Common Queer Readers Band Together on YouTube

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In an ironic nod to queer bibliophiles (*queer* the antithesis of *heterosexual* in this instance), blogger Dave White encourages men both happily gay and literate to accept their isolated fates:

> If you're a reader and queer, you've sentenced yourself to a marginal, neobohemian […] existence. You're on your own. Outnumbered. You'll always be single and you'll have to dust a lot. So get used to it and learn to be happy. And if being happy alone isn't your bag, you could scour the earth for a boyfriend who likes to read too, trap him, train him, and then seclude yourself. (55)

White's cautionary tale reminded me of Douglas, my gay student who asked for recommendations for summer reading. I suggested Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, the pioneering serial-turned-novel starring some of the most memorable characters in (gay) fiction. Douglas admitted later through e-mail that he confirmed the novel's positive contemporary reception before committing: "Thanks for that recommendation! I saw that the book got good reviews when it came out, and I wanted to make sure people still like it so I went online to see, and now I know they do, otherwise I probably wouldn't read it."

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I respect that decision to seek out popular opinion, for many do look into the reception of new novels before cracking their spines. Of course, publishers print only positive reviews on book jackets: as I browsed through my local public library's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) book collection, I noticed that David Leavitt's novel *The Two Hotel Francforts* includes accolades from Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Michiko Kakutani and publications including *The Guardian*, *The New York Journal of Books*, and *The Daily Beast*. Although I respect these evaluations and enjoy Leavitt's writing, I also investigated *Francfort*'s reception among queer readers. By doing so, I retreated to the comfort of trusting those voices feeding into my cultural identity but who also may assign higher ratings to books by queer authors and with queer protagonists based only on those criteria. Edmund White, a pillar of gay authorship since the 1970s, added to the dust jacket's list of compliments; author Ken Harvey shared on *Lambda Literary* that "*The Two Hotel Francforts* stands with [Leavitt's] very best work"; and the novel became a finalist for both a Lambda Literary Award and for the Publishing Triangle's Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBT Fiction. Its attachment to *Lambda Literary* lends significant credibility because of the organization's reputation among the LGBT literati. From the inception of the *Lambda Book Review* in 1987 and the Lambda Literary Awards in 1989, to the founding of its Writers Retreat for Emerging LGBT Voices in 2007 and the LGBT Writers in School program in 2012, the organization has confirmed its mission statement that "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer literature is fundamental to the preservation of our culture, and that LGBTQ lives are affirmed when our stories are written, published and read."

Aside from the professional authors and publishers who contribute to *Lambda Literary* and other online venues catering to LGBT bibliophiles, ordinary readers who identify as queer expose their audiences to both new

and classic titles via channels on YouTube's BookTube network.[1] *Letterbomb*, for example, seeks to "spread understanding, tolerance and acceptance—as well as good books, of course"; Nicole, who maintains the *Woolfs Whistle* channel, feels "passionate about LGBTQ+ representation in every form"; and Chris Vigilante's channel "features videos on Books, Music, Writing, and music. Usually all very queer." *Paris Review* editorial associate Sarah Fay, however, disapproves of accepting reading recommendations from such neophytes. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Fay bemoans the dramatic decline of the book review perfected by George Orwell and Henry James, which evolved into the contemporary creative criticism of Michiko Kakutani and Geoff Dyer. In fact, Fay argues that the genre has atrophied in the digital age with the prolific rise of the customer review: "The idea, of course, is that every book is reviewed, regardless of quality, and that 'the people' get to have their say. In theory, customer reviews are quick, easy, egalitarian, and make the 'consumer' (as opposed to the reader) feel in control of his or her reading choices." However, these customer reviews, "heavy on opinion and light on insight," leave much lacking.

