Chapter 6- "How To Be A Real Lesbian"

This chapter of Queer Youth Cultures focuses on the way that the World Wide Web can help form ideas of lesbian identity, especially in younger women. It focuses on a website entitled "The Pink Sofa" and specifically on one of the sites discussion boards entitled "Teenage Chix". The authors, Anna Hickey-Moody, Mary Louise Rasmussen and Valerie Harwood claim that online communities and discussion boards can shape the way lesbian youth perceive themselves and other females who also identify as lesbians, and claim this can have both positive and negative effects.

The first part of the essay is rather theory heavy, as they discuss some important scholarly work on identity formation to make their claims about, as the call it, The Sofa. They discuss Hirox’s idea that culture is important in producing narratives identity, and contrast that with Butler’s idea that sex and gender are constructed identities. The admit that while a message board will not truly reflect the real world, they can be seen as a place where ones behaviors and relations (aka being a girl who likes girls), connects to ones idea of self (aka needing to have a short hair cut to be considered truly gay).

The second half of the essay focuses on the website itself. The examples of discussion topics the authors highlight all focus on defining and spotting lesbians. The users talk about everything from haircuts to thumb rings as ways to identify fellow homosexual females, and they also express frustration about either not being read as gay or mistakenly reading others as gay. The authors also note that these examples, especially the discussion of hair length, show that most people conceptualize gender and sexuality as one and the same and are quick to say that should be queered. For as long as we can remember, they argue, being a woman has meant having long hair and being a woman has meant being interested in men. The authors of this piece say that in the present day that is not always the case. Finally, the authors claim that while message boards and online communities do have the ability to shift ideas of sameness by connection disparate people, their ability to enforce stereotypes and cultural ideas are just as large.

From a reader’s standpoint, this essay read a bit strangely. The first part was exceptionally theory heavy, making it hard to get through and the second part seemed rather common sense. I would have recommended they try to weave the theory more into the examples they pulled from the messages boards, although over all I thought the piece was interesting and informative.

The essay also speaks directly to the ideas of community and identity we have discussed in class. While it focuses on the virtual community of these teenage lesbians, it does claim that the World Wide Web has the power to bring people together more than to take it apart. Finally, it talks about the way that lesbian collective identity is shaped in these communities, with specific focus on how to tell if someone is a lesbian or not.