

Homo-Pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and Representation of Queer Identities on the World Wide Web

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This essay introduces the reader both to the varieties of representations of queers currently available on US Web servers and to the kinds of critical questions that scholars and activists can ask about such representations. As such, the author surveys, summarizes, and analyzes both pertinent Websites and scholarly writing about queer representation, identity, community, and social agency. Ultimately, the author concludes that analyzing queer self-representation on the Web is a significant scholarly undertaking in that it can help us understand better (1) how queers use, represent themselves, and are represented on the Web, and (2) what such representations might mean for our understanding of ourselves, our cultures, and our future both locally and globally.

KEY WORDS: queer representation; World Wide Web (WWW); Internet; identity.

In this introductory essay, I offer a brief survey of the variety and scope of queer self-representation on the World Wide Web. While I must acknowledge that, considering the vast number of queer and queer-friendly sites on the Web, such a survey must necessarily be cursory, I nonetheless think that such surveying prompts a critical reflection on the ways in which queers represent themselves—and each other—in an increasingly trans-national communications medium. As such, I offer this essay as an introductory sampling of the varieties of queer representation available on Web servers in the United States, and I propose in it to undertake the following: (1) an examination and questioning of identity constructions performed for us on such sites, and (2) a querying of the ramifications of such performances—both personally and politically—that is most needed in discussions of queer identity

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and its representation on the Web. The essay, then, is largely speculative, reflective of my own personal odyssey into cyberspace as a queer man. But, in the process of sharing such a journey, I hope to demonstrate that the increasing prevalence of personal homepages and sites with queer emphases and themes offers us a chance to meditate more critically on how queer identities, communities, and social agency are being constructed and deployed by queer individuals coming into contact with one another via the Internet.

POSSIBILITIES OF REPRESENTATION: VARIETIES OF QUEER WEBS

A quick survey of directory documents such as Gayscape or the Queer Ring reveal that many U.S. queer homepages are often quite similar in layout, design, and intent.² First, their writers often mark their pages immediately as gay-friendly with the frequent use of rainbow flags, pink pyramids (triangles), and other symbols generally associated with gays and lesbians. As Gregory Weight (1998) points out, such markers are typical when authors want to declare their cyber turf as gay:

[P]eople on the net often out themselves through verbal or, in this case, written language. This is done most often in one of two ways: people either blatantly mention their homosexuality ("I'm gay") or they mention their "partner," "lover," or, less frequently, "husband" or "wife." However, just as many people, if not more, perform their sexuality through symbolic or visual language, by selecting "obvious" queer images and icons. The rainbow flag and the pink triangle are the two most common symbols . . . (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/closet/index2.html>).

In terms of visibility, such symbols often serve as friendly online welcome mats (or warnings) for the Web surfer.

Second, many of these homo-pages replicate an essentialist understanding of gay identity, which narrates gayness as the core and relatively unchanging component of selfhood around which all of the other "plots" of one's life are organized and come (*contextually*) into meaning. A link to a "coming out" story is generally present—which makes sense, for according to Plummer (1995), an essentialist understanding of the gay self usually finds expression in "coming out" narratives that testify to the discovery of "truth" about oneself (p. 83). Further many homo-pages' use of hypertext reflects and reinforces the narration of a core gay identity by using a main menu page highlighting a series of links that circle around the presentation of a core gay identity, narrated mono-vocally. In other words,

²It should be noted that it is a common place of the ever-shifting and even transitory nature of the Internet and the World Wide Web that homepages and Websites available at the time of the writing of this essay (as well as any essay in this journal) may not be available upon publication. If you have questions about the validity of material cited and/or critiqued, please feel free to direct questions and comments to individual authors.

while links often abound, they usually link back to narrating the Web author's identity as primarily and essentially gay.

As a primary example, we can take a look at Jason's Rainbow World (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/7009/>), which presents most of the key characteristics shared by homo-pages. Jason's Main Entrance page announces his author's gayness with rainbow motifs in titles and graphics and with a link to www.mattshepard.org. And, if these did not clue you in to the author's sexual orientation, then Jason's dedication says it all: "This web site is proudly dedicated to Jason's beautiful boyfriend Scot."

Generally, the homo-page's rainbow-colored Welcome or Entrance Page leads to a Main Menu Page which hypertextually links the reader to a series of sites, often written by the same author, revolving around the opening gay theme. Jason's page holds to this pattern, and once we enter his site, we find a typical series of links: About Jason, Galleries, Coming Out, Rainbow Life, Resources, Links, Safe Sex (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/7009/index2.html>). You can also link to Jason's guest book (in which you can leave a message), as well as to another site to make personal contacts.

What story of gay identity is narrated here? First, in terms of pictures and content, the emphasis is decidedly homo-*sexual*; you can gaze at pictures, learn safer sex techniques, and possibly even find a partner. Second, you can read others' coming out experiences, all of which follow the patterns identified by Ken Plummer (1995).³ Often the repetition of the stories, as Plummer suggests, creates a commonality of experience—and community; you know you are not alone. Indeed, the importance of these stories finds expression in Jason's concluding comments:

Thank you to all of the wonderful people above for submitting your experiences for me to include on this page. I'm extremely proud of each of you for taking the time to share your experiences with us. You are extremely special to me, and to many others I am sure. I wish you all the very best with your future plans and experiences (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/7009/OutMain.html>).⁴

The sharing of stories engenders pride and affection—even pathos—among people who probably do not and will not know each other face to face; yet, for Jason, they are nonetheless "extremely special."

Many other homo-pages follow suit, with similar material, similarly laid out. Significant differences among homo-pages only really begin to surface when

³To wit, as Plummer suggests: a young gay person discovers his/her difference, or the "truth" about him/herself at an early age, struggles with telling close friends and family, finds various levels of acceptance and rejection, accommodates accordingly, and learns to love his/her life.

