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# Grassroots Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet in Turkey

***Serkan Görkemli***
**New York: SUNY Press, 2014. 233 pp.**

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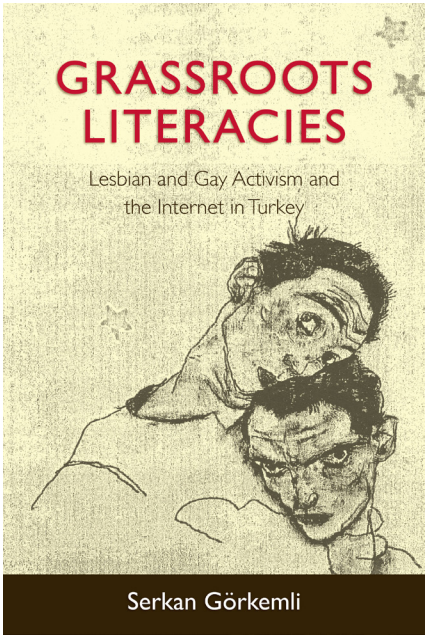


Few studies in rhetoric and composition have explored the bridge between literacy and the study of sexuality beyond the context of the U.S. writing classroom. Thus, Serkan Görkemli's *Grassroots Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet in Turkey* has been recognized as a major contribution to the field because of connections it makes between literacy and transnational discourses of sexuality and gender. Through engaging interviews, textual analyses, and historical insights, Görkemli proposes a "literacy-based approach to studying transnational rhetorics of sexuality in cross-cultural and international LBGT communities" (19). Recognized by the Conference on College Composition and Communication as the winner of the 2015 Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship, Görkemli's analysis of Legato, an Internet-based LGBT collegiate student group in Turkey, is potentially influential for scholars of community literacy, queer rhetorics, new media, and transnational feminism.

As explained in Chapter 1, Görkemli theorizes Legato's grassroots activism using the concepts of "sexual literacy," "community literacy," and "sponsors of literacy" while also addressing literacy as a societal force and an "individual resource or practice" (19). Through this literacy-based analysis, Görkemli investigates the "individual and collective rhetorical agency and power (or lack thereof) that are necessary to generate, disseminate, and, at times, oppose representations of homosexuality in culturally and geographically diverse contexts" (12). The book immerses readers in Turkey's mid-1990s LGBT activist scene. Legato, the main organization under analysis, was founded in 1996 in an effort to initiate activism on college campuses. What began as a group of students organizing social activities such as film screenings and discussion groups at Middle East Technical University quickly spread to online spaces and college campuses throughout Turkey. By December of

2000, there were 27 Legato groups at 27 universities. In just three years, the numbers grew to 857 members at 83 colleges and universities. Unifying these individual factions and contributing to the group's accelerated growth was a shared *Yahoo!* group mailing list and the establishment of a Legato website. Through their hybrid presence, Legato groups disseminated sexual literacy, particularly in regards to Euro-American discourses of sexuality and LGBT identities, as well as language and tools to "critique heterosexism, the social institutions that uphold it, and the underlying biological views of gender and sexuality" (17). Their actions depended on the digital literacy of their members and community literacy, or rather, a search for alternative discourses through action, reflection, and collective action. Legato took on the role of a "sponsoring institution," in that it supported members in linking their personal sexuality with a community seeking public recognition and rights. Other competing sponsors of literacy for Legato members included the non-collegiate LGBT advocacy organization known as Kaos GL (Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association), popular media, and the nationalist state. Later chapters further explore these competing influences on Legato members.

Chapter 2 introduces readers to the dominant rhetorics of homosexuality in Turkey including the popular understanding of homosexuality as "sexual inversion," the assumption that homosexuals desire to adopt the behaviors of the opposite gender. Two Turkish celebrities serve as examples of how mass media reinforced this rhetoric of sexual inversion: Zeki Müren, a queer male singer "who wore makeup and women's clothing," and Bülent Ersoy, a "male-to-female transsexual singer" (39). While on the surface, these individuals transgressed gender norms, neither individual publicly identified as LGBT or queer and their success depended on a bargain with heterosexual normativity. Lesbianism was left largely unacknowledged in mass media even into the 2000s, and widespread oppression of the *travestiler,* the everyday self-identified queer subject in Turkey, was commonplace. Viewed as socially deviant men and often assumed to be sex workers, *travesti* were subject to police violence and familial and societal discrimination. In order to combat these sensationalized, simplistic, and negative representations of homosexuality, Legato members made flyers portraying male and female homosexuals to advertise their campus events and distributed a zine with definitions of "homosexuality" and "lesbian" along with erotic art. Görkemli analyzes the visual rhetoric of flyers, zines, and the Legato website in order to demonstrate how Legato helped introduce "a new visual vocabulary and literacy that defied the rhetorics of homosexuality as sexual inversion," and provided Legato's young adult population "with critical tools to test its rhetorical agency and power" (60). This chapter sets up the rhetorical situation for readers, setting the stage for the next chapter, the heart of the book containing Görkemli's analysis of five narratives from Legato members concerning their sexual literacy.

