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UNRAVELLING THE WOVEN MAT: QUEERING THE WHĀRIKI

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ABSTRACT   *This paper explores issues related to sexualities following the author's 'reading' of Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum is the national early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand and is applicable to all licensed and chartered early childhood services. The readings described are multiple; lacking acknowledgment of sexualities, it is suggested that heteronormativity is central to the document yet, at the same time, the ways in which the underlying metaphor of Te Whāriki allows for alternatives to the 'norm' are highlighted. Queer theory is applied to the document and an attempt to queer the metaphor suggests that new options for children's learning about and development of sexuality and for the celebration of sexualities are possible.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins by briefly introducing early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand and the development of *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Fundamental aspects of *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* are explored before I describe my 'journey' as I 'read' *Te Whāriki* and its central metaphor interrogating, on my route, the emergence of new meanings. My journey reveals a multiplicity of meanings. From these meanings, two themes in particular come to dominate and engage my thinking. The themes – invisibility and visibility – as these relate to children's learning about and development of sexuality and the celebration of sexualities, are central to this paper.

Inclusion of sexuality issues in curriculum is controversial and has been met historically with resistance and/or censorship within the educational sector. Sexuality issues are, however, pertinent in early childhood education; the theme of *invisibility* serves to highlight this given my argument that *Te Whāriki*, in lacking acknowledgement of sexualities (whether intentional or unintentional), demonstrates censorship. I argue such censorship reduces the likelihood of all children achieving the goals laid out in the document[1] and reduces opportunities for meaningful inclusion by acting to legitimise, reproduce and reinforce heteronormativity within early childhood education services. I emphasise the ways in which the reproduction and reinforcement of heteronormativity transpires, providing examples specific to *Te Whāriki*. My analysis of why this occurs is based on two discourses; the construction of children as innocent and asexual (I surmise this is a dominant, yet inaccurate, belief that lends weight to calls for censorship) and one of moral panic, evidenced when children are viewed as sexual beings. I then draw on queer theory to further demonstrate how heterosexuality is licensed as normative and the ways in which sexuality is socially constructed. A key assumption underlying queer theory is that the terms sex, gender and sexuality co-create each other; identity is therefore fluid, flexible and highly contested (Jagose, 1996). My use of these and other related terms reflect this view.

The theme of *visibility* offers a subversion of the first (i.e., of invisibility). I argue the notion that while *Te Whāriki* is not overtly queer, the document's metaphor allows space for its queering. I advocate for such a queering and, using the space within the existing metaphor, add something new; a metaphor within the original metaphor that holds the potential to subvert it.

Challenging exclusion and heteronormativity is an obligation of curriculum. I conclude by suggesting this obligation be met by further evaluation and revision of *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* and its central metaphor, from a queer theory perspective.

WEAVING THE WHĀRIKI

In te reo Māori a 'whāriki' refers to a woven mat. The sub-title "Weaving the whāriki" signifies my intention to weave together the background to and key features of *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum*, thereby setting the scene for its later unravelling.

In Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education encompasses a range of services developed over the last century to meet the needs of infants, toddlers and young children alongside those of their families and whanau. Increasing recognition of the advantages of such services resulted in a number of significant documents detailing minimum standards and highlighting the need for a common curriculum (Meade, 1988; Department of Education, 1988; Ministry of Education, 1990). Interest focused on development of a national curriculum applicable to all services and able to accommodate the diversity across these, and culminated in the 1996 launching of *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum*. Since the launching of *Te Whāriki* licensed and chartered services must demonstrate that the programmes they offer are consistent with this document (Carr & May, 2000).

Te Whāriki stresses the importance of viewing curriculum as the sum total of that which children experience, whether planned or unplanned, within an environment tailored to learning and development (Ministry of Education, 1996). Ideally, the sum total of children's experiences will enable them to achieve the aspirations on which *Te Whāriki* is founded. These aspirations include that children "...grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Central to *Te Whāriki* is the positioning of children and experiences within an ecological framework cognizant of differing social and cultural contexts (Carr & May, 1993, 2000). Recognition of diversity is therefore paramount and reflected in the document's underlying metaphor, that of the whāriki. My assumption throughout this paper is that the whāriki is intended to be inclusive, bringing together and enabling everyone to belong. As Carr and May (2000) state "... the early childhood curriculum is envisaged as a *whāriki*, a woven mat for all to stand on" (p. 156). As my journey unfolds, my engagement with queer theory leads me to re-visit my assumptions about the meanings of inclusivity.

