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11 Talk Me Home: Visibility in Shared Narrative

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Cultural inclusion requires locations in which people can ‘discursively’ gather and reside. One method of creating a lesbian-specific location is through the reiterations and repetitions of narratives. Narrative structure is an effective heuristic in what could be called a naturalisation process. Using a well-known lesbian gossip column this paper demonstrates that a sense of cultural group-memory is produced and shared through the narrative of gossip. The degree of assumed knowledge subsequently attained is textually inscribed in the trajectory of gossip over time. In this gossip column, celebrities, through their ongoing coming-out processes, are participants in the naturalisation process, informing and normalising a historical background for lesbian community. Inclusion operates through this narrativisation to produce a cultural memory that becomes an assumed aspect of social interactions. Visibility is the predominant experiential choice of the writer in all of the individual recount segments around which the narrative structures of gossip are built. In this way, the intimate details of a celebrity’s ‘visibility’ process become the basis of the ‘unfolding intimacies’ of this social group’s ‘main characters’ (Dunbar, 1995: 5). The ‘synchronic’ moment through reiteration in gossiped-about visibility creates a diachronic collective memory to support an inclusive culture. In the instances of a lesbian gossip column this is accomplished through the established and everyday paradigms of narrative structure which produces a shared and mutually understood experiential meaning.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the constitution of inclusion into a culture or community through the role that language plays. The community in question is the lesbian community and the language analysed is lesbian language. ‘Lesbians ... have no readily apparent temporal or spatial means of identification’ (Wolfe and Penelope, 1993: 11). Cultural inclusion is not possible without ‘temporal or spatial’ location in which to discursively locate. One method of creating a lesbian-specific location is through the reiterations of lesbian stories, or narratives. I will demonstrate how gossip in a serialised narrative structure is a means of promulgating and perpetuating an accumulation of knowledge and collective memory. Accumulated knowledge

occurs when repeated events ‘suggest ways in which narrative recollections can be productively included in historically oriented ethnographic inquiry’ (Leap, 1996: 139), where ethnography signifies the ‘norms of communication in a speech community’ (Trask, 1999: 89).

The significance of studying gossip in any form is that it can be interpreted as a major contributing factor towards ‘an ongoing, negotiated solidarity’. Gossip is about ‘sharing opinions and judgements’ which subsequently compels specific social norms and values (Eggins and Slade, 1997: 276-7) and further operates to constitute a ‘solidarity around common points of reference; a micro community’. It also plays a significant social role in the form of knowledge production (Code, 1995: 145-6). The production of knowledge transmogrifies into a form of collective community knowledge in that it produces an insider knowledge group set against an outsider ‘unknowing’ group. The gossip columnist of this study, known as *The Shadow*, deploys the insider/outsider binaries to create a long-term and ongoing effect of inclusion. She does this by utilising the discourse of visibility.

‘Visibility politics’ is the term used by the lesbian and gay community to denote socio-political visibility or invisibility. The notion of being socially and publicly visible, or not visible, most likely originated from the lesbian and gay need to maintain ‘secrecy and silence’ (Leap, 1996: 72) in an often hostile heterosexual community setting. ‘Secrecy’ is one of the reasons for the need of insider community languages.

The Shadow uses the genre of gossip to conduct an ongoing textual political campaign to demonstrate her apparent notion that all lesbian celebrities have a social responsibility to be visible, that is to ‘come out’ to their public. ‘At some point a woman must “come out” – that is, adopt a lesbian identity or point of view (Zimmerman, 1993b: 136). *The Shadow* concurs and constructs an intensely political imbrication within the overt discourse of glamour. This manifests as commands, and even demands that celebrities must come out to the public, demonstrating the tenet that gossip is often preoccupied with the ‘monitoring of behaviour and development of social relationships’ (Tebbutt, 1995: 1).

Methodology

Lesbians on the Loose (LOTL) is an Australian magazine published monthly with a national distribution. I conducted my research on almost a decade of LOTL’s gossip column, LA Story written by *The Shadow*. Copies of the relevant pages of LA Story constitute **Appendix A**. The referencing system for quotations is based on the **date** of the issue which is located at the **bottom of the page**.

The value *The Shadow* places on visibility politics is demonstrated by its discursive incorporation into almost each gossip recount. An analysis of the process of gossip in a serialised narrative structure is the basis of my methodology. Melissa Etheridge and Ellen DeGeneres are two celebrities targeted by *The Shadow* for many years and I will be using their particular serialised narratives to demonstrate my argument.

