

## LOSING, FINDING, AND MAKING SPACE FOR ACTIVISM THROUGH LITERACY PERFORMANCES AND IDENTITY WORK

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Kira and I came to know each other through our work together at The Loft. The Loft is a youth-run center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in a large, northeastern, urban community. It serves a diverse population of youth ranging in age from twelve to twenty-three, although the majority of the youth who were there when I was there were young, black men. Kira is light-skinned and freckled. She wears her hair in twists or locks that hang just beyond her ears, unless they are pulled back. Her eyes are dark, and, every now and then, when she is tired, one of her eyes wanders. She has a rod through the piercing in her tongue. Her ears are also pierced, and she wears one small silver hoop in each ear. Sometimes she wears a chain around her neck on which there are either freedom rings or comedy and tragedy masks. She wears no make-up and no nail polish. On her left arm she wears a black watch, which, for a while, had a plastic sticker on it that said, "DYKE." She also has a black tattoo on her arm, about three inches below her elbow, of two overlapping women symbols. Neither of us work at The Loft anymore, but I can still picture her there, sitting in a chair, her feet on the floor, both feet and knees wide apart, her elbows on her knees. I can see her rubbing her hands up her face and across her head, smiling and laughing, not giddy, almost lackadaisical.

When asked to identify in terms of race, Kira identifies as biracial. Her father was black and her mother was white. She never knew her father, and her mother gave her and her four siblings up for adoption when Kira was very young. She was in touch with her mother for a brief period of time, at fourteen, just before her mother died of complications resulting from HIV/AIDS. For the majority of Kira's life, she and her siblings were raised by an African American foster mother. When asked to identify in terms of sexuality, she sometimes identifies as lesbian and other times as a dyke, both of which implicitly identify her in terms of gender. She is also a social drama, interactive, improvisational performance artist; a leader; an activist; and; more recently, a student. Currently, she is in her third year of college in an experiential learning program studying theatre and social justice.

When I met Kira, she was living on her own and was struggling to graduate from an urban, public, magnet high school for the creative and performing arts. She was supporting herself by working part-time jobs; as a result, she did not attend school with any regularity. She did, however, come to The Loft quite regularly, and had been coming for over a year by that time. As a regular and active member, she assumed leadership roles, including being a member of the Speakers' Bureau - a group of youth who were hired and trained to conduct outreaches to youth and youth services providers in order to educate them on issues pertinent to LGBTQ youth.

In this article, I examine the literacy performances and identity work of Kira, who upon coming to identify as a lesbian, failed to find space for herself at home or at school, and, as an alternative, found and made space for herself at The Loft and on the Speakers' Bureau, which I argue are in the margins of school and home. Through this work, Kira learned how to challenge heterosexism and homophobia. I draw on data collected during a three-year ethnographic study of literacy performances and identity work in The Loft in which Kira was one of the individuals with whom I conducted a case study.

When I talk about Kira finding and making "space," I mean a living, breathing context characterized by complexities and often conflicts. I draw this notion from Susan Talburt (2000) and bell hooks (1994). Talburt (2000) points to de Certeau's distinction between place and space in which he asserts that space is a "*practiced place*" (p. 19). Talburt describes spaces as "emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable" (p. 19), as opposed to *places* which she understands to be "an order of distributed relationships, location, and fixity, such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired" (p. 19). I understand this to mean that *places* exist in and of themselves; their existence is all but hypothetical, but spaces are these places brought to life. Although I understand space in this way, I also think space is something more particular. To me, space is not just place brought to life; it is the people within a place and the ways in which that place brings people to life. In other words, I understand space as a dialogic between place and people.

Talburt acknowledges that "certain discursive spaces encourage certain articulations of the self" (p. 17), and I would add that when a particular space does not allow for particular articulations of the self, or performances of identities, then that space stops being a space for that particular performance. For example, The Loft may be a place that makes space for LGBTQ youth to perform their sexual identities, while school may not be. School may offer these youth space to be students, or to be raced students or gendered students, while not providing space for them to students with sexual identities. In other words, it is not that there simply is or is not space; rather, it is that there may be space for some aspects of individuals and not for other aspects. In other words, there may be space for a person's racial and gender identities as a biracial female, for example, but not for that same person's sexual identity as a lesbian. Space can be squelched by assumptions that everyone shares a particular

perspective or by impositions of such a perspective. If space does not allow for contestation, then it is no longer space. For example, if a student in school feels like it is impossible to perform a sexual identity that is in conflict with the heteronormative, then she or he does not have space for such an identity at school.

According to hooks (1994), space is:

a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of experience. (p. 110)

Although she is talking specifically about space among women, the notion seems applicable more broadly. When I talk about space, I am talking about the space, or lack thereof, that LGBTQ youth find or make to explore their identities, particularly their sexual identities, in ways that often conflict with the heteronormative. A particular individual can only determine whether or not a space is safe enough for this kind of identity work at any given time. What is safe for me may not be safe for Kira, and what is safe for Kira may not be safe for someone else. Further, what may be safe for Kira at one time may not be at another time. When I say that a space is safe enough for particular identity work, I am not stating that the space that is characteristic of the time and place; rather, I am describing what an individual was able to accomplish in that time and place.

When Kira could not find or make space for herself at school and home, she made space for herself in The Loft and on the Speakers' Bureau, in the margins of school and home. hooks (1990), in her essay entitled "marginality as site of resistance," asserts that marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation .... it is also the site of radical possibility" (p. 341). She avows that marginality is something to cherish because it "offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (p. 341). In her essay, hooks draws from her experiences as a black American living in a small town in Kentucky and then later attending a predominantly white university. Race is integral to her conceptualization of marginalization; however, her notion of marginalization informs my understanding of Kira's work in that it was marginality that offered Kira the "radical possibility" of working against heterosexism and homophobia.

In particular, I focus on the literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002/2003; Blackburn, 2003) and identity work that Kira accomplishes in the spaces she finds and makes for herself in the margins. I bring together New Literacy Studies (Collins, 1995; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995, 1999) and Judith Butler's (1999, 1991) performance theory to conceptualize literacy as a series of performances in which we read and write words and worlds (Christensen, 1998; Freire, 1987) such that any one performance is among innumerable other performances, each of which is both similar to and different from all of the others, both confirming and disrupting one another. It is in the series of performances that literacy has the opportunity to reinforce and interrupt power dynamics. It is in this conception of literacy performances that I see hope for reading and writing for social change.