The content of *Te Whāriki* is built on and through the principles of 'Empowerment', 'Holistic Development', 'Family and Community' and 'Relationships' and the strands of 'Well-being', 'Belonging', 'Contribution', 'Communication' and 'Exploration'. Each principle and strand is woven into the

whāriki, as are related goals relevant to the knowledge, skills and attitudes it is hoped children will gain.

UNRAVELLING THE WHĀRIKI

I turn now to my unravelling of the whāriki. In 'reading' the whāriki metaphor[2] I use a strategy described by Silin (1997) as "...highlighting the normal through the abnormal, reading the text by deciphering the barely legible notes in the margins" (p. 225). In this way I discover a multitude of meanings dependent on my site of reference at any one time; new meanings (and the themes referred to earlier) tentatively emerge as my frame of reference shifts.

Silin's (1997) strategy draws on Foucauldian understandings of sex, gender and sexuality as historically produced and socially constructed. Spargo (1999) states "...sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather than biological, origins" (p. 12). This view of sexuality is in conflict with, and challenges, dominant developmentalist understandings of sexuality, and of child development in general, as a linear process determined from birth (Robinson, 2002). Robinson (2002) states:

> Theories of child development such as those developed by Piaget generally underpin early childhood educators' practices and understandings of 'the child' and of 'childhood'. Such theories have perpetuated the view of the 'universal child' where all children from birth are perceived to proceed through a biologically predetermined set of linear cognitive developments that correlate with chronological age. At the end of this process, children reach their destination of 'adulthood' (p. 418).

These dominant understandings become subject to my gaze as I disentangle the tightly woven components of the whāriki during an early reading. I perceive that in the absence of an overt acknowledgement of children's sexualities, the metaphor of the whāriki re-inscribes such historically located and culturally specific discourses of sex, gender and sexuality. In this reading, *Te Whāriki* appears to reproduce and reinforce heteronormativity for children, their families and practitioners within services in and through silence, a lack or absence – and so the theme of invisibility begins to emerge.

My deciphering of the marginalised or absent draws my attention to the centre, the reproduction of heteronormativity through the absence of its 'other'. Heteronormativity refers to the ways "het[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner, cited in Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 202). As a hegemonic concept or, in other words, "...a collection of meanings and practices that are 'owned' by ruling groups..." (McGee, 1997, p. 124), heteronormativity is accepted as normal and therefore legitimated in society while serving those with a vested interest in the maintenance of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, cited in Robinson, 2000). Under compulsory heterosexuality "...sexuality is primarily defined and constituted within the heterosexual/homosexual binary relationship in which heterosexuality is considered the 'norm' and a 'natural' expression of sexuality, while all non-

heterosexual sexualities are defined as abnormal, unnatural and powerless" (Robinson, 2000, p. 94). Compulsory heterosexuality is maintained in part through cultural reproduction, where underlying values are re-produced, in this instance, from within the curriculum.

My initial reading assumed that the principles and strands woven into the whāriki reflect one particular conception only – a heterosexually defined conception. In the analysis of discourses, concepts are understood as historically and culturally located and, hence, are open to contestation. To illustrate this point, consider the principle of 'Empowerment'. In reading about 'Empowerment', as it is described in *Te Whāriki*, I see the intent is to 'enable' children to develop their 'identity', 'personal dignity', 'self-worth' and 'confidence' (to list but a few of the relevant qualities described in the document). Placing this particular conception of empowerment under scrutiny, I query the potential for all children to experience empowerment and to be enabled without access to information about the full spectrum of sexual orientation. Robinson (2000) suggests that preventing children from accessing knowledge about sexualities and/or preventing them from expressing their anxieties may leave children "...to sort out their scripts with peers, media or alone in secretive and dark corners" (Plummer, cited in Robinson, 2000, p. 104). My reading at this point served then, to reinforce my belief that lack of access to knowledge may impact negatively on children's 'identity', 'personal dignity', 'self-worth' and 'confidence'. As I engaged with queer theory during later readings, however, this belief was challenged.

