

WHEN JILL JACKS IN

Queer women and the Net

Mary Bryson

Introduction

We are in need of a more radical reconfiguration of the relationship of (woman)/woman/machine rather than solely concentrating on man/woman/machine ... Women's Web presences can be a way of constructing oppositional identities, displaying the integration of women and computing culture, as well as building electronic and social networks. (Nina Wakeford 1997, p. 63)

The Internet represents both a meta-network of uniquely purposed spaces, and a set of linked technologies and practices; moreover, it is particularly significant as a contemporary site of cultural transformation, identification and community participation, as well as a means of access to and production of capital. Typically, research concerning women and the Internet has focused on "gender differences" in two ways: first, access to, perceptions of, competence in, and usage of, online tools (e.g., email lists, website authoring, etc.); and second, experiences in cyberspace locations, communities, and spaces (e.g., chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc.). The central tendency, methodologically and conceptually, has been to conflate sex with gender, and to compare research findings from samples of male and female subjects with the goal of discerning pertinent "gender differences" (see, for example, Lynn Cherny & Reba Weise 1996; Janet Morahan-Martin 2000; Sherry Turkle 1995). Differences between women, such as sexual orientation, race, age, and social class, are obscured by binary gender constructs (Teresa de Lauretis 1987). Queer, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered (QLBT¹) women constitute a heterogeneous group that remains under-researched despite the fact that, as a stigmatized sexual subculture, its members embody unique characteristics, vulnerabilities, and concomitant requirements that need to be documented and taken into account (Mary Bryson 2002; Ann Cvetkovich 2003; Suzanne de Castell & Mary Bryson 1998a/b; Mary Gray 1999; Kath Weston 1998). Given the far-reaching significance of new media, there is a pressing need for comprehensive research and participatory community development efforts concerning complex issues of both access to and usage of the Internet among QLBT women.

This research is an exploratory investigation into the significance of Internet technologies and communities for the production, mediatization, and narrativization of QLBT women's relations, identificatory practices, desires, community participation, and opportunities for building a wide array of competencies and knowledges (e.g., technological, legal, medical, etc.). Cyberspace research has, on the whole, overlooked the unique insights that could be gained by a study of QLBT women's uses and perceptions of, and experiences in, online tools and communities (significant exceptions are Shelley

Correll 1995; Sally Munt, Elizabeth Bassett & Kate O’Riordan 2002; Nina Wakeford 1996; Celeste Wincapaw 2000). The purpose of this inquiry, then, is to advance knowledge in relatively uncharted territory concerning the social and cultural significance of new media technologies within a heterogeneous marginalized subculture.

Theoretical Framework

Media scholars like Sue-Ellen Case (1996), Radhika Gajjala (2002), Donna Haraway (1997), Carolyn Marvin (1988), Bruno Latour (1993), Jenny Sunden (2001), and Susan Leigh Star (1999) have devoted extensive efforts to cataloguing and theorizing important relationships between artifacts, social relations, representational practices, and major nodes in the matrix of identity construction, communication, community formation, and the like. Fredric Jameson (1991), in describing the spatialization of postmodern culture, emphasizes the mediational role played by technological artifacts in the production, consumption, and negotiation of culture and refers to this as “mediatization.” A sociocultural view of technologies considers the ways in which everyday cultural practices have always-already been mediated by artifacts. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2001) have argued, then, it is more useful to cast our analyses of new media as studies of re/mediation. Nina Wakeford (1999), in her analysis of the production of gender in a specific cybercafe, emphasizes that research on technology takes as its scope the online and offline material and imaginary spaces of local cultures—a spatial view of artifacts, actants, relations and identities that Wakeford refers to as the “landscapes of computing.”

Feminist research on cyberspace has emphasized important relationships between identity, gender, sexuality and technology (e.g., Donna Haraway 1985; Zoe Sofia 1999; Allucquere Rosanne Stone 1995; Nina Wakeford 1997). As Mary Doane (1990, p. 163) argued: “When technology intersects with the body in the realm of representation, the question of sexual difference is inevitably involved.” Relationships between technology and sexuality regularly appear as emplotment devices in narrative constructions concerning the instrumental re/mediation of sexual possibilities (Suzanne de Castell & Mary Bryson 1998c). Two genres predominate. William Gibson’s (1984) cyberspace cowboys “jack into simstim” in a world where, as Scott Bukatman concluded, “There are no women” (1993, p. 314). Meanwhile, media anecdotes and conservative scholarship produce, and then appear to document, eruptions in moral panic concerning the apparently definitive blow to “the natural and the normal” produced in digital spaces where culture hackers recode connections between the body and the screen (e.g., Keith Durkin & Clifton Bryant 1995).

