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Pierce Fellowship

Fancy Fruits:

Exploring Language and Liberation in the June Horner PFLAG Collection

The June Horner PFLAG Collection, which came into Goucher College's Special Collections in 2022, is composed of books on gay and lesbian identity in the form of memoirs, biography, nonfiction, and fiction texts mostly spanning from the late 1970s through the 2000s. Ms Horner, the donor, is the former librarian and founder of the PFLAG Maryland chapter, which she began in 1985 after her son's coming out in 1984. A librarian in Howard County, she struggled to find books that could help her understand her son's experience and decided to create a resource for other parents. The collection's purpose was clear, and simple: to provide those trying to come to terms with and understand the identities of their loved ones with learning resources. During a time when it was very difficult to find any publications which spoke about LGBT identity, let alone positive and genuinely informative ones, the library likely served as many member's first or even only point of access to this information. And given the collection's size and purpose, it could be seen as representative of the state of LGBT publishing at the time. Through examining this collection and looking at the details of the language and terminology that authors used, I hoped to track how both members of and friends of the community were imagining gay identity. Beginning this search of the collection, several questions emerged which guided this search:

Were there easily measured shifts in the language and attitudes surrounding queerness from decade to decade? Between queer and straight authors? What was the purpose of the PFLAG Library collection? How did the collection meet or diverge from that stated purpose?

While all the titles collected were meant to help PFLAG members better understand their friends and relatives, and towards this purpose overall argued for acceptance and demystification of gay life, looking deeper into the language used illuminated clear distinctions in how these arguments were made. Two major factors began to emerge which often dictated how an author would describe gay identity - the age of the text, and whether or not the author was a member of the community. It's not necessarily surprising that these things would greatly affect the tone of a text - but, interestingly, key themes and narratives emerged which were highly consistent from one text to another within these groupings: by/for an LGBT person/audience vs by/for a straight person/audience, and before vs after 1980. (It's necessary to preface that there are far fewer examples to pull from before 1980, likely in part because of a lack of publishing before the 80s and in part because June Horner began her collection in the mid 80s.)

Earlier texts, overwhelmingly by straight writers, often attempt to create a binary distinction between two types of LGBT people, arguing that those who fall on one side of this binary are engaging in LGBT identity in a way which is healthy and acceptable, and therefore should not be persecuted. On the other side are those who are gender non-conforming, low income, 'too gay.' This argument, basically '*they aren't all like you're thinking,*' is used perhaps most clearly in *Gay: What You Should Know About Homosexuality*, which was published in 1979. The author dedicates two chapters to constructing this binary. The first, titled "'Queer' Gays," includes this description of cruising Greenwich Village locals:

“And queer they are in the eyes of straight passerby. Some wear flowered scarves, capes, and unbuttoned shirts, others are dressed in leather pants and metal-studded leather jackets, and still others wear blue jeans so tight that the shape of their sex organs show plainly...It’s all very strange and disturbing to the straights...”
(Hunt 126).

The language used here is sensationalizing, describing these too-gay gays as a biologist might strangely behaved wildlife. Describing the scene as “strange and disturbing” (126) seems to appeal to a straight reader - I know how they look, the author seems to be saying. Obviously this kind are no good. The next chapter, “‘Straight’ Gays,” provides a contrasting description:

“But a small number of gay men and a large number of lesbians are more like the straight people all around them than they are like the queer gays described in the last chapter... the unknown kind who are psychologically healthy and who lead relatively stable, occupationally successful lives.” (145).

The ‘queer gays’ of the first chapter are not outright described as unhealthy or unsuccessful, but here reading the description of ‘straight gays’ it is clear that this was Hunt’s implication. This constitutes the brunt of his argument for the acceptance of LGBT identity; those who behave most similarly to their straight counterparts, he argues, are not psychologically troubled in the way the less normative are.

This binary image of ‘queer’ and ‘straight’ gays can be seen throughout the earlier publications in the collection. In *Now What?*, a 1977 compilation of stories from many different parents aimed to help readers better understand their LGBT children, a mother described her daughter’s girlfriend like this: “She was what I would call mannish. I said to my daughter, ‘You don’t want to be that way. It’s a sickness; people who do those things are sick’” (Hutchinson 3).

The mother also describes her daughter as ‘feminine,’ speaking about her beautiful hair, and creating a clear distinction between her more straight-acting child and the ‘mannish,’ less palatable roommate. Similarly, in *My Son Eric*, a memoir published in 1979 about a religious woman’s experience coming to terms with her son’s gay identity, the author expresses terror early on that her son will become effeminate. (Borheck 20) Towards the end of the text, she has come to accept him, and begins spending time with other gay men in an attempt to understand him better. Of the communities she finds herself in, she writes: “Whom do I meet at gay parties? Weirdos, queers, queens, and f*gg*ts? I have yet to meet anyone who answers those descriptions” (Borhek 149). This defense of gay culture in the negative, arguing that the community isn’t as ‘weird’ as straight audiences are worried it is, and therefore should be accepted, seems to be rooted in the longstanding belief that there is a psychological issue at the root of LGBT identity. It seeks to disrupt that belief by proving that LGBT people can lead lives which are normative and therefore psychologically healthy.

