites just to see what others were creating or posting. For them it was validating and created a sense of belonging just to observe other queer people be open and upfront with their identity in a way that many of my participants struggled with in their offline lives. They told me how by observing others like them, their own identity felt validated. The question then becomes: in a space with invisible or anonymous participants, what counts as participation?

Such a question is not unique to digital media. Licona (2013) describes something similar when discussing zine culture. As I discussed in my historic background chapter, periodicals played a vital role in queer community and identity formation since at least the 1920s. Licona discusses how the collective creation of zines allows for its participants to grow and evolve in their ideas surrounding their identity. It does so by acting as a creative lightning rod, where those facing certain systemic issues could come together and explore their feelings on such topics. While participants in zine culture exist apart from each other, their ideas surrounding race, gender, and sexuality are all woven together via their participation in zines. Zines, which I argue as a predecessor to internet groups, allow for an in between space where uncomfortable questions can be asked and hard discussions can be had. Licona attributes this to the “third space” that is developed in zine culture.

Bhaba (2004) developed his idea of third space to analyze the ways in which the borders of cultures interact and hybridize. Throughout his work, Bhaba questions the spatial and temporal boundaries that are often placed onto culture. While Licona (2013) applies this idea to printed zines, the concept is relevant to the internet as well. If the internet functions as a third space, in which collective identity formation through performativity is occurring, community is the outcome of that space. Although, this is an idea of community that is much harder to see the boundaries of than in more traditional uses of the word. If one imagines community as being the idea that is created when participants come together, create a sense of belonging, have some sort of joint commitment, and create forms of association than online space falls under that definition. While it’s borders are loosely defined and difficult to try and map out, online space fills out what is arguably the most important tenet of community. That being as a space where others can come together, communicate, and create shared ideas. Queer community online arguably exists online due to the power of queer worldbuilding, and how that powerpulls people together to create a shared idea of community.

Fandom as Third Space

To analyze the concept of third space as it pertains to collective identity and community building, I will use a specific example that a few of my participants discussed. When asked about where online they found a sense of belonging, some discussed their involvement in fandoms. Fandom is a word that describes groups of people who are all fans of a piece of media and who take part in celebrating that media with other fans. Fans of a certain series will often meet up either online or in person to discuss that series and certain aspects of what they liked or disliked. It is also common for fans to make creative works which are to some degree derivative of the piece of media they like.

One of the major ways fandom manifests is through shipping. Shipping is the act of imagining two characters from a series as a romantic couple, often despite how they act in canon. The most popular type of shipping is typically yaoi or slash which imagines characters in a homoerotic relationship. Yaoi or 'slash' has a long history in both North America and Japan. Nagaike (2012) dates this homoerotic shipping back to the 1970s in both countries. Woledge (August 2005) discusses how the Kirk/Spock ship in Star Trek served as a forebear for slash shipping in North America. In Nagaike's book, she tries to answer why women would be so fascinated by yaoi literature. She argues that the fascination with male homosexuality has less to do with any interest in men than it is a covert way of exploring female sexuality.

Due to the popularity of yaoi and slash shipping, fandom spaces tend to be very welcoming to queer sexuality. This makes it easier to find that sense of belonging for those looking to explore their sexuality. Ariel was one of my participants who was active in fandom from a young age. She gushed to me about the different series, recommending a few to me. When I asked her if she had taken part in roleplaying, she got rather flustered and even admitted I was making her blush. We both squirmed in our seats with Ariel describing to me how she would pretend to be one male character of a pairing and would act out different scenarios with girls she would meet online, who would also be pretending to be a male character. While she did not divulge herself further, I know from my knowledge of these communities that these roleplaying scenarios often become erotic or downright explicit with each character describing in detail what they would do to the other.