Research on QLBT women and new media is scarce. Correll’s (1995) ethnography of the *Lesbian Café*, an Internet bulletin board system (BBS), provides valuable insights into the negotiation of individual and community identities in the ongoing construction of, and participation in a lesbian bar existing wholly online. Correll draws extensively on Erving Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model, which underscores the public performance of identity and the concomitant significance of interactivity and community. Correll’s research provides ample evidence of the positive significance of online interactive spaces to a diverse group of women at-risk of stigmatization and isolation. Cyberspaces are not, however, digital utopias for Sapphic community formation and interaction. Studies of QLBT women’s experiences of participation in lesbian email lists such as those reported by Munt, Bassett, and O’Riordan (2002), as well as Wincapaw (2000), suggest that many of the prescriptive and divisive forces that structure access to embodied queer women’s

communities are reproduced in online interactions. Munt, Bassett, and O'Riordan (2002, p. 136) argue that community membership proceeds by means of those specific communicative practices wherein participants shape the staging of their public performances of identity in order to match what is "socially intelligible ... through conformity to the coded ideologies of a lesbian subculture." Existing research on cyberspace and minority subcultures (Chris Berry, Fran Martin & Audrey Yue 2003; Lisa Nakamura 2000; Nina Wakeford 1996) cautions against deterministic accounts of any overwhelming or singular "impact of new media" and underscores the significance of community diversity and the complex negotiation of existing cultural practices of identification and older media with new technologies.

As a theoretical *point d'appui*, this research draws on a long tradition of feminist, socio-historical, materialist, scholarship on sexuality (e.g., Donald Morton 1996; Dorothy Smith 1998; Valerie Walkerdine 2001) that prioritizes a careful examination of the cultural contexts, media, institutions, discourses, and practices within which majority and minority identity categories are co-produced in a dialectic that is, in part, sustained by a hegemonic logic particularly difficult to displace. As I have argued elsewhere, "The tensions between postmodern challenges to identity politics and the material struggles of people identified as gay or lesbian constitute a starting-point for inquiry, and not an argument for dispensing with identity" (Bryson 2002, p. 377). The argument with respect to agency, then, is that it is critical that research document, make visible and accessible the conditions within which QLGBT people, communities, spaces, and practices manage to *queer* the status quo and exceed and "make unthinkable" (Deborah Britzman 1995) the totalizing boundaries of "the normal" if it is to be accountable to communities ravaged by homophobia and heterosexism.

Methodology

The data in this study consist of open-ended in-depth interviews conducted with 14 Australian women who identify both as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgendered" and as "frequent users of Internet tools and sites." Participants were recruited by means of an advertisement placed in a QLBT women's newspaper with a broad urban/suburban and rural distribution network. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 52 and represent a diverse group in terms of SES and geographical location. All participants reside within a 200 mile radius of a major Australian urban centre, and live in the following locales: urban (8), suburban (3), and rural (3). One of the participants identifies as Aboriginal and 13 as Caucasian.

In keeping with Wakeford's (1999) insistence that analyses of the cultural effects of new tools be situated in the "landscape" of everyday life (see also Daniel Miller and Don Slater 2000), interviews were conducted face-to-face and focused as much on offline identity construction and community participation, and concomitant analogue artifacts (e.g., books, community newspapers), as on the virtual. The typical duration of each interview was between 1.5 and 3 hours. Interview questions and analyses of transcripts focused on the construction of a queer identity, the impact of homophobia, the negotiation of community, relationships and desire, participation and experience in QLBT spaces—both online, and in the "real world"—as well as participants' uses of Internet tools, and their strategies for building technological expertise and accessing culturally appropriate knowledge.

Findings

The participants, most of whom had no formal training in computer or Internet-related skills: (a) made use of a vast array of computer-mediated tools (e.g., ICQ, Instant Messaging) and Internet communities (e.g., email lists, chat rooms), (b) shared knowledge and skills concerning the use of online tools and spaces with other women, and (c) spent a significant chunk of daily life online.

Paula, 51, dyke, white, working class (origin), secondary education²

Mary: What kind of access do you have to the Internet outside of your workplace?

Paula: I have my computer and a dedicated phone line just for dial-up access. We can't get cable, so this house has four phone lines—three for computers.

Paula: We are truly wired.

Mary: And how much time, more or less, would you say that you spend everyday online when you're not at work?

Paula: Depends who's around ... a few hours.

Mary: When did you first start using Internet tools like ICQ or chat or IM?

Paula: Probably about ten years ago.

Mary: And how did you first learn about them?

Paula: I think from friends in the States. Women that I was in email contact with, would say, did you know that you could get an application, like, IRC, and then I would download it, and then I would tell someone else...

Mary: What are the most frequent tools that you use now?

Paula: ICQ and chat.

Mary: And where do you spend the most time chatting?

Paula: A.O.L. ... it's commercial, and dominated by white Americans, but what space isn't?