Although such elitist rhetoric deems ordinary readers incapable of astutely recommending reading materials, interactive BookTube channels have contributed to transforming reading from a solitary, isolated experience into a vivacious social activity. As platforms for computer-mediated communication, BookTube and other participatory networks serve as testing grounds for LGBT users to develop and affirm both individual and collective identities and to separate their experiences and sensibilities from those of heterosexuals, such as by documenting their sexual awakenings (Bennett) and critiquing the impact of state politics and

[1] For the purposes of this article, I use the term "queer" to refer to these subjects because they identify as such in their biographies and videos.

social structures on legislation affecting the LGBT population (Mitra). At the same time, drawing from Cynthia Selfe's pioneering work on the contributions of marginalized groups to public discourse through digital technologies, Jesse Fox and Katie Warber confirm the existing research through their interviews with queer users of Facebook: "the voices of visible LGBT+ individuals may be silenced in many heteronormative networks on mainstream SNSs [social networking sites] as closeted individuals remain silent; those who are partially out voice their support but often do not clarify their identity; and those who are out self-select out of these networks" (93-94). In other words, language application in SNSs provides opportunities for queer participants to capture the complexity of the lives, trends, reading habits, and perspectives on the power dynamics between themselves and the heterosexual population. By drawing attention to the discourses of gender and sexuality as channels for establishing and challenging power relations, scholars working with language and gender continue to consider how "sexuality and sexual identity are represented linguistically in a variety of discourse genres" (Cameron and Kulick 12). Through this lens, I consider how queer readers who maintain BookTube channels both produce and shape a literate culture through their definitions of "queer literature" and their vitriolic censure of heterosexual readers who present that literature poorly.

Of course, these channels alone fail to represent the entire spectrum of online LGBT book discussions. Rather, their hosts serve as members of a larger discourse community of common readers who create shared meaning through reading and conversing. According to Geoff Hall, "readers reading literature are not just constructing interpretations of books in a vacuum or as an end in itself, they are also (for example) co-constructing identities in contexts of reading and booktalk" (334). Studying ordinary, unprompted readers gives license to scholars to focus on "questions of *meaning* and *value*" in naturally occurring and spontaneous discourse:

> Taking the reading process as it comes forces the researcher to follow the research participants' lead, learning about the preoccupations evident in their discussion rather than imposing an alien agenda upon them [….] Moreover, this learning process is actively facilitated when research participants respond to texts […] in their own way, rather than being restricted to a stereotyped set predetermined by the researcher. (Swann and Allington 249)

Therefore, through the interactive, collaborative nature of BookTube, queer bibliophiles become agents in the continuing formation of their sexual identities as they engage with the books, with one another, and with those who comment on their videos. Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin call this mode of communication the "back-and-forthness" of rhetoric, "the *actual* dialectic" inviting continual writing and responding "in an argument that could potentially go on forever" (W375-76). Through this "back-and-forthness," enthusiasts of LGBT fiction come to their literary experiences through a rhetoric seeking to both educate and separate from heterosexual readers.

The Cultural Capital of Literacy among the LGBT Population

My curious turn to recent LGBT self-improvement books counseling readers about seeking out mentors and allies, coming out at various ages, and securing healthy sexual relationships distressingly reveals that they overlook reading fiction as a means of positive self-fashioning (see, among others, Belge and Bieschke, Dawson, Hardin, Huegel, Isay, and Teich). As Deborah Brandt argues in the opening of her study exploring the literacy-learning experiences of cross-sections of Wisconsin's population, "To think of literacy as a staple of life […] is to appreciate how central reading and writing can be to people's sense of security and

well-being, even to their sense of dignity" (1). Ignoring this aspect disregards acquiring and using literacy as salutary and intimate acts in which to engage.