In terms of identity work, I draw from Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain's (1998) theory of identity, in which they identify four *contexts of identity*. The first of these contexts is the *figured world*, in which one understands the world in a particular way. The second is *positionality* where one understands one's position relative to the figured world; one's *positionality* is "inextricably linked to power, status, and rank" (p. 271). Holland et al. (1998) relate these two contexts to each other, stating, "figurative identities are about signs that evoke story lines or plots among generic characters; positional identities are about facts that constitute relations of hierarchy, distance, or perhaps affiliation" (p. 128). The third context is the *space of authoring*, or the in this space that one writes one's self into the world in a particular way. Authoring contributes to the fourth context, which is *making worlds*, in which one makes new worlds so that "new figured worlds may come about" (p. 272). As a person moves into, through, and out of these four contexts of identity, she has the repeated opportunity to author herself into the world as empowered, which may result in her making of new worlds. It is in this notion of identity work that I find the hope of social change.

While I believe that literacy performances and identity work can both open up and close down spaces, my focus here is less on how literacy performances and identity work affect space and more on how literacy performances and identity work facilitate activism within particular spaces including school and home. With this in mind, I first examine what Kira called the "kick-out process," and how that played out at school and home; then I look at her accomplishments at The Loft and on the Speakers' Bureau; and finally I consider how her work positioned her as an activist who challenged heterosexism and homophobia. My analysis of the data and reflections on the research are woven together throughout this exploration of literacy performances and identity work.

## **The "Kick-out Process"**

When I met Kira, she was already out of the home in which she had been raised, and she was no longer in school. She was

struggling to graduate from high school and had no intention of going to college. I didn't understand why because she was such a smart, articulate, mature young woman. In my mind, people like Kira were supported by their families and went to college. I wondered why this wasn't happening for her. It was only through the course of our relationship that I came to understand why Kira was living on her own, supporting herself, working, and not going to school.

It was not as if Kira graduated from high school and then just opted out of college. She fervently rejected school and what it represented to her, even before she graduated. For example, the first day I met her, she was part of the group of youth that interviewed me to determine whether I could spend time at The Loft. Someone in the group asked me whether I had experience working with youth, and I proudly responded that I had been a middle and high school teacher for six years, and that even before that, most of the work I had done had been with youth. Kira just looked at me, with a deadpan expression, and said, "What are you going to do to NOT be a teacher in this *youth-run* place?" Although I was taken aback by her comment, I explained that as a teacher I had worked hard to make the classroom *our* classroom, rather than *my* classroom, by negotiating with students what kind of work we did and how, by stating the requirements or the parameters, and opening up the possibilities to the imaginations of the students. I also said that I was glad she mentioned that because I would have to remind myself not to assume, or try to assume, teacher-like authority, and I would appreciate it if they would remind me of this. I revisited this interaction repeatedly while I worked at The Loft as I struggled with the tensions of offering support and guidance but not usurping youth's authority. What I did not pay attention to at first is what Kira's question revealed about her, particularly about her relationship with school.

**School.** When Kira told her coming-out story for Speakers' Bureau outreaches, she described herself as a good student before she came to identify as a lesbian. She said:

I never even cut [classes] until I came out ... never had the desire, straight-A student ... I was like, I was a really good student, I mean, I enjoyed school. I was on time, I left late, you know what I mean, I was really involved. (audiotape [AT] 7.27.99)

She talked about using school as a way of explaining her lack of attraction to young men; for example, when people asked her who she liked or was dating or why she didn't like or date anyone, she would say that she was putting school before boys. Her attention to school also gave her a way of dismissing her attraction to young women; she could conceal her attraction to young women by focusing entirely on schoolwork. In other words, she could hide her lesbian feelings, as well as her lack of heterosexual feelings, behind her schoolwork.

However, when she started to pay attention to her attraction to women (when she came to identify as a lesbian), she tried to make a different kind of space for herself in school, a space in which her lesbian identity was a part of her schoolwork rather than concealed by it. For example, for one class, she was assigned to create a document that included text and a photograph. Kira selected a poem that she written entitled "Of me" and a photograph of herself. In the poem, she describes herself as "Adventuring with Sappho and her woman warriors," thus defining herself as a woman, particularly a woman who loves other women. She also writes about "Building bulldozers, to break through barriers" and "Finding room to laugh when there's no space around" (documents [docs] 7.15.99); these lines convey her desire for and her efforts at making space for herself in places where no such space seems to exist. In this poem, I see Kira as trying to make space for herself in school. Kira said as much in an interview; she said, "by this time I was out, this was my senior year, and um, I had decided that any report that I had done would be on somebody gay or something ... because everything else wasn't [gay] ... it was an opportunity to have something gay in school" (AT 5.24.00). During this year, she wrote the above poem and a book report on Melissa Etheridge. Thus, through her reading and writing, Kira worked hard to "break through barriers" to make space for herself as a lesbian in school.

Her work was often thwarted by the heterosexism and homophobia she encountered at school. Although she asserted that she did not experience overt heterosexism and homophobia, she talked about how lonely it was to eat at the lunch table alone after coming out and how people there were "just being jerks" (AT 7.27.99). She also talked about "wanting not to be at school because of all the like stuff [homophobic abuse] that [her lesbian classmate] was getting" (AT 7.27.99). In other words, although Kira was not getting overtly abused by the heterosexism and homophobia, like her classmate was, the threat and impact of those forms of oppression were enough to make her feel isolated and like she did not want to be there. Kira said she would come to school, collect her work, and leave, and then, she would do as much as she could, return to school, turn it in, collect more work, and leave again.

During this time she wrote a story entitled "The Existence of Steven" in response to an assignment to write a myth that explained something. She actually wrote it at The Loft, where "some people ... helped me write it too ... [by] throwing out words, like frolic, they were throwing out words for me to use" (AT 5.24.00). Her myth plays off of the homophobic comment that it is wrong to be gay because God started the world with Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. Her myth debunks this notion asserting that God created Adam and Steve first, and then created "a superior gender, with child bearing abilities." According to her myth, Adam and Eve procreated, but Eve was bored and asked God to "make her an equal." God agreed, but insisted that "only one in ten of her descendants could frolic with members of the same sex." Here, Kira built on her familiarity with research done by Alfred

Kinsey (1948, 1953) in which he found that one in ten people had engaged in homosexual behaviors. Kira built on her knowledge of Sappho as an ancient woman who loved women by writing in her myth that God created "Sappho," of whom Adam was so jealous that he "decided it was wrong to frolic with the same sex." In this way, her myth explains homosexuality as created by God, and homophobia as a symptom of jealousy (docs 7.15.99).