The third space of the internet allowed teenage and young women like Ariel to experiment with their sexuality in a way that would not be possible in person. Despite the often-erotic nature, online roleplay often took place between two, presumably straight, girls. Ariel herself told me that at the time she was active in these roleplaying games, she considered herself straight. In fact, she described herself as somewhat homophobic. Ariel told me how participating in roleplay gave her a model of what a gay relationship could look like and it was her first exposure to same sex relationships. These kinds of interactions arguably fetishize same-sex relationships. However, they also allow for a channel of exploration into same sex relationships that might be denied to teenage girls and young women otherwise.

Roleplay was not the only fandom media that allowed for this kind of exploration. Chloe also told me about her experience with fanfiction. Fanfiction involves fans writing their own fiction based off their favorite characters and stories. These fanfics were also often homoerotic. "I spent a lot of time on Fanfiction.net," Chloe told me, "that's actually where I really explored

my sexuality." Penelope was one of the people who wrote fanfiction to share with others online. She talked about how writing stories for others in her fandom had made her 'kinda internet famous'. "There were a lot of queer kids on [fanfiction.net] and they would talk about [their sexuality] and I'd be like 'oh no I'm not that' but then I'd go and read about it," Penelope said.

These types of interactions are another place online where the question of community is frayed. Participants interacted with each other through stories. These stories would be posted, then commented and critiqued, then shared amongst themselves. While many do choose to interact with fanfiction authors, it is just as possible that one could simply read the stories and then click away without anyone knowing they were there.

All these points that I have brought up in this section show the ways in which joint commitment interacts with online space. While Amit argues that joint commitment is not possible via media, the truth is more complex than that. The medium of the internet allows for others to meet and be a part of the same space in ways that would not be possible offline. However, the fluidity of the internet means that the joint commitment of all participants is often questionable or varied. This puts into question the validity of community in these spaces but does not outright dismiss it.

Forms of Association

Amit (2010) says that forms of association exist at the points in which belonging and group commitment "intersect" (p. 362). Amit argues that by imagining community through forms of association, we can discuss community without falling into strict categorization. Many different factors may influence exactly how a community is imagined. This includes duration of the interactions, the size of said interactions, what medium the interactions are mediated through, and many more. Amit does not list these as the principles of forms of association, but rather as some of the many potential factors. When looking at community online many factors are at play, the most notable being the medium through which the interactions are taking place. That medium filters all interactions that take place online and acts as the scaffolding for any potential community building. Community online is in a constant dance with the corporations that own and operate most of the internet. Any positive experience of queer worldbuilding online, is always filtered through a corporation who owns the medium of communication.

McLuhan (1964) coined the now famous mantra 'the medium is the message'. He argues that the medium itself is often just as important, or sometimes more important, than any content that medium holds. While this theory is more typically applied to film or literature media analysis, it is still relevant in online contexts. The internet is the framework through which any discussion or interaction online takes place. By looking at the design flaws within digital architecture, the limitations of online communities become visible.

Dangers in Online Communities

It is necessary to note that the same conditions that allow for greater collective identity building (relative anonymity, lack of consequences for behavior, third space) are also the

conditions that make abuse easier. At 28, Karina was one of the older participants I spoke with. Much of our conversation was about the difficulties of community building in the modern internet, as she felt that much had changed since she was a teenager. “I remember going into chat forums [at 15] and saying really ignorant stuff,” she told me, “and I would have people tell me ‘look, you probably didn’t understand what you were saying but these things are not okay.’” She compared that to now where she worried that younger people might be met with much harsher criticism. “Which is unfortunate, because I don’t know if I was 14 or 15 now how I would navigate that,” she admitted to me. Karina worried that the spaces online which allowed for her to explore her sexuality and ask difficult questions might not exist for the younger generation as they had for her.

Some of the other women that I spoke with told me they often worried about saying the ‘wrong thing’ in online discussions. It was not just the fear that they might say something insensitive, but also the fear that saying something insensitive would result in dogpiling. Dogpiling is commonly used online to refer to a large group of people who all react loudly and negatively to something that another person said or did. Depending on the notoriety of the person and/or the severity of their perceived crimes, this can result in hundreds or thousands of users focusing on one person's transgressions.

