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Representation, Liberation, and the Queer Press

POLLY THISTLETHWAITE

I came out in a library. It was in the "new" public library building, which was really the done-over old Sears store in my Midwestern town. The new library's whole queer section consisted of fifteen, maybe twenty books on two bottom shelves of a back wall range in a dark basement corner, no lie. I think the entire bookstack arrangement centered around those Dewey decimal queer 306.7s being tucked into the building's most out-of-the-way place. Anyhow, in there I found *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, *The Stone Wall*, and *Our Right to Love* nestled in with some socio-psycho trash like *Sexual Deviance* and *The Homosexual in America*. Of course I was afraid to check these books out, especially those Arno reprint series books with the burnt orange covers saying HOMOSEXUALITY all over them, so on Saturdays I would inconspicuously snatch them up along with bluff material from the nearby feminist 301s, and, flushed, take them to a table across the room to read. This was the bravest thing I'd ever done. If somebody who knew me came by, I could quick switch the books so it looked like I was reading Betty Friedan.

Lesbian and gay people lay special claim to

the power of the printed word. It's through the printed word, consumed privately, anonymously, that we often first call ourselves queer, where we first find others who think what we think, do what we do, write what we feel. Coming out stories are thick with accounts of self-discovery through novels, dictionaries, magazines, libraries. The mass-mediated word, key to democracy and empire building both, also finds, unites, and empowers queer communities across regional, class, ethnic, and generational boundaries. All this is kept in check, of course, by censorship and a legion of insidious oppressive political and cultural constraints.

The lesbian and gay press has shaped and reflected the rise of gay and lesbian liberation. The proliferation of gay and lesbian newspapers, newsletters, and magazines in the U.S. has allowed us to weave a well-informed network of previously isolated individuals and insulated communities. In 1924, Chicago's Society for

In Brian Wallis, ed., *Democracy: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, 5:209-212. Seattle: Bay Press, 1990.

Human Rights published two issues of the journal *Friendship and Freedom* before organizers were arrested and brought to trial on obscenity charges. No copies of the journal are known to exist; only photographs of the covers remain. Lisa Ben's *Vice Versa* appeared in 1947 and 1948, the earliest known lesbian periodical in the U.S. It was a carbon-copied newsletter passed hand to hand among a West Coast circle of friends—you know, the softball team and the secretarial pool, girls like that.

The national “homophile” organizations of the 1950s and 1960s (The Daughters of Bilitis, the Mattachine Society, and One) built themselves by defying the law against putting queer stuff in the mail. *One, Inc. v. Olesen* (355 U.S. 371, January 13, 1958) established that homophile publications were, yes, “more than cheap pornography,” therefore eligible to be distributed by our postal service. The paperback porn industry began to boom postwar too, with drugstore lesbo pulp novels selling like hotcakes to dykes craving popular images of themselves. Other fringy mainstream but not specifically queer publications like physique magazines, science fiction club newsletters, grocery store scandal sheets, and eventually the *Village Voice* published queer-seeking-queer personals, like this one from the June 1, 1965 Wide World Confidential pullout section of the tabloid *Keyhole*: “MODERN MICHIGAN MODEL . . . with

understanding husband seeks uninhibited fun-loving females and couples . . .”

In the spring 1979 Lesbian Herstory Archives newsletter, Joan Nestle writes, “The roots of the Archives lie in the silenced voices, the love letters destroyed, the pronouns changed, the diaries carefully edited, the pictures never taken, the euphemized distortions that patriarchy would let pass.” Self-representation is essential for liberation. We must represent ourselves to ourselves and others on our own terms. Historically, we’ve been the social, medical, religious, psychological, legal “other,” “freak,” “deviant” according to the reporter, anthropologist, physician, theologian, analyst, politician, artist. In large part, the gay, lesbian, and feminist publications of the late 1960s and 1970s, *The Advocate*, *Come Out!*, *Gay Community News*, *Lesbian Tide*, and *off our backs*, began as publications from activist organizations or collectives, steeped in radical politics. Community-sustained lesbian and gay archives cropped up across the country during the seventies and eighties, as did lesbian and gay presses and bookstores. Though not unfettered by notions of assimilation, success, and respectability, the rise of lesbian and gay publishers, distributors, and archives has allowed queers control of the way we represent ourselves to each other, fostering the rise of our liberation movement. The printed word, rendered by us for each other, allows the queer nation to build, bolster, and unify.