To add a scholarly perspective, New Literacy Studies (e.g., Gee, Street, and Lankshear and Knobel) and feminist rhetorical scholarship (e.g., Long, Radway, and Royster and Kirsch) advance an ideological model of reading establishing the nature of literacy practices as dependent upon negotiated social practices. Thus these schools of thought demonstrate that leisurely readers promote and personally respond to their reading materials in the sense of *consuming* texts: By drawing from Michel de Certeau's theories of consumer capitalism, Ted Striphas suggests that readers actively and committedly produce both self and society as they use the content of books to understand and further their everyday interests and personal experiences in order to "make do in unique and unexpected ways" (179). In both theory and practice, then, readers adopt these texts in order to develop the figured elements of their identities by refusing to accept their reading and other educational practices indiscriminately, choosing instead to use these texts for expediency and self-preservation. Influencing this argument, Certeau referred to such actions as "tactics" and detailed how reading as a tactic encourages one to "poach" ideas or beliefs for such purposes (174). Thus Certeau lends credence to the roles of choice and interest in reading as facets of everyday life, that is, as communicative and cultural forms giving shape and meaning to quotidian domestic and social existence and interactions.

Specific to the adult LGBT population outside of formal academic settings, literacy levels and reading habits remain a general mystery. In fact, the dearth of information about their diversions beyond screen and speaker draws primarily from ethnographies of public library patrons and book discussion groups, revealing that these readers often investigate their interests, differences, and political allegiances through the intersection of

text and conversation (see Greenblatt, Pruitt, and John Vincent). For example, while interviewing a cohort of five middle-adulthood gay men about turning to fiction as a "refuge from a dominating heterosexual logic" during their primary school years, educational researcher Mark Vicars found that they discovered that "Literacy became a powerful tool for exploring our sexuality and for discovering about being gay without the fear of reprisal" (320). Among this group, "textual encounters" became a means by which they understood themselves as readers and ascribed the cultural significance of their literacy to their social and personal identities (314). The complexities of identity formation through literacy practices and patterns in reading habits thus become visible through interactions with others and the values or mindset forged during those interactions.

In this context, literacy practices and events drive readers to challenge and reinforce power dynamics both inside and beyond traditional and nontraditional learning environments. Contributing to an understanding of this relationship between books and their readers, Jim Collins links contemporary literacy practices with the nontraditional learning environments of popular culture venues. Through a number of changes contributing to a thriving reading public, readers determine what they should know in order to be considered literate from cultural authorities such as the film industry, bookstore displays, televised book clubs, and online vendors. This progression of becoming (culturally) literate, according to Collins, emphasizes continual social processes of self-making, self-transformation, and self-actualization in conjunction with others in personal, public, and digital settings, "Delivery systems [that] provide not just the books but also the sites, the talk, and the sense of belonging to a community of readers" (12). In this respect, multiple desires to learn, escape, and form social connections contribute to a lucrative reading experience.

Collins' emphasis on *community* is pivotal to understanding interactive identity formation through literacy events: As reading communities have

expanded and taken global form through digital media, many LGBT readers find variants of their experiences and cultures as members of an extensive social readership. In his historical account of gay and lesbian communication networks in the mid-twentieth century, Martin Meeker recaptures the moment when often isolated gay men and lesbians challenged the sluggish dissemination of information by creating and connecting through social networks via the circulation of print (15). For example, the San Francisco-based Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian political rights organization, compiled, mimeographed, stapled, and distributed *The Ladder* newsletter nationally between 1956 and 1972 as a means of increasing visibility and sharing resources in order to acquire stability, power, and recognition. Likewise, as mass-market paperbacks emerged in the 1950s, lesbians turned to both fiction and nonfiction such as Ann Aldrich's memoirs *We Walk Alone through Lesbos' Lonely Groves* and *We, Too, Must Love,* whose circulation contributed to her receiving more than six hundred letters from women seeking additional knowledge and resources. While such networks gradually overcame obstacles as communication channels expanded and improved, these innovations "established a clearer set of guidelines instructing people how to connect and what engaging in that process might mean for one's sense of who they were and what they might become" (Meeker 256). As mechanisms for welfare and security, these communication networks contributed to an awareness of belonging through shared reading.

