

CHANGING THE SUBJECT

by Jodi O'Brien



I'm looking at an ad in a recent issue of the *Advocate*. It's a full-page color spread that announces: "There are no closets in Cyberspace." The accompanying text reads:

They're called rooms, like America Online's packed Gay Member Rooms, or echoes, such as the say-anything Artlife echo, or groups, as in the sophisticated newsgroup soc.motss, or lists, like the sizzling Gay-LIBNlist. They're meeting places so free and open and wild and fun they make the Castro Street look Victorian.

The text for the *Advocate* cyberspace ad is printed over a colorized photo of a bare male torso, arms raised above his head. It's a hot ad. Very physical. I want to caress it.

Current research, science fiction, and wishful thinking suggest that cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race, age, body type,

and size will eventually lose their salience as a basis for the categorization of self/other. Because these features are not obviously discernible in cyberspace, the logic runs, they will cease to be a primary means of structuring interaction. Here is a typically hopeful expression of the potential of electronic interactions: "For me, words and thoughts and people's ideas are the most important thing about a person. Online reality gets to the core of things. In some ways there is so much less racism, sexism, lookism" (quoted in Adams 1993).

Fantasy aside, just how elastic is the institution of gender? How likely is it that cyberspace will be a site/occasion for "complicating" the customary gender dichotomy? How likely is it that we can interact without differentiating characteristics to provide a guide for whom to be and how to act? What is "reality" where one's emotions, future plans, and recipes for interaction are concerned? If I traverse the netscape as a GWM named Lestat and you fall in love with me, are we content to linger and love forever in a text-based realm where our romantic energy is carried by standard electronic impulses across wires we will never see? Will we be living together in "a fiction" or an alternate reality? If most of my acquaintances/friends/lovers exist online, does it really matter whether my online characterizations of myself "match" my physical attributes? Does it matter that I have a penis between my corporeal brown, hairy legs if I am having fabulous online sex as Wanda the recent virgin who is blonde and buxom? Can I really expect to be treated just like everyone else? Does "just like everyone else" mean "just like one of the [white] guys?"

Much of the current hype about cyberspace implies that the body is a barrier to experiencing a wider range of interactions. Far from unraveling the helix of the Cartesian split, this hype simply twists the strands more tightly. Generating multiple personae begs this question: who/what becomes the site of interpretation and agency? Sandy Stone (1992), following Derrida, refers to this issue as the "metaphysics of presence." Her point, one that the hucksters of hype fail to discuss, but that governmental regulatory agencies have been quick to seize, is that the site of authentication of personhood is the body occupied by a self-aware mind. This is no small

consideration in a political economy based on individual private property and agency. Governments are very concerned about the potential to generate multiple personae without a fixed location. Dislocated multiplicity makes it difficult to trace culpability.

A friend phones to tell me that she has just been speaking with her mother, a 50+, working-class, twice married black woman who is, according to her daughter, "the ultimate femme." Her mother called to report that she had just been riding with the "Dykes on Bikes" in the Chicago Gay Pride Parade. My friend, a Black Indian who lives with her white boyfriend and says she loves women but doesn't relate to either the category "lesbian" or "bisexual," has often tried to explain to me that consideration of sexual preference is a luxury not affordable to working-class women of color who want to make a career for themselves. Now she is both taken aback and delighted at her mother's behavior.

"Who'd she ride with?" I ask.

"Her girlfriend, Myrna," my friend replies. "You remember, I told you about her. The butch that works in the pet store where my mom buys her cat food. My mom's been 'seeing' her, but they don't call it 'dating.'"

"Is your mom into lesbians?" I inquire.

"She's comfortable with them but would never see herself as one. Myrna doesn't like being associated as a lesbian either."

"I thought you said she was a butch dyke?"

"She is. But she's not into the politics of it. She just likes sex with women. I think she sees herself as one of the guys."

"Is your mom having sex with Myrna?"

"She really wants to try it, but Myrna won't do it. Thinks my mom is too straight."

"Is she?"

"I don't know. I think she is just thrilled with the possibilities of trying out a new world and really doesn't care what anyone else thinks. She's obsessed with seducing Myrna as much for the experience of it as for the sex."