Terri, 32, queer, white, middle class (origin), tertiary education

Mary: Approximately how much time do you spend online most days?

Terri: Minimum, I'll go online one to two hours everyday to check my email, look at a few favourite sites, or to chat...

Mary: What are some favourite sites?

Terri: I love TheOnion.com.

Terri: You've got to go. It's fantastic. It's this satirical, like, newspaper thing. I think it's a bunch of college students who put it out. It's in the States. It's got, like, these crazy stories, like the one I was reading this morning was, oh, "Spring must be coming because the UPS men are putting their shorts on" and stuff like that ... InPassing.org is great. It's this college student in Berkeley, and she overhears bits of conversations and then posts them, but it's random weird bits of conversation.

Mary: Really? That's so good. I love that.

Terri: Where else do I go? My friend Rebecca has this website. I don't go there much, but there are pictures of me on it, so that's always fun.

Terri: My friend Sarah sends me a lot of links to really strange sites like ... I don't know, she emailed me this jpeg of a picture that's got a little picture of a kitten in a field and it says, "Every time you masturbate, god kills a kitten," and then at the bottom it says, "Please think of the kittens."

Mary: Have you spent time online chatting?

Terri: Yeah, I chat with friends, or go to chat rooms on a topic that interests me. Like there's this English music zine, and they have a chat room there and I spend a lot of time in there talking to people. And sometimes I go to the lesbian chat rooms on Gay.com or AOL.

Irrespective of age, all interviewees, no matter how "out," continued to identify an ongoing relationship both to "the closet" and pervasive and persistent impacts of homophobia. While unevenly distributed as a function of geography, occupation and likelihood of being perceived as "queer," discrimination is a ubiquitous aspect of participants' life experiences.

Iris, 37, lesbian, white, middle class (origin), secondary education

Iris: I went to school in a small town and didn't really know what a lesbian was until I was twenty-five.

Mary: So what happened at twenty-five?

Iris: I got a belting from a man.

Mary: Huh? And that was...

Iris: Well, I was beaten up for being a lesbian, and I didn't even know what that meant. Those sorts of things were never talked about when I was a kid.

Iris: There were cowboy comments about fags, but nothing to do with women at all. So anyway, I got a belting from my brother-in-law for being a lesbian and I thought, oh. I drove back to Brisbane, I got the dictionary and all of sudden everything fell into place. Cause I knew I was different. But I didn't know why.

Iris: Now, I'm totally out. Only, I certainly don't go out and say, "Hey, I'm a lesbian."

Mary: Would you would wear a Gay Pride t-shirt...

Iris: No, I wouldn't.

Iris: It probably would be more acceptable at the library than where I used to work, but no, I wouldn't.

Mary: Would you march in the Pride parade?

Iris: Oh, of course I would. I've been there, done that.

Rose, 24, queer, white, middle class (origin), tertiary education

Rose: In high school there was a huge stigma around being gay. It was just like, to be like a lesbian or a lesbo or whatever was just the worst thing you could possibly be. So I was conscious that there was something wrong, and I thought that I might be a lesbian but I was kind of going, "No, I can't be, and these are the reasons why I'm not."

Mary: Did anyone ever say to you, "You're a lesbo?"

Rose: Oh, yeah, all the time, but it was more a general purpose insult than an insight at that time.

Mary: Like "fag" for boys?

Rose: Yeah. And I kind of saw it as that but also kind of went, well, "Do they know?" And so I went through high school trying really, really hard to be straight and like, consciously trying, and then, I met Lisa and kissed her and just went, "this feels right." Finally, this fucking feels right, you know. Yeah.

All participants described their varied engagements in the construction of a queer identity as mediated by books (both fiction and nonfiction), movies, community newspapers, cultural events, and Internet communities and locations (e.g., websites with email bulletin boards, chat rooms).

Robby, 40, bisexual, white, middle class (origin), tertiary education

Robby: I read a lot of mythology and fairy tales, stories ... Pretty early on I exhausted the kids' section of the library with mythology ... and found the adult section.

Mary: What about gay fiction?

Robby: Well, gay fiction didn't seem to exist where I grew up. But there were queer stories ... of the androgynous beings in mythology, for example...

Robby: Stories where you had female warriors and that sort of thing.

Robby: That literature affected me incredibly.

Robby: That reading gave me a framework for how to live as a hybrid creature.

Robby: And I could imagine worlds where women were much more active. I didn't see myself as a goddess. That seemed a bit too presumptuous, but I liked to read stories where some kind of power was possible for queer characters I could identify with...

Rose, 24, queer, white, middle class (origin), tertiary education

Mary: What's your own history as a queer person? How did you do it?

Rose: I had a friend who I met on the Internet, interestingly enough. We became very close friends, and I hung out at her house a lot and she had, like, queer community newspapers and magazines around the house, and I kind of went, oh, okay ... It kind of transpired that she was bi. And we, like, got into having sleepovers and stuff like that, and I realized, I think I have feelings for this person.