Jo Freeman (1976) talks about something similar in what she calls “trashing” in her Ms. Magazine article. Freeman says that because she had tied up her identity as a woman with that of the “movement”, she had given the movement “the right to judge her”. This drives home a point that undermines a lot of the positives about collective identity. When the group decides what being a member of that group means, alienation from the group means alienation from your own identity.

British journalist Ronson (2016) argues that the internet, especially Twitter, enables this behavior to a greater degree. While most of my participants had not experienced this personally, many alluded to it. Eva told me about ‘callout posts’ she would see on Tumblr, where users would create posts telling others about a specific user’s crimes and often calling for them to be reported or removed from the site. While sometimes these concerns were legitimate, oftentimes they were either blown out of proportion or a case of miscommunication. Others who had been on Tumblr, like Chloe, also mentioned such callout posts.

The social media websites that have sprung up in the last 5 to 10 years seem to have aggravated this situation. Older forum and messenger groups relied on human moderators to ban hostile community members. Newer social media models rely on automated flagging systems. Any report of misbehavior on the site is reported to an algorithm. While this algorithm is *supposed* to moderate abusive behavior, it can often be unreliable or manipulated. It is often doubtful whether a human in the company ever sees the complaint at all. This means that there is no real arbiter of justice who can decide if an infraction is worthy of punishment or not. Due to this system, serial harassers often are not removed from platforms despite some complaints. On the other end, a group of individuals can target a specific user and mass report until their account is banned.

Kitzie (2019) describes the internet as “sociotechnical”: it is produced through the complex interactions between people, artifacts, and sociocultural context. While the idealized concept of online spaces is as a Wild West where anything can happen, this is no longer the case. The reality is that the ability to communicate online is shaped and cultivated by the technology

that makes that possible to do so. Kitzie states how technology holds the power to hinder and help identity formation through this relationship between people and technology.

Challenges from Social Media

The examples I have listed above illustrate some of the ways in which the architecture of a website may shape how users interact with each other. Another aspect of that is also who is facilitating these websites and what their objectives are. Media analyst Jonathan Taplin (2018) points out how large media conglomerates now dominate the internet landscape. He states that the internet is no longer just a place for pure entertainment but rather mini fiefdoms, which facilitate a large portion of commerce, communications, and socialization. Therefore, these companies' first priority is what will maximize capital rather than what might optimize community and identity building. While companies will often argue that they have their users' best interests at heart, the fact of the matter is that they benefit the same whether users are getting along or not.

This monopolization of online space also has a chilling effect on potential identity formation, transforming it into a commercial product. One's identity is treated as a "personal brand" and "authenticity" is a cultivated object to make one more marketable. This is prevalent especially in sites like YouTube and Instagram, where one can become a multimillionaire if they accrue enough subscribers or followers. These sites even encourage this behavior by hosting videos or websites with guides on how to become the next big "influencer." These guides encourage users to "build their personal brand" by sharing more and more of their personal lives. Whitmer (2019) acknowledges this self-branding as a way of interpreting one's identity. In her analysis of self-help books, she states that one's identity becomes a marketable product. With this mindset identity is imagined as something that is consistent and cultivated for mass market appeal. With this corporatization of identity, it ceases to be cultivated collectively and instead becomes something that is carefully coiffed.

