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Mary Robertson: *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBT Identity*

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Queer. This is where Mary Robertson begins her analysis of LGBTQ youth and their relationships with and within the Spectrum community center, a resource and gathering space for LGBTQ youth. Queer, Robertson describes, is "both to describe a way of being in the world that opposes normal, as well as to describe sexual conduct and behavior" (Robertson 2019, p. 6). Queerness, as described by her interview subjects, pervades the Spectrum space. Queerness is its essence, its community, and its joy. Robertson notes that other social science studies on LGBTQ youth have focused heavily on "risk and resilience", therefore coloring LGBTQ discourse in a way that highlights suffering. Robertson emphasizes the importance of *belonging* and *becoming* for LGBTQ youth, and how physical space, media representation, and linguistic history matters in their understanding of their gender and sexuality.

Robertson, rather artfully, nestles her work into the empty space in LGBTQ youth research; how youth *become* gendered, how they *become* sexual, and how they come to embrace the identity language that fits them with the most precision. Robertson not only adds to the existing research, but also weaves in and out of it, highlighting its relevance, but also indicates where it proves to be archaic. Using "queerness" as an analytic more adequately represents the youth she interviews, and allows her to present their stories and experiences in their capaciousness. Understanding the ethical quandary involved in researching youth populations, Robertson, responsibly, offers total transparency in regards to her research methods. She does this not only as a responsible research practice, but also as a way of participating in the research she conducted. She uses this

participatory method to offer reflexivity to her understanding of the word "queer" that appreciates its embeddedness in culture, bodies, and communities.

A discourse she notices among the youth she observes is the constant negotiation of gender and sexual identity, particularly in regards to how those identities are expressed. Aesthetic expression has occupied a prominent position in LGBTQ public discourse, as photographer Susan Kuklin (2014) centers in her photo essay book *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. Like Robertson, Kuklin comments on the crucial idea of *belonging* that the subjects she interviewed grappled with. Kuklin quotes a youth she interviews, writing, "…they call people like me "tomboy", which is basically a butch lesbian. I guess people had questions about me. I was questioning me too…I tried to make people think I was straight. I tried to be a girly-girl, just to fit in. No matter how pretty I looked, I felt like I was not right in a physical sense" (Kuklin 2014, p. 6). Kuklin and Robertson both find importance in centering this physical *becoming*. Robertson finds great importance in this *becoming* stage not only as a teleological time of transforming into an adult, but rather as a crucial time in its own right. Robertson (2019, p. 23) writes, "If we push back against the idea of adolescence being a hormone-crazed stopover between childhood and adulthood and instead embrace the motion that the process of becoming is as important as who we becoming, we can learn something from the youth of Spectrum". This idea offers an interesting contrast to an early-2000s study on the consistency of youth LGBTQ identity (Rosario et al. 2004). Rosario et al. found that identity continues to change even after an LGBTQ youth "comes out". This data, combined with Robertson's analysis, would suggest that rather than youth being a time of progressing towards a "destination", that identity is a continual process of *becoming*. This book is about that becoming.

Robertson begins by taking us on a written tour of the "Spectrum" LGBTQ youth center, which serves as the

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crucial "place" of becoming and belonging for the thirty-three interviewees she engages with. This chapter aids the reader in understanding Robertson's findings in the context of the environment and time that she conducted her research. She notes the center's "bright and clean" and "antiseptic" feel that characterizes the new Spectrum space since the organization moved. This description is important and emphasizes her point that the newness of the space is a turn-off to many of the youth who attended the previous center, with its "ratty old couches, graffiti-covered walls, and an actual DJ booth, not just a PA behind a counter" (Robertson 2019, p. 34). This difference between spaces is not only indicative of the youth's discomfort with change, but signals their visceral, necessary connection to their history. This connection to history, Robertson will argue in other chapters, makes the term "queer" so important to many. The connection is evident in the imagery of the rainbow flag, the pink triangle, and the reclaiming of the same type of language—spat at their ancestors like venom —that they now reclaim for their own self-understanding. Researchers took up this concept in a study published in 2016 that examined LGBTQ youth's personal and communal connection to symbols such as the rainbow flag. Jennifer M. Wolowic et al. (2016) found that the flag served as a foundation upon which to build shared meaning of community, as well as to share in the ethos and collectivity of queer history. This is very much consistent with the sense that Robertson got from the youth she interviewed.

In chapter two, Robertson explains the "straightening device" of heteronormativity, particularly in its ability not only to dictate normative sexuality, but also in its mandate of gender normativity. This effect conflates and combines gender and sexuality, provoking crises for LGBTG youth who struggle with contradictions within themselves based on this standard, which lead them to believe that if they don't identify along binary lines, that something is wrong with them. Robertson argues that the physical and affective space of the Spectrum center is where LGBTQ youth can come to learn the language of the community; to understand the nuances of gender and sexuality through the identity terms and descriptors that they learn there. Robertson emphasizes Spectrum as a "refuge for young people who struggle to find a sense of belonging at school and in their communities" (Robertson 2019, p. 66).

