Small acts to make safe space: a case study of the Queer Liberation Library as a queer space

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper examines small acts from the Queer Liberation Library (QLL) that makes it a *queer space* as defined in previous research. This emphasises the need for access to those with multiple minority identities, and the ways in which other libraries not focused on exclusively queer literature and membership can take these small changes to make a big impact.

Method. Using QLL as a case study, this paper focuses on the creation of queer space as a heterotopic mirror to normative space, refusing the unqueer spaces that attempt to enforce binaries through critical librarianship. Phenomenology is used to describe individuals' orientations towards the normative, queer and unqueer spaces mentioned above.

Analysis. The analysis takes a broad look at the purpose of QLL and other queer-focused libraries before narrowing the topic to look at three small acts on QLL's part that build the queer space of this library: the quick exit function on their website, the lists and collections they curate monthly and QLL's policies (collection management and membership).

Conclusion(s). Though there is much that could, and should, be done to build queer space into public libraries, especially for multi-minority individuals, this paper argues that small acts can and should be implemented before tackling larger tasks that require excess manpower, funding and time. Though these small acts do not replace the need for larger change, they can be implemented quickly and work to make public libraries safe spaces while larger changes are slowly implemented.

Introduction

The Queer Liberation Library (QLL), like many grassroots queer libraries, came about as a handful of individuals saw a need that was not being fulfilled. As the founder, or *idea-haver*, states in the history of the QLL, '*I learned that there are very few [queer libraries] in North America. So I daydreamed for a few years about making one myself*' (*About*, n.d.). They were more equipped to develop a project like the QLL, which is much more expansive than equivalent grassroots libraries that are significantly smaller operations, due to their MLIS and other connections. Maçãs (2022) and the QueerIST library developed by engineering students is a great example, where all the people included were '*volunteers with no previous knowledge in library science*'. This library, though revolutionary in its own right, does not have the scale that QLL has, focusing on a small community rather than the entirety of the United States. This paper considers the ways in which QLL acts as a queer space across a large population, navigating the nuances of multi-minority identities with care from the team members to the users. The QLL team makes big differences through small actions in their creation and implementation of the QLL such as their *quick exit* feature, the curated lists they provide, their active awareness of inclusion and diversity and, perhaps most importantly, policy. While not directly applicable to all public libraries, these small acts can be translated into physical spaces in a variety of ways. This concept of small changes to implement safe spaces is a great way to move the theory of critical librarianship into practice, despite '*the difficulty of creating change when up against the status quo*' (Foster et al., 2022, p. 66). This sentiment, shared by interviewees in Foster et al.'s (2022) study, is a feeling many librarians feel in the face of academia and critical librarianship (Foster et al., 2022; Drabinski, 2019). Suggesting small changes that can snowball into larger shifts in the status quo is a way forward from this stagnation.

Theory

Terminology

In this analysis, language is incredibly important. The QueerIST library acknowledges this in the development of categories with the word '*interest*', which

> is used to indicate that, while in some cases the identity of the characters in a book is never made clear and is only suggestive, those themes represented in the book are considered to be consistent with queerness and of interest to queer people. (Maçãs, 2022)

Defining *queer*, *queer space*, *unqueer space* and *normative space* is vital for understanding the ways in which QLL creates queer space, especially as these terms do not equate to queer-only spaces. This paper builds off understandings of these terms developed in my thesis *Defiantly queer spaces: queer exploration, becoming, resistance, and joy in* Ministry of Utmost Happiness *and* No One Can Pronounce My Name (Coltman, 2022).

Definition, however, is too strict a word for what I argue for *queerness*, as it is more of a boundary-setting than strictly defining one way to be *queer* other than simply *non-normative*, though it is inherently that. Instead, I am concerned with the *foundations* of queer identities and behaviours, which include '*consent, agency, self-determinacy, and safety*' (Coltman, 2022, p. 13). This prevents actions such as murder or paedophilia from being categorised as *queer*, as they disrupt all of the foundations queerness is bound by. By using the term *non-normative* in this pseudo-definition, it also belies a certain amount of reliance of the individual circumstances within which said queerness exists, rather than making a broad generalisation without acknowledging the hegemonic structures that queerness responds to.