Rose: When I started kind of coming out, then, you know, I got all the Naiad Press books, and all that kind of queer paraphernalia...

Rose: Then I read this great book by Shar Rednour. She did the "Hard Love" and "How to Fuck in High Heels" movies. She directed them ... co-directed them with her girlfriend, and she wrote a book called "The Femme's Guide to the Universe," and that was kind of like ... I always sort of thought of myself as femme, but after reading this book I embraced a femme identity more, and also the fact that I'm what's known as "femme squared," a femme who is attracted to femmes rather than to butches.

All of the participants described the Internet as an important source of knowledge and cultural engagement and as a valued toolkit for community apprenticeship that was purpose-built as a function of their primary locus of identification—women, QLBT women, Aboriginal women, women in the music industry, women living in rural communities, etc. Medical and legal knowledge were viewed as particularly important online resources, although participants observed that considerable skill was required in order to locate culturally appropriate QLBT informational resources.

Anita, 41, M > F trans/queer, white, working class (origin), secondary education

Anita: I've gotten a lot of information from the tranny hormone list. It was mainly an information sharing thing, and a few other lists along those lines. With the web, I've used transgendered sites for looking up reports of surgeons, photos of surgery, information from the surgeons where they'd posted that stuff up on the Net. Gaining information about hormones is important. I have a fair bit of experience in biochemistry and can read the scientific literature.

Mary: How do you access that material on the Internet?

Anita: I can get into the MedLine database and that kind of thing. If I want information about any of that stuff, the Net is the first place I go. It's not always easy to find good information though, especially if you are looking for knowledge that is community-based. And if you are going to read the medical articles, you really need to know the jargon and be able to read between the lines.

Interviewees tended to identify "white" as the default, assumed racial identity of online interlocutors. Few Caucasian participants identified racism as a problem of online communities, whereas the discursive construction of racial identity online was a persistent problem for the Aboriginal participant whose Net experiences were frequently characterized by marginalization, silencing and enforced segregation.

Kara, 29, queer, aboriginal, working class (origin), tertiary education

Kara: When people are online, they seem to just make the assumption that they're mostly—I mean, not consciously, but subconsciously—that everyone is white.

Mary: Even though they know some of the women they chat to aren't.

Kara: Right. So that is something that when I am thinking about somebody at more of a deep level than just their name, it is something that I am interested in finding out about. I find online almost nobody talks at all about ethnicity or race, unless somebody's nick identifies them as Black. And so it comes up occasionally, but it's sort of like everyone assumes everyone else is white, and then occasionally the status quo will be disturbed...

Mary: When somebody says that actually...

Kara: Yes, when someone like me says, "Hey that's racist" or, "Guess what, I am aboriginal" ... But mostly it's very white, even if it's not actually an all-white room. It's just ... other things come up, like people's gender identity, people's sexual identity, what kind of tea they like to drink, but not what colour they are.

Kara: And if you try to bring it up, as I have on a few occasions, the reception is pretty frosty. It's like, "well, then, go to one of the women of colour rooms – back to your reservation"...

Mary: Right.

Kara: 'Cause they're mostly white Americans, and the assumption that they make is that you're saying that they're racist. So, it seems like certain things people are quite open to discussing, and other things are kind of taboo topics. People will discuss their sexual fantasies more easily than race.

Online lesbian gender identities (e.g., butch, femme, grrl, and the like) were typically perceived in rather rigid and literal terms rather than being viewed as performances opened up by the possibility of transgressing "real world limits." Participants commonly

remarked that gender performances were frequently policed by members of online communities, whereas other aspects of cyber-identity were described as fair game for dissimulation, such as name, age, weight, appearance and the like.

Paula, 51, dyke, white, working class (origin), secondary education

Mary: How do you represent yourself in terms of your gender identity online?

Paula: My identity online often confuses people because I like roles where I can play with gender. One of the roles I take in my cyber play is that of a dyke daddy. So one of my nicknames online is OzDaddy. That makes for lots and lots of confusion.

Mary: And what's the nature of that confusion?

Paula: Well, people presume that because somebody's nickname is OzDaddy they have to be male. And then once you get over that hurdle, that no, it's not a male, it's a female, then the expectation is of somebody incredibly butch.

Paula: Right.

Paula: And I don't believe that I'm incredibly butch. I don't believe that I'm all that butch at all. There is part of me that likes sexy underwear.

Mary: Tell me how it comes up as a problem. How do people read your identity?

Paula: Well, when people get through the "no, this is not a male, this is a female," then it's that in their minds, somebody who is playing a daddy has to be very butch. And eventually, they want to see a picture of me, and then, oh my god, they are so disappointed, even though they know we have just been making up a story with our keyboards and our desire.