With thousands of books published annually by both small and large presses, the search for titles reflecting personal tastes may become an exercise in seeking out the advice of other queer readers through such communication networks. One can begin with commercial websites such as *LGBTbookshop* and *That Gay Site,* which simply sell books without recommending that their customers read them. However, exchanges on vlogs such as those on BookTube provide a variation of book club dialogues inviting multiple perspectives. Drawing from Lauren Berlant's

concept of the "intimate public sphere," the sense of shared community among even disconnected readers, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo identify participants in mass reading events as "citizen readers" (211). That is, book discussions, author readings, and other means of showcasing literacy in public venues connect readers through common experiences. In this respect, conversations published in online forums themselves become public events inflected with ideas about the socially transformative effects of reading.

Following these ethnographic leads, I ventured onto BookTube in order to determine how the following queer readers go about discussing LGBT texts and instructing their heterosexual peers about how to follow suit:

Joseph: *The Boy Who Cried Books*
Ivan: *thedragonshoard*
Nicole: *Woolfs Whistle*
Danika Leigh Ellis: self-titled channel
Josh: *Letterbomb*
Luce: *Things Lucy Reads*
Adriana: *Perpetual Pages*

Such reading, writing, and communicating contribute to the development and refinement of what Jonathan Alexander terms one's *critical sexual literacy*, which "asks us to take seriously the sexual and sexuality as significant dimensions through which we can understand the relationship between literacy and power" (17). As Alexander analyzes how markers of sexual identity are complexly articulated within the lives and discourses of student writers, I contribute by exploring how common queer readers challenge normative identity categories through a separatist ethos critiquing narratives of domination or oppression by the cisgender and heterosexual literary marketplace. By calling them to task for policing sexual orientation, queer BookTubers advocate for themselves and their peers by instigating public discussions centering on the metaphor of the closet, the "defining structure for gay oppression of this [twentieth] century" (Sedgwick 71).

The Separatist Ethos of Queer Reading

On April 4, 2016, Ivan uploaded a grievance against "cishet authors" and "cishet reviewers," that is, heterosexuals whose gender identity matches that of their sex assigned at birth. Currently transitioning from female to male, Ivan has reached a tipping point. Among several objections against their pedestrian writing, he vilifies them for neglecting to alert readers immediately to the sexual orientation of LGBTQIA+ characters, that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersexual, asexual, and so on, choosing instead to base the work's suspense on revealing that identity marker. He also encourages them to interview members of the LGBTQIA+ population in order to avoid portraying these protagonists both inaccurately and insensitively, and he challenges them to render plots other than coming-out stories because "sometimes you just need to see characters who are like you being able to rise up and save the day." The result became "The Angry Queer Book Tag," which concludes with an invitation to his queer BookTube peers to follow suit under the same title by disrupting heteronormative centers of power in the book industry through their own literacy practices.[2]

I begin with this diatribe because of Ivan's unapologetic rhetoric calling for queer readers to challenge heterosexual discourse and to amplify their voices collectively. Before addressing specific grievances, he clarifies that the title of this post is not "'angry *comma* queer,' it's the 'Angry Queer,' all one thing." Then, in a separatist turn, he warns his audience that "if you are a cisgender, heterosexual BookTuber, I really do

[2] To date, only Chris Vigilante has uploaded the same tag, but because of poor sound quality, I was unable to follow.

not want you to do this tag. Because it's not for you. It is for queer BookTubers to talk about queer lit. Just let us have this space." Kate O'Riordan and David J. Phillips write in their introduction to *Queer Online: Media, Technology, and Sexuality* that scholarship analyzing queer representation in digital media "highlight[s] the ongoing importance of place, space, embodiment, and everyday life in the construction and production of queer techno-practices" (4). By using first-person plural pronouns as one of the collectively marginalized—queer BookTubers—and imperatively addressing his viewers, Ivan claims this space by imagining an audience disrespectful toward literature written by and for those with whom he identifies and toward the misuse of his affirming identity category: under the illusion of camaraderie, the misappropriation of queerness actually erases the radical potential, the differences, the political struggles, and the anger.