Now knowing what *queer* is, we move on to the definitions of space: rather than putting another false dichotomy on the concept, I argue for a way to categorise space into layered meanings. First, there is normative space and queer space. Normative space is space which is oriented towards the hegemonic centre. This is space that enables easy existence for people with normative identities

and behaviours. Queer space acts as a heterotopic mirror to normative space, reflecting and subverting the hegemonic centre for people to exist in non-normative ways (again within the bounds or foundations of queerness mentioned above). Within both spaces, indeed all space that is not perfectly theoretical, there is '*The enforcement of normative labels, traditions, and expectations*' which '*creates an unqueer space*' (Coltman, 2022, p. 2). Using these three terms to navigate the different spaces in society helps move towards the orientation of the self within these spaces.

Critical librarianship

Critical librarianship is at the heart of most social justice efforts in libraries, as

> *Critical librarianship, influenced by a variety of critical theories, is a movement within LIS that asks us to consider the library's role in systems of oppression and to work with our communities to dismantle hegemonic structures that maintain power and perpetuate harm.* (Foster et al., 2022, p. 54)

This kind of dismantling is core to creating queer spaces by clearing new phenomenological paths. The unqueer space that is hegemonic enforcement is challenged and contested of the queer space of libraries, a heterotopic response to the community, culture and norms the library exists within. Critically engaging with sources of power, including the library as a source of power, is the only way to appropriately address and rectify these hegemonies that perpetuate harm to everyone, and to marginalised people the most. While this is the case, critical librarianship is best practiced, rather than theorised, as '*academic research around critical librarianship can also focus too heavily on theory while, at the same time, be elitist and exclusionary*' (Foster et al., 2022, p. 68). This paper uses critical librarianship and many of the theoretical underpinnings behind it to engage with the power structures it discusses, but more so urges the readers and librarians to engage critically with the suggestions and practice critical librarianship in the reading and implementation of the strategies suggested. As Drabinski (2019) states in her keynote speech at University of the Arts London:

> *It is simply not enough, not ever and certainly not in this urgent moment, to develop a critique, and then head to the pub for a pint. We must first locate the structures of power available to us – our labor unions, our cataloging and classification schemes, our electoral system – and begin to use those structures as ladders, bridges, staircases for building better worlds.*

The theory is well-discussed, but the practice, which will be highlighted throughout this paper, is more powerful than any words can be and often unique to the individual and the individual library (McElroy, 2017). Librarians can and should wield their power thoughtfully and with care for their communities, and QLL practises this kind of care in spades.

Orientations

While research on physical space in libraries may not consider phenomenologist perspectives as key to aiding their discussion, many still use concepts aligned with phenomenology. Bain (2022), for example, discusses the psychology of perception in her paper 'Queer affordances of care in suburban public libraries':

> *Gibson (1979) coined the term 'affordance' to refer to the possibilities for action that humans and other animals could see in the different objects they oriented themselves to in their lifeworlds.* (Bain, 2022, p. 2)

This idea of affordances is precisely the orientations that phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (1964), Heidegger (1996) and (queer phenomenologist) Ahmed (2006) are concerned with when discussing their orientation towards parts of their lives. In this, I particularly draw upon Ahmed's

spatial construction of society as paths more and less travelled, as well as paths not yet formed (Ahmed, 2006). In creating these novel paths, or re-treading the less-travelled paths, the queer becomes easier and easier to access (Ahmed, 2006). I posit that building signs and spaces, like Ahmed's (2006) queer dining room table, to 'support' queerness but also to acknowledge queerness and reject unqueerness, is vital for queer people to explore and become themselves. This allows for queer resistance and joy, both together and separate.

QLL, among other queer library spaces accessible to the masses, acts as both a queer space and a place oriented towards the non-normative. It is a heterotopia that is the product of national unqueerness in familial, local and regional politics. While some queer people may not have their own queer families and support structures that help show them these un-trodden paths, QLL highlights the potentiality for these queer orientations '*Online and accessible to anybody with a computer or smart phone*' (*About*, n.d.). Adding to this, anyone with access to a public library with Internet (its own issue which is discussed in other works) can access QLL. It creates a visible community accessible to anyone with an address in the United States.