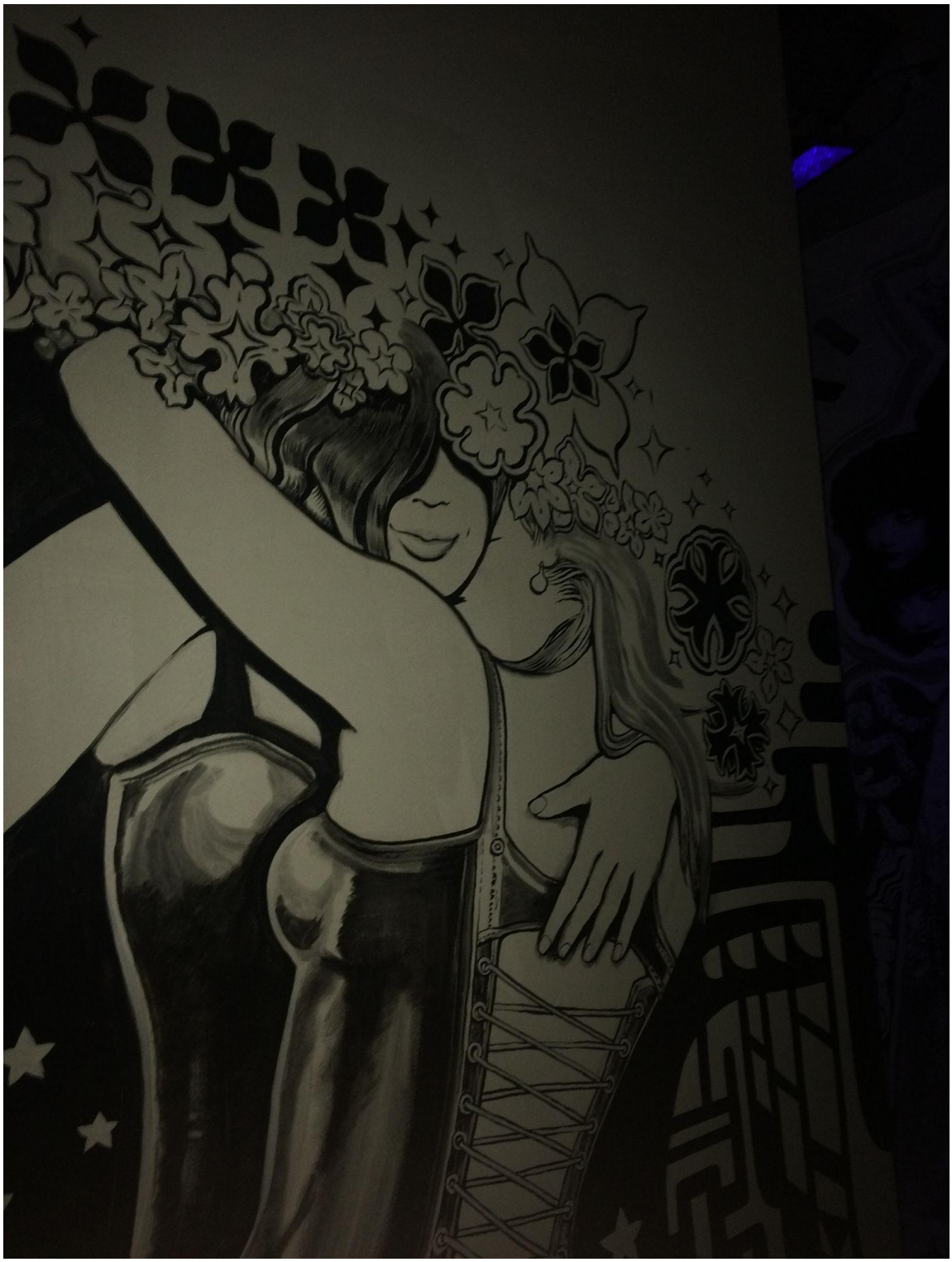
While participants did not speak outright about this issue, it seemed to show in their internet habits. Many spoke about using the internet as a creative outlet or one where they actively cultivated relationships in their teenage years. However, when they spoke more recently about their online habits, it was much more consumptive than creative. Many spoke about mindlessly scrolling through different websites as a sort of muscle reflex. This may be because the average age of my participants was 23. Perhaps participants simply grew out of the need for an online community or lacked the time they had when they were younger. Yet some seemed concerned for the teenagers who were following in their footsteps and worried that the internet was becoming a meaner and more commercialized space than had existed during their teenage years.