When she wrote this, it was toward the end of her senior year, a time that she described in this way:

at this point, I wasn't caring too much about anybody, and, uh, actually sometimes felt like 'ha ha ha, I'm going to show you, I'm going to make everything I say gay,' sometimes I did that just because everything was so not gay. (AT 2.22.00)

By this time, she was not really trying to make space for herself in school as much as she was trying to defend herself and retaliate against the forms of oppression that she was hurt by there. Her literacy performances were also helping her to make space for herself in the LGBTQ community (Malinowitz, 1995, p. 204), literally as she wrote the myth among LGBTQ youth at the center and figuratively as she figured out how she, as a woman who loves women, fit into a world of gay and homophobic men.

**Home.** While this was happening at school, Kira was engaged in a similar struggle at home. The previous spring, during Kira's junior year, her foster mother, who Kira calls "mom," went through her book bag and found fliers for the city's "alternative prom," a prom for LGBTQ youth. An argument ensued, and Kira answered honestly her mother's question about whether she was lesbian. After that argument, according to Kira:

me and my mom didn't talk about what was going on much more but we argued all the time ... it would be about anything, and within an argument, like it could be about 'Kira you left your book bag in the living room,' and it would turn into 'you're a big ole man, you're a this, you're a that, you're a bad thing, you're a nasty person.' So, and then, anything, and before this happened my mom like was really like I mean she cared where I was but she wasn't like all up in my business and saying that I wasn't doing anything. Now I wasn't doing anything, and on top of it, I was out drinking and doing drugs and let me tell you I didn't touch any sort of alcohol or drug in high school. ... I should have been worse cause I got blamed for everything, everything. If my mom had a beer missing it was [Kira's] fault. (AT 7.27.99)

At this point, her mom was not even willing to talk about Kira's lesbianism; rather, she expressed her disapproval of Kira in other ways, ways that were not grounded in Kira's reality. It was then that Kira began staying out very late and for entire weekends as a way of avoiding her mother's disapproval. Further, Kira's mom began imposing new rules. For example, it was no longer enough that she went to Sunday school, she now had to go to Sunday school and the church service. In response, Kira rejected her mother's authority by breaking these newly imposed rules. Kira even considered leaving her mother's home, but she did not want to assume sole responsibility for what she understood to be her mother's problem. She said:

At one point I was like, 'I'm going to leave' ... but then I was just like, 'no, I'm going to wait for her to kick me out, I'm not gonna leave. She's gonna have to kick me out, because I don't want it to be all my fault.' (AT 7.27.99)

Ultimately her mother did kick her out for breaking rules; Kira was supposed to go to church on Sunday mornings, but one Sunday she did not come home. The later it became, the less she wanted to go home and when she finally came home, it was after midnight. She told the story like this:

so I come home and I'm sneaking in. I go to the bedroom, and I go, and I'm getting ready to go to sleep. Next thing I know my mom pops up in the room, kicking my ass, telling me to get the fuck out, so I grab my school books, and I left. (AT 7.27.99)

This "kick-out process" as Kira called it, allowed Kira and her mother to both relinquish responsibility and assume power. For example, Kira insured that it was not "all [her] fault" by letting her mother (perhaps even pushing her to) say the words, "get the fuck out." This let Kira feel like it was her mother's fault for kicking her out and let her mother assume power by kicking Kira out of the house. However, by breaking her mom's rules, Kira assumed some power over her mother. Her mother could not *make* her come home by a certain time, and she could not *make* her go to church. Thus, Kira asserted her power where she could, while still relinquishing responsibility for being kicked out.

**Relationship between School and Home.** Getting kicked out of her home, of course, impacted Kira's schoolwork. She was less focused on school and she had to prioritize work above school in order to find and keep a place to live. Moreover, once she was supporting herself, her respect for authority plummeted. This was how she described the impact of the "kick-out process" on her schoolwork:

So what happened with school from there was that, um, I was, I was really upset when I, I, I don't know. I guess from that, and even before then I had started getting upset with, um, one with tones used in school, like, belittling stuff, you know what I mean. And so now that I was on my own, and I didn't have anybody, you know, for them to call, I was really just like, I could act out against it, so that was very empowering for me... so, I just didn't show up for school, like, there was a portion of time about like three months, that mean I wasn't doing my work, but it meant so much less to me. (AT 7.27.99)

Here, Kira explicitly stated that she asserted her own power by acting out against school authorities, a power that became more pronounced upon being kicked out of her home. This is evidenced in a story Kira told me about a time that she got in trouble at school and an authority called her mother who dismissed the call by saying, "[Kira] doesn't live here any more" (AT 7.27.99). Thus, Kira's being kicked-out of school and home were intricately intertwined.

Not only were they intricately intertwined, but the negotiation of the processes resembled each other. At school, she found plenty of space for herself as long as she was assumed to be heterosexual, but after she began identifying as lesbian, she found less and less space for herself in school. Eventually, she began acting out and eventually stopped going to school. At home, before her mother suspected she was a lesbian, her mother trusted her to behave in ways that were valued at home. Afterwards, her mother assumed that she was behaving in ways she did not respect, such as drinking alcohol and doing drugs, and she imposed additional confines, such as requiring Kira to spend more time in church. Here, too, Kira began acting out, this time against her mother. At home, Kira and her mother grappled with power; they asserted their power in different ways and then relinquished it in other ways. Although it seems like Kira tried to engage in a similar kind of struggle in school, the rules that she was willing to break there - such as cutting class, getting in fights, and smoking cigarettes in the bathroom - did not warrant expulsion. In other words, she did not break rules in ways that pushed the school to literally kick her out; she essentially dropped out by not coming to school. I do not think that Kira *wanted* to be kicked out of either her home or school. Rather, I think she was being kicked out of both of these contexts implicitly, by being treated poorly at home and being ignored at school. She was being kicked out in ways that did not offer her the respect of conversations that may have provided opportunities for resolution. Her mother and authorities at school gave her no opportunity to resolve the conflicts she was experiencing. It was only through many conversations with Kira over time and in a relationship that I was able to understand the "kick-out process" in this way.

