

Virtually Queer? Homing Devices, Mobility, and Un/Belongings

Mary Bryson
Lori MacIntosh
Sharalyn Jordan
Hui-Ling Lin

University of British Columbia

Abstract: This article counters and complicates decontextualized, celebratory accounts of queer subjects and cyberspace. The authors explore the significance of communicative media for queer women, with a particular focus on the negotiation of complex identifications, communities, social networks, and knowledge practices. Using a critical, sociocultural approach, the authors make illustrative use of interviews conducted in British Columbia and Alberta that are part of an ongoing research project (www.queerville.ca) that situates media practices in the quotidian. The authors' arguments concerning queer virtualities attend to (im)mobilities across multiple offline and online contexts; complex geographies of un/belonging; a paradoxical relation of intense suturing to, and disavowal of, mediation; as well as the problematics of a "politics of recognition" and of "visibility," at work in sites of subjectification and sociality.

Résumé : L'article qui suit renverse et complexifie certaines préconceptions mythes décontextualisés à propos du « queer » et d'Internet. L'enjeu des auteurs est d'explorer ce que signifie la communication médiatisée pour les femmes « queer », en portant une attention particulière à la négociation des identifications complexes, des communautés, des réseaux sociaux, et des pratiques de la connaissance. Via l'approche socioculturelle critique, les auteurs proposent une réflexion éclairante sur des entrevues dirigées en Colombie-Britannique et en Alberta—partie d'un projet de recherche en cours (www.queerville.ca) qui situe les pratiques médiatiques dans le quotidien. Les axes de recherche des auteurs quant au monde virtuel « queer » touchent aux im/mobilités à travers divers contextes hors ligne et en ligne ; aux géographies complexes d'appartenance et de non-appartenance ; à la relation paradoxale d'un point de rencontre intense

Mary Bryson is Associate Professor in Education at the University of British Columbia, ECPS, Faculty of Education, 2125 Main Mall, UBC, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4. E-mail: mary.bryson@ubc.ca. Lori MacIntosh is a doctoral student in Educational Studies in the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. E-mail: lhm@interchange.ubc.ca. Sharalyn Jordan is a doctoral student in Counselling Psychology in the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. E-mail: srjordan@interchange.ubc.ca. Hui-Ling Lin is a doctoral student in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of British Columbia, 1896 East Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1. E-mail: hui lingl@interchange.ubc.ca

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par la médiation et par le refus de la médiation ; autant qu'aux problématiques d'une « politique de reconnaissance » et de « visibilité » au travail dans les lieux de subjectification et de sociabilité.

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It all begins with an insult.

—Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*

We are in an epoch of simultaneity; we are in an epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.

—Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*

Introduction

Mass-media accounts about the significance of the Internet to queer folks (and communities) commonly foreground celebratory and *apparently* uncomplicated narratives that feature members of marginalized communities who find a place online to form communal networks, feel a hard-won sense of belonging, or, at least, locate relevant and appropriate informational resources. A *Time* magazine cover story on “gay teens,” for example, unproblematically recounts that “when University of Pittsburgh freshman Aaron Arnold, 18, decided to reveal his homosexuality at 15, he just Googled ‘coming out,’ which led to myriad advice pages” (Cloud, 2005, p. 37). There is, however, nothing straightforward about the relationship of subaltern sexual identifications and cyberculture.

Queer theoretical accounts of acts and contexts of categorical identification lean heavily on Foucault's (1977, 1980) problematization of an “economy of visibility.” Foucault's method of analytical critique proceeds genealogically as it excavates, and pushes to centre stage, a cultural matrix of power/knowledge relationalities within which access to minoritarian subjectivity is coextensive with the reiteration and incorporation of prescriptive norms. Post-structuralist arguments concerning queer subjectivity likewise make extensive use of Judith Butler's (see especially 1993, 2005) influential work on “performativity.” Butler (1993, p. 187) asseverates that “discourse. . . materialize[s] its effects” and “circumscribe[s] the domain of intelligibility.” In such denaturalizing, dramaturgical accounts of identity and sociality, *seeking to be “recognized as” belonging* to a particular (i.e., identitarian) group, or community, is, then, more adequately to be understood as a complex cultural *mise en scène* that proceeds by means of a set of contingent performative practices within which to “be subjected” is to always-already be imbricated within the discursive economy upon which the very constitution of that subject (or community) depends (see also Joseph, 2002).

Several key thematic preoccupations criss-cross scholarship concerning “queer” and “technoculture,” including an intense focus on the cultural politics, power relations, and radically contingent, and discursively mediated operations

and practices of space, mobility, sociality, consumption, citizenship, and subjectivity. Sheller and Urry's (2006) expansive discussion of the "new mobilities paradigm" provides a strong and insightful argument that social science research needs, itself, to adopt a less "sedentary" approach, and in so doing, to explore *critically* the productive tensions and complexities typically associated with globalization, increasingly convergent and ubiquitous media, and twenty-first-century "liquid modernities" (Bauman, 2000).

This article draws on the first year of interview data in a three-year project that looks at myriad aspects of queer women's engagements with cultural artifacts, including books, television, and the Internet (www.queerville.ca). There is not, yet, a significant body of research on queer women and new media,¹ and this project addresses that gap. Overwhelmingly, the scant research conducted to date² has proceeded by means of critical exegetic analyses of online discourse—postings to online bulletin boards, blogs, and the like. Insights into everyday uses of media is a critical aporia produced by an analytic emphasis on media textualities. Accordingly, we follow a line of thinking from cultural media studies scholars (e.g., Jenkins, 1992; McRobbie, 2005; Probyn, 1995; Radway, 1984; Valentine & Holloway, 2002; Walkerdine, 1997), who emphasize that research needs to eschew technological determinism (or an "effects of media" model) and carefully consider *quotidian uses of popular culture*.