⁴Further, Jason provides "24 Coming Out Tips" (which he copied from *XY* magazine), so your coming out experience can also lead to the kinds of ultimately positive experiences detailed in the stories; in a sense, the tips are narrative guides for telling your own story, shared from person to person, across the hypertextual medium.

contrasting men's pages with those written by women. For instance, "bent" (<http://www.angelfire.com/me/bentgrrrl/>) is

bentgrrrl's contribution to the pollution of cyberspace. bentgrrrl is a dyke, feminist, and lives in the land downunder. Site contains plenty of dyke, queer and womyn's stuff, links, bent quotes, grrrl quotes, film and book reviews, chat and extra stuff (<http://www.jwpublishing.com/gayscape/comout04.html>).

The dyke, feminist, and "womyn's stuff," plus the film and book reviews, promise a change of pace from the men's sites, but, upon clicking the link to her site, the Web surfer confronts much the same rainbow pride, gay markers, and—leading the page in large, eye-catching print—a queer affirmation: "Heterosexuality isn't normal, just common. . . . [I]f I have to explain it, you won't understand"—with this text tellingly wrapped around a rainbow flag.

Granted, bent's opening line is a bit more confrontational, and even political, than many of the guy's pages. Further, when you look under her menu heading "queer," for instance, you see a link to "Heterosexual Privilege: So what is it you gays are complaining about?," which details some socio-political thoughts on heteronormativity—a queer theoretical link we do not find on many of the men's pages. But this bit of political theorizing, though, is surrounded by almost exactly the same kinds of links to pages you would find on a typical gay man's homepage, including coming out stories and "The wit and wisdom of queers through the ages . . ." (<http://www.angelfire.com/me/bentgrrrl/queer.html>).

In general, the women's pages have fewer galleries than the men's pages, and some, such as bent's, will also be more politically inclined, including discussions of feminist activism, as well as links to sites with substantial feminist (but not necessarily lesbian) content. Such differences suggest a slightly broader range of identifications, which is to be expected since many lesbians often find their self-articulation in both lesbian and feminist thought. But, all in all, the kind and quality of *gay* emphasis, as it is rendered *hypertextually*, remains fairly constant throughout; links double-back on each other to create a circuit revolving around the primacy of a gay identity. Once that identity is marked symbolically the content you can link to maintains the performance of gayness.

Curiously, some homepages by transgendered individuals offer similar content and design. For instance, "A Gay FTM Home" (<http://members.tripod.com/~philkirk/index.html>) presents the surfer with a rainbow graphic of the United States and a seemingly apologetic caption: "ok . . . ok . . . so it's a transfag page." The next message continues the defensive tone with a warning:

This site is designed for transgendered individuals and their families. It is especially designed for Gay FTMs. Those who after the transition will be gay men. If you do not approve of this lifestyle—Hit back on your browser and you will be sent back to where you came from.

With such a message, oddly reminiscent of warnings found on entry ways to pages with pornographic content, one wonders how many times this individual has been

“flamed,” or sent harassing email messages. Whatever the reason for its existence, though, it establishes a clear boundary between the outside and the inside of the site. Once inside, we are told immediately that:

I am a gay FTM (Female to Male)... After spending years thinking that I could not be a man because I sexually preferred men, I ran into several FTM pages. At 38, I finally realized that gender id has nothing to do with sexual preference. I also realized that nothing made me this way I was born this way. For as long as I can remember I have been a boy or a man and ever since sexuality emerged I have been gay. I am a gay man. At this time I am in the process of transitioning to look like what I really am [sic] (<http://members.tripod.com/~philkirk/front.html>).

The author emphasizes the essential nature, not just of his sexuality but of his gender identity, even though “gender id has nothing to do with sexual preference.” Curiously, he suggests that his encounter with “several FTM pages” on the Web has prompted him to transform his body to “look like what I really am.” In a way, one could argue that the diversity of information—and personal stories told—on the Internet has enabled this individual’s transsexuality. What is most curious to me is that the wealth and *diversity* of information he must of have seen has resulted in a *reification* of sexual orientation and gender essentialism. Indeed, this individual is crossing our culture’s gender divide, but only to reassert the primacy of a perceived core gender.

The prevalence of multiple, similar homo-pages has drawn some fire from other members of the larger queer Internet community. For instance, the queer author of “Planet Soma” (<http://www.planetsoma.com/>) is often inventive—and biting—in his critique of gay identity. For April Fool’s Day 1999, the author set up a temporary Welcome page that parodied, with extreme hyperbole, the typical homo-page. For a few days, “Planet Soma” became “The GAYEST planet in the GAY Solar System!!!”—replete with affirmative slogans (“Celebrate, Don’t Denigrate!”) and an irritatingly assertive and graphically gaudy rainbow motif. Part of the page’s mimicry—and implicit critique—involved referencing everything in and around an easily identifiable gay identity, marked with bright rainbow colors and the kinds of links typically found on a homo-page. For example, the following statements, with corresponding hypertext links, piled on top of each other as the viewer read down the page:

- I’ve realized lately that I should take more seriously my status as a role model and a spokesman for the GAY COMMUNITY. According to my email, I should “set a good example” for all GAY PEOPLE. Here’s how I plan to do it!
- The GAYEST Links on the Web
- Check out these links to our GAY COMMUNITY. Each of them tells you a little more about the GAY CULTURE and GAY PRIDE I live for.
- About My GAY Life

- Find out about some of the GAY things which make my GAY life worth living!
- San Francisco The GAYEST place on earth!
- Send me GAY-MALE!
- You're the 337,326th GAY visitor since 2 March 1996.

In its exaggeration of the typical homo-page, this faux "Planet Soma" captures the basic homo-page organizational structure—and story: the centrality of one's gayness to all aspects of the Web author's life.

What is the purpose of such parody? In a way, the hyperbolic mimicry of "Planet Soma's" April Fool's page allows this Web author to critique the pressures he's felt to "affirm" gay life by a community looking for affirmative role models—or, put another way, a community looking for its own story to be replicated again and again on the WWW. With that affirmation, though, comes the imposition of boundaries, including some unfortunate bigotries within the gay community itself; you can "gay male" Soma, but "No fats, femmes, fish, or trolls, please!"—a biting reminder that in-group membership status within the gay male community often comes at a certain price, extracted on the body of those seeking inclusion.