Under the principle of 'Holistic Development', *Te Whāriki* requires curriculum provision for holistic development in the cognitive, social, cultural, physical and spiritual dimensions; the document notes these dimensions are integrally woven together. Placing this conception of holism under scrutiny, I query the weft that weaves a whāriki inclusive of all aspects of a child's development bar his or her developing sexuality.

The principle of 'Family and Community' includes the concept of 'well-being'. As suggested in *Te Whāriki*, where children's well-being is fostered so too is the well-being of family and community. 'Acceptance', 'respect' and 'valuing of others' are therefore significant in the document. The principle of 'Relationships' further highlights the need for meaningful connections, in this case between people, places and things. Yet my early reading of *Te Whāriki* as heteronormative, and as heteronormativity is played out in early childhood education services, suggests the document presents a particularly powerful message of exclusion, to children parented by adults of non-heterosexual orientations, and to these adults. I suggest these children and adults are unlikely to feel they and their families are 'accepted', 'respected' and 'valued' and consequently are unlikely to experience 'well-being' given the lack of overt attention to their particular experiences and views of the world within *Te Whāriki*.

As my initial reading of the "...notes in the margins" (Silin, 1997, p. 225) drew then to a close I found myself tempted to suggest that *Te Whāriki*, in disregarding sexuality, disregards those outside the 'norm'. In this sense, it might be claimed the central metaphor described earlier as a "...whāriki, a woven mat for all to stand on" (Carr & May, 2000, p. 156) is not an apt metaphor for inclusion.

McGee (1997) notes that the development of curriculum is a complex process. He states that "intense political activity is normally a part of the process and different political factions and interest groups lobby to have their views accepted or others' views denied" (p. 57). Numerous decisions are required; all of which are

open to contestation. McGee argues that decisions are influenced by a range of factors including educational ideology. Ideologies, as belief systems, affect what curriculum content may be considered as problematic and important, therefore, to exclude. McGee uses the term 'dangerous knowledge' in relation to content considered too controversial and, therefore, too dangerous, for inclusion. In the literature concerning the development of *Te Whāriki* I was unable to find evidence to suggest sexuality was ever discussed as a topic worthy of inclusion. Perhaps it was simply felt to be too dangerous or perhaps, given the ways in which hegemonic values are reinforced, no conscious decision was ever made to exclude on the basis of dangerousness.

Exclusion or censorship of sexuality issues is not surprising given that these issues are "...fraught with many obstacles and cultural taboos that operate to silence, marginalise, and/or limit any dialogue or representation of this form of difference, especially in the context of children and, by association, early childhood education" (Robinson, 2002, p. 416). The younger the child, the greater the furore. It is my view that exclusion or censorship springs from a desire to protect the assumed innocence of children (and, therefore, implicitly heterosexual children). Sexuality and the assumed state of innocence of children are seen as antithetical to one another (Jackson & Scott, 1999). As Robinson (2000) points out, this view often results in the belief that children are "...incapable of understanding or dealing with 'adult' concepts such as sexuality..." (p. 95). This view may also lead to "...the belief that children have no sexuality" (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999, p. 41). *Te Whāriki's* apparent collusion with these views reinforces the theme of invisibility at this point in my journey. I reason that *Te Whāriki's* silencing of this aspect of children's development leaves practitioners within early childhood services open to discomfort with, and uncertainty about, how best to address "...behaviours that indicate awareness of sexual organs and pleasuring" (Honig, 2000, p. 70). Furthermore, assuming sexuality to be too dangerous "...misses the point of what helps an 'innocent' develop into a self-sustaining 'citizen'" (Bickmore, 1999, p. 21). Bickmore argues that as children grow up they "...gain the power to protect themselves by learning to acquire and evaluate knowledge, not by being denied information" (1999, p. 21). Tobin (1997) notes that "events and experiences hold significance only if our narratives of education and child development name them as stepping stones on the path toward positive or negative developmental outcomes" (p. 13). In the not naming of sexual development and sexuality in *Te Whāriki*, by design or otherwise, I assume, on the basis of my reading, that it is considered of no relevance to the lives of children and adults within services. Currently prevailing child development theories, as described earlier, likely intensify this apparent irrelevance.