Opposing the hype, constructionist theorists argue that all interaction, as we currently experience and represent it, is predicated on symbolic cues that derive largely from face to face communication: gestures and voice. In other words, whether someone is present or not, we conjure up and make sense of ourselves and others in terms of embodiment. I take a materialist-constructionist approach in this essay, assuming that bodies, selves, technologies, and cultures are mutually constitutive (cf. Butler 1993, Stone 1992). My interest in this is this: what happens to gender as a primary cultural distinction when the narrow bandwidth of a technology precludes the common visual/audible transmission of gender cues? Sandy Stone asks the question this way: How do groups of friends evolve when their meeting room exists in purely symbolic space? How does narrowing the bandwidth -- that is, doing without the customary modes of symbolic exchange such as gesture and tone of voice -- affect sharing and trust, how do inhabitants of virtual systems construct and maintain categories such as gender and race? How do people without bodies make love? (1992)

In the introduction to her by now classic treatise on the "cyborg," Donna Haraway asserts: "Social reality is lived social relations" (1991). In other words, the classification schemes that we use to impose meaning and order on interaction become ossified as "reality." Moreover, morality consists precisely of the willingness/ability to accept and organize one's behavior in accordance with these "ossified" recipes for interaction. If gender is a primary (read: coded as "natural") institution for organizing social interaction, then boundary transgressions are not only likely to arouse confusion, but to elicit moral outrage from the boundary keepers.

Gender is one of the first means by which persons introduce and represent themselves to others in electronic communications. For instance, one of the most frequently asked question on bulletin board systems (BBS's) is "are you male or female?" (Herring 1995; Kendall 1995). Individuals who evade this question are not considered to be creative mavericks; they are assumed to be hiding something. If someone persists in maintaining a gender-neutral position,

others online will inquire of one another about what the person's gender "really" is and why he/she is reluctant to reveal it. The failure to "reveal" gender is viewed with suspicion. These questions underscore rather than erase the significance of gender. Additionally, on almost any system, the System's Operator (Sysop) requires a real name, address, and phone number. For many chat lines, where presumably individuals intend to cruise for friends and possible romance, users are required to specify sex and sexual orientation. These designations, which appear as biographical information available to other users, cannot be changed without going through the sysop. There are also reports that for some "spaces" the sysop attempts to verify aspects of user-identity, particularly gender, by making unannounced phone calls to the person's home and/or checking credit card information (Katz 1995; Wiley 1995). I do not have enough information to verify the veracity of these claims. But it does seem reasonable to conclude that gender, conventional binary gender, is being transported into online interactions as a significant, perhaps the significant, feature of identity.

We are in the sex shop because my lover wants a dildo so that we can have boy-boy sex. Or at least that's what I had in mind when I agreed to get the thing. But now that we have acquired the "purple penis" it turns out that she wants to perform "heterosexuality" with me positioned as the girl.

"Take off your pants," she commands. "And bend over on your knees. I'm going to enter you from behind."

"Do you want me to take off the rest of my clothes?" I ask.

"No, this is just a quickie for me," she snaps. "And you are just a very bad girl who wants it more than she should."

Girl?! I feel something in me shift. I really don't know if I could do it; be a girl to her boy. In our repertoire this means letting her (playing as boy) control the sexual activity. But the experience is amazing. I've never "let go" like that before. Now I'm wondering why we don't just think of these acts as variations on submission-dominance sex. Why do we position ourselves as some combination of boy-girl? And what is it about the shifting that makes our sex so thrilling? Are we having sex in our heads or in our bodies?

Although the prevalence of gender switching online is not readily knowable, it is the case that gender policing is considerable. The tacit agreement seems to be that crossing is acceptable -- after all, this is a space in which one is supposed to "experiment" -- but the motives for crossing must not involve an intent to "deceive." This introduces an interesting tension. What constitutes deception on a frontier yet to be ordered with social norms? Women who cross as men in order to avoid harassment or dismissal are "just being reasonable." Men who create female characters with the intent of understanding the "female experience" are acceptable it seems, so long as they provide this as an account when they discuss the experiences of their female characters. More problematic are those who appear to be using a gender switch as a means of eliciting behavior from another that would not be forthcoming if the person's "true" gender were revealed. Gender vigilance is especially keen on the date or chat lines. A common pattern when someone meets someone else with whom they would like to pursue further conversation or perhaps even "tinysex" is to ask additional questions about gender. A person who is coy or ambivalent in response to these questions is generally "dropped" from the interaction. Often, this character will be the subject of conversation among other users, all of whom are engaged in gender-sleuthing. It is often assumed that any "woman" who is cruising for sex and who is hypergendered is actually a guy trying to "trick" other men into having sex. Regarding the risks and morality of such encounters, Kendall quotes one user who sums it up like this: "I think the rule should be: if you are a homophobe don't have tinysex cuz that cute broad might be a guy in real life. If you aren't bothered by this, have fun" (1995: 12).

"Did you really think you were the girl when I fucked you with the dildo?" my lover wants to know.

"I don't really know what I was thinking. I felt like a girl, or at least what I think a girl feels like when she has sex with a very eager boy," I answer, and then inquire further: "Do you feel like a boy when you wear the strap-on?"