It took me years to develop this understanding. I was frustrated by youth who were kicked out of their parents' home for breaking their parents' rules which seemed immature to me. Why couldn't they just follow their parents' rules until they could support themselves? I had heard Kira's story repeatedly, and even her story frustrated me. I could not see that, in fact, she was being kicked out for being lesbian, in part because the kick-out process did not play itself out so neatly. I couldn't hear "get out for breaking my rules" as "get out for being gay." I couldn't make the connection between one statement and the other. I was also frustrated by youth who left their parents' homes without being explicitly told to leave. I thought they were being irresponsible for leaving without first getting a job and a place to stay. The only explanations I would hear were those of physical abuse, and would not understand that sometimes the abuse they experienced was not physical, but still difficult to reveal to other people. I couldn't understand that it was what was not said, what could not be articulated, either to themselves or to me that was the catalyst for the "kick-out process."

I recall, after an outreach to a master's level class in my graduate school of education, how one of the instructors of the class commented on how these youth just needed to get it together and focus on their schoolwork. There was some part of me that agreed with her and another part that felt repulsed by the comment and my agreement. I was troubled by my conflicting feelings. However, as a result of her comment, I found myself defending the youth in my mind, and, in doing so, I found myself being more understanding of their stories and their decisions behind them. It was during the following summer when something seemed to click. Nothing in particular happened that day; I was writing about my frustration surrounding these issues and something clicked. I found Kira at The Loft and explained to her my new understanding about how youth can be kicked out - of home or school or anywhere else - without being explicitly kicked out, but that the expulsion is just as real, even if it is not confirmed by a conversation or documented with a letter of expulsion. She just smiled at me and said, "yes, you got it" (field notes [FN] 6.16.00). This is not to say that there are not some youth who are immature and irresponsible and are on the streets as a result; however, I think the youth's stories are much more complicated than they often communicate, not because they are inarticulate as much as because they are made more vulnerable by revealing their experiences with the "kick-out process."

Throughout Kira's "kick-out process," of both her school and home, she used literacy performances and identity work, along with many other strategies, to make space for herself. At home, before she came to identify as a lesbian, Kira kept a journal that she

hid under the mattress in her bedroom, but she learned early on that her mother read this journal. So, by the time Kira began coming out to herself as a lesbian, she stopped leaving her journals at home and kept them with her (FN 12.17.99, doc 3.23.01). In other words, the only space for literacy performances and identity work that she made for herself at home was a small, secretive space that she could pack up and take with her. In Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) terms, Kira figured her world at home as one where as long as she, or anyone else, was assumed to be straight, they were valued, but, as soon as anyone identified as something other than straight, they were discarded. Kira knew this even before she came out to herself and was outed by her mother because her older sister had been kicked out of the house for identifying as lesbian. In this figured world, Kira's positionality was one of affirmation and support before she came out. In order to maintain such positionality, Kira tried to conceal her writing of herself as a lesbian into the world of her home by hiding the texts that revealed her as such. In other words, she worked *not* to author herself into this world. By choosing not to write herself as a lesbian in her world at home, Kira failed to make a new world there, so the world in which lesbians were oppressed and eventually kicked-out was perpetuated.

After Kira was outed by her mother, her figured world was confirmed, particularly in terms of not being valued as a lesbian. Her mother called her names once she identified herself as lesbian, and then the conversation was over; they did not talk about Kira's lesbian identity anymore. Further, her success as a student was ignored, as if it was eclipsed by her lesbianism, and eventually, she was no longer achieving in school as she once had. In short, her positionality had shifted dramatically from a position of affirmation and support to one of shame and silence. As a result, Kira wrote herself into the world of her home less and less by avoiding spending time there. Although this prevented Kira from making a new world of her home, it allowed her, even required her, to make a new world for herself outside of her home.

As a student, Kira engaged in literacy performances and identity work through which she tried to make space for herself as a lesbian at school. This was risky work because, again, in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) terms, her figured world was one characterized by heterosexism and homophobia, as shown by her isolation at school, the experience of other people as "jerks," and the abuse of her lesbian classmate. In her figured world at school, Kira's positionality was marked by oppression, but not entirely. She also asserted her power, particularly as she wrote herself into the world as a lesbian. This writing took various shapes, including the necklace she wore with freedom rings, the "DYKE" label on her watch, and the tattoo on her arm of interlocking women symbols. The writing of herself into the world also took the shapes of the poem she used for her project in which she associates herself with Sappho, the report for which she read Melissa Etheridge's biography, and the myth that explained homosexuality and homophobia. Through these various literacy performances, Kira authored herself into the world as an out lesbian, or a lesbian who chooses not to conceal her sexual identity. This authoring of her self marked an effort at remaking the world, particularly her world of school, as a place where lesbians were included in the curriculum. In fact, she explicitly stated that it was her intention to use opportunities to select topics for writing and reading as opportunities to add queer-inclusive literature into a curriculum that was devoid of such texts. To do this kind of work, this remaking of the heterosexist and homophobic world of her school, was incredibly difficult, and, over time, Kira chose to do less and less of it, particularly once she had been kicked out of her home.

The literacy performances and identity work in which Kira engaged at home and in school layered on one another, complicating and troubling one another. When Kira was unable to remake her world at home in ways that would allow space for her as a lesbian, it hindered her progress in doing this sort of work at school. Eventually, she could not find space for herself either at home or in school. As a result, she negotiated complicated exits from both of these contexts and co-constructed alternative spaces where she could engage in literacy performances and identity work that supported, and complicated her lesbian identity.

## **Beyond School and Home**

Although Kira was unable to make space for her literacy performances and identity work in her home and her school, she found and made space for such explorations outside of these contexts, including at The Loft, as well as other LGBTQ-friendly places. Among these out-of-school-and-home contexts, Kira engaged in an inquiry about what it meant to be lesbian (or not).