Throughout this chapter, I have used Amit (2010) to consider the different aspects of community and how they take form online. Identity building and community building are two concepts which often intertwine and should be considered together. By creating a sense of belonging, one can find a place to safely experiment with identity. Through joint commitment one can strengthen those bonds and the trust that exists within participants, creating the emotional support needed to do the hard work of identity building. Through forms of association, the unique architecture of online space creates a unique shape for community to form and for

identity work to take place. Online communities restrict strict definitions or boundaries. They do not exist in the same way that an offline club or neighborhood association might. In that way, online community is almost like clouds in the sky. Ephemeral and wispy, often twisting in shape with the winds of change. Despite this ever-changing nature, clearly community plays an influential role in the concept of sexual identity that these young women developed.

Ethnographic vignette: Edith

When I first met Edith, I felt a little intimidated by her. She had a very direct way of speaking, bordering on kurt. However, as we spoke more I realized that was simply a red herring. Once we sat down to talk, it was clear that Edith was the type who chose her words clearly and meant everything that she said. Once I got past my initial unease, it felt refreshing to speak with her. Edith was not one to be shy about her past either. She told me about her adolescence on the internet, taking part in an online group of artists that each 'raised' virtual pets. Edith also told me about her online addiction that resulted from her heavy involvement in this online group. That she would devote 16 hour days to her hobby, barely leaving her chair to use the bathroom. It seemed both a time of great joy and anguish for Edith. In her usual candid way she admitted that in hindsight, her addiction was probably a coping solution to her parent's divorce. Especially when it came to her strained relationship with her father. Even though Edith felt she had gone too far in her youth, she credited her past online with her current success. Edith was studying as an animation at Concordia University at the time of her interview. She felt that animation gave her the ability to work through her past trauma.



Picture 10: part of an art mural inside of Sky gay bar in Gay Village in Montreal

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the ways in which my participants understand and put language to their understanding of their own queer sexuality. While I acknowledge that this question is difficult to answer and may never have a concrete answer, seeking to put words to that question still has worth. The fact that participants found value in such a fuzzy concept as queer gives insight just as much as a more solid or unified answer might have. Just because I do not have an exact answer, does not mean that I did not gain any information. In my thesis, I have explored the many bits and pieces that were available to me to get a clearer picture of how my participants' internet usage affected their understanding of their own sexualities. Facets of this answer have appeared throughout my data.

In the methodology section, I explained how my first steps into ethnography challenged my mindset. By essentializing sexuality as an individualistic concept in my initial research methods, I had ignored the further nuances that exist when imagining sexual identity formation. This early breakthrough would become the through line for the rest of my work; understanding how my participants conceptualized their sexuality not only by themselves but through the connections and conversations they built online with others. With the realization of the role fluidity and collectivization played in my subject, I centered those ideas in my analysis.

In the historic background chapter, I gave a summary on the history of how queer people came together to explore their sexuality and the media they use for that purpose. I argue that the internet is the descendant of such efforts. Both by allowing a space for questions surrounding the topic and for performativity of queer identity. I focused on queer media of the 20th century to show how it evolved into online communities. The historic background chapter also served as a place to highlight issues that would become more apparent, especially the division between different groups within queer spaces.

The chapter titled 'Who gets to be queer?' brings that discussion to the forefront, as I focus on the question of how to define queer. In discussing the definition of queer itself in a purely academic setting, I contrast that to my participants feelings. This chapter uses ethnographic data to highlight participant's complicated feelings around their own sexuality as well as group dynamics and gatekeeping. Yet these spaces are also faced with inner conflict. When discussing one's place in queer discourse, there was a fear amongst participants that one might be deemed a freak amongst freaks. That one might be a being too on the margins to be accepted even by those who have an outsider status.