Tobin (1997) adds to the points already outlined, arguing that it "...is not just sexuality but more generally pleasure and desire that are under siege in early childhood education" and that "pleasure and desire, now banished to the dark recesses of early childhood educational theory and practice, need to be brought to the fore" (p. 2). As I engage with Tobin's writing, much of what he describes evokes a response from my position of engagement with *Te Whāriki*. In particular, Tobin's perception of sexuality, pleasure and desire as 'missing', 'uncharted', 'unexplored' and 'undiscovered' fits. *Te Whāriki's* position (assumed through my earlier reading) precludes charting, exploring or discovering sexuality, let alone pleasure and desire. Fitting too, is Tobin's perception that sexuality, pleasure and desire are missing as in 'lost'. He notes "...the study of sexuality and desire in

early childhood education is less an undiscovered new area than a forgotten old one" (Tobin, 1997, p. 5); explaining that as this particular educational sector developed in western cultures, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, knowledge of the developmental stages of childhood sexuality was usual. Presumably, therefore, childhood sexuality was also addressed within the curriculum. In contrast, Tobin (1997) describes the 'disinformation campaign' or "...process of actively not speaking, hearing, or thinking about children's sexuality..." (p. 10) as a newer norm over approximately the past 30 years.

Viewing sexuality as "...a social relationship that is socially organised..." Robinson (2000, p. 94) seeks to uncover the ways in which childhood has been positioned and is represented as part of this relationship. She achieves this through exploration of several contradictory discourses, two of which are particularly pertinent here. The first discourse I have already alluded to; that is, the construction of children as innocent and asexual. The second discourse centres on moral panic. Moral panics are "...built on a foundation of widespread preexisting anxieties, fears and prejudices" (Tobin, 1997, p. 8) and spring to life when children are viewed as sexual beings. Indeed, "children who have an understanding of sex and sexuality are often 'othered' as 'unnatural children', with 'unnatural knowledge'" (Robinson, 2002, p. 419) and/or their perceived early interest in sex and sexuality is construed as dangerous (Jackson & Scott, 1999). Yet sexual behaviours are normal and inevitable (Essa & Murray, 1999) and sexuality a part of "...a young child's sensual repertoire" (Honig, 2000a, p. 27). Of those accepting this moral viewpoint many come to this understanding from the perspective of compulsory heterosexuality, acting "...as if all children were heterosexual until proved otherwise" (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999, p. 41). Compulsory heterosexuality is part and parcel of everyday practice in services and is rarely questioned (Robinson, 2002). As Robinson (2002) describes it, "the incorporation of mock weddings, the encouragement of various activities in the home corner, such as mothers and fathers, and young children's participation in kissing games and girlfriends/boyfriends, are all part of young children's narratives of their experiences in early childhood education" (p. 420). Compulsory heterosexuality is particularly relevant to children given that "...adult's surveillance of children's sexual behaviour operates to assure, as much as possible, that children do not fall 'prey' to homosexual behaviour" (Robinson, 2000, p. 102). Limiting the possible repertoire of sexual behaviour available to children it is also particularly destructive. In the face of moral panic, and given my reading of *Te Whāriki's* position, practitioners within services may well revert to such surveillance.

During later readings of the metaphor I began to question whether or not excluding sexuality, rendering it invisible, specifically acts to erase queer possibilities – (in other words, alternatives to the 'norm') – as I had assumed as an outcome of my initial reading and as I have attempted to demonstrate here. What, I now asked myself, might queer theory make of the whāriki metaphor? Might queer theorising enable a queering of this metaphor and, if so, what effects would this have?