This page starkly contrasts with the "old" Planet Soma site, whose Welcome Page is a slick and sleek portal to the Web author's life, which is narrated in often graphically interesting hypertext, including embedded links in narration. The pages interweave Soma's queerness as part of an ongoing narrative thread, not a central organizing plot item; you can link to pages on West Coast cities and *The Simpsons* as easily as to pages with substantial queer content. No need for a rainbow flag or a pink triangle; in fact, as we can tell from the critique of the April Fool's page, such symbology would not be welcome here.⁵

Critics have also taken notice of the similarities of many homo-pages. In his two online essays, "Closetspace in Cyberspace" (1998) (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/closet/index.html>) and "queer wide web?" (1999) (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/queer/index.html>), Gregory Weight (1999) asks how "queer" the Web truly is from a queer theoretical perspective that privileges the constructedness and fluidity of identity over static essentialism. On one hand, he suggests that "the homeless and nomadic desire of queer theory seems suited to use the Web as a stage for all of its varied performances." On the other hand, however, he concludes that most queer Web sites "are not very queer at all," primarily because of their use of "fixed symbols, systems, and identities" in their representation of queer lives, as well as their similarity to "straight"

⁵Certainly, part of the de-emphasis of gay identity markers stems from a *queer* critique—and David very much orients his site around that critique; in fact, this site epitomizes, down to a mention of the book *Anti-Gay*, the "queer revolt" against "gay."

homepages in design and form (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/queer/left.html>).⁶

Weight also, however offers the following qualification:

[I would not] say that the current content of queer Web pages is not valuable or valid, but what has emerged on the Web are pages which conform to a particular concept of what one should put on a Web page (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/queer/content1.html>).

And that conformity is telling—and politically significant. Writing about sexual stories in general, Ken Plummer (1995) suggests that “Stories are often, if not usually, conservative and preservative—tapping into [a] dominant worldview” (p. 178). And the conservatism of such stories may be bolstered by the chaotic postmodern flux of our age; Plummer explains that:

At both millennium and century’s end, when a strong sense of massive and rapid social change is in the air, stories take on a crucial symbolic role—uniting groups against common enemies, establishing new concerns, mapping the social order to come. Stories mark out identities; identities mark out differences; differences define “the other”; and “the other” helps structure the moral life of culture, group and individual (p. 178).

Weight (1998) offers a slightly different critique, suggesting that the relatively small number of markers of gay identity may delimit the ways in which people can perform the stories of their sexual identities on the Web:

[To] attain the freedom of being out of the closet, the queer subject has to perform certain symbolic and verbal acts which are recognized and codified by both heterosexuals and homosexuals. . . . Unlike the real world closet, the Web closet can be a relatively unconscious act: the choice of a lesbian not putting a rainbow flag on her Web site may just be based on Web style; however, because of the stylistics of queer identity on the Web, this inaction puts that woman in the closet on the Web (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/closet/index2.html>).

With so few ways to perform one’s queerness online, the use of such markers might assume priority in the minds of many Web authors, especially if their intent is to avoid appearing—or *being*—closeted on the Web.

Exceptions, of course, always abound on turf as diverse and changing as the World Wide Web. For instance, CUMPOST: A Radical Faerie Site (www.interlog.com/~matt634/cpost.html), may reify an essentialist understanding of homosexuality, but the site’s recontextualization of it as “faerie” points to different ways of thinking—both personally and politically—about sexuality. Other Web authors intentionally forgo more “traditional” markers of gay identity (pink triangles, rainbow flags), but, nonetheless, clearly mark themselves as gay or queer in their

⁶To encourage alternative—and, as they see it, substantive—queer site design, Sneerzine has started its own Web Ring, *Queers by Design* (<http://www.sneerzine.com/qbd/>). Subtitled “a webring for queers with content,” this Ring aims to “eliminate ‘pink trash’ from the ‘net’ ” and “set a standard in web design” (<http://www.sneerzine.com/qbd/about.html>).

content, such as Planet Soma. And still others experiment more daringly with hypertext to narrate more complex, polyvocal, and challenging representations of gay identity, with some setting themselves up in contradistinction—if not outright antipathy—to the plethora of gay sites linked via The Queer Ring and Gayscape.

Such sites parallel the recent movement from articulating queer experience via traditional “coming out” stories to crafting more experimental narrations of queer lives. As Ken Plummer (1995) suggests, the postmodern world has called for and enabled different kinds of sexual and identity stories, many of which diverge from and even contradict the older “modernist” stories, such as “coming out” stories. The newer stories are often less linear, less revelatory of a “truth” about one’s sexuality, and even less clearly identified or concerned with articulating specific identity “modes,” such as “gay” or “lesbian” as opposed to “straight.” Further, these stories often problematize traditional assimilationist (and heteronormative) figurings of sexuality and sexual orientation as part of one’s private, as opposed to public, life. In essence, these newer stories query and resist the standard older “genres” of gay sexual story telling that narrate an individual “coming out” into awareness, acceptance, and identity as a gay person. As Plummer (1995) puts it:

Identity stories at century’s end—like all other stories—move in many directions. Asking the basic questions of who we are—our sense of boundary, of difference, of destiny—some stories move in very bleak directions: with portrayals of the future in which identities become manipulative, pure pastiche, narcissistic, even nonexistent. But equally come stories in which new identities take us beyond the limiting categories of the past, and start forming identities which are forged around relationships and conscious choices over the life one wishes to live and who one wishes to be (p. 160).

And indeed, some queer sites are often daring in their use of hypertext and Internet technology, taking advantage of the possibilities of the Web to cross boundaries and query old modes and genres of gay self narration.

For instance, upon entering Justin’s site, a trans person’s page (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/8305/index.htm>), the contrast in site design is obvious. There are no pink triangles or rainbow color schemes, and there is no main menu list to direct you to coming out stories or picture galleries. Instead, Justin provides a short narrative, which freely rambles about his various interests and pursuits, not all of which revolve around his trans or queer identity. In fact, it is not evident that this is a trans individual’s page until you scroll down to the “Short Bio” section, which tells you that:

Like anybody else, I have obsessions that fade into the normal pattern of my life. My life as a transgendered person has just begun, so I’m learning a lot about it as quickly as I can, making new connections, and talking about it a lot. But I do have a life. Really. I’m putting up more pages here that relate to my other interests: technical writing (my career), singing (my usual obsession), web design (I’m a geek, okay?!), queer theory (I’m not an academic, but I play one on the web), and writing poetry and short fiction [sic] (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/8305/index.htm>).