**Learning about Sexuality.** Although Kira found little space for herself in school, she was still very interested in learning; it's just that what she was interested in learning was not being taught in her school. She told me about leaving school and finding places to read about topics that interested her. For example, when we were working on her story for Speakers' Bureau, she told me:

I would leave school and go sit in [a local café that was lesbian-owned and LGBTQ-friendly] or go sit in [a local gay, lesbian, and feminist bookstore] and read books for free ... I would leave school, [the bookstore] didn't open 'til eleven, so I would leave by twelve, and I would sit in there for three hours, until [The Loft] opened. (AT 7.27.99)

Perhaps part of her motivation was simply to have a place to be where the impact of heterosexism and homophobia was alleviated, relative to school and home. However, she also had genuine curiosities that she explored through her reading. She

described finding some kind of almanac in the bookstore that defined words that were used in the local LGBTQ community and The Loft, in particular; this vocabulary was something she really wanted, even needed, to learn. She said:

I felt like this was something I wanted to learn, you know, about myself, and I just wanted to learn about the community because, if you sit here at [The Loft], you hear language, you hear like stories, you hear about people, you're just like, 'what?' And you're really, really lost. It's a whole different like conversation. You know what I mean? And so, I needed to know. (AT 7.27.99)

Learning the vocabulary of The Loft and the LGBTQ community helped her to understand what people were saying, but it also gave her access to some of the conceptual categories that were being imposed upon her. For example, she said that she would go to the bookstore and look for definitions of words, "like the butch<sup>1</sup>, the femme<sup>2</sup>, the dyke<sup>3</sup>, the soft butch<sup>4</sup>, the this, the that, muff divers<sup>5</sup>, I'm like, 'Are they all the same thing? What's the levels?' ... I wanted to know" (AT 7.27.99). At this point she was looking for answers to questions about what it meant to be a butch, a femme, a dyke, among other names, and where she fit into these categories.

Kira also sought portraits of women among these categories by reading books by and about lesbians. She read a variety of texts and genres as a way of exploring what it meant to be lesbian. She said she read autobiographies and biographies of famous lesbians, including Melissa Etheridge and Ellen Degeneres. She also read novels by and about lesbians, such as those by Rita Mae Brown. She tried to read erotica, but it did not appeal to her. This reading not only gave her the opportunity to use literacy performances as a way of exploring lesbian identity, her identity work also rekindled in her an interest in reading. She said the reading was "great" because "for some reason, my reading had stopped. I had stopped reading, and like, it was really nice to like read again, and feel like interested in books" (AT 7.27.99). In this way, the explorations she did outside of her school and home not only enhanced her identity work but also her literacy performances. Kira continued to engage in literacy performances and identity work throughout the time we shared at The Loft, selecting texts just because they were about lesbians (AT 5.11.00).

Kira's inquiry was not limited to the bookstore or The Loft any more than one's education is limited to school, but it was limited by the discourse of hegemonic heterosexism. For example, she talked about having a clear image of what it meant to be straight:

because of TV, because of things that were said and, and, I knew about marriage, and I knew about, you know, 2.5 kids and a white picket fence American dream, and I knew about all that kind of stuff, so I sort of knew about straight life, but I had, I had never, like I knew gay people, but I had never seen them interact with their partners, and still today, I, I, I feel like I'm still learning about being a lesbian, and, or whatever... I didn't know what they did, you know what I mean? (AT 2.22.00)

Even though she knew she could not rely on "TV" and "things that were said" to answer her questions about what it meant to be gay or lesbian, she thought she could rely on reading books and observing people. She said, during this time, "In the beginning I went with, 'this is what the book says,' 'this is what this person does, this is what that person does,'" rather than going "with how I felt" (AT 2.22.00). In this way, her inquiry was further limited by the discourse of the LGBTQ community. She told me that she picked the label of "lesbian" too fast because, as she said, "the term that was thrown at me. That [was the term] for a woman loving a woman" (AT 2.22.00). It wasn't just "lesbian" that was "thrown" at her, it was also "granola lesbian," or a lesbian who stereotypically wears sandals, participates in outdoor activities, and is a vegetarian. Kira described this part of her identity work in an interview:

Kira: ... Well, I was a lesbian, and the type of lesbian I was, was

Mollie: this crunchy

K: granola

M: As opposed to what?

K: As opposed to being butch, as opposed to a lipstick lesbian<sup>6</sup>, as opposed to a leather dyke<sup>7</sup>.

M: And you were learning those things too, and you were saying, 'not me?'

K: Well, I was told 'not me.'

M: Oh, really?

K: I was told that I wasn't those things.

M: Who, who tells you that stuff?

K: I guess, like when I first came here, it was just like, 'Kira's a granola dyke.' You know, and I'd be like 'no I'm not,'

M: Oh, ok.

K: and they'd be like yes you are. That's the kind of lesbian that you are. Look at the things that you do, look at the things that you eat, look at the way that you dress, look at the

M: Ok, so just people here?

K: People. People here, and

M: Oh, and people outside of here too?

K: Pretty much people, well, all gay people that I came into contact with around my age.

M: Would refer to you that way?

K: Yeah. I felt they were labeling me that way, and some of them actually did come out and say that they were labeling me that way. (AT 2.22.00)

As a result of Kira's identity work, both in and out the bookstore, she came to a particular understanding of what it meant to be lesbian, particularly granola lesbian. She understood this because that was the label she was assigned, even though this assignment was not necessarily in accordance with the way she felt.

**Complicating Sexuality.** Kira was looking for answers regarding what it meant to identify as lesbian, and her literacy performances contributed to her exploration, but this was complicated by an understanding of her identity as multiple and variable. By multiple I mean that she is not simply a lesbian, she is also raced, classed, and gendered, among many other things; and by variable I mean that her identities are not static, that is, they vary throughout her lifetime. This conception of identity is in keeping with queer theory, according to which, identity, particularly sexual identity is "an unstable, shifting, and volatile construct, a contradictory and unfinalized social relation" (Britzman, 1997, p. 186). It is this notion of identity that served as the catalyst for what I am calling Kira's follow-up questions.

That she understands her identity as multiple is evident by her frustration at reading literature that is by and about white people. In other words, she is not only lesbian, she is also biracial. In the Fall of 1999, Kira came into a meeting and declared that if anyone wanted to get her a birthday present, she would like a book from the local gay, lesbian, and feminist bookstore. She excitedly described the book as a collection of lesbian monologues, which sounded perfect for her. Several months later, on her birthday, I found, purchased, and gave her the book, having barely flipped through it (FN 1.10.00). Kira never really said much about the book to me until I asked about it during an interview, when she told me that she had read parts of the book and there was one monologue she liked. It was a:

rewrite of a famous black woman's story, slave story, I think, rewrite, and she was a lesbian ... I'm trying to think of who it was, but it was a rewrite of a black person, and it was a monologue, but she was a lesbian, in real-life. (AT 5.24.00)

I was a little disappointed that she only liked one monologue from the collection, and I asked her why she had asked for it. She told me that she wanted it:

because it was lesbians and it was theatre and maybe I could find something interesting that would suit me, but it did, I didn't find anything ... they were kind a lame. I don't think they really represented me at all or who I was. (AT 5.24.00)

Even though she shared similar sexual and gender identities, her racial identity was distinct from the vast majority of those represented in the book. She could not connect with characters based solely on their gender and sexual identities, and, in fact, she connected most with the single character who was of color, even though that character was of a different era and of dramatically different circumstances. Still, she was most drawn, in fact, *only* drawn to the monologue that was written from the perspective of a black lesbian.

