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Queer Literacies: Discourses and Discontents

Mark McBeth

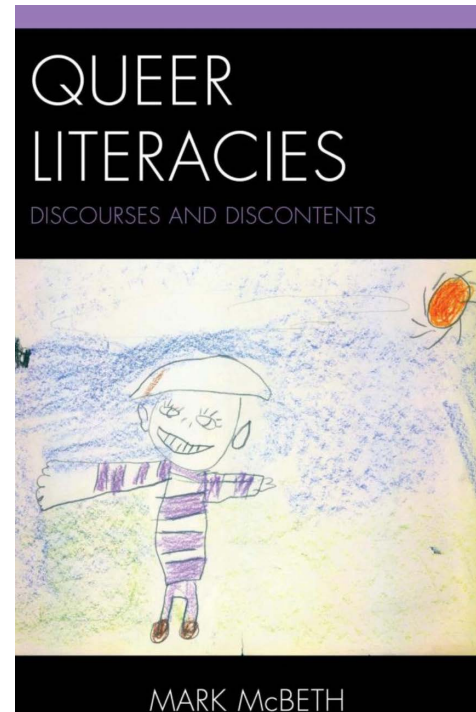
Lexington Books, 2019, pp. 271

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Mark McBeth's *Queer Literacies: Discourses and Discontents* uses his own Queer literacy narrative ("auto-archival self-investigation") and Queer ethnographic artifacts created by others ("books, archives, memoirs, and other memory banks") to frame an explication of how the rhetoric surrounding queerness has changed since the homophile movement of the early twentieth century (6). These techniques encourage readers to identify with him and the Queer activists he discusses. This book would be an excellent resource for scholars and advanced graduate students interested in rhetoric, (auto)ethnographic research, literacy, pedagogy, Queer history, and Queer theory. The overarching goal of the text is to emphasize the purpose Queer literates, that is Queer rhetors who "practiced discursive performativity that made words do things that would transform the world in which they lived," served in combatting the homophobic and heterosexist practices and messages put forth by various types of publications and institutions (3). Barbara Gittings is heavily featured as a key Queer literate activist and agent of change. Each chapter of the text focuses on a different cultural institution and examines the part that institution played in shaping the discourse on Queer lives historically and today. The book has *kairos* in that the Queer literate's job is never done—learning from the past and seeing the strategies Queer literates used to move public opinion about Queer people will be useful to today's Queer literates.

In Chapter 1, "Queer Literacies on the Brain," McBeth situates his theorizing by starting at the beginning—the beginning of his own Queer literacy journey and at the beginning of the Queer movement. He discloses that as a young Queer person in a heterosexist world, he had to conceptualize and reconceptualize his world and worldview to create a place where he fit in; he pairs these experiences with the reality of the archived experiences of other LGBTQ people. Building upon this structure, the author takes these first-hand experiences a step further to clarify "how literacy sponsorships played a role in the dynamic power play between heteronormative/homophobic public discourses and Queer subject formation in common place public venues such as family dinner tables, doctor's offices, bible schools, and elementary classrooms, or



other public forums” (9). Using Deborah Brandt’s definition of literacy sponsors, that is “figures who turned up most typically in people’s memories of literacy learning” (e.g. relatives, teachers, clergy, writers, etc.) in conjunction with Michael Warner’s theories of publics and counter-publics, McBeth illuminates the ways that “literacy sponsorships and their underlying platforms shaped homosexuality as a discursively ‘objective’ subject; and then subsequent Queer counter-literacy measures reclaimed a discursive foothold to reinvent their subjective public image(s)” (9, 14, 28). McBeth successfully creates a framework to examine “literacy normalcy,” how Queer rhetors are shaped by literacy sponsorships, and, in turn, how these Queer rhetors reshape the publics around them.