The opening normalization is interestingly “queered” by the list of specific “obsessions,” which reveals that Justin will on occasion, in the deployment of a cyberspace identity, perform the subject position “queer theorist.” But among his listed “obsessions,” queer theory takes a definite back seat to his computer and technology interests.

Also, embedded throughout the opening narrative are links that allow you to pursue more specific areas of interest at will—and again, only a few of the links take you to substantial queer or trans content. For the most part, Justin has mixed his various interests (ranging from literature to technology to music) in and around his queer identity, such that no one aspect of his self narration can take precedence over another. And even when we click on the link to “queer theory” and see a small resurgence of the rainbow motif, it is relatively understated and interestingly coupled with feminism—a linkage more reminiscent of the lesbian pages and mostly absent on the male homo-pages. In fact, as we look down, we see that Justin is interested in cultural studies and postmodernism in general—not just queer theory. He even links to my “Hypertext and Queer Theory,” calling my paper “neat” (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/8305/queerfem.htm>). Keep in mind, though, that this is only *one* page of several that links off of Justin’s Main or Welcome Page. His online journal also “outs” his queer lifestyle, but a “queer identity” is clearly not the focal narrative point on this set of Webpages.

Some might construe this format as a pseudo-closeting gesture or a self-ghettoizing maneuver, since the queer material seems cordoned off to one linked page. But since you can access Justin’s queer interests from the Main page, which outs Justin as transgendered, it seems unlikely that he is closeting himself. Further, almost all of the pages, such as the links to “Writing” and “Resume,” contain queer content; for instance, when we look at his resume, we see queer references, such as a link to the “Rainbow Coalition Against Domestic Violence” page—a particularly significant inclusion since a resume is, in a way, the “outline” of one’s professional life story (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/8305/resume/resume.htm>). Indeed, while the focus of Justin’s pages ultimately seems to be on technical writing, Web design, and even hypertext theory, his queer identity is woven in and around his work identity—all in a page simply titled “Justin’s.” His queerness is not viewed as a separate identity, but just one of a set of “obsessions” or interests comprising, and constructing, Justin’s multifaceted life; as he says, “I do have a life. Really.”

Another popular site, RexCam (often spelled “reX.cam”) (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/index2.html>), serves as both the homepage for Rex and for his “cams,” which provide images, updated every 30 seconds, taken at Rex’s home and work. The layout of the site demonstrates high design values, which should not be surprising since we quickly learn that Rex teaches Web design and works for MacIntosh. The attractive Welcome page does have a main menu, but from it you link to numerous text and graphic sites within the Rex cluster—almost all of

which provide narratives with embedded links. Rainbow flags and pink triangles are conspicuously absent, and little exists to identify this as the homepage of a gay man, except perhaps for the advertisement for a gay-themed CD at the bottom of the opening page. Indeed, we only discover Rex's sexual interests once we delve into his FAQs ("frequently asked questions"), his "slambook" (a message board to which you can post comments and questions), or his "rambles" (a pseudo-journal). Even so, at no point does Rex technically tell us his coming out story; it is as though he assumes that no one will be problematized in the least by him or his various erotic interests, which are told almost as footnotes or asides in the "rambles": Rex sees a cute guy—yeah! Rex fights with his boyfriend—yuck! Throughout, then, the relative lack of gay or queer emphasis allows us to read Rex's sexual interests as just another part of his life.

One unique feature to Rex's site is the presence of the RexCam, which replaces the typical gay gallery.⁷ Instead of the sleek, glossy, and hyper-idealized pictures of the galleries, Rex invites us to see his day-to-day life, which usually consists of Rex sitting in front of his computer staring at the screen. At other times, he's watching TV. Occasionally, you might catch Rex engaging in more "graphic" pursuits, as he explains in his FAQs:

Although that may or may not be cool with you . . . i must stress that since this is a peek into my life and i dont script this out there may be some "adult content" . . . hey! . . . it's also a peek in my house . . . sometimes i wear my underwear around . . . and sometimes i pick my nose and sometimes i . . . ummm . . . well . . . NO KIDS allowed . . . !!! ok?.there's lot of cool content in reX.s world they can look at though . . . so i default my splash page to that . . . notice the warning? . . . thanks . . . (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/faqs/index.html>).

Rex offers the opportunity for us to see his life, but not necessarily just his *gay* life. His comment, "i dont script this," is revealing about the kind of queer story he wants to tell: if you see some queer "content," then that is just part of Rex's life; if not, then that *too* is part of Rex's life.

In fact, Rex's rationale for putting up his pages with cams speaks to an interesting critique of other digitalized gays and their homo-pages. In response to the question, "why the reX.cam?" he replies:

Basically a peek into my life . . . personal . . . work . . . and interests. . . The rexcam gives the visitors of reX.s world the chance to see that there is a person behind webpages. I really dug the William Gibson books . . . think we are in the primitive ages right now though . . . will be very interesting to see how this all develops (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/faqs/index.html>).

Rex suggests that the virtuality of Webpages, and the stories they tell about people's lives, can actually eclipse the reality of the individuals writing them. Besides referencing the remove of any mediated reality from the reality it is mediating,

⁷The use of such cams is becoming more and more frequent on the Web, and several "pay sites" (for which you have to pay an entrance fee) allow the viewer to watch both men and women, sometimes in their own homes, performing a wide-range of activities, from doing laundry to having sex. In a sense, Webcams are the Internet's cross between *Candid Camera* and *The Truman Show*. For more on gays and Webcams, see Donald Snyder's article in this issue.