Some participants talked about their heralding experiences trying to be allowed into queer spaces. The fear that some women expressed was often founded by commentary or hostility exhibited by other users. This hostility is often shown through declarations of who truly 'counts' as queer. Participants were left in a sort of limbo where they felt unwelcome by queer/gay groups but equally unaccepted by heterosexual groups. Many were put in a position where they felt both ostracised from others because of their sexuality but also greatly attached to the communities they had found online.

This friction lead me to ask with such arbitrary specifications of who was 'truly' queer, who can say who qualifies as queer in these online spaces? Plenty of my participants talked about the power of queer community. Yet, how could such a fractured collection of individuals imagine themselves as a shared community. My thesis confronts the expansion of human connection and also the limitations of said connections. It highlights the tensions that exist within

online space, especially when it comes to the question of online community. By highlighting that tension, one might believe that I am arguing the case for superiority of either online connection or offline connections. That is not the case, they each have their value and bring their own strengths to queer worldbuilding. However, confronting those tensions in my data was important for a full picture of participant's experiences online.

All of this comes to a head in the final chapter. During the chapter on collective identity, I take all the previous ideas that I have built on to make my final point. By using Amit (2010)'s three tenets of analysis for community, I discuss how those tenets apply to my participant's experience with online queer community. This analysis analyzes the positives and shortcomings of imagining such spaces as a large community The largest point in the internet's favor being it's strength in providing an area for queer worldbuilding. By having a space devoid of the typical heteronormative expectations and pressures cause by offline cultural expectations, the internet plays a role in queer identity building. Participants used the internet as a place to first test their feet in the waters, before entering it all together. This safe space allows for ideas to be considered, tinkered with, and improved upon in a way that is largely not possible offline. It also allows for a larger scope of collaboration and breadth of ideas than might be available to participants otherwise. The internet also serves as a place of reflection and self confirmation. By allowing a vision of what a queer life could look like, participant's are continually minded of life outside of a hetereonormative mold. Performativity in queer spaces means that participants have the ability to see other's presenting as queer online, and use that as confirmative to their own identity.

What does this all mean?

My research began from a very personal place: It originated from conversations between myself and friends I had met in online spaces. We collectively spent most of our adolescence talking in circles, wringing our hands in an effort to understand what it 'meant' to be queer. We were so unsure of what queer was, or if any of us truly even 'counted' as such. Despite our numerous conversations on the subject, a conclusive answer never seemed to be possible, much to our chagrin. Initially, I had hoped that my research might bring me closer to such an answer. However, after conducting my research, I am uncertain that such a clear answer even exists. In the end, I can only present what I observed and accept it as a broken partial truth.

Things are more complicated than I anticipated

Most of my preliminary observations into research on online space typically focused on one website or one subculture of a website. Initially I had thought this was too limiting of a perspective. No one I knew lived their whole internet life on one website, so doing so seemed a very narrow way to view internet usage. I had hoped to get a broader view of how each of my participants spent their time online to get a fuller picture. While I do not think this mindset was entirely incorrect, it made any attempts at categorization very difficult. The kinds of websites the women I interviewed were visiting varied quite a bit. This fractured reality of online space is a unique challenge to anyone who wants to conduct fieldwork online. As I discussed in my methodology section, 'the field' online is not so easily defined. It is essentially endless and ever

expanding, even focusing on a singular website means focusing on a niche within another niche. This was made doubly difficult by my choice of topic. Choosing something like sexuality is already rather personal and difficult enough to parse on its own without the additional level of difficulty added by doing fieldwork on the internet.

It is easy to imagine the internet as a monolith where participants only have a handful of choices that are doled out by large corporations. Instead, I imagine the internet as a city. In such a city the landscape is dominated more and more by large chain stores but smaller run shops and communal spaces still exist.

If one were to analyse a city like Montreal, the task might feel too great. Each person visits dozens of different places in the city and many of those places carry their own personality. If you were to talk to someone who lived their whole life near Mile End or Little Italy, they might feel left out if an analysis of Montreal focused on NDG or Pointe St Charles. Yet at the end of the day, they would all call themselves Montrealers. Similarly, while participants often visited varying websites online they imagined themselves all a part of one online community.