However, it is not just that Kira has a collection of multiple identities; rather, it is that these multiple identities shape and inform one another. For example, she read a part in a script that was supposed to have been loosely based on the youth at The Loft, but Kira felt that neither she nor anyone else at The Loft was accurately represented by the script, in part because of race, but also because of the way in which racial and sexual identities, among other identities and experiences, take shape together. She described the play as representing:

white male, white older kinda male culture. A lot of the terms used in it I had never heard. Like them talking about Barbara Streisand, how many times do you hear people at [The Loft] talk about Barbara Streisand? ... So in those cases, I was just like, 'this isn't us,' you know what I mean? (AT 5.11.00)

Although Barbara Streisand is considered by many to be a gay male icon, she is not an icon at The Loft. According to Kira,



Streisand is not an icon for all gay men; rather, she is an icon for older, white, gay men in particular. By pointing this out, she suggests that the play fails to represent *The Loft* by representing and perpetuating the stereotypical image of gay people as older, white men. She said:

They're always wealthy; they're always male mostly ... most likely white, you know, and they're just going through the schools, and I'm just like, 'I don't see that that much.' I see less of that, you know what I mean. I really see youth mostly of color from the inner city with no money ... whose parents aren't accepting, get kicked out of the house, live on the streets, and I don't see that. (AT 5.11.00)

I understand Kira to say that identity, hers as well as others', is not just about gender and sexuality, it is also about race and class, among many other aspects of identity, and that these identities interact with and shape one another.

That these other aspects of identity - aspects that are not in the typical list of race, class, gender, and sexuality - are significant to Kira is evident in the texts that she values. I heard her repeatedly applaud a television show called, "In the life," for example. In an interview I asked her what was so great about this show, and she told me about an episode that featured "ninety something years old black, black lesbian. That was awesome because usually you hear about older white lesbians, but you don't hear about older black lesbians" (AT 5.24.00). However, the appeal of the show was not only about race, gender, and sexuality; she also appreciated how the show portrayed gay people doing many different things. For example, she said that she liked the show because "once you're gay, that's not it, that there's gay people and they're doing all sorts of things, and [the show is] not all based around them being gay" (AT 5.24.00). For Kira, it is not enough that the texts that inform her identity work are only about being gay or lesbian, they must also be about being fuller, more complex people of multiple identities.

Not only does Kira understand her identities to be multiple, she also understands them to be variable, or changing over time. As I described previously, when Kira first came out in the LGBTQ community, she assumed the identity of lesbian, particularly granola lesbian, mostly because it was imposed upon her. I, too, imposed this identity upon her by assuming that she identified as lesbian. However, when we worked on her story for Speakers' Bureau, she told me,

for a while I was calling myself a lesbian, and for a while I wasn't. Sometimes I just say the word lesbian so I could conform to what, you know, is ok to say, especially at outreaches, like, I really say lesbian because I can't say that I'm a dyke because, you know, it doesn't really conform, but I don't really feel like a lesbian. (AT 7.27.99)

Here, she explained the variability of her sexual identity. She also pointed to this variability in a Speakers' Bureau meeting when she said that she identified differently in different places, that on outreaches she is a lesbian and at home she is a dyke (FN 12.2.99). This variability is not only characterized as shifting from lesbian to dyke and vice versa; it is also characterized by the suspension of these classifications. In an interview, Kira stated,

I thought that I had to have a label, and I'm realizing that I don't know if I need a label. I'm trying not to label myself because it puts me in a box, and whenever I go out of it, I feel like I've done something wrong. (AT 2.22.00)

Here, Kira asserted that a single identity, such as lesbian, granola lesbian, or even dyke, did not accurately represent her, that such an identity confined her; for that reason, she preferred to avoid assuming a label. In queer terms, Kira preferred the "suspension of all such classifications" (Jagose, 1996, p. 132). In fact, she even articulated the hope she has in the work that postmodern notions of identities - as represented by language-based labels - could do for social change when she said:

I'm sorta glad that the languages are getting all mixed up because then maybe we'll break out of 'this person's gay, this person's a lesbian.' There'll be so many terms that people will get tired of using them and they'll just say 'hey you, how you doing?' (AT, 5.24.00)

She seemed to believe that if classifications were so confusing that they lost their meaning, people would treat people like people rather than like stereotyped categories of people.

Although there were times when Kira appreciated the multiplicity and variability of identities, there were also times when such a postmodern perception of identities was disconcerting. In an interview, Kira talked more generally about how destabilizing it can be to feel and think she knows something to be true, only for that knowledge to be disrupted by conflicting feelings, thoughts, and experiences. However, I think her statement applies to notions of identity in particular. She said:

At some point, you get really lost ... It's just like 'What the fuck? It's all gone. ... I knew everything. How it worked.' And it's usually something that like you've made an opinion about or you thought went a certain way and then something came along and completely changes that, and you're just like, 'Everything's wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.' ... It feels like your world is just crumbling, and it's gone. (AT, 5.24.00)

The loss of a truth, or, in terms of identity, the loss of a single, stable identity can be devastating because the labels that come with them do some sort of work, not just for those imposing the labels, as Michel Foucault (1982) asserts, but also for those assuming the labels (Harstock, 1990). Kira sometimes chose to maintain a singular and stable identity for the purpose of affiliation with those who "have something socially significant in common" (Jenkins, 1996, p.80). For example, she said, "sometimes I feel like I need a label to hold on to, in order to make me feel comfortable. ... I think sometimes you just feel like you need to belong. And labels are very belonging" (AT, 2.22.00). In other words, Kira not only felt boxed in by labels, she also felt supported by them. She pointed to a time when there were more women at The Loft and there were "a lot of, like, labels being thrown around" (AT, 2.22.00), such as granola dyke, and I asked her whether she found the labels to be divisive. At first she said, "yeah," but then she said, "but we all did stick together, on some level" (AT, 2.22.00). In other words, although the labels distinguished some women from other women, they also brought the women together, not only within a particular label-defined box, but also among the labeled women.