Findings

Narrative 1: Melissa Etheridge

The Shadow introduces Melissa in her first column, in November 1993. This recount segment operates as the orientation stage of Melissa's narrative:

In future, I'll be bringing you movie, music, and book news, who's doing what and to whom and of course, the obligatory Melissa Etheridge news and sightings. She IS a local girl after all. And speaking of the wondrous one, her next album is already **OUT** and is titled, "Yes I Am". She "emphatically denies" the title has anything to do with the fact that she's newly out loud and out proud. [Nov, 1993]

The discourse of visibility politics is introduced when *The Shadow* discusses Melissa's album title, '*Yes I Am*', and also through the statement, '*newly out loud and out proud*'. In fact *The Shadow* uses the word 'out' three times in two consecutive clauses. In the same paragraph the reader is given further personal details of Melissa's life:

But Melissa, take a tip from me; **LIGHTEN UP!!!** You're telling everyone how you're finally in a happy and monogamous relationship, and that you've even bought a house and a dog together. [ibid]

An addition a few months later renders the orientation complete:

Lots of fun reading all the coverage on **Melissa Etheridge**; now that she's officially out, seems our media can't get enough of her; she's being interviewed everywhere! [Feb, 1994]

Melissa is very sought after, ascertained by use of the inclusive nominal group, '*our media*', for being out and famous. We now have a fairly complete 'picture' of Melissa Etheridge, lesbian, singer, stable love and home life and, most importantly, is publicly out.

A complication arises when Melissa is due to write the music for the new Ellen DeGeneres television series 'Ellen'. The show is consequently cancelled due to the homophobia of the show's '*powers that be*':

In other television news, the new **Ellen DeGeneres** series will not be using **Melissa Etheridge's** music as was previously reported. Although the first episodes were taped with Mel's music, at the last second, the powers that be decided a re-edit was needed. Why? Insiders say that even though the show is supposed to be straight, it already has dyke written all over it. Publicity photos for the series have DeGeneres dressed in flannel, ripped jeans and Docs and using Mel's music would have kicked the closet door completely open. [April, 1994]

The language used in this example denotes the field of visibility politics again, with, '*supposed to be straight*', '*has dyke written all over it*', and '*kicked the closet door completely open*'. It also introduces the concept of the 'insider/outsider' group binary because '*straight*' and '*dyke*' define a social polarity.

The narrative reaches the evaluative stage because the story has stabilised and will remain so for many issues. That is, Melissa is famous in the lesbian world, and famous in the straight world.

Well, don't tell Jodie but **Melissa Etheridge** and I are now secretly engaged!

The Shadow personalises the lesbian context of her gossip by announcing that she is '*now secretly engaged*' to Melissa, co-opting the outsider group social ritual of engagement without explanation to the reader.

The remainder of the paragraph is a straightforward recount of Melissa's stage popularity with women. In the same paragraph:

She's also become a mainstream celebrity and has been all over the airwaves. ...
Of course, those very proper straight stations never, ever mention the "L" word!
[August, 1994]

The straight world however is still treating Melissa in a homophobic manner implicit in *The Shadow's* nominal group choices: '*those very proper straight stations*' and '*the "L" word*'. These choices serve to maintain the binaried locations of insider and outsider groups.

The resolution of Melissa's narrative comes in the form of mainstream success as a lesbian performer. Of interest here is the implication that mainstream acceptance is the pinnacle of success, the ultimate consequence of the visibility trajectory. Melissa has been accepted professionally with her music and personally with her relationship.

Speaking of Melissa Etheridge, she has made the cover of rock and roll's oldest and most illustrious magazine, Rolling Stone. This is the first time ever than an out lesbian musician has graced the cover of this classic rock publication. The

times, they are a changin'! Melissa has definitely made the big time and may now be considered a 'mainstream' celebrity. [July, 1995]

The Shadow is clear that Melissa is responsible for her successful public status by using the pronoun 'she' as the point of departure in an active clause. That is, Melissa, the active agent, 'made the cover of ... *Rolling Stone*'. *Rolling Stone* did not, therefore, 'make' Melissa. However:

And though it's fun to read the straight press interviews that don't even lift an eyebrow as the mention her lover Julie and the 'normal' relationship they have, I think it's now time to christen a new anti-heroine. Anyone have any suggestions?? [July, 1995]

The main point of interest is *The Shadow*'s suggestion and request for 'a new anti-heroine'. Melissa's mainstream acceptability reduces her potential as a fulcrum for visibility. *The Shadow* needs a lesbian 'anti-heroine' in order to maintain the political tension that drives her text.

Narrative resolution continues in a segment almost one year later:

We couldn't be happier.

MELISSA ETHERIDGE and lover JULIE CYPHER set off all SORTS of reactions in the press when they announced publicly that Julie is pregnant!!! [Oct, 1996]

A photograph of Melissa and Julie wrapped in a blanket together, pretending to kiss, accompanies this recount segment. The resolution of the story is complete: an out lesbian with a happy family and a successful music career.