Scholars have problematized "queer" across the disciplines to the point that it seems to have lost both its force and its meaning, especially among those separate from the academy's abstruse theories of sexuality. In his introduction to the spring/summer 2008 issue of the *Massachusetts Review*, John Emil Vincent reminds the magazine's readers that academics usurped the term only after it had been popularized by activists, the "poets, fiction writers, video artists, theorists of many stripes, historians, essayists, and lumping them all together in a category: thinkers, feelers, and, well, writers" (9). In fact, Vincent continues, these same activists "vibrated very pleasantly to the term for over twenty years before we were told that the garage door was closed, the car parked, and us, sitting in it, idling" (9). This "idling" took place as scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, David Halperin, and Teresa de Lauretis shaped and developed Queer Theory, a school of thought building upon challenges to the idea that gender constitutes part of the essential self and esoterically complicating the intersections among gender, sexuality, and other identity constructs. Thus, through this issue of the *Massachusetts Review*, Vincent

and the activists reclaim "queer," reinforcing its meaning as "ALIVE: inventive, thoughtful, artful, delighted and delightful" (9), but not angry.

Vincent curiously omits readers from this list of *queer* activists equally able to create textual meaning, but Ivan and his fellow readers reinvest in the term as the empowering antithesis of *cisgender* and *heterosexual*. Rather than problematizing *queer*, they find solidarity and safety under its comprehensive aegis. In his post "Queer Fantasy TBR," for example, Ivan asks his followers to understand that he uses the term "queer" in his reviews when "I don't know whether the character is specifically gay or bisexual or any other of those sexual orientation labels. It's just I don't know their sexual orientation specifically and 'queer' is an overall umbrella term for the LGBTQIA+ community." With similar language, Joseph explains in "Queer Lit! Importance of Representation!" that "people use 'queer' as an umbrella term because it's easier than saying all those letters." Those who prefer the letters, however, rely on particular classifications. Adriana identifies as a "23 year-old queer Hispanic vlogger," more specifically as "Pan[sexual]/Aro[mantic]/NB [non-binary]." Similarly, Josh, a *Letterbomb* contributor, eschews the umbrella term in order to identify as panromantic, agender, demi-androsexual, admitting that "It's a bit complicated but we'll go with it." Through both a conflation and a parsing out of identity markers suitable for explicating their complex sexual orientations, these BookTube personalities critique the heteronormative, binary categorizations of *gay* and *straight* by articulating fluid, even multiple sexual identities made sense of through additional categorizations of sexual desires and practices determined through critical reflection.

While defining sexual orientation requires a particular terminology, defining preferred reading material appears much simpler. According to "What Is LGBTQ+ Literature?" narrated by Nicole, "The only books that you can count as LGBTQ books are the ones that have a queer protagonist or are the ones that have a lot of point of views, and one of the characters

that has a point of view is queer." By accusing reviewers of egregiously referencing popular series such as *Harry Potter*, *Throne of Glass*, and *Mortal Instruments* because of the mere presence of queer characters, she argues that "Naming these books as works of LGBTQ literature is quite a bold move." Joseph concurs. In his list of favorite "Queer Side Characters," he directly references Nicole's definition, that "'queer literature' is a book with a queer main character—a queer protagonist specifically—and a book that has a straight main character but with a side character that is queer, that is not a queer book." Still, he finds comfort in unexpectedly discovering queer side characters such as Aech in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and Chandresh and Tsukiko in Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, for "not only is it a good book, also it's freaking representing me in a little way." In light of the complex theories seeking to determine how and why readers identify with fictional characters, Jonathan Cohen states it well, that "*identification* is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them" (245). Such direct identification both haunts and comforts readers seeking out meaning from LGBT novels. In this way, Joseph forges vital attachments to other queer readers by demonstrating how these interactions influence the relationship one enjoys with a book. For him, a sense of self is at stake in his reading.