The discrepancy between experiencing identities as multiple and variable but claiming and being assigned a single and stable identity is, according to Harriet Malinowitz (1995), a product of "our society in the twentieth century [which] is disposed to file people in such ways in order to make sense of them" (p. 27). For Kira, this discrepancy resulted in tensions between the freedom and individuality offered by multiple and variable identities and the affiliation and support provided by a single and stable identity. She did not want to feel boxed into a particular identity, but she did want to feel like she belonged with a group of people. Sometimes, it was as if she had to choose between the two. Social identity theorist Richard Jenkins (1996) recognizes that "membership may offer access to resources and it may have costs; it may be a benefit or a penalty" (p. 156). I would argue that for Kira, membership had both benefits and costs - the benefit of support at the cost of individuality.

For Kira, these tensions also existed among other identities, particularly her racial identities. When Kira was asked to identify herself in terms of race, she identified as biracial, but this identity was a complicated one. Her biological mother was white and her father was black, but an African American woman raised her, along with her four biracial siblings. In an interview, she told me that she is usually assigned the racial identity of African American; she said, "I think people write me in [the world] with my hair, color of my skin ... They assume what I am, or assume that I'm Afro-centric" (AT 5.24.00). However, on several occasions, she said that she experienced the African American community as more homophobic, and I have only known her to date white women. By identifying as biracial, Kira defined herself in a particular way with significant consequences, among these consequences was the sacrifice of both the freedom of going unlabeled and the support of either a white or black community.

Among these tensions - tensions between a single, stable identity and multiple, variable identities, between having to give up either individuality or support or, most likely, some of each - Kira both found and made space for engaging in literacy performances and identity work outside of her school and home. Her identities included gender identities, sexual identities, race identities, class identities, and activist identities. It is this activist identity that Kristin Esterberg (1997) asserts can alleviate many of these tensions. In her study of identities of lesbians and bisexual women, Esterberg proposes:

Instead of seeing communities as places in which people really 'are' alike in some fundamental way, we may be better off acknowledging that lesbian communities are really overlapping friendship networks and boundaries. ... Engaging in social and political action with others creates new network links; in so doing, we stretch ourselves. In learning to work with others who are different, we learn new tools for social and political action. (pp. 175-176)

Her proposal raises the question of whether Kira could find both freedom and affiliation, both individuality and support, in activism. It is her activist work that I will explore next.

## **Activism**

Just as Kira found and made space to engage in her own inquiries outside of school, she also found and made space to work against heterosexism and homophobia like that she experienced as a student in school. Through her work on the Speakers' Bureau, Kira worked to educate students and teachers about what it is like to be LGBTQ in schools, in ways that she could not do when she was a student in schools.

When I started working with the Speakers' Bureau, Kira was already a member of and a leader in the group. By this time, she had been a Speakers' Bureau member for two years. This meant that during the time she was struggling with going to school,

she was able to work on the Speakers' Bureau, which is interesting because so much of the work of the Speakers' Bureau is like the work of school.

Speakers' Bureau members worked with me to shape the stories they would tell about themselves in outreaches. Together, we drafted, edited, and revised these stories. The youth developed and revised outlines that guided the outreaches. They created and assembled handouts to distribute during outreaches and made visual aids to complement their presentations. Sometimes this preparation required the use of outside resources. They met to assign and practice parts of the outlines, and dealt with the logistics of getting to and from their scheduled outreaches, usually by navigating the public transportation system. They presented information, particularly concerning LGBTQ youth, told their stories as LGBTQ youth, and answered questions that participants in the outreaches asked. Their audiences were real, which brought to life the work that they did. Following their presentations, they reflected on what did and did not work, and developed and revised outlines and stories accordingly. When they felt uninformed on a particular topic, they solicited more information. Their learning was grounded in their teaching which was grounded in their learning, and so on; in this way, their learning and teaching was dialogic and on-going. In doing this work of the Speakers' Bureau, the youth exhibited their competency at so much of what is valued in schools. It was through this school-like work of Speakers' Bureau that Kira found and made space to work against heterosexism and homophobia in schools.

When I first started working with the Speakers' Bureau, in the summer of 1999, Kira and I met to work on her story. She had told me a version of her life story before, to help me on a class project, but this Speakers' Bureau version had distinct parts, including coming out to herself, her friends, her family, and within a gay community. Both versions were more like conversations than presentations, and during this summer conversation, I asked her how peers helped and hurt her at school. She described just wanting friends, people with whom to talk and eat lunch. She said that toward the end of her junior year, when she came out, she had a group of friends, who were:

just cool, and they let me talk about whatever I wanted to ... most of them dated guys, you know, but they were cool, and not only that, they would, they would, like [ask] 'who are you dating now,' and get all up in the gossip and like, really like, it felt like a conversation, you know, that I could have with people here at [The Loft], only that, it was at *school*. (FN, 7.27.99, italics added)

It meant a lot to her to just be able to talk about her relationships in ways that are often taken for granted by people in heterosexual relationships. However, that group of friends was not at her school the following year, for various reasons. It was during this year, her senior year, that her attendance became more sporadic, which she attributed, in part, to her peers' response to her coming out. She said:

I had friends that just stopped talking to me and never explained why ... I didn't really care that I didn't have any more friends. I just wouldn't, I just wouldn't go to school, you know what I mean? ... It's really hard to sit at a lunch table if you don't talk to anybody. ... When you go to the same school for four years, and then your senior year, you're alone, you're just like 'ok,' so you don't go to lunch, then, eventually, you just don't go to school. (FN, 7.27.99)

Although she did not seem to be asking for much, just company and conversation, it was a request I never heard her make at outreaches. I heard students ask what they could do to help LGBTQ youth in schools, but I never heard Kira answer these questions, which I understood, in part, to be protective. It was as if by answering that question, she would have had to have owned up to needing their help, not because she went to school with them in their particular school, but because she went to school with people like them in a school like theirs. The parallel was too close.

In fact, after Kira moved away for school, she sent me an e-mail about an outreach she did in a high school in another large northeastern city, during which she was reminded of her vulnerability in school. She said:

all those feelings came rushing back to me. I began to remember a moment in the lunch room when the boys were teasing about how big some ones ass was or how small their breast were (or the other way around) You tried to do anything you could not to be different. Except when you knew there was no way that you could ever fit in, So you rebelled and shouted on the roof tops that you were dancing on the outside of main stream society. Yet you still wished to be apart of the crowd. Freshman year KIRA returned, with all her adolescent insecurities. My self-conciusness effected my every move. I was aware of how un"cool" I was then and how I still don't fit. ... During the performance as some of the youth told [their stories], I saw myself not like the teller[s of these stories]. They reminded me of high school enemies. I feared them! I continued try to pull myself back in to the open postion need for excepting peoles stories but found it very hard. (doc, 3.20.01)

The outreach made her vulnerable, and she felt the need to protect herself. I understand her silence in response to students'

questions about how they can help as protection, a kind of protection that she did not need when I asked her the question.