The coda or wrap-up of Melissa's narrative comes a few issues later:

Melissa and Julie were featured on a news magazine show here giving their first interview together about their impending parenthood. 'Gays as Parents' was the theme and of course in the end, they showed that, shock horror even queers are capable of feeling maternal and paternal love for children!! [Dec, 1996]

The Shadow does reclaim her favourite political lesbian icon, because Melissa is once again an active agent in the politicisation process:

Of course it's no secret who's number one on *The Shadow*'s nice list: head and shoulders above the crowd would have to be Melissa Etheridge. [Dec, 1996]

These is gossip segments wrap-up the long-term serialised narrative of Melissa Etheridge. She is publicly acclaimed for entering domains that have been traditionally considered the privilege of straight community, that of raising children in a family setting.

The Shadow continues to write about Melissa Etheridge after December 1996, but a 'new' narrative is about to emerge, with a different orientation focusing on Melissa and her family and their visibility.

Narrative 2: Ellen DeGeneres

A brief mention of the Ellen DeGeneres story is warranted. A different kind of resolution and coda is the point of interest here. From Ellen's initial introduction and ultimately her narrative orientation in December 1993, as an 'in the closet', 'stand up comedian', until more recent issues, she has been involved in a long and protracted complication consisting of the homophobia that surrounds her television show. *The Shadow's* evaluation stage depicts Ellen coming out personally as well as coming out publicly as her television character. The resolution is the result of being privately and publicly out through her relationship to Anne Heche, and the outing of her lesbian television character 'Ellen'. The coda in this narrative is that Ellen loses her television show.

Discussion

The narrative of Melissa Etheridge could almost read like a traditional heterosexual narrative, with a 'once-upon-a-time' orientation ('*newly out loud and out proud*') and a 'happy-ever-after' coda ('*shock, horror ... children*'). The exception is that there are two princesses (Melissa and Julie) instead of the usual heterosexually prescribed prince and princess. Melissa was professionally well established prior to coming out, so the move from insider to outsider domains has not damaged her career. Her outsider/public domain is mainly the concert stage targeting a bipolar audience. Ellen DeGeneres on the other hand had a profession involving a broader public domain, the television audience. Ellen's coming out narrative ends quite differently, with loss as the coda. While these examples appear to be structured along the lines of mainstream narrative traditions, they are not like traditional heterosexual narratives because the writer has chosen generic and other linguistic devices to procure a definitive political dimension. That is, the politics of visibility is the predominant experiential choice of the writer in all of the individual recounts that contribute to the temporal narrative structure. This is one way in which *The Shadow's* gossip becomes an important 'arena for moral and political debate suggesting that gossip plays a formative part in the shaping of social values' (Tebbutt, 1995: 1). The discourse of visibility politics is an assumed lesbian (and gay) dimension – heterosexual writers don't do it; heterosexuals don't do it in any context.

Melissa Etheridge and Ellen DeGeneres, through their ongoing, coming out processes, are participants in the naturalisation process, informing and normalising the historical background of lesbian community. *The Shadow*, as the recorder or reporter of these processes is also a participant and, through vicarious engagement and complicity, so is the reader.

Conclusion

I have incorporated the two examples of narratives of Melissa Etheridge and Ellen DeGeneres to demonstrate how gossip in a serialised narrative structure serves to construct the notion of cultural inclusion through a discursive naturalisation process. Using *The Shadow*'s gossip column, I have focussed on language analysis through narrative structure as a means of determining the gossip writer's speech choices and the ramifications of those choices. The confluence of the gossip and narrative processes has demonstrated how the lesbian writer and reader are included in the production of lesbian-specific text.

The Shadow accomplishes a sense of belonging each time she addresses the reader making possible the idea of collective knowledge, and ultimately belonging. The combined attributes of gossip in narrative and the discourse of visibility, operate to inform the process of inclusion. Lesbian culture and its language are inseparable. By making language visible, the culture is made visible. *The Shadow* produces inclusion through her text linguistically and thereby creates, through the process of writing and reading, a visible, temporal and spatial, discursive location in which to be included. An extension of the notion of assumed knowledge informing a naturalisation process and assumed knowledge is the concept of inter-generational continuity. As all cultures or communities exist on a temporal time line, that is, a diachronic line, the contemporary out lesbian will, through being out, create a collective history of lesbian visibility. This is one example of the natural process of information and ideas being passed on from one generation to the next, ensuring a continuity of community knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1966: 66; Card, 1995:12-3). This has also been called an act of 'ventriloquism' (Livia and Hall, 1997: 7) where speakers are the conduits for previous utterances or collections of information, and where the stories or narratives of lesbians' lives become the accumulated memories of a culture.

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