For Nicole and Joseph, the overt representation of queer protagonists with whom to identify defines the genre, while Danika Leigh Ellis problematizes the definition by turning directly to the author. Addressing in "Diverse Characters vs. Diverse Authors" her personal challenge to read books only by people of color throughout 2015, Ellis ponders over the criteria by which to identify such novels. In a compelling epiphany, she realizes like Nicole and Joseph that she defines *queer literature* by content alone, but her apprehension lies in authentic portrayals of the characters. While reading novels with queer female characters, Ellis trusts

her intuition: "I am a white lesbian, so when I see depictions of lesbians and of queer women in books, I feel like I'm informed enough to know whether it's an offensive depiction." Conversely, she must commit to the self-identification of authors of color in order to establish their credibility, for "I would rather read books where people are representing themselves in some way because even if it's not their exact life, which it probably isn't, it still seems less likely to rely on cheap stereotypes." This trepidation cuts widely across demographics, for readers often avoid novels that differ from them ideologically or culturally (see Barstow and Long). Indeed, Ellis cedes that male and/or heterosexual authors *may* portray her sexual orientation accurately and unoffensively, but she doubts her own ability to draw that conclusion.

On June 16, 2015, BookTuber Charr Frears uploaded the video "I Don't Like Reviewing LGBT Books," which articulates a similar argument about reviewing ideologically challenging novels. Frears' anxiety stems from how to approach unfamiliar subjects such as "transgender, LGBT books that a lot of us are reading these days, a lot of us are commenting on, and my personal opinions and awkwardness when it comes to reviewing those types of books." This video was inspired by Simon Packham's young adult novel *Only We Know*, whose transgender protagonist, Lauren, maneuvers through school without the expected negative social consequences. For Frears, this portrayal of Lauren "came across as very trivialized, and it didn't highlight the suffering that people go through, the unacceptance, the bullying, anything like that." Thus the novel falls outside of the realm of Frears' reality, a reflection of her own world in which transgender subjects certainly contend with both physical, social, and psychological obstacles. Invoking Louise Rosenblatt's definition of the aesthetic process taking place during reading, when "the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (25), Frears distances herself from the unfamiliar by denouncing her inability to identify with the non-

heterosexual: "I *can't* really comment on the transgender perspective, I *can't* really say what it's like because I haven't experienced that myself." She thus abandons her agency as a reader by refusing to comprehend the text. While not addressing Frears specifically, Ivan condemns such thinking and the reluctance of misguided readers to empathize in "The BookTube Code of Silence towards LGBTQIA+ Lit": "What dystopian governments have you overthrown? What wizarding schools have you gone to? If you're not going to review something because you haven't experienced the same thing as a character, then you're just saying that you're ignorant and you're not going to do anything to educate yourself about it." In this ethical challenge, he rejects Frears' proposed weakness for understanding a subject position contradicting her own.

Although inherent in her complaint lies the conviction that queer authors and readers have specific and possibly enigmatic ways of knowing and behaving, none of the thirteen comments responding to her confession condemns this professed shortcoming. Rather, they encourage her to enjoy, learn from, and discuss LGBT novels with LGBT readers. In fact, Nicole assures Frears that "the worries that you have are completely normal and should be present in all people's minds, when they do or say anything, because purposefully hurting anyone around us is not only ill-mannered, but also unpleasant to ourselves." She also reminds Frears of BookTube as an open forum, indicating that "You have a wide variety of people watching you, so communicating with them is the way." In other words, Nicole reinforces Frears' anxiety: audiences will easily gain access to the reviews that Frears posts, reviews disseminated widely and publicly via YouTube, thus exposing her vulnerability to critique.

