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## Intentionally Public, Intentionally Private: Gender Non-Binary Youth on Tumblr and the Queering of Community Literacy Research

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## *Issues in Community Literacy*

# **Intentionally Public, Intentionally Private: Gender Non-Binary Youth on Tumblr and the Queering of Community Literacy Research**

*Megan Opperman*

### *Abstract*

In this essay, I uncover the ways in which the non-binary gender community challenges what we know about privacy and reciprocity within community engaged work. Using my experience as a program coordinator for an LGBTQ youth center, I illustrate the myriad of privacy needs of non-binary gender teens and young adults who expect to be simultaneously both public and private in their online writing on Tumblr. I argue that for the non-binary gender community on Tumblr, direct contact from the researcher not only may invade their intimate space but also cause physical or emotional harm as many non-binary Tumblr users are underage and participating on Tumblr in secret. Instead, I demonstrate how the study of non-binary gender literacy practices can be done without engaging with or quoting directly from publicly published content, instead favoring an emergent thematic methodology. Additionally, I make a case for a queer methodology which instead seeks to recruit participants in the real world and be invited into their digital community once trust and reciprocity is established should interviews be important for further study.

### *Introduction*

At home and school, Alex performs like any other American teenage boy; but online, in a community gathered around the hashtag #nonbinary, they share selfies in make-up. Alex identifies as genderfluid but is only thirteen and from a conservative home. Alex is not sure how their family would respond and doubts they would understand a gender identity outside the binary. They worry that their safe haven online, which is publicly searchable though anonymous (except for Alex's pictures which display their unobscured face), may be discovered; but that doesn't stop them from taking a chance and publicly expressing themselves through images and words that affirm their identity.

Becky carries around a sketch pad where she keeps comics of Coi, an anthropomorphic, genderfluid fox. On Tumblr, Becky, as Coi, displays this work but never her face. She chooses instead to make her identity public through her comics. Coi's ad-

ventures range from everyday interaction to superhuman feats and sexual experiences. In daily life, Becky goes by the name Becky and uses female pronouns, while using this imagined persona of Coi to explore gender and sexual orientations and develop identity in the safety of anonymity. Eventually, probably after high school, Becky will become Coi full time, or some other name, along with a matching gender pronoun that expresses her true identity. In the meantime, at age seventeen, she uses Tumblr to safely explore and interact with others doing the same.

Though Alex and Becky are fictional, they are a composite of numerous real life, non-binary gender identified youth I met in my work at an LGBTQ youth center in a liberal urban area in a conservative southern state and whose writing I include in my ongoing research. I have intentionally chosen to include fictional anecdotes instead of direct examples from my data for reasons I will explain throughout this essay. In this essay, I uncover how the non-binary gender community on Tumblr challenges what we know about community engagement, more specifically community listening, and requires a different methodology and code of ethics than most community engaged projects. I argue that, given the tag-based architecture of Tumblr, users expect to be both intentionally public (in order to reach their audience and build community) and intentionally private (in order to navigate their various subjectivities across different real-world settings). This multi-faceted level of privacy can be problematic for researchers wishing to engage non-binary gender communities in literacy research. In my nearly two years working at the youth center, I listened to the stories of youth who expressed the importance of Tumblr in the development of their gender identity and in gaining the language in which to speak of the feelings they have had all their lives. From this experience, I have come to realize queer methodology to be most appropriate and ethical for my research site and community.

### *The Public/Private (Non) Binary*

Scholars have noted that the word “queer” does not refer exclusively to members of the LGBTQ community “but rather [an] orientation against normativity” (Bessette 28). To queer something means to transcend or challenge the status quo (Marinara) as well as to challenge structures of power (Warner; Browne and Nash). Therefore, my methods are not queer because my research site is LGBTQ (though it is), but rather because, in taking on this research, I have had to queer the commonly agreed upon methods of community literacy studies in favor of what is best for my individual community. Though the term queer is not typically used in this context, community literacy has a history of queering the field of rhetoric and composition in a quest to meet the needs of the community in *tactical* rather than *strategic* ways—to borrow terms from Paula Mathieu. Queer methodology can be seen as a “scavenger methodology” that requires a sort of flexibility that is always willing to change as needed and often draws upon multiple methods based on the needs of the research site (Halberstam 13). Sidney I. Dobrin asserts that the advent of digital writing and digital literacies have led scholars to rethink how they study writing, leaning more heavily into the ecology metaphor (or queer ecology metaphor) of writing to encompass the complex