Mary: They had constructed you as a fantasy of a particular kind of person...

Paula: Yes. And I'm not.

Mary: And then you didn't quite measure up?

Paula: No. And I won't play along with that game for them.

Mary: Would you play along with that game if it amused you?

Paula: If it amused me, I would, yes.

Most participants talked about experimenting with certain parameters of online identities. On occasion, women played roles that differed from their "real world" identity in terms of age, appearance, relationship status, geographical location, profession and the like. Several participants engaged in online same-sex sexual activity where they performed a gay male identity. Idiosyncratic forms of sexual activity mediated by tools were

described, such as an ongoing sexual liaison that was enacted solely by means of cell phone text messaging.

Lori, 26, queer, white, working class (origin), tertiary education

Lori: Sometimes I go into the gay boys rooms and play a gay boy.

Lori: I love gay male porn. I've read so much gay male porn I can actually play that part.

Mary: And when you have been in the male spaces, have you had sex with other men in those spaces online?

Lori: I have. I think a lot of what makes it fun for me has been getting away with it.

Mary: Do you practice safer sex online?

Lori: If it's in a public room, absolutely.

Despite the fact that all interviewees emphasized that they did not "go online to meet someone," all had, in fact, met people face-to-face (f-t-f) whom they had originally met online, and many were in some kind of "real world" liaison with someone they had first met online. Relationships (both sexual and non-sexual) formed online, if they were to stand the test of time, typically moved to telephone chats, and then to "real world" encounters. This transition proved essential where long-term viability of the affiliation was valued.

Rose, 24, queer, white, middle class (origin), tertiary education

Mary: So, I'm really interested in the phenomenon of where you have talked to somebody only online and then you meet them face-to-face.

Rose: Ok, let me tell you about Brenda. There was like, this Melissa Etheridge website and they had a database of Melissa Etheridge fans and links to their personal websites. So I went to her personal website, emailed her, went, "your website's really great." She emailed me back and she was like, "Oh, I've just moved to Canberra. Do you want to go have a coffee?" kind of thing. And so we did, and the relationship just went from there. The same thing happened with my first girlfriend. She lived in another state, and I met her on another Melissa Etheridge list. She sent this post saying, "Oh, I've just fallen in love with my best friend and slept with her" ... and all this kind of stuff, and drama, drama, drama. Totally unrelated to Melissa Etheridge. God knows why she posted it to that list, but then I sent her a message going, "Yeah, I sympathize. I've been in a similar situation," and yeah, it just went from

there. We emailed, talked on the phone, met, and fell in love. So it happened a couple of times.

Discussion

The pilot research reported here is consistent with, and extends, existing research on queer women and the Internet. The findings indicate that Internet tools and communities serve a variety of functions that are relevant to, and scaffold, the lives of QLBT women, including (a) interaction with other queer women in a space that is relatively safe, (b) opportunities to experiment, in certain respects, with sexual identity and practice/s, (c) entry into a cultural context within which to learn *how to be queer* through immersion and participation in a sexually-specific subculture, and (d) access to culturally relevant knowledge and technological know-how. The reproduction of oppressive identity normalizing practices located in "real world" interactions and communities in online worlds, such as the policing of proscribed lesbian gender performances, and persistent racism, caution against monolithic utopian conclusions concerning the transformative potential of the Internet for QLBT women. This research also highlights the importance of exploring further those mechanisms that enable and prevent minority women's access to Internet tools, knowledge and communities.

The critical importance of the provision of culturally appropriate services in meeting the needs of the diverse communities of QLGBT youth and adults in a range of important areas, including education, legal services, counseling, and healthcare, has been widely recognized during the past decade (Allison Diamant, Cheryl Wold, Karen Spritzer & Lillian Gelberg 2000; Gary Harper & Margaret Schneider 2003; Billy Jones & Marjorie Hill 2002; Janice Ristock & Joan Pennell 1996; Ruth Simkin 1991; James Smith & Ronald Mancoske 1997). Research that documents QLBT women's uses of the Internet has the potential to inform and shape services and resources provided by a wide range of organizations. Since almost all women's organizations and community groups provide some kind of web-based resource and online services and knowledge, enhancing our understanding of QLBT women's patterns of Internet use and particular needs and experiences may build institutional capacity and cultural competence as stakeholders design and make use of evidence-based practices in their Net-based development work.

This study's small sample size, racial homogeneity, and its deliberately atypical participant group (queer women who make extensive use of the Internet) place strong limitations on any generalizations of the findings. It is more useful, likely, as a basis for the design of further research and for its conceptual articulation of the relevant issues and questions. At this juncture, then, it seems particularly fruitful to conclude by speculating, albeit briefly, about how the Net adds to the toolkit of culturally relevant artifacts available to mediate lesbian performativity, or what might be thought of as a *queer pedagogy* (Mary Bryson & Suzanne de Castell 1993).