QUEERING THE WHĀRIKI

At a glance, queer theory and the whāriki metaphor sit together uneasily. The metaphor evokes something finished with a prescribed pattern, definite edges and the ends tied tidily. The principles and strands that weave the whāriki (the

conceptions of which I earlier argued are heterosexually defined) suggest fixed identities working together as parallel but intertwined threads, highlighting, I assumed, heteronormativity. Avoiding, resisting and actively undermining the stability implicit in heteronormativity, queer theory instead views identity as highly contested, fluid and flexible (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theory "... is as elusive to nail down as mercury" (Dilley, 1999, p. 457) and queer "...among the slipperiest of terms" (Carlson, 1998, p. 113). In simple (albeit slippery) terms, queer seeks out both alternatives to the 'norm', as already indicated, and the incoherencies in the terms sex, gender and sexuality; demonstrating the ways in which they function to license heterosexuality as normative (Jagose, 1996). In its rejection of the binary system of heterosexual/homosexual (Dilley, 1999; Luhman, 1998; Meiners, 1998; Sumara & Davis, 1998; Tierney & Dilley, 1998), and the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and mind/body that underpin systems of western thought, queer theory questions "...the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from those positions (marginal and central), especially those that normally go unquestioned" (Dilley, 1999, p. 462).

In order to queer the metaphor, I have attempted to question "...the regime of the normal" (Tobin, 1997, p. 26) as it relates to *Te Whāriki's* position by drawing that position to attention. Demonstrating an understanding of "...the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality..." (Jagose, 1996, p. 3) is also important. I have already referred to the view of sexuality as "...a category of experience..." (Spargo, 1999, p. 12). Butler adopted the argument, "...that sexuality is discursively produced..." (Spargo, 1999, p. 53) suggesting that sexuality is constructed through its performative reproduction in language (Butler, 1990). Referring to constructivism, Sears (1998) defines sexuality "...as a socially constructed *concept*" (italics in original) that "...emphasises the plasticity of human sexuality, asserting the power of society's beliefs, artifacts, and values to mold it" (p. 83).

Boldt (1997), in her interpretation of sexuality as socially constructed, points out that:

> The normativities of gender and sexuality define those who are 'inside', those who reiterate the norms sufficiently and consistently, as well as those who are 'outside', those whose gender and sexuality is not consistent with the norms for their sex. Those inside often have certain officially sanctioned and recognised privileges of power, and those outside are generally marginalized in at least some ways. (p. 198)

Boldt suggests that the illusion created here serves to operate as 'truth' but, more importantly, that "...such truths can also be understood to be, finally, not 'natural', 'normal' or 'true' but, rather, constructions that create and reiterate the sustaining logic of any exercise of power" (p. 194).

My journey moves me towards acceptance of a position that claims there is no 'natural' sexuality and that sexuality is socially constructed. From this position I begin to see how sex, gender and sexuality are defined and organised both through *Te Whāriki* and other dominant discourses and practices. This heightens my awareness of how the definition and organisation of sex, gender and sexuality (within *Te Whāriki* and other dominant discourses and practices) could be changed. In applying queer theory "...a radical shift in the possibilities available for the means, modes, and mechanisms of sexualities..." (Meiners, 1998, p. 135) is immediately evident.

How might a shift in possibilities manifest itself in relation to the whāriki metaphor? Gazing again at the whāriki, and attempting to interrogate my own reading, I see that while the principles and strands used to weave the metaphor are not overtly queer this invisibility does not necessarily equate with either the presence of heteronormativity or the absence of queerness. Given the "...zone of possibilities" that is queer (Edelman, cited in Jagose, 1996, p. 2), perhaps queer possibilities (and indeed a multitude of other meanings) can be read into the text. The whāriki may provide a space for alternative threads to be woven. My exploration of the theme of visibility thus begins.