It was not uncommon for participants to make vague allusions to their activities online or simply stating "you know what I'm talking about" before continuing to their next point. Even though I was from a different country and had a different background, participants still considered me part of their online community. The idea of what a community can even be is complicated by online space. It allows both for greater closeness and separation from other members.

Participants often seemed to crave a sense of belonging from other queer people. They not only wanted to know that they were queer but they wanted to be amongst queer people. Yet many also faced confusion or uncertainty about their own identity. This caught me off guard, as I would have anticipated this from teenagers or those in their early twenties, but even some of the women who were closer to thirty felt complicated about their sexuality. That uncertainty made it harder for participants to put words to their feelings at times.

This need to feel a sense of belonging while also feeling ostracised by those same people was further complicated for many because of the intersection of their sexuality with other core identities. As Ariel told me, she did not know how to explain her sexuality without also talking about being an Asian woman. She also felt that being Asian and being queer sometimes came into conflict This friction arose when participants' ideas of who they were conflicted with a more homogenized imagining of queer. Often this friction resulted in participants attempting to prove their queerness through various means. The most prominent one being the achievement of having a girlfriend or having had physical intimacy with a woman. This was seen as undeniable proof of one's sexuality, a badge of success that one could point to. This was not the only one, as others looked to aesthetic markers, like haircuts or clothing choices to mark oneself out. Participants liked Edith worried about 'looking gay' enough to not be mistaken as gay.

Inter community frustrations/friction

Participants often felt frustration at the lack of correspondence between an idealized image of what it meant to be queer and their own experiences. In these cases queer was not simply a statement of sexual attraction. It was an aesthetic, an attitude, an 'eau de queer' that was highly sought after but difficult to encapsulate. While many participants couldn't fully describe what queer meant to them, they were quick to describe what they were lacking. They were too

feminine, too inexperienced, too nonwhite etc. These statements would make it easy to declare that the internet is a purely hostile place. Or that the internet helps to create this false homogenized idea of what queer means. Or that participants in queer space feel pressured to perform that ideal of queer in order to fit into a box.

Yet despite this, participants were quick to declare that online space was not all bad. Many had found life long friendships or even partners online. For participants like Karina it was their first experience outside of their sheltered upbringings. When challenged, participants revealed an ambivalence about online space and worried about how the online landscape might be changing for users who were now teenagers. Some seemed concerned that the scale between harm and help in online space would soon be tipping in the wrong direction.

Though it is not my place to make any moral judgement on the value of online space in queer identity, I want to point out that a tension exists between online space as a place for greater experimentation, and as a place for greater homogenization. How that tension might be resolved, if ever, is still to be seen.

The internet currently provides a space for young queer women to come to understand their sexuality. It accomplishes that by creating spaces to have uncomfortable conversations with their peers and to practice queer worldbuilding. While some questions remain on how useful such spaces might be in the future, they currently provide an invaluable resource to the many queer people that interact with them.

Future research projects

The COVID 19 pandemic brought a lot of boiling topics to the surface in a heightened state. While online community building has existed since the 1980s, the pandemic brought it into a new light as for many the internet became the only way to keep social ties. This meant that families and friends were able to stay in touch despite being kept apart. It also means that people have become more reliant on online technology than ever before. While this is not wholly a negative issue, it also comes at a time where large corporations such as Apple and Facebook are seeking to consolidate more and more of the digital landscape.

Through these large algorithmically run websites, the ability to find others is not simply a matter of tenacity but often what the website is willing to show a user. For marginalized groups like queer people, this often takes the toll of shadowbanning and being listed as adult material. Many of my participants worried that the online atmosphere of their youth was threatened or disappearing. This is an area ripe for further scholarship, as the digital landscape is quickly transforming. Many websites that were popular five or ten years ago have either decreased in popularity or ceased operation altogether.