In the middle of an impassioned argument about the ethical implications of postmodernism/s for conceptions of lesbian identity, Monique Wittig (1994) interjected with: "The real question about lesbians is not, 'Who are we?', but, 'How have we survived?'" It is, in part, this question that motivates the preliminary research concerning queer women and cyberspace that is presented here. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) identifies specific institutional "technologies of normalization" that are brought into play to make sure that children are brought up to perform "normal" sexual and gendered identities. Sedgwick leaves unanswered the fascinating pedagogical question of "How to

bring your kids up gay?”—how to nurture and support the construction of non-normative sexual and gender identities.

So how have lesbians survived? What is the relationship, if any, between notions of a queer pedagogy, mediative artifacts (e.g., books, film, the Net), and the deliberate production of deviance—*deviance by design*? How do Internet technologies and communities re/mediate the narrativization of queer lives, queer communities, and queer desire?

Lesbian identities and lesbian lives are performed always-already as transgressive and illegitimate moments of participation mediated by myriad artifacts (Mary Bryson 2002; Elizabeth Kennedy & Madeline Davis 1993; Kath Weston 1998). Research on QLBT women invariably underscores, for example, the critical role played by books, and by the eventual identification and formation of lesbian community, in the construction of a viable life as a member of a sexual subculture located in a homophobic world. Virtually every text, whether a scholarly ethnography or an autobiographical “coming out story,” that engages with how QLBT women’s identities are fashioned, refers to the significant mediative role played by books as carriers of social and cultural scripts that afford the reader the doubled pleasure both of finding herself represented, and of making herself, as a plausible, even desirable, character in the world. Lesbian author Lee Lynch (1990, p. 42), for example, writes about “cruising the libraries,” as follows: “Identifying variant books was as subtle, frustrating, and exciting a process as spotting lesbians on the street. I had to find reflections of myself to be assured that I was a valuable human being and not alone in the world.” It is of interest, then, to note that in the study reported here, books have not been made redundant by the Net. Rather, QLBT women, irrespective of age, continue to report that books, as pedagogically potent cultural artifacts, play an important role in the articulation of a queer life-world and sexual imaginary.

Interactive locales in cyberspace are, it is interesting to note, still accessed in large part as textually mediated worlds, and play a role that borrows certain elements from the world of books but are fundamentally different as a function of the potent elements of interactivity and immediate access to multiple and diverse queer women’s communities. The Net provides those QLBT women with the means to get online an almost infinite regress of interactive stages replete with culturally familiar characters and half-written scripts that afford the opportunity to practice, in spaces that Amy Bruckman (1992) has termed, “identity workshops,” live performances of a deviant identity—the queered woman (Donna Haraway 1985; Jodi O’Brien 1999).

Sue-Ellen Case (1996) invokes the “performing lesbian” in order to underscore the theatrical and staged material conditions within which “lesbian” identities are constructed and deployed. Case’s analysis retains a politics of alterity without invoking an ontological claim to essence. If one considers the notion of performativity to be a productive strategy for representing what it is *to be* queer, then the group that is made up of QLBT women who are very active in online environments provides us an interesting opportunity to consider what specific identificatory possibilities are enabled *when Jill jacks in*.

Discussions of the cultural significance of the Net typically begin with, and are framed by, William Gibson’s (1984) initial, and at the time, wholly original representation of virtual worlds as “Cyberspace, a consensual hallucination”—disembodied spaces where male computer geeks “jack in” to the Net to cruise endless pathways of data and “swap identities” effortlessly in the ether of digital simulations. Cyberfeminist critics (e.g., Donna Haraway 1997; Sadie Plant 1997) have argued that the trope of disembodiment is

masculinist, and not a useful narrative frame for thinking about the experiences of women on the Net, and have emphasized the political importance of taking explicitly into account both gender and agency for rethinking women's construction and inhabitation of women-only spaces online.

Participation in, and construction of, online spaces, identities and relations by QLBT women seems to be motivated less by the desire to "Go anywhere and be anybody," than strategic engagement fueled by the urgent need to gain access to live performances of queer culture, including queer women's communities, in order to be afforded the hard-won and often unavailable space to play, in relative safety, with non-normative identities, and of critical importance, to take up an improvisational role on a stage populated with other variant characters who also serve the function of an audience. The Net, construed as a mediative cultural artifact, provides a productive lens for looking at how women are making use of digital technologies *to learn how to be queer through their participation in communities of queered practice*—a formidable educational project (Bryson & de Castell 1993). And since in almost every location imaginable, women typically do not encounter facilitative curricula for fashioning queer relations and subjectivities, this research provides a tentative blueprint, as well as an urgent call for further investigation, concerning: (a) the remarkably varied participation of queer (and other minority) women on the Net, and (b) the potential value of digital tools and spaces for the democratization of access to safer spaces for QLBT interaction and inhabitation, and (c) the ways in which power circulates *productively* (Michel Foucault 1978) in online spaces so as to authenticate and render normative and intelligible only a narrow range of queer performances and in so doing, intensifying disciplinary identity effects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Heartfelt thanks to the women who participated directly in this research by stepping forward as interviewees. Queer women's life stories are an important form of cultural knowing and political memory work. Versions of this article have been presented at various conferences and in colleagues' graduate seminars, and I would like to thank participants for their useful feedback and incisive critiques. Conversations with Sue-Ellen Case, Janice Stewart, and Valerie Walkerdine provided critical impetus to carrying out conceptual and empirical work in an area that is significantly under-researched and also, in some respects, a new area of inquiry for me. Needless-to-say, all of the work's infelicities are of my own making.