nature and interconnectedness of the digital world. The very nature of social media—as well as community engagement in general—requires flexibility in research methodology that lends itself well to queer methodologies (Dadas 61). To queer research methods is to challenge established research methods or sites of research, especially in instances where the established norm centers around heteronormative or cisnormative research subjects or participants.

Generally, community-engaged work requires an informed consent as part of the IRB process; however, as Banks and Eble assert, the IRB process often does not address the complexities of online research and the people behind the words that are being posted publicly online. In fact, Banks and Eble argue that the researcher's participation in online activity may bring unwanted and potentially dangerous attention to the community involved. While community literacy scholars generally seek a relationship with their participants that encourages reciprocity (Moss; Mathieu; Long; among many others), other scholars have recognized that this type of involvement varies once the research site moves online. Caroline Dadas asserts that “working with multiple and varied online communities/individuals can make it difficult to establish meaningful ties with potential participants” (67). I further this assertion by arguing that, in addition to not easily forming meaningful relationships, attempts to do so may actually cause more harm than good.

Often non-binary Tumblr users participate in this space in secret. Whether this is a secret kept from their family, friends, school, religious community, or other group, Tumblr serves as a way in which youth can connect in a public way while also maintaining anonymity. This comes in numerous forms. Some users see Tumblr as an “imaginary space”—to borrow the term from Marinara—where they are free to assume a character representing their inner identity while maintaining their closeted status elsewhere. To do this, these youth often use artwork rather than photos of themselves and names different from those used in daily life. Other youth choose to go public with their writing, expressing their true selves without images of any kind. Others choose to display images of their face and body, a way to be seen and therefore affirmed.

Of the many ways non-binary youth go public, there are a variety of degrees of publicity they employ. While public and private is often viewed as a binary, I treat public and private as fluid and as non-binary as the genders of those in my study. Patricia Lange used the terms “publicly private” (sharing intimate details to a public audience) and “privately public” (utilizing privacy controls to control public access to shared information) to demonstrate two common ways of participating in online spaces. However, these two terms fail to fully explain the writing done on Tumblr, as it is not through privacy settings that non-binary youth limit their audience. Instead, the architecture of the platform and place Tumblr holds within society controls who these youth are out to online. Unlike other forms of social media, Tumblr does not require a real name, nor does it require that individuals follow, add, or friend one another in order to interact (though followers are possible and often desired). In fact, unlike other social media sites, one does not even need an account to view publicly posted materials. From my time at the youth center, I learned that oftentimes youth

would read Tumblr without posting or interacting with the posts at all. The way information is delivered through Tumblr is through the “networked counterpublic” created through hashtags, or a form of keyword labeling and searching that links like content together through public hashtag searches (Dame 2016).

The non-binary community is a vulnerable population for numerous reasons. First, as members of the LGBTQ community, they experience various levels of the closet depending on who they are with and where they are. It is possible that even the most “out” Tumblr user within a Tumblr page may be completely closeted in all other areas of their life. Additionally, Tumblr allows for users ages thirteen and up, though younger youth often bypass this requirement with a fake birthdate at registration. This makes a large part of the population under the age of eighteen. For these reasons, among others, users blur the lines between private and public and often view Tumblr as a queer space—an imaginary space that Martha Marinara refers to as “that liminal space, the space where identity—who we are and where we come from—” exists in opposition to the status quo.