Rex is also suggesting that Webpages can be reductive (“primitive”) in their representation. It is exactly this kind of reductiveness that Rex wants to avoid, and he uses his site’s design and layout to do so. For instance, commenting about the various responses to his Webcam, Rex says:

some of the first emails i get are . . . “nice bod” or “show me” . . . then the second emails from them are “i love your sites’s design” or “I have catts too” . . . The motivation has changed . . . I enjoy that . . . being able to change motivations with designs . . . that is a big challenge . . . (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/faqs/index.html>).

Initially, viewers respond to Rex’s live pictures in much the same way they would to the gay male picture galleries on many homo-pages—in passive appreciation of the “views” offered. But then, according to Rex, comments about the site design—and about Rex’s day-to-day life—replace them. And, apparently, that’s part of Rex’s intent; as he says, “I want the viewer to get to know me . . . not what I do with my body . . .” (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/faqs/index.html>). In a way, Rex’s “Webcam as gallery” subverts the typical function of such galleries, which only offer a one-dimensional view of a “gay” body; the *Webcam*, however, allows a more multidimensional image of Rex to develop, both on our screens and in our minds, resulting in an neat deconstruction: Rex lets us take a peek at his body so he can undermine our interest in it. In a sense, then, sites such as Rex’s, which move beyond hypertext to hypermedia, might offer both more diverse and more complex self-representations.

Additionally, Rex claims that his chat room performs a similar function, increasing interactivity *and* troubling attempts to reduce his performance of himself on his homepage as just another static or one-dimensional representation:

interactivity with webpages . . . i can talk with the folks visiting me . . . and they can talk with me . . . I can get the general comments about my page from here . . . It’s funny cause most people will come to my page looking for “skin” . . . after awhile the motivations can change . . . they discover my gallery . . . with myscrapbook . . . or find out that I have a lot of webpages out there . . . they discover that there is more than just showing off a little booty . . . (heh! . . . which mine is small! true!) . . . it’s not about showing off or performing it’s about taking a peek into my life . . . (<http://209.176.166.59/rexcam/faqs/index.html>).

Rex uses all of his various hypertext links to craft a life story that moves the viewer beyond a uni-directional understanding of Rex as “gay” into a more complex, multifaceted, and even polyvocal collage of a life, especially as others are invited to contribute to the chat room and message board, to which Rex always responds.

If anything, by leading an actual life on the Web, Rex seems to strive to collapse the boundary between, on one hand, a “performance” of a gay life on his Web page and, on the other hand, the realities of day-to-day living; and, in the process, he indirectly “queeries” the various Web “performances” of gay lives on the homo-pages by showing up the univocality of the story they tell about gay identity. Indeed, the most striking feature of this site, its layout, reflects—and enables—a radical shift in the story about queers told here. Rainbows and

triangles, markers of queer identity, disappear in favor of a sleeker layout that emphasizes interactivity. In a way, this promotes a more active engagement with the (hyper)text, as opposed to the rather passive mode prompted by other sites, where you look and read more frequently, only to return again and again to the main menu. Further, since the various uses of hypertext allow for greater interactivity, the boundaries between Web author and Web reader are crossed and recrossed, along with the boundaries between the personal and public. You do not have to replicate your story here, or find narrative tips for crafting it to reflect the “truth” revealed in coming out; instead, you are invited to join your voice with others collaboratively in telling a multifaceted and multivocal life story/ies.

Taken together, Justin’s and Rex’s homepages tell a different *meta*-story about queer life. These homepages—among others like them—emphasize crossing boundaries, questioning identities, and exploring the queer as it permeates, but does not *center*, one’s life. And in recognizing and celebrating this multiplicity of self, this diversity of selves within the self, such sites seem to enact the nearly utopian dreams of “cyborg theory.” In one of the now classic, early studies of identity representation on the Internet, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle (1995) provides interesting analyses of the use of computer networks to explore gender, gender differences, and gender-swapping. Turkle concludes that computer technologies might call forth “Multiple viewpoints . . . [that] call forth a new moral discourse. . . . The culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (p. 168). In this way, Turkle picks up on the rhetoric of cyborg theory already made famous by Donna Haraway (1991) in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. In this book, Haraway unpacks her notion of the “knowing self,” which is “partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (p. 193).⁸ For Haraway, the image of the cyborg, which straddles the line between the human and the machine, is just such a “knowing self” in that it recognizes—and *uses*—its multiplicity of identities to create new modes of being and knowing unbounded by older, more static and constraining forms of identity. The use of the cyborg imagery also underscores how our new communications technologies might foster this meeting of “human” and “machine” to redirect our attention to the uses of multiplicity and, in Turkle’s terms, our concomitant “flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy [that] comes from having access to our many selves.”

⁸See “(Re)-fashioning the Techno-Erotic Woman: Gender and Textuality in the Cybercultural Matrix” by Dawn Dietrich (1998) for an unpacking of Haraway’s claims for cyborg resistances and revolutions, clustered around and permeated with feminist considerations, critiques, issues, and investments.

And for Haraway (1995), imagery such as that of the knowing cyborg, fantastic as it may be, is ineluctably political; as she puts it in “Fractured Identities,” “It is important to note that the effort to construct revolutionary standpoints, epistemologies as achievements of people committed to changing the world, has been part of the process of showing the limits of identification” (p. 96). As an example, we can take Shannon McRae’s (1996) discussion of gender swapping in MOOs and MUDs in her essay “Flesh Made Word: Sex, Text, and the Virtual Body”:

If boys can be girls and straights can be queers and dykes can be fags and two lesbians lovers can turn out to both be men in real life, then “straight” or “queer,” “male” or “female” become unreliable as markers of identity. It is not so much that gender roles or sexual preferences actually change as that cross-gender role play troubles the link between gender and desire, from which we, usually unquestioningly construct our identities as sexual beings. Gender becomes a verb, not a noun, a position to occupy rather than a fixed role. In many cases, gender becomes the effect that one individual can have upon another (pp. 79–80).