NOTES

1. Use of the QLBT acronym does not imply a naïve assumption about any kind of straightforward relationship between such arbitrary markers of identification and universal aspects of being, ontology, or essence. Rather, as Gail Mason (2002) argues in her analysis of identity and homophobic violence, these deeply problematic, spatially and temporally situated, and contested signifiers discursively mediate the visibility of groups and have both subjugatory and liberatory effects. In this exploratory work, my goals and assumptions are in line with Frigga Haug's (1999) representation of the circulation of women's stories about sexualization as a political project that takes as its primary aim the foregrounding of agency on the part of women at-risk of marginalization.

2. Interview segments are framed by the multiple axes of participants' self-identifications, as follows: Paula (pseudonym), 51 (age), dyke (sexuality), white (race), working class (class of origin), secondary education (completed formal education). To protect anonymity, details that could permit identification of the participant were changed (e.g., location).

REFERENCES

- BERRY, CHRIS, MARTIN, FRAN & YUE, AUDREY (eds) (2003) *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- BOLTER, JAY & GRUSIN, RICHARD (2001) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- BRITZMAN, DEBORAH (1995) 'Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight', *Educational Theory*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 151–165.
- BRUCKMAN, AMY (1992) *Identity Workshop: Emergent Social and Psychological Phenomena in Text-based Virtual Reality*, [Online] Available at: www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/papers/old-papers.html#iW (5 May 2004).
- BRYSON, MARY (2002) 'Me/no lesbian: the trouble with "troubling lesbian identities"', *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 373–380.
- BRYSON, MARY & DE CASTELL, SUZANNE (1993) 'Queer pedagogy', *Canadian Journal of Education*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 285–305.
- BUKATMAN, SCOTT (1993) *Terminal Identity*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- CASE, SUE-ELLEN (1996) *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- CHERNEY, LYNN & WEISE, REBA (eds) (1996) *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, Seal Press, Seattle, WA.
- CORRELL, SHELLEY (1995) 'The ethnography of an electronic bar', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 270–298.
- CVETKOVICH, ANN (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- DE CASTELL, SUZANNE & BRYSON, MARY (1998a) "'Don't ask, Don't tell": sexualities and their treatment in educational research', in *Curriculum: Towards New Identities for the Field*, ed. William Pinar, Garland Press, New York, pp. 232–252.
- DE CASTELL, SUZANNE & BRYSON, MARY (1998b) 'Identity, ethnography and the geopolitics of text', in *Inside the Academy and Out: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Studies and Social Action*, eds Janice Ristock & Catherine Taylor, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pp. 97–110.
- DE CASTELL, SUZANNE & BRYSON, MARY (1998c) 'Re-tooling gendered play', in *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Girls and Computer Games*, eds Henry Jenkins & Justine Cassells, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 232–261.
- DE LAURETIS, TERESA (1987) *Technologies of Gender*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- DIAMANT, ALLISON, WOLD, CHERYL, SPRITZER, KAREN & GELBERG, LILLIAN (2000) 'Health behaviours, health status and access to and use of health care: a population-based study of lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women', *Archives of Family Medicine*, vol. 9, no. 10, pp. 1043–1051.
- DOANE, MARY (1990) 'Technophilia: technology, representation and the feminine', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, eds Mary Jacobs, Evelyn Fox Keller & Sally Shuttleworth, Routledge, New York, pp. 163–176.