At the root of Frears' complaint lies a question of difference: heterosexual readers often locate LGBT fiction at the margins of mainstream literature, but queer readers celebrate that difference. In fact, Joseph revels in it. In a "Booktube Partner Tag!!! w/ WoolfsWhistle," who asked him to identify the category of wizard to which he would belong in

the *Harry Potter* universe—muggle-born, half-blood, or pure-blood—he proposes muggle-born because

> you know how when you're gay, you, like, get like, the random lottery, like of being gay, and everyone else in your family is pretty much straight? Well, I feel that would be, like, muggle-borns, right, like they would randomly win the magical genes and they would be a wizard. Well, I randomly won the magical genes, and I am gay.

Further emphasizing the debate between difference and universality, Josh reveals in the introduction to his "Classic Queer Books | UK Edition" that he disapproves of labeling novels for particular audiences:

> I don't quite like the term 'queer book' or 'LGBT+ book' because it implies that they are only for members of the queer community while every other book is for everyone, and that's not quite right because an excellent book should be there to be read by absolutely everyone regardless of their gender or sexuality or lack thereof.

Thus he and his peers confront the paradox stated by Frears: LGBT novels, replete with tensions and conflicts, afford numerous prospects for appreciation and social action among all readers.

The erasing of such differences, however, sparked a hostile lashing toward the "BookTube Code of Silence," initiated in early 2015 by Luce. Reflecting on the past year of posting and listening to reviews, she struggles to understand "why people are so hesitant to say that a book is a queer book. Is it because they're afraid they'll lose followers if they openly admit to liking a book with a gay character or a queer character? Why, why is this a thing?" These rhetorical questions contributed to lengthy paraphrases by both Ivan and Adriana, with all three invoking the metaphor of the closet. For Luce, refusing to divulge sexual orientation

equates to "forcing that book into a closet that it was never meant to be in in the first place. You don't know that one of your followers isn't being raised in the worst kind of situation possible for a queer person, you don't know that they might need that book desperately because it might be exactly the kind of book that relates to their life." In similar language, Ivan asserts that these reviewers are "putting that book in a closet, and something that the LGBTQIA community really needs right now is recognition, it needs visibility." Adriana adds that "failing to mention a character's sexuality or identity would just further promote closet culture, which dictates that people in the queer community have to come out, and it has to be a big reveal, and we have to sit down our friends and family and send out a post on social media." For these three BookTubers, hiding sexual orientation denies queer participation and representation in mass culture.

The issue, it seems, often centers on politeness, on the unwillingness of readers to ruin a plot by revealing the important narrative twist of characters unveiling their queerness. For example, TeaLeavesAndBook Bindings confessed following Luce's video that "The biggest two reasons I've not mentioned queer characters were 1. They were side/background characters (*Ruin and Rising*, *Heir of Fire*, *Dreams of Gods and Monsters*) or 2. I thought it might spoil the book (*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*)." It's true. With Benjamin Alire Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante* as a test case, I listened to nine BookTube reviews and discovered that none referenced the sexual orientations of the eponymous protagonists, only their "developing friendship." In such a review, Sophia, who maintains *thebookbasement* channel, assures her audience that "This review is going to be spoiler free" (also see videos posted on the channels *RemusReads*, *cloudsofbooks*, *Bookish Wardo*, *frandalfthegrey*, *leaninglights*, *jennaclark*, *RecMeBS*, and *Thoughts on Tomes*). Similar respondents to Ivan, such as 1book1review, do admit that "While it may help you and others who are looking for queer characters find them, the

whole book and twist of the book might be spoiled," and frankly, "I know I am bad at mentioning that there is a queer character in a book also when it is not part of the twist. And I am trying to change that, but like you said, sometimes it doesn't register with me as special." But for Ivan and his peers, suspense built simply upon disclosing an identity label demonstrates poor writing: "To me, and a lot of other queer readers, a character's SO [sexual orientation] /GI [gender identity] is on the same level as their favorite color or food—it's just a part of who they are and it's something that shouldn't need a big reveal. When authors do make some big reveal of a character's SO/GI, it doesn't feel genuine."