Chapter 2, “Archival Tracks and Traces: Evidence of Queer Literacies,” highlights the importance of literacy to Queer lives and accentuates the ways that literacy has allowed Queer literates to resist and work against heteronormative discourses and hegemonies. McBeth begins the chapter by sharing a portion of Barbara Gittings’ literacy recollections:

I flunked out of college as the end of my freshman year because I had stopped going to classes in order to run around to libraries and spend my time reading about myself in categories such as “Sexual Perversions”—and wondering and worrying. When I returned home in disgrace, I couldn’t explain to my parents what was wrong, and I still knew no one I could approach to talk to—so back to the stacks I went. (35)

This narrative will resonate with many pre-internet Queer people—McBeth uses it to reinforce the important place literacy played in the self-definition of Queer literates and to show the double-edged sword that literacy presented. Queer people used all available means to discover themselves, but much of the literature available was created by heteronormative/homophobic literacy sponsorships, sharing inaccurate and damaging information, often with young and vulnerable people. McBeth builds on Gittings’ narrative, sharing brief vignettes that showcase his own journey of self-discovery as a Queer person as well as stories from Queer activists, like Judith Grahm, Harry Hay, and Fenton Johnson. These narratives further solidify the important functions that literacy, reading, and text play in the lives and self-discovery of Queer people. McBeth points out that Queer literacy gave people the chance to resist heteronormative cultural narratives and to “expose the misinformation and false claims” that “the established and accepted literacy authorities” made about Queer people (54). Experiences like the ones described in this chapter fueled Queer literates to fact-check texts, disseminate unbiased research, and rewrite literature on homosexuality to accurately reflect Queer lives as normal and healthy.

Shifting focus in Chapter 3, “Adult Supervision: Insights to Queer Silence, or Family Got Your Tongue?,” the author reviews the history and evolution of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), detailing the role the organization played in literacy efforts to shift the rhetoric surrounding Queer people. Citing Catherine Tuerk, McBeth highlights that PFLAG literature was some of the first material she was exposed to that didn’t “make [her] think that being gay was *disgusting, sick, or*

sinful" (80). Further, McBeth presents Tuerk's experiences to "underscore the reparative literacy labors that happened among PFLAG members and that constantly re-routed them to new research and effective ways to recirculate this knowledge" (81). The work done by PFLAG since its inception in 1973 is evidence that "literacy-laden and love-based activism can shift cultural discourses" (86). McBeth explains how PFLAG confronts anti-LGBTQ ideologies and thwarts heteronormative discourse.

Chapter 4, "Teacher Teacher: Queer Literacies in K-16" discusses the gendered socialization taught in school and how teachers were charged with "reproducing normative behavior and rehabilitating those that undermined socially accepted norms" (99). He begins the chapter by recounting a story of his elementary school teacher gender policing his eleven-year old self. She disapproves of him playing with the girls at recess:

. . . she called out, "Mark McBeth, will you come to the front of the room please?" Not knowing her intentions and with the confidence of a designated [high-performing smart] child, I approached the front of the classroom. . . She prompted me "I'd like you to tell the class why you prefer to play with girls, and then explain to them, why you're not proud of your masculinity?" While I stared at her and my classmates stared at me, their silence anticipating my yet-unspoken words, our silence in deference to the now ominously quiet teacher, her silence pursed and impatient for an answer. . . Beyond the burning blush that I felt in front of my peers. . . I must honestly say that I don't remember how else I felt. . . I knew that crying in front of my classmates would have only justified her accusation, guilty as charged, a sentence of sissy guilt. (93)

He uses this and another experience as a launch pad to dive into the pedagogical education teacher trainees received in the 1930s through examining teacher training textbooks. He reveals that teachers, steeped in eugenics and biological essentialism, were to "act as educational vigilantes, staying alert to defects and abnormalities that they should then attempt to rectify" in an effort to "improve the race" (104). Drawing his examination forward to the 1970s, McBeth shares the "Bill of Rights for Gay Teachers and Students" from the New York Gay Teachers Association and the Columbia Student Homophile League's "Statement of Purpose" to illustrate the action that Queer literates took to enact "official institutional protocols" to change education and confront institutional homophobia within the education system (112–121). This chapter showcases direct actions that Queer literates used to reform treatment of LGBTQ people in the educational sphere.