- DURKIN, KEITH & BRYANT, CLIFTON (1995) 'Some notes on the carnal computer and erotic cyberspace as an emerging research frontier', *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 179–200.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL (1978) *The History of Sexuality*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, UK.
- GAJJALA, RADHIKA (2002) 'An interrupted postcolonial/feminist cyberethnography: complicity and resistance in the "cyberfield"', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 177–193.
- GIBSON, WILLIAM (1984) *Neuromancer*, Ace Books, New York.
- GOFFMAN, ERVING (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday and Anchor Books, New York.
- GRAY, MARY (1999) *In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth*, Haworth Press, New York.
- HARAWAY, DONNA (1985) 'A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980's', *Socialist Review*, vol. 80, pp. 65–107.
- HARAWAY, DONNA (1997) *Modest_Witness@Second millennium*, Routledge, New York.
- HARPER, GARY & SCHNEIDER, MARGARET (2003) 'Oppression and discrimination among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and communities: a challenge for community psychology', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 243–252.
- HAUG, FRIGGA (1999) *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*, Verso, New York.
- JAMESON, FREDRIC (1991) *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- JONES, BILLY & HILL, MARJORIE (eds) (2002) *Mental Health Issues in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Communities. Review of Psychiatry Series*, Volume 21, Number 4, American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington, DC.
- KENNEDY, ELIZABETH & DAVIS, MADELINE (1993) *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, Routledge, New York.
- LATOUR, BRUNO (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- LYNCH, LEE (1990) 'Cruising the libraries', in *Lesbian Texts and contexts*, eds Karla Jay & Joanne Glasgow, New York University Press, New York, pp. 37–48.
- MARVIN, CAROLYN (1988) *When Old Technologies Were New*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- MASON, GAIL (2002) *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge*, Routledge, New York.
- MILLER, DANIEL & SLATER, DON (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Berg, Oxford.
- MORAHAN-MARTIN, JANET (2000) 'Women and the Internet: promise and perils', *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, vol. 3, no. 5, pp. 683–691.
- MORTON, DONALD (ed.) (1996) *The Material Queer*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.
- MUNT, SALLY, BASSETT, ELIZABETH & O'RIORDAN, KATE (2002) 'Virtually belonging: risky connectivity and coming out online', *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 125–137.
- NAKAMURA, LISA (2000) "'Where do you want to go today?': Cybernetic tourism, the internet, and transnationality', in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura & Gilbert Rodman, Routledge, New York, pp. 15–26.
- O'BRIEN, JODI (1999) 'Writing in the body: gender (re)production in online interaction', Routledge, New York, pp. 76–104.
- PLANT, SADIE (1997) *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, Doubleday, New York.
- RISTOCK, JANICE & PENNELL, JOAN (1996) *Community Research as Empowerment: Feminist Links, Postmodern Interruptions*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- SEDGWICK, EVE KOSOFKY (1991) 'How to bring your kids up gay', *Social Text*, vol. 29, pp. 18–27.

- SIMKIN, RUTH (1991) 'Lesbians face unique health care problems', *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 145, no. 12, pp. 1620–1623.
- SMITH, DOROTHY (1998) *Writing the Social*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- SMITH, JAMES, & MANCOSKE, RONALD (eds) (1997) *Rural Gays and Lesbians*, Haworth Press, New York.
- SOFIA, ZOE (1999) 'Virtual corporeality: a feminist view', in *Cybersexualities*, ed. Jenny Wolmark, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 55–68.
- STAR, SUSAN LEIGH (1999) 'The ethnography of infrastructure', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 377–391.
- STONE, ALLUCQUERE ROSANNE (1995) *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- SUNDEN, JENNY (2001) 'What happened to difference in cyberspace?: the (re)turn of the she-cyborg', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 215–232.
- TURKLE, SHERRY (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- WAKEFORD, NINA (1996) 'Sexualized bodies in cyberspace', in *Beyond the Book: Theory, Culture, and the Politics of Cyberspace*, eds Warren Chernaik, Marilyn Deegan & Andrew Gibson, Centre for English Studies, University of London, London, pp. 93–104.
- WAKEFORD, NINA (1997) 'Networking women and grrls with information/communication technology', in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, eds Jennifer Terry & Melodie Calvert, Routledge, New York, pp. 51–66.
- WAKEFORD, NINA (1999) 'Gender and the landscapes of computing in an Internet café', in *Virtual Geographies*, eds Mike Crang, Phil Crang & Jon May, Routledge, New York, pp. 178–201.
- WALKERDINE, VALERIE (2001) *Growing Up Girl*, Palgrave, London.
- WESTON, KATH (1998) *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science*, Routledge, New York.
- WINCAPAW, CELESTE (2000) 'The virtual spaces of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 45–59.
- WITTIG, MONIQUE (1994) Conversation with author, 16 April.

Mary Bryson is associate professor of Education (University of British Columbia). She has taught "gender and education," "queer theory," and "new media/cultural studies" courses in Women's Studies, Education, and Lesbian, Gay & Transgender Studies. In 2000, Mary received the Canadian Wired Women's "Pioneer in New Media and Technology" award. Mary is the (co-)author of numerous articles and chapters, as well as a book, *Radical In < ter > ventions: Identity, Politics, and Difference/s in Educational Praxis* (SUNY Press). URLs: <http://www.shecan.com> and <http://www.queerville.ca>. E-mail: mary.bryson@ubc.ca