Virtually queer? Identity, community, and the politics of difference

Nina Wakeford (2000, p. 411), in a significant review essay that inquires critically into academic discourse regarding the juxtaposition of Internet and non-normative sexualities coined by the term "cyberqueer," adroitly observes that "[t]he construction of identity is the key thematic that unites almost all cyberqueer studies." Bryson (2005) posits that a discursive logic of mobilization and heterogeneity organizes discussions of "queer" and argues that:

Contemporary accounts of *queer* invariably situate this slippery signifier as designative of a heterogeneous, historically and geographically contingent, contested and performative set of "identity effects" (Butler, 1993). Thus construed, *queer is always-already virtual*. . . "[V]irtually queer" marks the intersection between the performative and "in progress" qualities of queer culture and its manifestations and permutations engendered by networked digital technologies—construed as spaces and artifacts—as important mediative elements in the production of "queer." (p. 85, italics in original)

Jamie Poster's (2002) study of a "lesbian chat room" provides us with a useful elucidation of the complex dynamics of the "encoding and decoding" (Hall, 1980) of identity within the locus of ongoing efforts devoted to the formation and stabilization of virtual community. Poster's analysis of the production and negotiation of "computer-mediated identity" in #LesChat (a lesbian IRC channel) indicates that participation is mediated by a significant set of norms, many of which pertain to the definition of who might count as an eligible interactant (woman + lesbian). Poster's observation of this site indicates that a great deal of time is spent in extensive interrogatory activities where "regulars" determine that newcomers are, in

fact, "women," by means of a series of screening questions. And in the event that a visitor "fails the test," community members deploy extraordinary effort and creativity in "kicking" the interloper from the chatroom. Poster argues that the frequent repetition of the authentication/kicking scenario performs the function of shoring up the members' sense of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) to the extent that "shared local knowledge performatively harvests coherence among people" and reminds those who remain that they belong (Poster, 2002, p. 240).

Poster's research provides an intriguing glimpse of the tricky negotiation of online space that presupposes (one might think, paradoxically) a homogenous grouping of coherent queer female subjects. And although it is critical to affirm the difficulty, innumerable obstacles, and hence, the social and cultural importance for queer women to "take up space," this research leaves unanswered the question of the cost of a "politics of recognition" (Fraser, 2000; Markell, 2003; Taylor, 1994) to the opportunities for participation that remain for those who "pass the test." As Wakeford (2000, p. 413) observes, "There is a disturbing silence on the issue of ability to perform identities once users are in a cyberqueer space. . . . The question might not be 'Are you lesbian?' but 'Are you lesbian enough?' to participate."

Wincapaw's (2000) research on participants in lesbian and bisexual women's e-mail lists provides an important analysis of the limits to identificatory mobility in virtual locations. Respondents to a survey distributed across a variety of queer women's e-lists provided extensive validation for the observation that any community that is organized in relation to an articulation of a marginalized identity that presupposes assumptions of homogeneity will re-inscribe exclusionary practices, even as it also provides a welcome relief from the multiple violences that accrue to members of marginalized sexual and/or gendered subcultures (Mason, 2002). In accounting for the value of participation in same-sex e-mail lists, subscribers emphasized the importance of "safety," "freedom from homophobia," "interaction in a women-only space," and "distance from men." However, respondents whose identificatory practices marked them as "different" in these locations experienced exclusion, non-recognition, and a lack of belonging.

Racism was a significant factor shaping participation in the lists, where White respondents "considered 'race' to be a non-issue" (Wincapaw, 2000, p. 54), while women of colour reported an assumption of ubiquitous White racialization and/or a repudiation of efforts to represent any experience or identification explicitly coded as non-White. Respondents also made it very clear that membership by bisexual women in the lists was intensely problematic. Many lists explicitly excluded bisexual women, whereas others required that bisexual women refrain from discussing men, and in so doing, clearly demanded a form of self-censorship that effectively transformed the performativity of their sexual identification from contextually non-normative to normative. As Wincapaw (p. 54) notes, "The LISTS re-inscribe the often discriminatory and usually intolerant practices of the rest of the world. 'Same shit, different medium!' said one woman who self-identifies as a 'fatdyke.'"

It is clear that access to "narrow bandwidth" (Stone, 1992) sites coded as "lesbian," such as e-mail lists or chatrooms, while providing an important location of relative "safety," also seems to engender hyperbolic performances of identity that

result in exclusion, to the extent that homogeneity of identification is a condition of participation. Studies of online locations as decontextualized from everyday life don't tell us much about the how queer women make use of these spaces as part of quotidian routines, nor do they shed any light on uses of the Internet outside of participation in seemingly dislocated online spaces whose relation to lived geographies is typically not tackled as a significant or interesting research question.

Queer mobilities: Everyday practices of mediatization

In his discussion of "telling experiential stories about cyberspace and everyday life," Bell (2001, p. 31) emphasizes the importance of situating scholarly inquiry concerning the Internet in the realm of the quotidian and stresses the importance of risking the production of research narratives that stress "banality or mundanity." Bell argues that narrativizing everyday usage involves an explicit description of practices as well as an authorial aesthetics that eschews idealization or romanticism. As Wakeford (1998, p. 180) argues:

The concept of cyberspace is suffering from over-excitement, over-exposure and under-precision. . . . The competing definitions of the territory might better be resolved by characterizing cyberspace as a series of specific performances, rather than searching for one underlying totalizing definition (Wakeford, 1995). Focusing on the local practices of those who are constructing spaces in self-proclaimed cyberspaces suggests that a strategy which schematises the variety of spaces and activities may be more useful than continual (de)territorialisation.