That “troubling” of the link between “gender and desire” feeds directly back into the queer theoretical critique, which, borrowing from postmodern identity theories, reveals the constructed nature of all sexual orientation identity categories, with the overt political aim of destabilizing reifying notions of “naturalness” for heterosexual subject positions.⁹

Speaking in more global terms in *Global Literacies and the World Wide Web*, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (2000) see in this play of identities the development of new literacies of self. In their “Conclusion: Inventing Postmodern Identities: Hybrid and Transgressive Literacy Practices on the Web,” the authors discuss the impact of globalization on the Web, commenting on how such globalization offers shifting sources of identity construction, resulting in changing identities and changing literacies to describe and represent those identities. They maintain that “. . . individuals who use the Web are multiply defined . . .” (p. 287), and that we can view the Web as a site of changing understandings of both literacy and identity—with both personal *and* political ramifications:

In this electronic environment of rapid and disturbing social change where conventional social formations and institutions are being deconstructed, personal and group identity—as expressed through language and literacy practices—is, in [Manual] Castells’ words, “fast becoming the main, and sometimes the only source of meaning. . . . People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of who they are, or believe they are” (Castells, 1996, p. 3), and they define their primary identities in their everyday literate practices within the networked society (p. 279).

The deconstruction of “conventional social formation and institutions” and the emphasis on “personal and group identity” brings with it new possibilities for

⁹For more on this, see my (1998) “Hypertext and Queer Theory”; Wakeford’s (1997) critique of the potentially adverse dominance of queer theory in cyberqueer studies; and Morton’s (1996) Marxist critique of the seemingly queer theoretical absorption of gay cyberspace studies as an opportunity for further ahistorical, postmodern, ludic play.

political coalition; summarizing Haraway, Hawisher and Selfe (2000) suggest that “geopolitical identities no longer satisfy in a world where we must act not out of ‘natural identification’ . . . but only out ‘of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship’” (p. 280).

POSSIBILITIES OF CRITIQUE

These, at least, are some of the *hopes* and *possibilities* offered by Web technologies, but it is worth asking exactly what kinds of coalitions, affinities, and political kinships are being created by and for queers on the Internet and the Web—and if such are politically productive. When we ask these questions of the queer sites we’ve just examined, we find some troubling answers. In general, homo-pages provide a wealth of information, including support and advice, for those just coming out—and for those who need to be reminded that they are not alone in the world. But, as some representations are put forward, others are left behind and critical silences are created—silences that reveal assumptions, values, and omissions that call for interrogation. For instance, discussion of the intersections between personal and professional life are all but nonexistent; Web searching can affirm and reaffirm one’s gayness, and you can even find encouragement to come out, but the self narration of the homo-pages rarely thinks about how the boundaries between personal gay identity and public professional identity can be negotiated, crossed, troubled, or even integrated. In many ways, this may speak to the relative privilege of the site’s owners and authors, who have to be able to afford both access to the Internet and time to create their pages; as such, many of them may be privileged enough not to have to query the connections between personal and public identities. Conversely, however, we should keep in mind that many others may just as well put up their personal home-pages as one of the few, perhaps *only* venues in which they feel safe enough to express thoughts about their sexuality. Further study is needed along these lines.

Moreover, fairly static boundaries between straight/gay, male/female, and public/personal are often reinforced through these pages. For instance, bisexuality sometimes garners a mention, but is seldom explored on the homo-pages, and, in directory documents such as Gayscape (<http://www.gayscape.com/>), bisexuality is usually separated out into its own category (<http://www.jwpublishing.com/gayscape/bs.html>). Further, other alternative kinds of sexual practices and identities are generally fetishized and fixed into their own category with corresponding (and seemingly separate and ghettoized) Webring, such as the Gay S/M Ring, the Gay Bowlers Ring, or the Lesbian Feminist Ring. Granted, a gay man searching the Web may not feel that “Portland Lesbian Avengers” is necessarily his cup of tea, but the captions announcing content specific to men or women would not encourage his interest; instead, they reify boundaries between lesbian

and gay—not to mention the division between gay and straight. Indeed, there are few pages about straights here, not even supportive straights, beyond sites such as PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) at <<http://www.pflag.org/>>.

Because of such trends, the question of ghettoization on the Net has drawn some critical commentary. In “Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction,” Jodi O’Brien (1996) asks, “Is there considerable crossover [between queer/straight spaces and their users], in which case variations in forms and the dynamics of interaction found in queer spaces might be transported into straight spaces? Or are the traditional ghettos being reproduced in emerging online communities” (p. 103).¹⁰ The sheer volume of material on the Web, as well as the massive number of daily communications sent over the Internet, makes answering such questions difficult, but they point to a concern that the replication of ghettos in online spaces may serve only to reinforce differences as opposed to fostering communication across those differences.

As we turn our attention to sites such as Justin’s and Rex’s, other concerns appear. While the hypertext of these sites is often deployed to cross formerly discrete boundaries of identity, it is never evident that these Web authors think of their sexuality in terms less “essential” than those of the homo-pages, and, in that sense, they are not necessarily more “queer”; instead, the difference between the two is simply one of concentration and centering, with the homo-pages more centrally organized around a gay identity and the queer pages tending to disperse that identity throughout the pages’ narrations.¹¹ Further, in my ongoing search for queer sites, I have not come across any sites by women that are similar to Justin’s or Rex’s. This is not to say that they are not out there, but it *is* to say that this “queer” site design seems to appeal more to men than women. To explain this, a Women’s Studies colleague at the University of Cincinnati commented that the sites I have identified as “queer” seem almost narcissistic in their self-display (such as Rex’s Web cam). Her comment is suggestive: perhaps queer-identifying

¹⁰For more specifically on gender and the Net: *CyberReader* by Victor J. Vitanza (Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1999) offers numerous short articles on cyberspace as it intersects gender and sexual politics, including: “Men, Women, and Computers” by Barbara Kantrowitz; “Gender Gap in Cyberspace” by Deborah Tannen; “Cyber-Gender Stereotypes Just Don’t Compute” by David Nicholson; “Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier: Gender Differences in Computer-mediated Communication” by Susan Herring. Collectively, these pieces tell a mixed story of sexist stereotypes both brought to the Internet and troubled by it. And for more critical insight on the ways in which technology might change sexual behavior, if not sexuality, see *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (Grove Press, New York, 1996) by Mark Dery, particularly chapter Five, “Robocopulation: Sex Times Technology Equals the Future.”