The QLL librarians, actively using phenomenological understandings of orientations or not, create new paths and patterns for queer people to access and follow, especially as they act as a public library for any and everyone within the United States. QLL began with the '*idea-haver*' witnessing a path being cleared for queer people via the *Out on the Shelves Library* in Vancouver, BC (*About*, n.d.). He and his friends found this library to be a space where they could '*breathe the air of a room where we could truly relax, even if just for a moment*' (*About*, n.d.). This kind of atmosphere exemplifies the heterotopic '*queer surface*' or space which Ahmed (2006) emphasises as important;

> It is not only that queer surfaces support action, but also that the action they support involves shifting grounds, or even clearing a new ground, which allow us to tread a different path. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 170)

QLL was born out of the reaction to this queer surface of society: the founders saw a need for '*more of these spaces and resources*' (*About*, n.d.). Freely accessible information for and about queer people, especially those most marginalised in society, is the kind of clearing of grounds which functions for queer people as allowance for understanding, exploring and feeling safe while doing so. As such, QLL being a public library further enforces the phenomenological queer space.

Purpose

This orientation highlights the purpose of QLL, which was over five years in the idea phase (*About*, n.d.). Kieran, the founder, states that there are not enough of these kinds of spaces and resources with queer and other marginalised people in mind, but it was not until they were working in digital libraries that he came up with the concept of a digital library (*About*, n.d.). Studies back this up in both Canada and the United States, even just considering if libraries are actively working on being *safe spaces*. In a study of 29 libraries in and around Toronto, only one had worked towards active inclusion for queer people with a positive space committee, which

> leveraged the launch to forward a broader organizational agenda of LGBTQ+ inclusion that also involves a variety of initiatives: an annual financial commitment to build the LGBTQ+ collection and monitor its circulation; special occasion booklists and Pride displays; gender-inclusive new client registration; and the designation of all-gender washroom. (Bain, 2022, p. 4)

Other than studies, from the Texas-based research of Spencer et al. (2017) to Santos Green et. al.'s (2022) book on policies, programmes and practices, *LGBTQIA+ inclusive children's librarianship*, there is a lack in the active production of queer space in public libraries, but Bain's (2022) study exemplifies this in the greatest detail. While the committee mentioned above is a *best-case* scenario, even half of what the library above did would have made the other libraries also *safe space*

certified, but no others did. (Bain, 2022) Priorities for public libraries do not tend towards queer inclusion, unless during Pride month or if they have critical librarianship principles in place and are actively working against unqueer space. Therefore, QLL and other queer-specific libraries become all the more vital for queer and questioning individuals.

Quick exit

One key aspect of queer space is that it is a '*semi-permeable*' heterotopia (Coltman, 2022). This is for the safety of those who require the queer space, especially if they have a lot of unqueer space around them. Computers and browsers track a lot of data that is easily accessible to anyone who can get onto the browser or computer. While there is not a lot that can be done about this data tracking, QLL offers a '*quick exit*' solution for individuals who cannot be seen oriented towards *queer* sites, which is at the top of every page on the website (*Queer Liberation Library*, n.d.). Not only does this button take the user to weather.com, but it also prevents the backspace button taking a user back to the QLL website (*Queer Liberation Library*, n.d.). Ensuring this semi-permeability give the users privacy that encourages them to use the site. As Maçãs (2022,, p. 21) states, '*patrons have the right to use the library service with confidentiality and discretion if they choose to*'. Going to the neutral site of weather.com allows for this confidentiality and discretion, which protects the user from being targeted by others trying to enforce unqueer space and block those queer paths. Though it seems a small part of the website, the quick exit button is vital in aiding the users of QLL in both feeling and being safe while accessing the queer space.

To integrate a similar button, a version of the code given by Will Myers' team (2024) can be used with alterations that can be customised to the individual library. Where the HTML code indicates 'newWindow =' the library can input the library's homepage whenever there is a page which contains information someone may not want to be discovered looking for. This is not only relevant to queer information, but also can be used for people looking for aid around domestic abuse, sexual assault and more. In fact, having this button at the top of all catalogue pages may help patrons feel more comfortable with searching for books on these, or any, topics as well.

```
<!-- Quick Escape Button -->
<a id="quick-escape">
  <span class="text"> EXIT SITE </span>
</a>
<script>
  function quickEscape() {
    let newWindow = 'https://www.amazon.com/';
    let replaceURL = 'http://google.com';
    window.open(newWindow);   // Open New Tab
    window.location.replace(replaceURL);   // Replaces Current Page
  }

  document.querySelector('#quick-escape').addEventListener('click', quickEscape);
  document.body.addEventListener('keyup', (e) => e.keyCode == '27' ? quickEscape() : null)
</script>
```

Figure 1. The functioning HTML code (without custom css formatting) for a quick escape button which both opens a new window and redirects the old window (Website 'Quick Escape' button | Will Myers | Squarespace Plugins, 2024).