Recent research by Rothbauer (2004) on (Canadian) "lesbian and queer women's" reading practices provides us with an interesting example of scholarly inquiry that focuses its analytic lens on the everyday. Rothbauer set out to study the function of reading in the lives of lesbian and queer young women. She was also interested in participants' practices as users of various libraries and related online information networks. An interesting unexpected finding was that despite a high level of information/computer literacy and extensive familiarity with searching for queer cultural materials online, "access to the Internet and previous knowledge of lesbian and gay texts did not result in more satisfactory on-line searching experiences" (p. 93). Participants' searches for queer reading materials frequently failed to produce the desired books because either the texts were not housed in their school or public libraries, or their use of search terms (e.g., "lesbian," "queer") did not correspond with the classificatory systems of the public library system (which uses subject headings such as "homosexuality"). As Rothbauer emphasizes, access to lesbian and queer texts is problematic on multiple levels that are not addressed either by a high level of access to online information networks or by adequate familiarity with conducting online information searches.

While these young lesbian and queer women's online searches were structured, and, as such, constrained by the paucity of available lesbian/queer texts housed in institutionally sanctioned locations (like libraries), it is equally critical to note that the women's opportunities for textual engagement were not wholly determined by an overwhelming and oppressive lack. In fact, participants' Internet searches provided access to a wide array of digital texts, including fan fiction,

comics, and zines—all genres that are, apparently, marginalized in their classification by librarians as “grey literature” (p. 100).

Cultural Studies research on popular culture has prioritized the reframing of engagements by members of subcultural groups with media that are conventionally regarded as debased, non-canonical, and/or insignificant. Henry Jenkins’ (1992) widely cited work on fan groups emphasizes the cultural significance of participants’ mediated practices as well as the inherent sociality of fandom, which he describes as “a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed, of a new culture and a new community” (p. 46). And indeed, Rothbauer notes that participants’ mediated engagements with diverse queer cultural artifacts and locations proved a means for mobility between multiple spaces of sociality where the “discursive logic” (Jenkins, p. 40) of shared interests and intertextuality was concomitantly productive of networked interaction.

Our research is intended to address an “important agenda for queer studies” identified by Cvetkovich (2003, p. 47): namely, to embark on “inquiry into the nuances and idiosyncrasies of how people actually live their sexual and emotional lives.” We ask, “What are the cultural practices and mediative artifacts that mobilize the articulation of provisional non-normative identifications and collectivities?” This is, then, critical, sociocultural research that addresses the significance of artifacts and the production, mediatization, and narrativization of queer women’s relations and sociality, identificatory practices, desires, community participation, access to, and production of, knowledge and social networks. We are anchored by work in media studies that prioritizes for “the archivist of deviance” (Terry, 1991) a preoccupation with the ways in which “people live and negotiate the everyday life of consumer capitalism” and the manner in which people use mass culture in their quotidian practices” (Coombe, 1992, p. 16).

Conjuring the quotidian: Queer accounts of media in the assemblage and negotiation of everyday life

Cultural Studies has the pedagogical task of disentangling the Internet from its given millennial narratives of universality, revolutionary character, radical otherness from social life, and the frontier mythos.

—Jonathan Sterne, in *Doing Internet Research*

Open-ended in-depth interviews concerning artifacts, identifications, and communities were conducted with 63 women who identify as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgendered.” Interviews took place in multiple locations in British Columbia (Vancouver, Steveston, Victoria, Nanaimo, Abbotsford, Prince George, Fort Nelson, Williams Lake) and Alberta (Edmonton, St. Albert, Red Deer, Calgary) that include rural, suburban, northern/remote, and urban areas. British Columbia and Alberta represent two Canadian provinces with distinctly different histories with respect to political climate and the provision of human rights legislation to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Filax, 2004). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 65 and represent a diverse group in terms of S.E.S. and dis/ability. Two of the participants identify as

Aboriginal, two as African-Canadian, five as Asian, and 54 as White. For the initial phase of research we conducted face-to-face interviews. This methodological choice was primarily motivated by a desire to address the absence, in existing research, of queer women's accounts concerning the situatedness of media in the context of everyday life. Our interpretive frame for thinking about interview data is informed by Gail Mason's (2002) landmark study of homophobia, gender, and violence. Mason proposes a genealogical approach wherein interviews provide access to "interpretive repertoires" that index "fields of knowledge" by means of which processes and practices of subjectification are mediated. As Lisa Lowe (1997, p. 33) argues, "Forms of individual and collective narratives are not merely representations disconnected from 'real' political life; nor are these expressions 'transparent' records of histories of struggle. Rather, these forms—life stories, oral histories, histories of community, literature—are crucial media that connect subjects to social relations."

It is critical to acknowledge here, albeit in a very truncated form, irremediable complexities pertinent to critical engagements with the methodology of interviewing. Perhaps of greatest significance, no matter what kind of interview, is that this is a discursive act structured by the problematic obligation to, in the words of Judith Butler (2005), "give an account of oneself." Butler's analysis of the conditions of this linguistic injunction focuses on the necessary relationship between the opacity of the subject to herself and, therefore, of the ethical importance of both singularity and, in prioritizing singularity, the recognition of a relationality that is based not on a politics of recognition, but of a willingness to coexist with the fundamental unknowability of the other. As Butler argues:

Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self identity at all times, and require that others do the same. . . . By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. (2005, p. 42)

We take it as axiomatic that a research interview (a) is enacted in a location of uneven power relations, (b) runs the risk of "reducing meaning to that which can be narrativized" (Frosh, 2001, p. 29), and (c) is circumscribed by the limits of language, and the problematic of re-inscribing the very discourses of subjectification that it seeks to trouble.

This is not an authoritative reading, nor is it in any sense exhaustive or comprehensive. This is also not (yet) a reflexive reading—one that strives explicitly to account for the presence of the interviewer in the text. Our use of interview data in this article is somewhat unorthodox, in that it eschews ethnographic exegesis and proceeds by means of a juxtaposition of theoretical deliberations and interview excerpts. This strategy seems apt, given that the primary function of this article is generatively to configure a theoretical terrain complex enough to be good to think with in relation to the complex set of questions that converge at the intersection of sexuality, alterity, and media practices. It also signals our methodological

alignment with post-positivist research that troubles (Lather & Smithies, 1997) modernist readings of interviews as transparently representational and unproblematically accessible to the technics of hermeneutics. There are many important themes that this particular reading cannot attend to, including geographic location, age, continuities and discontinuities between embodied and online community, extensibility of social networks (Valentine & Holloway, 2002), complexities implicated in the production of gender in ostensibly “same sex” communities and locations, and a whole lot more.

