

Rescuing Our Words: Second-Hand Books on Difference and Activism

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The places I grew up never afforded me the opportunity to know a wide range of experience. Everyone was much the same. I played that I was too even though I knew inside that I felt differently than most of the people I knew. The problem was that I never had words or ideas to describe how I felt, so it seemed I was the only one who had ever felt that way.

It wasn't until I was able to be on my own and experience more than what had previously been available to me that I began to understand that other people shared my experiences and felt a lot like I did about many things. After reading an article by Adrienne Rich, I realized that, looking back on growing up, I had never had a source that allowed me to understand and discuss variety of experience, so they remained foreign concepts to me even though I felt my experience was also dissimilar. In the writing, "It Is the Lesbian in Us...", Rich describes her father's library as his source of power; something that could explain how to live and tell what was possible. But she found little in the library to explain her feelings and experiences. The article goes on to describe her search for a literature that explained and named her experiences. She believes that without this literature, the unnamed remained out of the realm of possibility and was doomed to be "unspeakable."

This collection began as a search for literature that both described and empowered me as a woman and a lesbian. It began as a collection dedicated to finding words that tell me both what has been and what can be. It has grown into a collection that aims to rescue the words that tell what has been and what can be for all of us, and represents a wide range of racial, ethnic, social, and gendered experience, not just works that describe mine. I believe that we are better able to understand our experiences and how we fit together by being able to attain knowledge of experiences that are decidedly different than our own.

The collection also combines my love of books and of the used, discarded, and recycled. I describe the collection as rescuing these words because the vast majority of books in this collection are "rescues." They have been found at recycling events, library sales, thrift stores, used book retailers, and overstock shelves. Purchasing books in this way also has the added benefit of helping local non-profits and assistance programs. Some books have also been gifted by family, friends, teachers and acquaintances from their own personal collections. The notes, receipts, cards, and signatures that are found in some of the "rescues" also add another, more personal side to the idea of saving experience because they tell a story about the book that no other copy has. Even though most are not first editions or collectors items, they are, in this way, one of a kind.