An additional concern I address in my research methodology is that of informed consent and the collection of demographic information, particularly as it relates to the IRB process. Generally speaking, the IRB process was developed with a normative view of privacy, which the non-binary community disrupts. While Tumblr content is often posted publicly and is therefore searchable without login credentials, it is tempting to treat it as published content; however, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) reminds researchers that digital content “at some point involves individual persons,” and therefore needs to be treated, to some extent, as research involving human subjects (4). This does not necessarily mean, though, that a full informed consent should be used. In fact, I have found that reaching out to certain individuals may put them at risk, as many use Tumblr in secret, and the bulk of Tumblr users are under the age of eighteen.

### *Background and Current Study*

My interest in the literacies of non-binary gender communities began in 2014 when I took a position as program coordinator for an LGBTQ youth center. Prior to this position, I, like many of the non-binary youth in my study, did not have the language in which to discuss gender that is not defined in exclusively male or female terms. I feel it important to identify myself at this point in my research. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender—yet also gender-non-conforming—woman who, through my research within this population has found my strength within my own queering of gender. Though I must never for a moment forget my own privileged position in this world both on and off screen, I find myself in some ways an insider to this community while an outsider in many others. My own position speaks to the broad range of the non-binary gender identity and the fluidity of gender more generally. Like the term queer, which many argue can never have a solid definition, non-binary gender identity comes in many forms and escapes easy definition. This topic came up fre-

quently in the youth center among youth who struggled to form their identity in a society that gave them only one narrative of acceptable gender.

Part of the programming at the youth center included a twice-monthly gender identity discussion group led by a transgender woman and attended by anywhere between ten and twenty young people ranging the entire spectrum of gender identities and expressions. I would sit in these meetings as an observer, not a participant, listening to experiences and emotions of the youth in attendance. From these meetings, along with candid conversations in the center, I first learned about Tumblr and began using it as my own reference point for the issues non-binary youth and young adults face.

Unlike many traditional methods of inquiry, such as ethnography, my research does not involve interviews. I argue that the best course of action when examining the non-binary community on Tumblr is often to simply listen at this intersection of public discourse and extreme need for privacy. It is through a great deal of listening to this community over the past three years that I have gained insight into the intricacies of their needs. Addressing these needs reshapes how I understand the field of literacy, composition, and rhetoric and the ways in which literacy is studied. The architecture of Tumblr requires a different approach to research ethics, which serve to minimize risk to the community. When combined with a vulnerable population, such as the non-binary gender identified youth in my study, I have found a queer ecology metaphor with a non-binary approach to privacy to be an important aspect of my research ethics.

Choosing not to contact individual Tumblr users while also treating their published work as research involving human subjects creates an ethical gray area. Reading their words and viewing their images feels intimate, and not allowing them to know my presence feels at times inappropriate. However, reaching out to them poses numerous threats to their safety and comfort. As I begin my initial browsing of Tumblr content, I occasionally run across familiar faces. Knowing these individuals, having worked with them, advocated for them, and heard their personal stories during gender identity discussions makes it even more apparent that they must be protected and their safe space guarded from outside invasion. For this reason, I select Tumblr accounts from which to collect data based on the following criteria: 1) the accounts are public and available without login credentials, 2) the posts are crowd sourced from multiple Tumblr users and are, therefore, more difficult to trace to a single individual, and 3) they use the hashtag #nonbinary or #nonbinarynotandrogynous or #genderqueer to link content. I scrub the collected posts of identifying information including Tumblr account name, individual username, and date posted. Finally, I refrain from using direct quotes or images from my collected data and instead rely on an emergent thematic method in which I will code the data for themes in literacy.

So how can we—with empathy and sensitivity—recruit research participants for a more direct study of the non-binary community on new media platforms? While I believe it is best for my current work to refrain from direct interaction with Tumblr users, I envision future research in which non-binary participants and researchers connect through the physical world, perhaps in a youth center designed for LGBTQ

youth or other such trusted spaces. I believe it important to meet non-binary youth in a public space, get to know their needs, and then wait to be invited into their online world. With the internet and social media occupying such a prominent space in our daily lives, it is easy to forget that for many non-binary youth, Tumblr is not just a virtual space, but rather an extension of their bedrooms—their most sacred spaces.

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