This discussion of the interviews focuses on (a) the mediated construction and re/presentation of complex, sometimes contradictory, and invariably intersectional identifications (such as “fat lesbian living in the sticks,” “queer’n’Asian,” “dis/abled leatherdyke”); (b) mobility and negotiation of communities and social networks; and (c) relationalities, that is to say, embodied and affectively energized engagements with particular places, actors, artifacts, and networks.

Mobility, cultural intelligibility, and mediatic identifications

Virtually queer?

Narratives concerning identificatory practices can be read as awkward try-outs for particular parts in a series of dramaturgical stagings, including reaching out for specific props, costumes, and scripts, juxtaposed against culturally normative accounts of the mediated self as Other (Butler, 1993; Goffman, 1959, 1963; Munt, Bassett, & O’Riordan, 2002). As Clifford (2000, p. 95) notes, “Since the project of identity, whether individual or collective, is rooted in desires and aspirations that cannot be fulfilled, identity movements are open-ended, productive, and fraught with ambivalence.”

It was relatively common for participants to describe daily practices of living as highly mediated by a range of Internet technologies and spaces, and their lives as relatively insulated from any cybercultural “effects” or “affects.” This may seem paradoxical. However, Mazzarella (2004, p. 345) argues, “The cultural politics of globalization, inside and outside the academy, involve a contradictory relation to mediation, on the one hand foregrounding the mediated quality of our lives and on the other hand strenuously disavowing it.” Many of the people we interviewed are imbricated in exactly this juxtaposed relation of intense suturing and simultaneous disavowal with media.

INT: Are you comfortable talking about cyber sex?

Ham: Sure.

INT: So have you ever cybered?

Ham: I have. Okay. How can I word this? I’ve made other women very happy.

INT: How’s that?

Ham: I can’t even remember why I was doing this ’cause I don’t normally cyber. This wasn’t even somebody I was particularly interested in. I don’t even know how it began. But the next thing I know, I’ve got all the *Playboys* out. I’ve got books open at different pages. And I’m just think-

ing, "Okay. This looks good. Seriously. She's loving it. She's loving it." I'm like, okay, I'll just type this. "My fingers are crawling up your leg." Okay. Oh yeah. She seems to like that. I got nothing out of it.

INT: That's hilarious. But it didn't do anything for you.

Ham: Oh no, I'm not into it. I need the physical contact.

INT: Right.

Ham: I need to look into somebody's eyes I know, right. I'm copying crap out of the magazine, how do I know you're not doing the same thing?

(Ham³, dyke, 36, White, Urban Centre, British Columbia)

Participants' descriptions of their varied engagements in the construction and presentation of queer identifications feature mediatic spaces and practices, including Internet communities and locations (e.g., websites with e-mail bulletin boards, chatrooms), books (both fiction and non-fiction), television, movies, community newspapers, and cultural events and sites.

Sam: I had this thing that I secretly called Project 9. I would collect any sort of, like literally any instance of lesbian or mostly lesbian interaction. . . my parents had an editing suite and I would edit them onto these tapes.

INT: Wow.

Sam: So I would cut out, like actually cut out the negative or just like whatever. If there was a lesbian kiss, I would cut out a lesbian kiss, even if it was framed around something kind of really negative. I would actually edit them. So I have like hundreds, I have literally hundreds of hours. Which is crazy. Characters that I suspected were gay, like Rosie O'Donnell before she was gay. Like when she was on the Arsenio Hall show, for instance, I have that clip. I collected k.d. lang. . . I have those clips even before they were sort of gay. Even *Madison*, the stupid lesbian subplot, I edited out everything else other than the lesbian subplot and produced a story. So for me, when the "Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love," like those narratives came out that were explicitly lesbian, and I was like, "Wow," 'cause I was like, you know, reading "The Unlit Lamp. . ."

(Sam, queer, White, 26, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

Becki: Like I was really femme and everything, and I found a real huge denial of my identity just 'cause I didn't look like a lesbian. Now there's a lot more like femmier girls coming out of the woodwork, which is really cool. I don't know if that has something to do with *The L Word*. Although I think it is kind of linked to that.

INT: Do you watch *The L Word*?

Becki: Yeah, shamefully, yes we do.

(Becki, queer, Filipina, 21, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

Participants' narratives of identification are complex and discontinuous accounts in which subjectivities are produced as *moving* projects, both prospective and retrospective—going somewhere and all the while, weighted down by the baggage of a particular history and rootedness in a specific trajectory of locations and chronology.

Shane: I was watching *Ally McBeal* and they had a scene where Ally and Ling Woo kiss and I played that scene over and over again 'cause I recorded it. . . . I was kind of turned on I guess. . . . Yeah and then after that, after I just went on the Internet and looked up articles about "Am I gay?"—that type of thing.

INT: What did you find?

Shane: Not very much at that time. But all my friends were straight, like all my friends at that time. There was a posting for a gathering on blurf.com, and it was at a coffee shop so I went there and met other people. The website wasn't local <Hong Kong>. . .

INT: But the posting was?

Shane: I don't think my friends would just go to a meeting, meeting other Chinese women like, my straight friends.

Shane: It was just for queers in particular.

INT: And was that the first time that you had been in a room with a whole lot of other queer Asian women?

Shane: Yes.