In Chapter 5, "'Gay books? Libraries? That Rang Bells for me!': Reforming the Literacy Platforms," the author returns to Barbara Gittings' activism with the Gay Task Force of the American Library Association. The chapter reiterates her efforts to "shift heteronormative platforms of library policy and practice" and replace them with "literate sponsorships in which Queer literates could find accurate facts and empowering words" (132, 133). Recounting Gittings' work alongside other librarians, McBeth explains the steps they took to include LGBTQ acquisitions in the library,

resist “the heteronormative cycle of deaccessioning Gay materials,” and surveying encyclopedia entries to ensure they provided “unbiased and objective information on homosexuality and *healthy* Lesbian or Gay sensibilities” (145, 161, 166). The contributions and importance of Gittings’ activism is reiterated in this chapter and links back to the discussion of the importance of libraries and literacy in Queer self-discovery from Chapter 1.

Focusing on scientific texts and their depictions of homosexuality, Chapter 6, “Psycho-Babble: Literacies as Dangers and Salvations,” McBeth opens the chapter by recounting his exploration of the term “homosexuality” in the *Modern Home Medical Advisor*, a medical encyclopedia published from 1935 to 1969 (174). Early editions of the text had “homosexuality” listed; however, later editor, Morris Fishbein, buried any mention of homosexuality under “the Crush,” relegating it to young girls’ deep friendships and urging that the crush “should not be allowed to develop to an intimacy which approaches a homosexual level” (176). McBeth critiques Fishbein, stating “Any scholarly rhetoric has been omitted [from *Modern Home Medical Advisor*] and replaced with subjective opinion, impersonating social edict” (176). In this chapter, McBeth presents evidence from “a group of psychiatric ‘authorities’ on homosexuality,” finding that “the medical rhetoric for Queers between 1930 and 1980 shifted from various levels of denial of existence, to a mishap of heredity, to a case for criminal lunacy, to a target for psychotherapy, to an experiment in conversion therapy” and more that continues to today (177). Once he presents this evidence, he explains how Queer literates worked to change this medical discourse. For example, Frank Kameny’s critiques of the psychiatric community and work with Barbara Gittings, lobbying the APA to remove “homosexuality” from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and Jay Prosser’s later efforts to remove “transsexualism” from the DSM (190–193, 197). Queer literates are still working to change the rhetoric of the medical community toward LGBTQ people.

Moving forward to the 1980s, Chapter 7, “Viral Impetus: The Rhetorical-Literate Activism of ACT UP,” is notably much shorter than the other chapters in the text. The author remarks that this is to “point to the abbreviated lives that People with AIDS” had during that time period, adding that “an incredible brain trust of Queer literates was lost in the twentieth century. . . and we should not forget how the literacy lives of Queer literates lost helped in the efforts to act up, fight back, fight AIDS” (126–127). This chapter sets the scene for governmental dismissal of the AIDS crisis and focuses on the rhetorical action taken by ACT UP, both publicly and “behind-the-desk,” to raise awareness of the crisis and to “uncover the unwieldy practices and discriminating policies of power-wielding organizations overseen by governmental agencies, pharmaceutical corporations, insurance companies, and medical conglomerates” (214). This chapter illustrates the literal life-or-death struggle Queer literates faced in the fight against AIDS and the way AIDS was presented in the public sphere.

In Chapter 8, “In Conclusion, Queer Literacy’s Inconclusiveness,” McBeth ends the text with the assertion that “Queer literacy has not concluded” because “as sponsors of homophobia/heteronormativity continue to rework their discursive powers, into more elaborate, nuanced, yet no less vicious rhetorical arguments, so do Queer

literates need to polish their pearls of rhetorical wisdom” (231). He recaps how society has changed, the actions Queer literates have taken, and attempts to smooth over the “divide between activist and academic” Queer literates (237). In his smoothing, he refers readers back to the archives to hear and tell “the stories of others to confirm, complicate, and contest our narratives, so the telling can remain queer, so it doesn’t become normativized” (239). This chapter maintains that while Queer literates have accomplished much, the work is not complete. As heteronormative forces shift their attacks on Queer lives, it is important to remain vigilant and continue using literacy to support an accurate and empowering Queer rhetoric.

This book is a helpful resource full of many examples of cultural criticism and rhetorical analysis of cultural texts. It provides a literacy-focused review of LGBTQ history and how Queer literates shifted the current cultural climate. This text would be useful as a textbook for a graduate-level rhetoric course to provide examples of how to complete ethnographic case studies. The personal stories and pieces from archives make the book interesting and engaging.