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### Lesbian discourses: images of a community, by Veronika Koller

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Lesbian discourses: images of a community**, by Veronika Koller, New York, USA and Abingdon, UK, Routledge, 2008, 226 pp., US\$39.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-88389-4

The central claim in Veronika Koller's recent book *Lesbian Discourses: Images of a Community* is that 'notions of [lesbian] group identity and community differ vastly across time, as [...] do the linguistic features used to define and communicate such a community' (p. 18). Koller argues this point adroitly, combining Wodak's (2001) discourse historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (CDA) with socio-cognitive insights – in particular, Anderson's (1983) notion of 'imagined communities' – to provide a detailed linguistic analysis of eight texts written by 'self-identified lesbian authors' (p. 1) between 1970 and 2004.

It is not Koller's intention in this work to describe 'typically lesbian way[s] of using language' (p. 4). Rather, she sets out to identify the linguistic means by which various lesbian authors construct diverse images of lesbian community, and to explain that diversity with reference to the socio-political contexts in which each text was produced. This book will be of interest, therefore, not only to discourse analysts, but also to scholars working in the wider field of gender and sexuality.

*Lesbian Discourses* opens with a brief introductory chapter in which Koller situates her research in relation to CDA and herself in relation to lesbian communities. Also, in this chapter, Koller acknowledges both the Anglo-American orientation of her work and its somewhat arbitrary temporal focus. The omission of bisexual and transgender identities, as well as the intersections of sexual and other forms of social identification (such as ethnicity and class), is also conceded.

In her second chapter, Koller outlines her research questions and defines several key terms, including 'discourse', 'genre', and 'text', before succinctly introducing CDA, and the DHA in particular. In doing so, she deftly roots her work in social constructionism, while maintaining a clear sensitivity to the material dimensions and consequentiality of both discourse and identity. Koller also defines the terms 'image' and 'community', thus marking the socio-cognitive representation of collective (rather than individual) identities as the object of her inquiry. Strikingly, however, she does not define 'lesbian' in this chapter, highlighting instead the capacious semantic range of this term, which has included – for different authors, at different times – 'a political practice', 'a form of desire', and a partner to gender identity (p. 9).

It is precisely this diversity that Koller explores in the four central, analytical chapters of *Lesbian Discourses*. Each of these chapters examines two texts written in a specific decade (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s) and each begins with an overview of the socio-political situation of lesbians in that era. These surveys are based on scholarly accounts, as well as on Koller's own knowledge as a member of various lesbian communities in Western Europe, which she supplements with ethnographic interviews with other self-identified lesbians. Koller's discussions here provide a rich contextual background within which to consider her analysis, although I found the treatment of different decades to be somewhat uneven.

Koller then discusses the production, distribution, and reception of lesbian texts in each decade. Here again, useful contextual information is provided. Koller's treatment of textual reception focuses more on how potential readers gained access to lesbian texts, however, than on how those texts were interpreted or comprehended (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Titscher, Wodak,

Meyer, & Vetter, 2000; van Dijk, 2005). The latter is a more difficult question to answer, particularly when working with historical materials, but more thorough use might have been made of Koller's ethnographic interviews had they also explored readers' reactions to the texts and the impact (if any) of those texts upon readers' lives (van Leeuwen, 2005).

Central to Koller's four analytical chapters, of course, are her selected texts, each of which is presented and analysed in turn. Her data are wide-ranging, including pamphlets, magazine articles, and web-based documents that clearly display disparate conceptions of lesbian community. Both of the texts written in the 1970s, for example, depict a politicized and de-sexualized lesbian–feminist community. Yet, the first portrays that community as a 'safe haven and endpoint of personal development', while the second sketches 'a group under attack from outside' (p. 187). The texts from the 1980s, by contrast, challenge the silence on sex that Koller argues characterized 1970s lesbian feminism: in the first case, by upholding butch/femme culture against implicit criticism from lesbian feminists; in the second, by explicitly rejecting the perceived suppression of lesbian sadomasochistic practices. The notion of a homogeneous lesbian community is also called into question by the texts Koller chose to represent the 1990s. Both juxtapose 1970s lesbian feminism with alternate perspectives and voices, producing a strong sense of hybridity, individualization, and commercialization. Finally, the images of lesbian community depicted in Koller's texts from the 2000s differ from each other and from those portrayed in earlier texts. The first text envisages 'a strong imagined [lesbian] community' (p. 172), albeit one that has been thoroughly 'colonized' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 30) by corporate marketing; the second, by contrast, belittles lesbian activists and prioritizes privatized individual lesbian identities over identification with a lesbian community.

The linguistic analysis that underpins Koller's observations about these texts is methodical and thorough, addressing several key elements of language used to construct collective social identities. Koller focuses on six rhetorical devices: the representation of social actors; the evaluation of those actors; the types of action ascribed to different actors; various forms of linguistic modality; in-text references to other texts and discourses; and the use of metaphor. Not surprisingly, certain of these devices are more significant than others in each text, but the systematic format of Koller's analytical chapters helpfully facilitates comparison. One can readily observe, for example, whether, how, and to what ends each author uses the personal pronoun 'we', which is widely recognized as a linguistic tool for constructing collective social identities (Kitzinger, 2005; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999).

More impressively, Koller traces an important – though less often noted – interdiscursive link between lesbian and religious discourses, which is forged via metaphoric expressions, religious terminology, and such 'shared concepts' (p. 118) as purity, conversion, and separatism. This association merits further investigation (Power, 2010, 2011) and I would have liked to see Koller engage with one of the many texts produced by self-identified religious lesbians during the early 2000s – not only because the profoundly important debates around same-sex marriage in the UK and the USA at that time were integrally bound up with religion, but also because these debates brought to public notice previously marginalized images of religious lesbian communities.

In this respect, *Lesbian Discourses* is susceptible to two critiques that apply equally to other CDA work. First, although Koller's selected texts clearly support her central claim, I did not find the significance of these particular texts (and portions of texts), over against other possible selections, to be thoroughly established. Second, Koller's analysis unambiguously shows variation in the images of lesbian community conveyed by texts written in different decades, but the import of time – in comparison to other variables, such as the age, sexual practices, and political orientation of specific authors – is unclear. Socio-cognitive models of lesbian community are demonstrably varied, but not necessarily changing.

More specifically (although less significantly for Koller's overall argument), *Lesbian Discourses* draws on, but seems to misapply, Halliday's three metafunctions of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 29–31). Koller claims, for example, that certain of her selected texts 'fulfil' (p. 24) one or another of these metafunctions. Yet, as Koller acknowledges in the glossary provided at the end of *Lesbian Discourses*, Halliday (1994, p. 179, emphasis added) explains that '[t]he three functional components of meaning, ideational, interpersonal and textual are realized throughout the grammar of a language' – such that all texts can be seen to play all three functional roles at the same time. Koller's claims that 'Britain is a secular country' (p. 154) and that '[t]he value of individualism... had first surfaced in the 1980s' (p. 187) both also struck me as problematic.

Quibbles such as these aside, however, *Lesbian Discourses* is a valuable book – and not merely because it is the first book-length discussion of discursive constructions of lesbian collective identities. Koller's research provides an imitable example of CDA, which is at once of service to the communities she studies and applicable to the study of other marginalized communities. Koller concludes *Lesbian Discourses* by reviewing and answering her original research questions, by arguing for the importance of linguistic analysis in the study of collective social identities, and by identifying potential areas for further research. Students of marginalized social identities might certainly do worse than to follow in Koller's footsteps.

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