(Shane, Chinese, lesbian, 22, Suburb, British Columbia)

Participants' accounts of self-making do not necessarily or invariably prioritize (homo)sexuality, but rather, entail a series of refusals of specific articulations of gender, racialization, sexual desire, age, and the like and, concomitantly, the taking up, often provisionally, of available non-normative identifications (Weiss, 1999).

TS: I've spent a lot of time thinking about this and talking about this. I'm involved with a group of people in town here and we realize that we all identify first as two-spirited before a woman and before queer or dyke or lesbian.

(TS, Two-Spirited, Aboriginal, Cree, 44, Urban Centre, Northern British Columbia)

Lee: I'm starting to move out of the one <identity> that I've been living with, you know, trans butch dyke but—

Lee: I consider, I am transgendered, which is different than transsexual.

Lee: And nobody gets that.

Lee: It's living between the genders, really, you know. All growing up I didn't really identify with female but I really didn't identify with male.

Whenever I had names for pets or stuffies or anything like that, <they> were always non-gender names and they never had a gender in my world. And I didn't understand that until I got older that that's what I was doing was trying to get rid of gender. I was working with the gender clinic for about a year and knew that if I was getting any services I had to basically lie and the woman I was working with, she kept saying, "Why don't you live between the worlds?" And I said, "Because this world doesn't allow it, you know." And she just kept sort of at that and she was really right, that's really where I do belong. I don't belong as a male and I don't really fit as female. So it's in between the two. Which is a hard concept for people to get. Friends say, you know, good friends of mine who are well versed in a number of trans issues say there's no third gender, you know, you're just a butch dyke, deal with it.

(Lee, trans/dyke, White, 40, Urban Centre, Northern British Columbia)

Weblogs, or "blogs" as they are more commonly known, and "bloggers" are a distinctive subgrouping within the data. In the space of the virtual, blogs are aggregate spaces wherein many elements of online communication and network formation coalesce. Herein, the Habermasian bifurcation of the social world into spaces of interiorized privates and open or exteriorized publics (Dean, 2001) is issued a challenge. As artifacts in the digital landscape, blogs are spaces of liminality where articulations of "self" and perceptions of "community" collide, the lines of so-called public and private no longer manifest, and users no longer "inscribed according to this set of oppositions" (Carroli, 1997, p. 359).

For some users, blogs serve as narrative receptacles for the detailed events of day-to-day existence, documenting the mundane in all of its transformative potential. Narratives are performed in consumable portions for anticipated audiences, be they extant or merely anticipated, adhering to a performative standard that is tightly tied to audience expectation, and, thus the audience's consumptive participation in the blogging process. As Butler (2005, p. 12) argues, "Giving an account. . . takes a narrative form that not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion." One of the participants, Becki, takes up this argument when she states:

Becki: And I guess the way I think about blogs is that if somebody really wanted to know so much about me then go ahead, read my stuff. If you want to spend the hour, like, looking through all of them. . . "feel free," you know. That's why I don't care so much. . . most of my posts [are], like, just public like even everything, but there are some that I do keep to myself, or just to my friends, more personal stuff. . .

(Becki, queer, Filipina, 21, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

The bloggers with whom we have spoken create personal journaling blogs, as opposed to the topical, link-driven, filter blogs. The personal journaling format is unapologetically confessional, a space where the self is carefully and painstakingly constructed and consumed. Julie Rak (2005) convincingly summarizes the

unfulfilled promise of the virtual modernist project in her analysis of blogging culture. Rak argues that while these personal journal-style blogs move beyond the written diary as “a point of translation” from which to circulate articulations of self in a community of seemingly like others, they invariably re/produce and perpetuate a politics of normativity. These articulations are complex, part self-absorbed narrative, part performative iteration demanding witness and interpretation.

Malificent: I really like the way I write. I think I’m funny. And it’s interesting ’cause sometimes I catch stuff that I didn’t mean to write. I don’t know, it’s, I’m really interested in myself and I like reading. It sounds crazy but maybe it is. Well it is, definitely. I’ll go into MySpace, and then I’ll like search for myself as though, like and pretend that like, what if I’m someone else looking for me. I’ll click on me, and then I’ll read the journals, like imagine myself as someone else and what would they think. I don’t know. It’s weird.

(Malificent, queer, White, 21, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

The narrative act of blogging adheres to a performative standard that is tightly tied to audience expectation and thus audience’s consumptive participation in the blogging process. Blogging as a self-productive act is driven by desire and is both a “means” and an “end” to the production of the “*self as*—” (Cohen, 2005). Individuals perform the “truth(s)” of who they are via gender identifications, belief systems, political positionings, et cetera. This “truth” of being requires that others witness and thereby confirm the recognizability of the self’s emergence (Butler, 2005). Yet blogs are not utopic spaces of virtuality where the self can posit an endless number of representations, claiming subjectivities in an online world of free-floating signifiers. For example, when speaking of her blogging male alter ego, Malificent notes the following:

Malificent: He’s really kind of pretentious and philosophical and so I just, I usually go through that and try to. . . . ’Cause it’s a persona and like with my regular profile, the boy is only part of who I am. So this writing might be found in my normal blog, but this is only one aspect of my personality, and all my personality is found in my blog. Well, maybe not all of it but, but just different aspects of it, and so this one is just like if I put it through a filter.

INT: Right. Your boy filter?

Malificent: Yeah.

(Malificent, queer, White, 21, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

Mark Poster (2002) argues that blogs effectively disturb our “[r]eliance on the familiar distinction between the public and the private. . . . fundamentally upsetting the markers of freedom in each domain” (p. 758); however, within this voyeuristic exchange, online bodies remain tied to the normative filters of corporeal embodiment.

Historically, there has been extensive debate about the space of the body in the hybrid landscape of new media. Feminists such as Anne Balsamo (1996) argue that the “phenomenological experience of cyberspace depend[ed] upon and in fact requir[ed] the willful repression of the material body” (p. 123). Others, such as Katherine Hayles (2002), maintain that the body exists in a “dynamic flux” between flesh and machine in a series of posthuman articulations. In keeping with Hayles’ claim of the posthuman space of the body, we want to argue further that within the threshold of the virtual, the body and the public/private trappings of identity come to be most clearly dis/articulated, and that this ataxic subjectivity carries its own liberatory potential.

