Chapter 3 Redefining Realities

In “Redefining Realities Through Self-Representational Performance,” Jama Shelton advocates for queer youth projects that “emphasize media literacy and self-representation” in order to assist young LGBTQ individuals develop “a more complete sense of self and stronger, more confident voices” with which they can speak up for queer equality.

Whereas mainstream media depict one-dimensional and/or heteronormative versions of queerness (i.e. the fashion-wise, effeminate gay men of Queer Eye for the Straight guy, or the ‘married-couple-esque interdependence of Will and Grace), Turned Up Volume!, a video/performance residency in Houston, Texas, encourages queer youth to examine “what it means to be a queer young person living in America” and facilitates individual performance (and/or video) art pieces wherein participants tackle questions of sexuality, gender, desire, politics, and conformity. In the process, they establish a safe “community of inclusion,” develop confidence in their own identity and ability to “actively speak out and act against oppression and injustice,” and ultimately become “creatively mobilized agents of change.”

Shelton illustrates her argument by examining the artwork of three TUV students. In reaction and resistance to typecast caricatures of gay men in the media, Larry engendered “an interactive performance, wherein he instructed audience members how to be a perfect gay boy.” Sarcastically announcing that “any modern day gay boy can tell you that it is best to conform,” Larry delineates characteristics of three prevalent notions of young, gay men: the “standard gay boy” (a slave to fashion trends and gay bars), the “flamer” (an attention-addicted, popular queen), and the “abercrombie boy” (a straight-acting, brain-dead boy). Larry’s media literacy enabled him to reclaim his identity by “control[ing his] self-image, rather than leaving that power in the hands of the dominant culture.” Shelton emphasizes that self-confidence leads to personal agency (or sense of power) and a willingness to express their needs and desires.

Rae, meanwhile, challenged ideas of masculinity and femininity through a gender-bending video and personal monologue, which foregrounded his anxious experiences of avoiding the bathroom. Through this performance, Rae “deconstruct[ed] shame-based ideas surrounding [her] queer identity” and reclaimed the power of her own voice. Lastly, Millie wrote and performance poems that examined her experiences as a lesbian, a Hispanic woman, and an American. Her piece embodied a rejection of the dominant culture’s “answers and guidelines on the ‘correct’ way of living” and offered a restoration of personal power to develop one’s own sense of identity.

After the TUV performances at the conclusion of the residency, a panel discussion engages audience members in questions of representation, visibility, and equality. These discussions bring together queer (and straight) individuals from various ages, races, and classes to create “a level playing field, where the experiences of the participants are valued.” Shelton ultimately argues that such projects, in addition to inspiring self-confidence, a higher awareness of cultural hegemony, and individual agency, benefit efforts to “move queer people away from marginalization and toward equality.”