¹¹In an email message to me, David Halperin (2000) noted that “it may be naive to suppose that new technologies will produce new subject-positions or subjectivities in and of themselves. Hypertext may be new, but the subjectivities of those who use it are well-established, and so it is not surprising to find hypertext being used, at least initially, in the service of conventional models of subjectivity.” I agree, but I also maintain that we are moving beyond an “initial” stage and *may* be seeing other modes of subjectivity *perhaps* prompted by new communications technologies; this is a fruitful field of inquiry, I think.

women, who traditionally also identify as feminists, would not be interested in the kinds of potentially objectifying bodily display that Rex's site, for instance, seems to engage in.

Further, in the crossing of boundaries, other, sometimes unforeseen, boundaries crop up. First, the attitude exuded by sites such as Planet Soma suggests little tolerance for traditional gay styles of representation or story telling. Second, some queer site authors resist "normalization by commodification"¹² in that they refuse to mark/market their Web pages as *only* gay sites. In a way, though, they risk recommodifying themselves as Internet savants. For instance, the Web authors of the queer-inflected e-zine, *Sneerzine*, bemoan the paucity of hypertextual creativity on the Internet, suggesting that queers have not taken full advantage of the narrative possibilities afforded by hypertext. And, in contrast to the "clone-ishness" of the homo-pages, *Sneerzine's* designers want pages with "content"—which is understood as originality of layout. To promote this creativity, the *Sneerzine* designers have established a set of Rules for participation in their Web Ring, among which include

1. Under no condition will a QBD site contain a rainbow flag, pink triangle, or any mainstream gay symbol unless used for humor purposes. If site has those horrible pink triangle/rainbow ring logos that people are so fond of, they must be on a separate page.

and

4. Standards of good design must be upheld. No QBD site will contain tons of animated gifs, large image/sound files inhibiting download times, blink tags, or gigantic text so blind people can read it (<http://www.sneerzine.com/qbd/rules.html>).

Interestingly, the "standards of good design" are probably a matter of perspective and personal taste, and the expressed value seems less on presenting oneself as queer and more on presenting oneself as technically savvy, hypertextually astute, and graphically interesting. One has to wonder, though, if the cool hypertext graphics have replaced the affirmations, coming out stories, and nude galleries as the principle markers—the foundational acts of self narration—of queer Internet identity. Moreover, are not the slick graphics a new criterion for the "hip" and the queer "in-crowd," replacing perhaps "No fats, femmes, and trolls"? The end result is that, in the crossing of boundaries into, through, and with hypertext, other boundary lines are being drawn. According to Plummer (1995), this should not be surprising: "The first, and in my view the most dangerous and pessimistic response to the problem of conflicting stories, is the reassertion of *tribalism*, *fundamentalism*, and *separatism*" (p. 162). As techno-hip queers tell their own, highly individualistic stories, they may be marking their separation from

¹²I'm indebted to David Halperin (1995) for this phrase, which appear in his *Saint-Foucault*, page 112.

others—their own identity—with an assertion of cyber-tribalism. Thus, they deploy hypertext both to create new modes and genres of self-narration *and* to erect new identity boundaries.

And, most tellingly, one notices a distinct lack of class, racial, and ethnic diversity on these pages. As Geoffrey Weight (1999) points out, “While having any kind of queer presence on the Web could be deemed a ‘good thing,’ the gay male dominance of what ‘queer’ . . . means on the Web over other sexualities, ethnicities, and classes tempers just how queer the Web is” (<http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/queer/content1.html>). Indeed, the varying visibility (or invisibility) of multiple sexualities, ethnicities, and classes on the Internet needs critical examination. For instance, it is fairly obvious that the high degree of interactivity of Rex’s site is enabled by a class differential that separates out what he can do with his self-representation on the Web from others less economically privileged. And as Nina Wakeford (1997) has pointed out, cyberqueer studies in general have been remiss in analyzing how class differences impact varying levels of access to the Internet, which, in turn, affect possibilities for community building and, potentially, personal growth. Donald Morton (1996), writing from both a queer and Marxist perspective, has been even harsher; he maintains that “Cyberspace is a bourgeois ‘designer’ space in which the privileged Western . . . subject . . . writes a ‘preferred’ history (creates a virtual reality) according to his or her own desires rather than dealing with the actuality of present historical conditions” (p. 16).

Potential problems and issues become even more striking in terms of race and ethnicity. Rainbows aside, the reality envisioned and performed is invariably a white one, with little crossing of the racial divide so present IRL (“in real life”), for both gays and straights. And the ramifications of such divides are drawing increasing critical attention. By the mid-nineties, Daniel C. Tsang (1996), in “Notes on Queer ‘n’ Asian Virtual Sex,” could note how Asian-Americans would often hide their ethnicity on Internet Bulletin Board Services in order to be more attractive to Caucasians. Further, Max Padilla (1998) asserts in “Affirmative Access: A Gay Chicano Lost in Cyberspace,” “The World Wide Web has turned out to be nowhere near as diverse as the number 7 train I ride home every night. . . . Netizens post about themselves, and I don’t see myself in there” (p. 122). For Padilla and others like him, the relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity on the Internet problematizes some of the assertions made by the medium’s more enthusiastic supporters: “I still use the Internet, but I’m wary of its claims. This is no Netopia, but an all-too-painful reflection of the real world. American online [sic] resembles America, all right. Majority rules” (p. 122).

POSSIBILITIES OF COMMUNITY

Through surveys such as the one we have just undertaken, we can see how queer Web representations are figured not just personally, but also politically, and such surveys reveal and highlight what sense of social agency various Web

constructions assume, attempt to enable and foster, or inadvertently elide. In the process, both the personal and political possibilities—and limitations—of using the Web to represent queerness, both individually and communally, are revealed.