Object lessons: Homing devices, communities, and un/belongings

Irrespective of age and location, interviewees continued to identify an ongoing relationship both to “the closet” and to pervasive and persistent impacts of homophobia. While unevenly distributed as a function of geography, occupation, and likelihood of being perceived as “queer,” participants’ narratives of sexual subjectivity testify to the cost of the “economy of visibility” within which being recognizable as queer is both necessary and also constitutive of a mark of difference that is a target for violence in its myriad incarnations. Alongside Eve Sedgwick’s (1993) powerful articulation of the epistemic structures that are produced and sustained by homophobia, it is axiomatic that what Ann Cvetkovitch (2003) describes as “insidious trauma” structures the quotidian experiences of those whose queer lives are produced as repudiated subjectivities. As Cvetkovitch observes, “Trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them” (2003, p. 12).

Sam: Even when I’d go back to <Small Town, Ontario>, it was like, because you’re so terrified of being found out, those worlds become sealed. . . I think the story that kept everyone in line in my town was they thought that a guy was gay and they carved FAG in his forehead. And whether that was true or not, that was the narrative that sort of capped everyone.

(Sam, queer, White, 26, Census Metropolitan Area,
British Columbia)

Jeanette: I was living on my own so it didn’t matter to me if my family never talked to me again but Leslie was still living at home and I didn’t want to, you know, ruin her relationship with her parents. We’ve been together for six years now, and lived together for five of those six years, I don’t know why we can’t just be open about it and if you don’t like it you don’t like it, but—

INT: But <Small Town, Alberta> is not necessarily fruit friendly?

Jeanette: No. No.

INT: So at this point do your parents know about your relationship with Leslie?

Leslie: No. There’s been lots of suspicions and I think once or twice I

tried to speak of it but it didn't go over very well, so ...

INT: What happened?

Leslie: Well, I tried to tell my mom and she basically told me that I could never see Jeanette again.

(Jeanette, fruit, White, 24, and Leslie, blind, White, 23,
Small Town, Alberta)

Cultural studies scholarship on queer migration and mobility underscores critical relationships between dis/location and specific articulations of sexual identification and community formation. "Sexuality is indeed on the move," Michael Warner argues, "not just because people are more on the move now than ever, but because non-normative sexualities so generally seem out of place and are so often enabled by the displacement of culture" (in Patton and Sanchez-Eppler, 2000, back cover). The complex imbrication of constitutive processes of crafting a performative self, which is to say, a public self situated in relation both to others and to spatiality, within the web of psychic and material violences that Goffman (1963) referred to as "stigma and the management of spoiled identity" and Eribon (2004) as "the shock of insult" seems intimately implicated in the production of finely tuned practices of mobility and reconnaissance.

Fortier (2001) argues that queer invocations of dialectical tropes of "home"—as sites of both "familiarity" and "estrangement," "attachment" and "loss"—are complexly related to mobility and belonging. Fortier (2001, p. 410, *italics added*) notes that "[q]ueer and diasporic narratives of belonging often deploy '*homing desires*'. . . . The widespread narrative of migration as homecoming within queer culture, establishes an equation between leaving and becoming." Our interest in media practices, then, leads us to consider the figurative, tropic significance of "homing devices" as a necessary and fruitful correlative analytic construct in exploring how it is that "homing desires" are negotiated and re/mediated (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) within and against the limits of spatialized queer imaginaries and varied sociocultural topographies.

Lee: I started using online stuff when I moved up north to <Small Town, Northern British Columbia>. There's not much gay community. I started to look online for community. I needed some sort of connection. I found a Yahoo group called B.C. Dykes. They were going out and meeting down in the Lower Mainland for coffees and for movies and there was a real sense of caring and they tried to include those of us that were outside. Then they were gonna have their first ever gathering on Spinstervale, on the Island. And so I said, "Okay, I'm leaving, I'll see you guys." And I hit the highway and when I get there people had already posted, and there was a little log of my travels all the way down. So here I was completely isolated and I suddenly had a community of queer women. It really did save my ass.

(Lee, trans/dyke, White, 40, Urban Centre, Northern British Columbia)

Participants' movement toward sites of connection was mediated by a wide range

of homing devices, including gaydar, Internet knowledge-searches, e-mail lists, and other “quasi-objects” (Latour, 2004). Efforts to hook up with and/or to locate, and belong to, communities of “like others,” or “target others,” are prominent features in our research interviews.

Kumi: I was on the Internet searching for my bisexual thing. I had come across some like bisexual lesbian bi-curious website and I started talking to one of the other bisexual women in <Urban Centre, Alberta> and we decided, well, we should meet for coffee. And I met her and through her I discovered that there's a bi-women's group.

(Kumi, Japanese, bisexual, 29, Census Metropolitan Area, Alberta)

Sam: For a while I was very interested in large men—very muscular—so I just used the Net to find the largest, buffest guy I could find—to play out any fantasies that might require a man. Depending on the particular whim, yeah, zero in on the specific, and you get pictures of 20 super buff men and you can just choose. It's like shopping. It's great.

(Sam, queer, White, 26, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

Although there is considerable variability across the sample, participants' accounts of participation in “community” are frequently marked by a relation of “un/belonging” and, therefore, of desires that propel further mobility. Our invocation, here, of “un/belonging” signals the complexities of contemporary notions of relationality that involve dialectical rather than binary logics of location, and related implication in affective topographies (Gemeinboeck, 2005; Probyn, 1996). As Smethurst (2002, p. 8) observes, “Unbelonging is not itself a stable condition in the postmodern. . . . While postmodern space and place become fluid, shadowy and mutable, identity, which attempts to map such spaces, is conditioned by dislocation and dispersed belonging.”