The development of *Te Whāriki* has been likened to finding a tentative 'path' through the 'forest' while choosing 'trees' as markers to guide decisions about the curriculum, bearing in mind the particular needs of very young children and the conflicting beliefs about how best to meet these. Four kauri trees became those markers and represented the theorists Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky and Bruner (Carr & May, 1993). The strength of the kauri is difficult to deny, as is the rationale for the chosen theorists these trees represent. Yet, as Tobin (1997) makes clear, an "...overreliance on developmentalists, structuralists, and biologically based theories and an ignoring of poststructural and humanities-based perspectives distorts the way we approach questions of pleasure and desire in our work with young children" (p. 20). With the whāriki providing the necessary space and weaving alternative threads, I envisage, therefore, the addition of paniculata (native clematis) to the forest as a new marker representing the contribution of queer theorists[3]. As strong as the kauri, though not always as immediately evident in the way of the so-called 'giants', paniculata belongs there nonetheless. Queering the whāriki in this way gives rise to endless possibilities as the previously unquestioned dominance of the kauri is disrupted and troubled by the unruly paniculata's weaving under, over and through the forest. New goals for children's learning can emerge; goals relating to the development of sexuality and the ways in which it is constructed under the strand of 'Well-being', and the celebration of sexual diversity and embodied desires under 'Belonging'. Enhancing the well-being and sense of belonging of all those who make up the early childhood community is indeed possible, from a queer theory perspective. The whāriki can be as queer as we might wish to make it.

CONCLUSION

My weaving of, unravelling of, and queering of the whāriki chart a journey I have woven through my readings of the metaphor of *Te Whāriki*, and *Te Whāriki* itself. My readings are themselves the product of discourse, and my practices as a lecturer in early childhood teacher education. As such, my readings do not stand 'outside' my own historically constructed sexuality or the theories to which I have referred. My early, embodied desire, as a lesbian, to read invisibility into *Te Whāriki* has been challenged throughout my journey. I have now arrived at a place where I query my claiming of the identity 'lesbian'. The term lesbian is socially constructed in opposition to heterosexual. Therefore, does my investment in this identity re-inscribe heteronormativity? Has it hampered my ability to make the invisible, visible? These questions and others remain with me as part of my journey.

"Living within heteronormative culture means learning to 'see' straight, to 'read' straight, to 'think' straight" (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 202). Sumara and

Davis (1999) argue, however, that it is possible to interrupt normalised forms (and I assume, therefore, ways of 'seeing', 'reading' and 'thinking') suggesting that "whereas this desire is, in part, impelled by the desire to eliminate the destructive homophobia and heterosexism that pervades all social forms, it is also spurred by the desire to create more interesting forms for thinking" (p.202). In my readings I have sought to create this very possibility. *Te Whāriki* and its metaphor can be 'seen', 'read' and 'thought' straight as I have endeavoured to highlight. In so highlighting, I concluded, on the one hand that *Te Whāriki* legitimises, reproduces and reinforces heteronormativity and, further, that the whāriki itself is not an apt metaphor for inclusion. On the other hand, I have also highlighted the ways in which the whāriki can be interrupted, thus enabling the weaving of alternative threads; that is, the weaving of the queer in, thereby better reflecting inclusion. In weaving the queer in I am not arguing that *Te Whāriki* become sexed. "Queer theory asks not that pedagogy become sexed, but that it excavate and interpret the way it already *is* sexed and, further, that it begin to interpret the ways in which it is explicitly heterosexed" (Sumara & Davis, 1998, p.199, italics in original). If *Te Whāriki* is heterosexed and if "...heteronormativity characterizes contemporary research, theory, and practice in early childhood education" (Tobin, 1997, p. 2) it is timely to reveal a way beyond its confines. Evaluation and revision of *Te Whāriki* and its central metaphor, including an opening by the early childhood community of (discursive) spaces for thinking about, and broadening the possibilities for, children's learning about and development of sexuality and the celebration of sexualities from a queer theory perspective may reveal a way forward.

NOTES

1. I presume the ideal is to increase the likelihood of all children achieving these.
2. Here I signal a specific and partial reading, that is, my own, as a self-identified lesbian.
3. Perhaps including those whose work is drawn on in this paper.

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