June Horner herself describes how this was the prevailing narrative surrounding homosexuality in the 1980s; looking for texts on the the subject in her local library system, the only thing she could find included only a brief section. “The book informed me that the cause of this disorder (homosexuality) was probably a too close binding mother and a distant father. I was devastated to see that I might be responsible...” (Horner). Given this experience, and that this was likely what happened to many other parents and loved ones, it becomes clear why dispelling this narrative was such a priority for authors in the 1970s and early 80s, and why June Horner collected so many texts which contained these arguments. The earlier parent memoirs in the collection, especially *My Son Eric*, unilaterally echo her fear that her son would never be able to live a ‘normal’ or good life. For a new PFLAG member, borrowing from the library, reassurance

that their loved one could still have a long term relationship, find love, and keep a good job would have been new, and necessary. Even earlier narratives from LGBT authors contain this assumption that homosexuality is an issue of mental health. In a memoir about gay New York in the 1960s and 70s, one author writes of the shift that occurred after the Stonewall riots that “Up till that moment we had all thought that homosexuality was a medical term. Suddenly we saw that we could be a minority group - with rights, a culture, an agenda” (White 54).

Another clear theme in texts written by straight authors was a focus on ‘knowing,’ and on the moment of coming out as either a revelation and unveiling of a great secret or a chance to prove that they had some secret intuition as to their child’s sexuality. This theme seems to be primarily present in later texts, especially when the parent asserts that they knew all along. In the 2009 memoir *The Meaning of Matthew*, written by Matthew Shepard’s mother about her son’s life and tragic death, the author writes about “... a sense I had as a mother of who my son was and who he was growing up to be. It’s a sense I still stand by today when talking with and about parents of gay children. I think a mother just knows” (Shepard 34). Her sense of motherly intuition is contrasted by Matthew’s father, who had no idea and has a harder time coming to terms with the news. She focuses several pages on the subject of this intuition, and to her son’s eventual coming out. The author of *My Son Eric*, also dedicates pages to the subject of knowing, but in a different way; she agonizes over how she could have missed the signs and whether she should have figured it out before her son told her. Betty DeGeneres, in her own memoir, writes that while her daughter’s coming out was a huge shock, she definitely would have known if she’d been able to spend more time with her in person (Degeneres 4). Overall, parents seem to be consumed by this issue of ‘knowing’ - to not know before your child tells you is framed as a failure, a symbol of your lack of closeness with your child.

LGBT narratives, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend not to focus so heavily on the coming out moment or the issue of knowing. They tend to focus on the difficulty of keeping secrets, as one author writes: "... she realizes that even as an adult her private life - unless she chooses to announce her lesbianism - must have the added protection of secrecy" (Barret 69). LGBT authors and interviewees, if they do speak about coming out, often focus more on the process of coming out to themselves. And interestingly, specifically in the lesbian narratives in the collection, the terminology of 'coming out' is often used not to describe the act of telling friends and family - as it is now almost universally used - but in reference to their first gay experience. Like a debutante at a party, they describe being 'brought out' by women who already have experience in the community (Barret 63). They also describe not knowing that they themselves are gay until very late, especially in earlier texts (Navratilova 60). And interestingly, many will say that they were not gay 'yet,' rather than that they weren't sure or didn't know. A woman in *Invisible Lives* says of someone she was interested in that "she was not gay at that time either..." (63). Descriptions like this pop up throughout the book, and in others in the collection. This use of language seems to communicate 'gayness' in some ways as an action, which positions the doer as a member of a community, rather than an inherent state of being which one comes to understand through experience. Certainly, it is not described as a choice to have the associated desires and feelings, but there is a distinction between the existence of those desires and the movement towards living in the gay community.

The collection seems to represent an unsurprising tension between the narratives of members of the LGBT community and their loved ones. Gay narratives rarely (if ever) focus on the perceived normalcy of some gay existence. They don't try to draw distinctions between "queer" and "straight" gays, like Hunt does, and they don't focus much on the act of coming out

to parents. Even terminology which overlaps in these different kinds of narratives is often used differently. While both gay and straight narratives mention an initial assumption of 'sickness' associated with LGBT desire, how they move away from and argue against that medicalized model differs. The desire to prove that LGBT people can live a functionally 'straight,' normative life is ultimately confined to straight narratives, especially earlier on. (Ellen's biography, published in the mid 90s, provides a counterexample (Degeneres 14).) As a collection, it certainly seems to serve the purpose it was created for - to provide the loved ones of LGBT people with a broad array of informational resources that allowed them to move past the limited and biased information widely available in conventional local libraries and bookstores. And here, in Goucher's Special Collections and Archives, it can continue to serve a valuable educational purpose. It provides a snapshot of the attitudes prevalent in the community and around it during an incredibly tumultuous and fast-changing time. Spanning from the post-Stonewall early years of the liberation movement to the height of the AIDS crisis to the 2000s, when acceptance of LGBT identity was growing rapidly, it shows us very literally how homosexuality was being created as an identity and becoming disengaged from psychological illness.

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