Alice: The Internet facilitated those discussions, and those discussions couldn't have happened without these kind of forums. I was talking with people and reading what people had to say. Like when I first heard the word “femme,” I imagined it meant something really specific. I was like, “Oh, you have to wear a dress all the time and you have to be only attracted to butch women.” And then all of a sudden I was meeting all these people who were not fitting into that, and who were like, “No, femme can mean a variety of things. This is what it means to me. This is how it works with a lot of things, a lot of other parts in my identity.” So yeah, it was really important for me. . .

Alice: The community in <Urban Centre, Alberta>, from my perspective, was really closed and really tied to a really particular look, and a really particular setting. Which I can sort of understand, for visibility and recognizability. There's importance to that. The younger women my age, anyway, were kind of like this “baby butch”—short hair and bleached and looking like a skater. They had no place for someone who wore lipstick and didn't want to cut her hair. I tried to, you know, I went to gay bars and that sort of thing, but I would just. . . I got hostile attitude and it was

just like clear that people didn't think that I belonged there. I was just like, "Okay, well, there you go." Being not strictly identified as a dyke or as a lesbian so yeah. . . in <Urban Centre, Alberta>, in particular, that was kind of my saving grace.

(Alice, queer, White, 23, Census Metropolitan Area, Alberta)

Sandra: I haven't been involved with the hearing queer community because of the communication barrier. I've tried, it didn't work out. So then I became involved with the deaf gay and lesbian community, but there's lots of issues within the community. I think one of the reasons is that Alberta is very "red neck" compared to the States, and there's a very, very different perspective there. I go to the States often and so I know the deaf queer community there. So I've got something to compare to and I see a big difference. . . I'm a leather dyke and that's something I'm very proud of. I tend to conform to people's feelings in <Urban Centre, Alberta> and the reason is that they don't really get it. It's, you know, a big issue, it's arguments and I don't want to have to deal with all that stuff. So I don't.

(Sandra, deaf, queer, leather dyke, White, 45, Suburb, Alberta)

Participants described the Internet as an important source of knowledge, cultural engagement, and what Warner (2002) refers to as "counterpublics" *only where it was possible*—by means of blogging, or participation in a focused online community or e-mail list—to *identify a relatively bounded social network made up of similar others* (e.g., Asian queer women, queer folks living with mental health issues, members of the Xenaverse, fat dykes, deaf queers, leather dykes). Community-appropriate health and legal knowledge were ubiquitously very difficult for participants to locate online irrespective of access to sophisticated public knowledge sites, like university library databases.

INT: Do you look for two-spirit resources online?

TS: I've looked for books. I've looked for conferences. . . . There's an organization in Ontario. I haven't found anything. . . I've lost the terminology. You know, when you have a particular site where people go to discuss a particular topic—

INT: Right, like a bulletin board or a chat room or—

TS: I haven't found anything like that for two-spirited but one that I stumbled across is called Fat Dykes and that's been really good. It's a very fat-positive site and as long as you identify as a dyke, you can be a part of the site.

(TS, Two-Spirited, Aboriginal, Cree, 44, Urban Centre, Northern British Columbia)

Within the virtual demarcations of their acknowledged social networks, few White participants chose to identify or to discuss racism as a problematic aspect

of “community.” Conversely, for Aboriginal, Asian, and African-Canadian participants, the intersectional discursive construction of racial identifications offline and online *explicitly* organized and regulated the self-presentation of participants, if they all experienced the following, whose experiences included (but were not, importantly, limited to), marginalization, silencing, and enforced segregation as well as engagement in resistance and the construction of counterpublics (see also Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman, 2000). These interviewees identified “White” as the default, assumed racial identity of online interlocutors.

Shane: I think they would assume that I’m White because from the posts that I made <on SuperDyke.com>, I didn’t say that I was Chinese or Asian. I guess there was one instance where I talked about my red-neck uncle or my cousin’s husband but otherwise I guess they couldn’t figure it out.

INT: So would that make it more appealing to you to go to blur-f.com, or one of the Asian women’s sites?

Shane: Yeah, I think so. I’m more comfortable with other Asians because they speak the same language, or other Chinese I mean, not all Asians.

(Shane, Chinese, lesbian, 22, Suburb, British Columbia)

MoMo: Most websites look to me very race neutral. They don’t have specific Asian content. . . it looks neutral but it’s mostly for Caucasians. . . whenever I go to any so-called queer or gay events, I hardly find any Asian queers and there might be some but they’re not international students. . . I feel there’s a boundary there, although I’m a part of that space but I’m not.

MoMo: At a book reading there was an Asian queer writer, and I volunteered that night. I just walked around and thought, “Okay, if I’m not gonna see any Asian people I’m just going to leave.”. . . She <the writer> said that when she looked around the whole space that there were no Asians, and so when she saw me walk inside the room, she said she felt like there’s a special energy in the room. . . I told her that after her talk, that at that moment, a very short moment, that although we were the only two Asian queers there, I felt a sense of community.

(MoMo, Taiwanese, queer, 29, Census Metropolitan Area, British Columbia)

Postscript

We must not look only at mass-produced objects themselves on the assumption that they bear all of their significance on their surface. . . If we can learn, then, to look at the ways in which various groups appropriate and use the mass-produced art of our culture, I suspect we may well begin to understand that although the ideological power of contemporary cultural forms is enormous, indeed sometimes even frightening, that power is not yet all-pervasive, totally vigilant, or complete. Interstices

still exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are not satisfied by their place within it or by the restricted material and emotional rewards that accompany it.

—Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*

Our discussion has highlighted the complex, multiplicitous trajectories of queer women's (im)mobilities within and across sites that are (a) mediated by a range of technologies, both new and not-so-new, (b) dispersed across multiple offline and online contexts, and (c) affectively charged with persistent agonistic entanglements with the complex politics of recognition, belonging, and a sense of community. Benedict Anderson's (1983) classic analysis of the hypostatized identification of "nationalism" articulates critical links between *communication* and *community* in the immensely generative and politically precarious identitarian sphere of "imagined community."

Communicative practices and artifacts are, in this account, usefully thought of as providing a mediative cultural grammar that plays a constitutive role in the production, in community, of an *imagined recognition of like subjects*. In this view, intelligibility and belonging across pluralistic public spaces are cultural accomplishments enabled by the technologically mediated *semblance* of simultaneity, like-mindedness, and social homogeneity. As Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 32) pithily observes, "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison." "Imagined community" has, since its conceptualization, proven to be a generative and robust construct in contemplating the unavoidable tensions of "cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 32) produced across the varied mobilities (and immobilities) of globalization. Political theory critiques of "community" prove much like critiques of "identity"; that is to say, they are essential analytical tools circumscribed in their explanatory power by the observation that we are unlikely to abandon our desire for belonging, nor our efforts toward recognition (Gamson, 1996; Markell, 2003).

Having considered the ways in which "community" and "identity" are complexly implicated in the production of complex relations of power/knowledge, and a politically problematic politics of recognition, how might we think about the affective charge of identifications that exceeds a rational critique of its fallibilities (Benjamin, 1995)? Hills (2001) argues that Anderson's imagined community construct is "seemingly affectless" and, as such, is mechanistic and incapable of dealing with the affective dimension of relationality. Drawing on object relations theory to analyse identification and sociality in an online fan community, Hills posits that:

[T]he community of imagination therefore acts as a specific defense against the possible "otherness" or even "alien-ness" of the inexplicable intensity and emotionality of fandom. Reassuringly, by going on-line this intense but somehow almost inarticulate fan experience can be endlessly replicated, and the affect involved can be displaced through a circuit of mimesis, such that the self rebounds against its own unspeakable identifications. (p. 155)

Hills' construal of online sociality as constitutive of a "community of imagination" offers an important and relevant corrective to any overly deterministic

account of practices or technologies of subjectification and affiliation. And it is important here to point out that this is not an idealized articulation of “imagination” that might be synonymous with something like “creativity.” In this context, the labour of imagination is dedicated to practices of “serious play” (Turkle, 1995, p. 269) where identificatory relations provide “transitional spaces” (Winnicott, 1993) for the endless work of being and becoming.

“Virtuality”, then, no longer refers to being “somewhere else,” nor to being “online” as a location that could somehow be disentangled from “offline.” A more usefully complex perspective of contemporarily mediated social and cultural geographies conceives of “the virtual” as a series of “contiguous realities” marked by “perforated boundaries” (Gemeinboeck, 2005), that is, as ever-proliferating networked surfaces that destabilize a monolithic cultural syntax of recognizability. For queer women, these re/mediated spaces may open up the identifications lodged in ongoing practices of self-formation and the negotiation of sociality. By way of a Foucauldian “self knowledge,” we are inclined to think about this divaricated negotiative process as “a pedagogy of the self” (Foucault, 1996; 2005). William Haver refers to these “infinitesimal negotiations by which we learn and unlearn the world”—and to which we would add “the self”—as the “*pragma*. . . of the pedagogical” (1997, p. 285). Angela McRobbie (2005), Henry Jenkins (1992), and others (see Bryson & de Castell, 1993, on “queer pedagogy”) have emphasized the cultural affordances and improvisational public pedagogies that lurk in everyday active modes of cultural engagement constituted by practices of archiving, distribution, networking, resignification, appropriation, recoding, and recirculation.

In place of the pleasant foreclosure offered by a finite conclusion, we pause, here, and highlight the need for further discussions that trouble perorations extolling the promises of “queer virtuality” construed unproblematically as utopian incarnation, freedom from the constraints of embodiment, or free-wheeling access to either public space or public knowledge. We look forward to research accounts that work against the seemingly ineluctable rhetorical incitement to reproduce media mythologies (Barthes, 1972; Bryson & de Castell, 1994) that trumpet “new and exciting possibilities.” We favour, by contrast, and against all odds, cautious, critical framings of multiple locations where hybrid subjects negotiate non-foundational particularities—“ex-static subjectivity” (Žižek, 2001). In an “age of digital reproduction,” to harken back to Walter Benjamin’s (1968) cautionary historiography concerning “progress” and “technology,” “*the work of queer*” research might be, then, critically to articulate multiple and complex relationalities between nomadic subjects (Braidotti, 2006), (counter)publics, heterotopic spaces (Foucault, 1986) and artifacts that are always-already problematically lodged within a political economy of consumption and misrecognition. As Foucault (1984, p. 343) noted, “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.”

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Notes

1. Nominalization is not an insignificant aspect of research that deals with minoritarian identifications (Bryson, 2002; Halberstam, 2005). "Queer," in the context of this research, designates a post-foundational troubling of any notion of a stable or essential marker of sexual identification (Jagose, 1996).
2. A reasonably complete list would include Addison & Comstock, 1998; Bryson, 2004; Case, 1996; Correll, 1995; Driver, 2005; Gray, 2004; Munt, Bassett, & O'Riordan, 2002; Nip, 2004; O'Brien, 1999; Jamie Poster, 2002; Wakeford, 1996, 1997, 2000; and Wincapaw, 2000. This list of publications deals primarily with sites identified as "lesbian" (rather than "queer"), and with English-speaking women located in North America, the U.K., and Australia. Nip's project concerns Queer Sisters, a Hong Kong queer women's community and online bulletin board.
3. The bio info that accompanies each transcript quote includes a self-chosen pseudonym, the marker that the speaker uses to signal her particular queer identification, age, race, location, and any other identificatory flag of particular significance to the interviewee. Ellipsis dots indicate an edit, angle brackets an editorial insertion.

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