In chapter three, Robertson explores the youth's experiences with becoming gendered. She allows us to experience secondhand a daily routine in the Spectrum center called "check-in". This event, she argues, normalizes the discussion of gendered language, and serves to "socialize youth and adults alike [into the] queer milieu that is Spectrum" (Robertson 2019, p. 67). Through this lens of gender and habit forming, Robertson illustrates the concept that the gender binary pervades all of the institutions that the youth

interact with, such as bathrooms, schools, etc. By creating a space of choice and freedom in regards to gender, Robertson argues that space is being made for youth to feel safe from the discursive violence that they experience when interacting with these binary institutions. In their 2012 study, researchers Michelle Dietert and Dianne Dentice found that transgender youth, even when supported by their families, tended to occupy a gender expression and understanding that existed somewhere outside of the male/female binary. This finding fits well with Robertson's analysis; youth at Spectrum engaged in gender discourse that dismantled the gender binary, because that binary depends on flattening gender, sexuality, and gender identity, which, as Robertson argues in chapter two, is a tool of heteronormativity.

In her fourth chapter, Robertson takes a broader look at queer media and its impact on LGBTQ youth communities. She describes one youth—Aaron—and his story of watching *Brokeback Mountain* for the first time. She quotes Aaron, writing, "I guess not only did it help me be a little bit more comfortable with myself—with my sense of self—but um, I guess that kind of opened the world to other films" (Robertson 2019, p. 92). Through this example, as well as other interviews, she explains how the youth described queer media as showing them a roadmap, or a history book, to see what queer desire and relationship building could look like for them. Before youth had these depictions in the media, Robertson explains, their future looked like a question mark because they did not have access to narratives that illustrated their experiences. A book by Christopher Pullen (2014) called "Queer Youth and Media Cultures" examines these media relationships, too, but finds very little info on positive lesbian and bisexual media representations. Following Robertson's analysis, this disparity likely impacts the self-image of lesbian and bisexual youth.

Finally, in her fifth chapter, Robertson explores the importance of family in LGBTQ youth's lives. She also considers that this generation of children is the first generation where it is possible that not only one child in the class has queer parents. As a product of her own self-reflection in conjunction with her research, she considers how else the term "queer" could be applied to family structures. Do you have to *be* queer to exist queerly? She argues that queerness pervades solely identity and is illustrative of a broader norm breaking and alternativeness in family structures and life paths. Social scientist and youth researcher Katherine Kuvalanka (2013) considers these questions of queerness in her empirical study, "The "Second Generation": LGBTQ Youth with LGBTQ Parents". Kuvalanka found that in most cases, LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ parents found their parents' identities to be a positive factor in their development in regards to support and guidance, following a social constructionist approach to childhood development. Robertson's observations at

Spectrum seem to support this, as many LGBTQ youth expressed "deep anxiety and stress about the anticipation of talking to their parents about their sexual and/or gender identity" (Robertson 2019, p. 123).

Robertson (2019, p. 139) leaves us in a moment. In a changing world, she says, "LGBTQ politics—and, by default, all LGBTQ-identified people—occupy the middle ground of a battle between normal and queer". How, she asks, will LGBTQ politics proceed when identity categories—the very things that activism is often based off of—are in constant flux and evolution? Robertson's answer to this question is in exactly the place where her book started: "queer". Queerness, she argues, can accommodate these identity changes while still providing community and a ground zero for activism. However, Robertson's image for queer futurity is, of course, colored by her brief foray into queer life. Queer-oriented activism is its own kind of optimism, which comes from an experience with occupying a space, like Spectrum, which is set up to foster community. Outside of the walls of Spectrum, however, "queer community" is often fragmented; the existence of *communities*, plural, is necessitated by geographical distance, racial difference, socioeconomic disparities, opportunity, religion, and other life factors that make our lives different from each other's. The umbrella of queerness—though an interesting analytic—is one of many intersecting factors that make up the lives of people who experience and embody queerness. Robertson notes that much of social science research on LGBTQ youth takes place in resource centers like Spectrum. Within the context of youth-specific, urban spaces, her argument is crucial; queer youth build gender, sexual, and otherwise relational identities through direct engagement with and resistance to the gender binary. However, an LGBTQ youth in rural America experience a particular type of isolation which queerness cannot yet reach. Queer, in such a context, may still wound them with its deeply historical sting. Future scholarship may tackle these disparities; how we connect urban queerness to rural, isolated homosexual and transgender identity? How do we bridge the gap between these two worlds; one seemingly suspended in time, the other, speeding towards futurity? These questions of temporality, geography, and LGBTQ youth are important in accounting for gender and sexuality in their multitudes.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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