Similarly, libraries can consider *privacy covers* for books patrons feel are of a sensitive nature. Offering basic book jackets of varying size can provide some measure of security for patrons. Though this will not completely protect the patron's privacy, it is a small step that is easy to implement to make public libraries safer spaces. This will also uphold the ALA's Library Bill of Rights point seven:

All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people's privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information. (Library Bill of Rights | ALA, 2019)

Allowing for library use data to be physically hidden from people who happen to be in the library or where patrons are reading gives more privacy to those who are reading books on sensitive topics.

Curated lists and collections

QLL also curates lists and collections of books for library patrons and website visitors alike. While these are most easily found on their Libby app, they can also be found in the Blog portion of the website under each of their collection updates (*Queer Liberation Library*, n.d.). These lists offer a great place for people unfamiliar with queer literature as well as those with niche interests in queer literature, but they also respond to national events. For example, there were two curated lists for November; the first highlights Native American Heritage Month through '*North American centered Native and Indigenous queer reads*' because '*Decolonization is a queer issue*' (*November Collection Update*, 2024). This highlights the focus on diversity and people who hold multiple minority identities, which is particularly important in larger queer spaces that attempt to be space for every queer person as those with multiple minorities tend to be most disenfranchised and in need of queer space. The second was in response to the elections in the US, where Trump was elected president after a long campaign of anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment; this one was named '*Words for resilience, community care, and survival*' (*November Collection Update*, 2024). The ability to include national issues of inclusion and be responsive to politics is a perfect example of the heterotopic nature of queer spaces on the part of QLL as well as a small way of showing care month to month for their patrons. Considerate and consistent inclusion of diverse lists underlies each of these collections.

Public libraries can and do create similarly diverse *collections* with endcaps and book displays and through book lists (on bookmarks, paper or online). These spaces already exist and are utilised in different ways throughout different libraries, and librarians can use critical librarianship to emphasise minority identities in these spaces as much as possible throughout the year. McElroy (2017) mentions how working in spaces which employ critical librarianship processes was not difficult for people who lacked knowledge of different minority groups;

I didn't have to have a deep understanding of white supremacy or know the full history of segregation in public schools in order to help build a display about the Chicano student walkouts in 1970s Los Angeles. (McElroy, 2017, p. 8)

Librarians, even those not specialised in particular topics, know how to find the information needed for patrons just as well as they are able to search for diverse book recommendations to include in book displays. Including recommendations from diverse librarians and readers is a great start to building these lists; even if a library does not have a varied staff, there are many online resources available to discover these kinds of diverse books. Further, creating a comprehensive collection of the different temporary book displays will allow users future access to these otherwise temporary displays. This could be an excel spreadsheet or simply a printout of each, and will also help librarians quickly reference which books are on display in larger libraries. This process of engaging in critical librarianship around book displays can include policy that requires a percentage of books on each display to be from minority writers, encouraging diversity through the promotion of diverse voices year-round.

Policy and practice

'*Queer books! That's it. That's the policy*' (*Collection Development*, n.d.). Though this line simplifies the nature of their policies and practices, it does get at the heart of QLL's goals; queer literature for queer folk, free to access. Their policy does not end, but begins, there. Foundations set, they discuss two key aspects of their collection management policy: the assortment of content from '*romance to horror, sci-fi to memoir, and everything in between*' and '*curating a collection that reflects the diversity of queer lives and imaginations*' (*Collection Development*, n.d.). This kind of policy, similar to the public library Bain (2022) discussed setting aside specific funds for queer content, can easily be transformed to fit any public library's collection policy. An emphasis on diversity in collection management is key for critical librarianship, and putting policy in place ensures inclusivity long-term. QLL's membership policy furthers the requirement for inclusion and diversity, ensuring an actively safe space for members.