Though the third chapter is called "Coming Out," Görkemli challenges both the genre of the coming out narrative and the literacy narrative, which have been critiqued as simplistic, linear, and utopian. Legato members' experiences "confirm that coming out does not necessarily follow the normative narrative arc of complete emancipation" (120). Some of the individuals interviewed never came out to their

families, for example. In his "interpretive portraitures" of the participants, Görkemli first reports participant interviews with extensive quotes, attempting to amplify participant voices before inserting his interpretive gaze. Through this thoughtful organizational structure, he constructs a complex view of the multiple gateways and sponsors of both heterosexual and LGBT literacies that complicated Legato members' attempts to come out in Turkish society.

The narratives provide evidence that television and the Internet served as gateways to LGBT literacies. In addition—or rather in opposition—to Müren and Ersoy, the participants referenced gay characters from American television shows such as *Real World* and *Melrose Place* as early influences on their sexual literacy. Seeing masculine gay men and evidence of lesbianism and bisexualism on TV confirmed "there are different ways of being a homosexual" (103). Through other gateways such as Internet search engines and online chat rooms, participants located communities of homosexual Turks, leading to involvement in Legato and Kaos GL. As a sponsor of sexual literacy, Legato introduced the participants to social constructionist discourses of sexuality. Before joining Legato, as one of the participants explains, "I didn't have anything to do with or any knowledge about social issues . . . [or] minorities . . . Legato pushed my perspective on homosexuality ten years forward" (105). Legato members served as sponsors for each other as they shared their experiences, research findings, and perspectives online and across college campuses. Families and schools provided participants with access to computers and the English language, which opened opportunities for exploring human rights developments and LGBT issues happening abroad.

However, families and educational institutions also served as gateways and sponsors of heterosexual literacy. Participant experiences provide evidence of prevailing familial homophobia driven by religious and political rhetoric that characterized homosexuality as deviant, perverse, and punishable. Though homosexuality has never been explicitly illegal in Turkey, "participants grew up watching televised police violence toward non-gender-conforming *travesti* citizens on television" (107). Educational institutions also played a significant role in sponsoring heterosexual literacy; most participants did not take any courses that covered sexuality until college, as the subject was seen as "taboo" and an illegitimate area of study. In drawing attention to the multiple sponsors of both LGBT and heterosexual literacy in the participant narratives, Görkemli demonstrates the coming out process as a complex sexual literacy event composed of multiple literacy practices. The narratives are powerfully presented and carefully analyzed, leaving readers with a greater understanding not just of Turkish society and LGBT activism, but how to conduct a transnational analysis of sexual literacy that acknowledges the complexity of participants' experiences without submitting entirely to conventions of the coming out or literacy narrative genres.

Chapter 4 delves deeper into how Legato's uses of digital media both aided and undermined the group's activist efforts. Görkemli returns to three of the participant narratives to trace their digital and non-digital involvement with Legato and other related LGBT activist groups. Their experiences show the contradicting benefits and

drawbacks of computer-mediated activity; on the one hand, websites, mailing lists, and chat rooms helped broaden Legato's influence and provided an opportunity for individuals to anonymously participate in conversations about LGBT identities and culture, while on the other hand, participants abandoned offline efforts to make their presence known on college campuses, leading to what one Legato member describes as "talk without any result" (157). In short, a lack of continuity grew between the online and offline incarnations of Legato, leading activist leaders to issue calls for participants to "come out" of their "digital closets." Görkemli explains how the tensions between the digital and non-digital practices of Legato played a role in the group's eventual demise and calls on community activists to pay attention to how digital media can work for or against the building of sustainable community literacy efforts. Though Legato is no longer active, readers will find Görkemli's analysis of their early successes and failures at using digital media reminiscent of current debates regarding the effectiveness of online activism, sometimes referred to as "slacktivism" (e.g. changing one's Facebook profile picture or using hashtags to show support of a social issue, signing online petitions, or re-tweeting political messages).

The author concludes with a request for similar literacy-based analyses of sexuality in international contexts. Görkemli urges other scholars to account for multiple influences on sexual literacy, as is demonstrated through his analysis of the role of media (print, television, and the Internet) and discourses of religion, heterosexuality, and nationalism. Görkemli's intricate weaving of participant voices with visual rhetorical analysis, historical and cultural insights, and key concepts from literacy studies is the overall strength of this book. Indeed, it sets a precedent for future transnational studies of sexuality and international grassroots movements.