Especially emerging from these posts come better understandings of diversity within the queer community through the multifaceted composition of LGBT characters and the enigmas of identity politics. Introducing his audience to Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante*, Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath*, and Lucina Stone's *Santa Muerte* in "Seeing Ourselves Culturally in Books!!" Joseph considers his reading practices from the perspective of a queer Latino. Specific to *Aristotle and Dante*, for example, he reflects on his identification with Dante, who struggles less with his gay identity than with his Latino identity. For Joseph,

> It's not, like, a problem or questions of identity with the Mexican-American identity, it's, like, not because of shame or anything, it's just I hadn't felt Latino enough or Mexican-American enough […] It was a very big problem for me and that's just, like, a very specific problem for a young queer Latino to have.

Adding to the turmoil, Daniela, the Mexican/Italian protagonist of Stone's *Santa Muerte*, travels back in time from 2030 to 1923, because "you don't really get to see someone who's not white go back in time because, mainly, because who freaking wants to go back in time when you're not white because that's just not gonna be fun." However, one means of addressing past convictions about sexual orientation, through historical

fiction, invites readers to contemplate the complexities of and respond emotionally to contemporary social issues. Nicole encourages her audience to read queer historical fiction because "to see yourself or to see concrete people like yourself in history is an extremely important experience." Furthermore, in an homage to lesbian historical fiction and romance, Nicole enjoys the irony of these authors who borrow tropes from heterosexual romance novels, tropes such as arranged marriages, cross-dressing, and violations of sumptuary laws, in order to explore themes of sexual expression in repressive settings "and make it logical, and own it." Such novels encourage debate about nationality, class, race, and other social constructs shared by members of the LGBT community, all complemented by literary merit and the urge for others to share in the artistic fashioning of meaning.

The Future of Queer Reading Communities

Reinforcing Charles Schuster's definition of literacy as the "ability to make oneself heard and felt, to signify," so that literacy can be "the way in which we make ourselves meaningful not only to others but through ourselves to others," queer readers use novels to organize and share their experiences across geographies and cultures (227). But even more so, by engaging in social practices unique to the digitized spaces of contemporary life, these bibliophiles disappoint Sarah Fay, who, as indicated earlier, regrets that digital spaces invite democracy boldly into the public sphere. These discussions nevertheless provide a medium of social exchange helping these readers define themselves and formulate responses to the larger world. Indeed, their insights into and reflections on gay culture through these vlogs created by common readers entice us to re-examine who has the right or authority to participate in knowledge-making processes.

Because members of book discussion groups share meanings and stories in order to build and perpetuate communities, even online, Ken Plummer's thesis proves useful, that "for narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear; that for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics. The one—community—feeds upon and into the other—story" (87). Just as solitary readers find themselves in concert with their social contexts and processes, they achieve self-awareness and self-improvement from their social interactions. By putting cultural production in the hands of ordinary readers, BookTube enables participation in online discourse production, consumption, and dissemination plus the cultivation of imaginative and critical skills. In this respect, the literary production and reception of LGBT culture occurs in an often propitious, occasionally cacophonous space enabling readers to recognize shared experiences in works of fiction and to confront definitions of that experience.

Still, on January 1, 2012, Natazzz, who maintained the blog *LGBT Reading*, thanked all participants who contributed to GLBT Challenge 2011. Although fifty people contributed by writing and posting at least one review, "not enough people indicated they wanted to continue the LGBT Reading Challenge for another year. Thus, this is the final post you will read on here." Sad but true—to date, no one has since posted on this site. To be the good gay citizens that authors and readers want us to be, we shouldn't keep our reading to ourselves.

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