Specifically, such critiques of the representation of LGBT/queer identity on the Web (and the Net in general) raise questions about how the Web fosters (or fails to foster) a queer *community*—both on- and off-line. An anonymous reviewer (2000) of an earlier draft of this essay tellingly questioned a virtual vanishing point in any discussion of the Web and community, particularly as the Web relates to *queer* community: “What does it mean to be closet[ed] in real life and ‘out’ on the net? What does it mean to substitute connection and interactivity [on the Web] for that very messy notion of ‘community’?” Certainly, as Egan (2000) suggests in her article, “Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same,” the desire for community is one of the primary motivating forces for young people (and perhaps too for adults, in the United States at least) to seek others out on the Internet and the Web, particularly if they live in isolated areas where access to materials about queers, as well as other queer people, is limited, or where such associations may be dangerous. For instance, in “Gay Men and Computer Communication: A Discourse of Sex and Identity in Cyberspace” by David F. Shaw (1998) writes poignantly about how some gay men have used one particular Internet communications service:

The texts users produce online are . . . discourses of absence. They are replete with *homosexual desire* and *homosexual need*. The desire is manifest in the fantasies projected onto other #gaysex-ers as well as the desire to meet other gay men and fight the constraints of the medium. The need is manifest in the text’s unspoken sense of community that drives members to return to one of the few places in society where gay men convene. Most importantly, while the playground potential of the IRC inarguably exists and people will (and do—even on #gaysex) try on different personalities, the uniqueness of #gaysex lies in the fact that it presents an opportunity for gay men, who often go through life hiding this most vital aspect of their identity, to try on this real identity (p. 144).

The tension between “virtuality” and the “real” in the concluding sentence points to the double bind that many queers may find themselves in—in which the only sense of community or affirmation of identity that they can find may be virtual, despite the “reality” of their feelings in the real world. It is hard to see such community as anything but “absence,” as underscoring the lack of vital (if not virtual) community.

In fact, as Derek Foster (1996) points out in “Community and Identity in the Electronic Village,” “Any sense of community found on the Internet must, I contend, necessarily be virtual, but may not be sufficiently communal” (p. 24). Some of the scholarship about queer usage of the Internet bears this out. For instance, in “Urban culture for virtual bodies: Comments on lesbian ‘identity’ and ‘community’ in San Francisco Bay Area cyberspace,” Nina Wakeford (1998) examines an online lesbian “community” and reports that, “Despite . . . the extent of interaction and off-list socialising, and the geographical boundaries around

participation, in interviews many participants seemed to be hesitant to call BACD [their online space] a community, and it was certainly not a highly conscious utopian project” (p. 189). Wakeford’s conclusion is worth reproducing in full:

Virtual bodies learn urban lesbian culture. They also encounter virtual culture and the way in which on-line identities and exchanges materialise in the interactions of get-togethers. These are lesbians who negotiate part of their lesbian identity as a computer-mediated lesbian identity. Some also participate in off-line gatherings, but there is no requirement to do so. Therefore some cyber-dykes participate in the on-line list without ever experiencing the constraints and opportunities of face-to-face interactions with others in the group. . . . Additionally, since 1994 there has been a flood of new lists about specific interests which have no formal regional restriction: kinky-girls, boychicks and politidykes, for example. What kind of urban (or other) cultures will clash or coalesce for the virtual bodies inhabiting these lists as they cross national and international boundaries? What situated silences will be reproduced? There is a risk that such questions of geographically located experiences and the local politics of boundary markers become lost in the rush to claim the Internet as a vehicle of a global (lesbian) community (p. 190).

Although she only leaves us with questions, Wakeford highlights the connection between community, social agency, and change that, I think, is beginning to haunt many discussions of how and why queers use the Internet.¹³

Some critics are all but dismissive of the possibilities of the Web fostering community among queers. Commenting on my original analysis of the interactive chat rooms on Rex’s site, one anonymous reviewer (2000) declared, “‘sleek interactivity’ on its own offers nothing more supportive to gay/queer positionalities than other, more ‘outmoded,’ modes of net discourse and address.” Other critics, though, respond to the Net’s possibilities with a bit of hope mixed in with their skepticism. Christopher Mele’s (1999) conclusion to “Cyberspace and disadvantaged communities: The Internet as a tool for collective action,” is telling on this point:

Although online communication appears as a useful tool to challenge and even subvert differentials of power expressed as control over the access, transfer, and application of knowledge and information, the implications for social change are unclear. Online communication offers disadvantaged or what the ethnographer Terry Williams has called “hard to reach” populations access to sources of detailed information beyond the confines of locale and to bring those resources to bear on real and immediate problems. Yet the potential for putting to work electronic communicates and networks to effect change in place-based communities is thwarted by several realities. While online communication may ameliorate negative features of face-to-face interaction between consumers and producers of information and knowledge . . . and modes of discourse that reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities . . . , it does not eliminate them. Computer-mediated networks are said to point toward a new kind of civil society that is technologically predisposed toward a

¹³As a possible answer to Wakeford’s implied question about those who never experience “the constraints and opportunities of face-to-face interactions,” consider Sue Barnes’s (2000) comment in her essay “Developing a Concept of Self in Cyberspace Communities”: “Digital representations of self can be edited, modulated, and partial identities. But, eventually the real-world personality is revealed through the process of electronic conversation and the need to meet in-person. However when digital personals don’t match the in-person personality, members of virtual communities can become disappointed or disillusioned” (p. 199).

more democratic interaction . . . , but new patterns of inequality and forms of division are created . . . (pp. 305–306).

Again, serious questions are raised: What do we gain and what do we lose in online communities? Who is and who is not represented, and why? Further, how does the increasing globalization of those communities affect not only our conceptualizations of ourselves but also our thinking about sexual politics?

The answer to these questions are multiple and complex—as multiple and complex, in fact, as the diversity of experiences, identities, representations, and politics that somehow have found themselves clustered under the LGBT/Queer umbrella. While no one article, or no one special issue of a journal, can attempt a complete answer to such questions, I contend that it is important to engage in such critical examinations, so that we can understand better (1) how queers use, represent themselves, and are represented on the Internet in general and on the Web in particular, and (2) what such representations might mean for our understanding of ourselves, our cultures, and our future, both locally and globally. Such understanding, I think, will enrich not only our own individual and personal experiences of each other via communications tools such as the Internet, but may also help us envision possibilities of connection and identity of which, before, we could only dream.

WEBPAGES AND HOMEPAGES DISCUSSED

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