Inclusion and diversity

While the curated lists are a definite aspect of inclusion and diversity within QLL's practice, the policy integrated into their collection management ensures diversity and inclusion is maintained as a core tenet. Through a single paragraph, they emphasise the reasoning behind this choice;

> *We actively work to ensure BIPOC voices are not just represented, but are core components of our collection. We also know that, historically, some facets of our community are underrepresented. It is a simple fact that more books have been published about cis gay men than aromantics or intersex people, for example. Knowing this, we will actively seek out materials from all parts of the LGBTQ+ community, to resist replicating the historical and ongoing bias within the publishing world.* (*Collection Development*, n.d.)

From the outset, the terms *core component* and *underrepresented* stand out immediately as action and reaction. This *active* work on the part of QLL is to resist the historic and ongoing bias that queer people still see perpetuated as unqueer space, mainly the centring of cis gay men. Focusing on the less represented serves two functions: the first, to uphold queer space for multi-marginalised individuals and the second, to fill a queer niche many libraries not focused on queer content specifically would likely miss. It is unlikely that a library not specifically catering to queer people will build a collection based off the popular, which will more likely than not contain the works that are more popularly published, especially through mainstream publishers. QLL instead focuses on those that are often missed in these collections: aromantics, intersex people and BIPOC queer people.

This echoes the policy recommendations Maçãs (2022) highlights where evaluations should include queer voices, local voices, queer and gender diversity, ethnic and ability diversity, cultural and geographical diversity, format diversity, age targeting and ensuring positive representation. While local representation is difficult to establish when the locale of the library is digital across an entire country as big as the US, the focus on diversity is most definitely at the forefront of their collection policy. Here is where localised public libraries can truly excel. In developing language in their collection development policies carefully like QLL, these libraries can assure diversity as *core* rather than a *bonus*, and by employing Maçãs's (2022) evaluation recommendations, public libraries can evaluate their current collections and the future potentials for their collections.

Membership policy

QLL's membership policy is not just a policy for the members to uphold, but also policies around how they manage membership data (*Membership Policy*, 2023). This ensures members can feel safe in the knowledge that they are respected just as much as they are expected to respect everyone in the space. This fulfils the same function as another community-based queer library's '*Statement of patrons' rights and responsibilities*' where '*the first item is that all patrons shall have an equitable*

treatment, with respect for their own person and identity' (Maçãs 2022). It is key that all libraries pledge just as much respect and safety as they expect from patrons.

The second aspect, of the respect QLL expects from its patrons, can be summarised in one section of the membership policy;

> *All of QLL's events, campaigns, and social media feeds are hate-free zones. QLL does not permit homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, ableism, colorism, xenophobia, or any other type of discrimination or hate speech.* (*Membership Policy*, 2023)

This concise explanation of intolerance for hate of any type of discrimination similarly emphasises QLL's intent to be a queer space for those most likely to struggle to find space to exist as themselves. Through two small sentences, they highlight the emphasis on BIPOC inclusion. This can easily be implemented in public libraries, and is in many cases, even if not upon signing up for a card.

Conclusion

In the *purpose* section, I highlighted how intensely one public library fought for inclusion of queer people to create a safe space. Indeed, often this kind of intensity is required to work against a system that is rife with unqueer spaces and tends to be a tenant of critical librarianship as Foster et al. (2022) state in their title: '*They don't necessarily play nice with power structures*'. However, small acts also often make a huge difference and can be employed from an individual employee level to a policy level in public libraries. Maçãs (2022, p. 21) argues '*If the library is not specialized in queer subjects, one of the most important decisions it can take is to implement a queer section or queer corner*'. Dedicating a small space in a library to queer content for queer people is a good way to start small, as well as individual librarians becoming *safe surfaces* for people to come to with questions and requests. Similarly, implementing changes in membership and collection development policies that emphasise safety and representation for their patrons most in need of both things would help provide safe space for them. Examining QLL's multiple small acts and how they made big changes in the creation of the library as a queer space can aid other libraries to overcome the '*tensions between reality and theory*' (Foster et al., 2022, p. 67) of critical librarianship.

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