She was, however, quite willing to talk about the ways that teachers helped and hurt LGBTQ students. When I asked her what teachers did, or could have done, to help her as a queer student, she answered my question by telling me about opportunities teachers offered her to engage in her own inquiry as a part of her class work in ways that really counted. She said:

I enjoyed English in school even after I came out like I would go, whenever I had to turn in a project, I would really like turn in my project. Like, I would be gone for a long, long time, and not know any of that work, but if I came in on a day and they told me that they had a certain project to do, and it was due on a certain date, I'd be there for that date and I'd have it all ready. ... But the reason why was because in English, especially, you'd get to choose your own book, you got to you know, so it was your chance of like, you know, just doing what you wanted to do in school, and like, actually getting graded on it and feeling good that 'ok I read this cause I wanted to read this.' ... and it counts, you know what I mean? (FN, 7.27.99)

The invitation to explore a topic of her own choosing and for that exploration to count mattered enough to Kira to contribute to her decision about whether to attend school.

When I asked Kira what teachers did to hurt her as a queer student, she talked about teachers who cared more about their needs than hers. She said:

I guess that I just felt that in school that they weren't concerned. They were concerned, I didn't think they were concerned for what I wanted. You know what I mean? Like maybe if they felt more concerned about what I wanted, then I could have, you know, maybe would've wanted to stay in school more. So I just felt like they were, I don't know, maybe they had their own personal agendas for me, or something. (FN 7.27.99)

When she told me this, I immediately found myself defensive. I wondered how a teacher could possibly be expected to know what each of her too many students wants her to be concerned with, and I thought that it was the teacher's job to set the agenda. Even though she had just told me that teachers learned about her concerns by assigning projects that gave her choices, and even though I had practiced, in my work at The Loft, co-constructing agendas with youth, I was not in a place to hear what Kira was telling me. My defensiveness marked my resistance; I resisted Kira's comments because when I reflected on my own teaching, I worried that I would have made the same mistakes that her teachers had made. I would have given her choices about what to explore through her reading and writing, but when it came down to it, would I have been concerned about her being kicked out of her house or about her poor attendance, plummeting grades, and diminishing chances at graduating? I worried that I would have only seen her life with respect to school.

Kira conveyed these same messages at outreaches we did to teachers, including those in the school district from which she eventually graduated. She also told teachers that heterosexism and homophobia are problems we share, and that these forms of oppression not only impact LGBTQ people, but they also impact their families and friends (FN, 7.26.99). When teachers expressed reluctance to address these issues in their classrooms because they feared the response they would get from students and parents, Kira reminded them about the policy that protects them in addressing such issues, and she stated plainly that each person makes his or her own decision about whether to reject, accept, or enforce this policy in his or her classroom. She invited, almost demanded, teachers to work against heterosexism and homophobia in schools, and in this way, she worked to make schools better places for LGBTQ youth through her work on the Speakers' Bureau.

When Kira did outreaches to students, she figured her world in ways that closely resembled the world in which she was a student, and in that world, her positionality was marked by isolation. She was distanced from other youth because she perceived herself to be different than they were. As a result, she vacillated between authoring herself in a way that declared her difference and in a way that pointed to her similarity to other students. In this struggle between trying to stand out and fit in, she ended up not authoring herself in that world very much at all. This was evident when she did not answer students' questions about how they could help LGBTQ peers, and, instead, protected herself from their critique by not saying anything. Through this work, she tried to make a new world, one where students could become more understanding of LGBTQ youth, by telling her story, but she did not extend herself so far as to make herself vulnerable by portraying herself as needing anyone else's help. Thus, her efforts at remaking the world were limited.

However, when she did outreaches to teachers, Kira's figured world was one where she felt more protected than she did among students. Although she did not expect teachers to be concerned with her concerns, she did not expect them to neglect or abuse her either. In fact, before coming out, she had had relatively positive experiences with teachers. In this figured world, Kira's positionality is one of support, just misinformed support; that is, she had known teachers to support her, but they did not know

how to support her as she was coming out and going through the "kick-out process." Therefore, when she had opportunities to correct their misinformation, she did so by explicitly telling teachers what they did that hurt LGBTQ youth and what they could do to help these youth. She authors herself in this world as an activist and an educator working to make a new world where LGBTQ youth can find and make space for themselves in schools in ways that she could not.

Kira went on many different outreaches during her time at The Loft, some to students, some to teachers, as well as others to social workers, counselors, nurses, doctors, youth, and youth service providers. The identity work she accomplished in each of these outreaches both confirmed and disrupted each another. The outreaches confirmed her activist identity by being opportunities to work against heterosexism and homophobia, but they disrupted her power within these opportunities, in that sometimes she was silenced by her figured worlds and other times she was positioned to use her voice with strength in those worlds. Thus, the power she had as an activist, fluctuated with her perceptions of herself and those around her.

Kira could not find or make space for herself at home or in high school, so she created alternative spaces, spaces in the margins, in which to engage in queer identity work. Literacy performances were a part of this work. In these alternative spaces, including the local gay, lesbian, and feminist bookstore, The Loft, and the Speakers' Bureau, Kira worked to construct herself as a lesbian, and later a dyke, as well as an activist and an educator. As such, she was able to work against the forms of hatred that pushed her out of her school and home.

It was in these alternative spaces, the margins of school, the local gay, lesbian, and feminist bookstore, The Loft, and the Speakers' Bureau, that Kira learned to work against heterosexism and homophobia and for social change. Having learned this, she returned to school where she continues to learn, teach, and work for social change.

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## Notes

1 - Butch refers to a masculine lesbian. ([back](#))

2 - Femme refers to a feminine lesbian. ([back](#))

3 - Dyke refers to a lesbian who actively and proudly asserts her sexual identity. ([back](#))

4 - Soft butch refers to a lesbian who is masculine, but not as masculine as a lesbian who is butch. ([back](#))

5 - Muff diver refers to a particular role one assumes in a particular sex act. ([back](#))

6 - Lipstick lesbian is a type of femme who is particularly feminine. ([back](#))

7 - Leather dyke refers to a lesbian who engages in sadomasochism. ([back](#))

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