This is especially the case for users of color and transgender users. As their intersectional identities mean that they face additional algorithmic suppression. A greater understanding of these groups would provide a rich topic, especially as many members are bullied or suppressed off of websites. Many of those with popular YouTube channels or Twitter accounts have

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APPENDIX A Recruitment Flyer

An MA student from the Concordia University department of Sociology & Anthropology is looking for research participants to contribute information to a study on queer sexuality and internet usage. With my research I hope to better understand the potential role that online spaces play in how young cisgender women define their sexuality. If you choose to aide in my research, you will be asked questions during an in person interview. The interview will take place in a safe public setting and will take approximately an hour.

If you are interested and fit the following criteria:

- You are a cisgender woman

- You identify as a lesbian/bisexual/pansexual/sapphic/wlw/queer or other label that means you are physically and/or romantically attracted to other women

- You use the internet often to engage in conversations concerning sexuality/identity/orientation in discussion boards or via social media.

- You are between the ages of 18 and 30

I'm interested in talking with you for the purpose of my research. Due to the nature of my research, all inquiries will be handled discretely and sensitively. If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact us.

Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com
Samantha Richterr
smrichter95@gmail.com

APPENDIX 2: Interview Guide

Preliminary Interview Guide

So before we begin, I'd like to remind you that this is completely voluntary. So if you ever feel uncomfortable or you don't want to answer a certain question, you can ask me to move to another question or we can stop all together.

- For the record, can you tell me your name and your age?
- What level of education are you at now?
- How long have you lived in Montreal? Where were you born/have you lived outside of Canada?
- What race or ethnicity would you classify yourself as?
- Which economic class would you put yourself in? Upper class, middle class, working class? (might need expand example if person confused/unsure)
- Would you say your family is more liberal or conservative?
- Would you classify yourself as christian, jewish, muslim, seikh, atheist, etc? Were you raised in a religious household?
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- What sexual orientation label do you currently use?

- What labels, if any, have you explored or used before the label you currently use? How long have you used this label?
- How often would you say you use the internet? Per day? Per week?
- When did you first start having regular access to the internet?
- What's a typical day on the internet for you like? Can you take me through it?
- Which websites do you frequent the most? Do you have a preferred social media account?
- What are your favorite kinds of posts to make or share? Do you go to certain websites specifically for a certain kind of content?
- Can you tell me when you first learned about (label)? Growing up did you know anyone who was (label)?
- Can you describe when and where you feel the most like (label) ? What situations make you feel that way? How would you describe that feeling?
- How important is your sexual identity to your overall identity? How would you feel if you didn't have somewhere to express it?
- How often, if at all, have you discussed your sexuality/are you "out" in online spaces? How would you describe the difference between an "out" and "closeted" person?
- Can you remember any responses you got to those kinds of posts/discussions? Can you remember any similar discussions you've had in offline spaces?
- If you hadn't had access to the internet when you were exploring your sexuality, how do you think that would have affected your development?

- Could you tell me the story of when you first came out to someone, online or offline?
- How did they react after you told them?
- Was there ever a time, while you were closeted or out, where you didn't post something because you were afraid of who might see? If so, could you tell me about that time?
- Think back on what you've told me and your past, if you could say anything to the person you were before you knew you were not straight what would you tell them? Would you do anything differently?
- I'm at the end of my questions, but I want you to give the chance to reflect on what we've talked about. Is there anything that I've asked that has surprised you or maybe was something you hadn't considered before?
- Is there anything you'd like to clarify or speak about more before the interview is over?

Then that will be the end of our interview. I thank you for your time and your information. I hope that this information will be useful to my data and I may be interested in contacting you for some follow up questions would you be comfortable with that? If you have any follow up questions for me or if you have anything else you want to add to what you've told me I have given you my contact information. You can also contact me if there is anything you want left out of my data or if you change your mind and decide you want to discontinue from this project.

Table of Illustrations