She gives me a coy grin and blushes. "Depends on what I'm wearing and what the story is going on in my head." She stretches and then pulls off the calf-length silk skirt she is wearing and continues to undress until she has on only a pair of sheer black thigh-high stockings. "Right now I feel like becoming a dominatrix," she announces over her shoulder as she grasps the harness from the edge of the bookshelf where it is hanging. "When I get back I'm going to want a boy to play with," she adds as she goes in search of her leather jacket. I feel my body stir and look down to see that she had already undone the top two buttons of my jeans when she kissed me earlier.

For many champions of cyberspace as utopia, the desirability of erasing gender as a form for organizing interaction is based on the premise that gender is a hierarchical form of differentiation. For this reason, many women users report that they aim to keep their gender hidden on conference lines precisely so that they will not be at a disadvantage in business transactions with male colleagues. To the extent that these women are successful in masking gender, they are likely to be performing patterns of interaction associated with male assertiveness. Many women users report that they attempt to pass as men so that they will be "taken seriously" or to avoid what many participants suggest is an unusually high level of sexual harassment. Rather than encourage alternative forms of interaction, the relative anonymity of online communication may be a site for the dismissal of the social norms that otherwise protect us from displays of outright predatory aggression and interpersonal hostility. For instance, several players have observed that in MUDS complaints of harassment are routinely dismissed with the logic that "this is a fantasy space so anything goes."

Many men say that a common motivation for logging on as a female is because they are fascinated by the unusual amount of attention they receive from other men when they are perceived as women. Regardless of the motivation -- whether to gain respect or to satisfy curiosity -- reports to date indicate that switching, if discovered, is seen as a violation of rules of authenticity. One woman who passed successfully as a man on a conference board for several months was threatened with "real, very physical, very painful rape" when the mostly male group discovered her "real" sex. Although the fluidity of gender is often recognized as an aspect of certain types of cyber interactions, the distinction between "real" and "fictitious" remains tightly writ. If we agree that morality in interpersonal relations is based on the premise that persons can trust one another, a partner who constantly shifts shape is not only unpredictable, but through the very act of shape-shifting re-positions the other as well. For this reason, the tension that arises in online gender switching may be less about the possibility that persons can transcend the physical and author themselves in myriad forms and more about the expectation that we maintain fixed positions that others can depend on. Is the line between "fact" and "fiction" immutable? When is multiplicity not a threat to authenticity?

Thus far, I have been discussing the conventional forms likely to be reflected in the conceptual scripts held by the average user. Sandy Stone makes the point that most of the engineers currently debating the form and nature of cyberspace are young men in their late teens and twenties, and thus likely to be "preoccupied with the things that have always preoccupied the post pubescent." (1992). Her inference here is that the (pre)conceptions and interests of this particular group are an unlikely basis for the practice of radically altered gender forms. I agree with Stone that transubjection of gender will require an alchemy, and will not occur through piecemeal "crossings" or transgressions. It strikes me that electronic interactions are not necessarily mind-altering, precisely because they are disembodied experiences. The pounding of heart and the racing of the pulse that occur when one encounters social hostility because one is physically marked as socially "other" is at the root of an empathetic comprehension of forms of social hierarchy. I don't see how the "performance" of the "other" by a group of persons who

themselves occupy positions of privilege and consider themselves unmarked is likely to reproduce anything other than narrow stereotypes. Many of these users lack the 'mestiza consciousness' that develops as a result of occupying multiple, marked, and often contradictory positions. Attempts at 'voguing' notwithstanding, I remain unconvinced that such uniform minds are capable of performing the complex re-formulations that result in a change in the subject. If I, as a biological male, log onto a dateline as "Hotpants," a "36D24D34 red-headed female looking for some stiff action" and am pursued and "bedded" by someone whose biography reads: "young black male body-builder looking for a woman who can take all of me," does it matter that I am really a white, forty-something male middle-manager? Does our sexual ranting constitute a heterosexual or homosexual encounter? Obviously the answer depends on whether one uses the physical or the imaginative as the site of authentication. In the moment however, if the interaction is "successful," one interpretation is that we have formed an agreement about the definition of the situation and have enacted the script that accompanies this definition (O'Brien and Kollock 1996). And nothing has changed. We each know our "physical reality" and we each recognize that we have participated in a successful "fiction." Even if neither of us suspects (or cares) that the other's character is different than her/his anatomy, we both know the script. We can name the act and our respective positions. And in so doing, we have reproduced conventional gendered sexual intercourse.

Now consider this. Imagine a self-identified lesbian; a thirty-something woman who dons her leather jacket over white t-shirt and jeans and heads for a RL sex party. At this party she meets a gay male who asks her to shed her leather jacket, don a leather harness, and fuck him in the ass with a dildo. What have they just done? Is she having sex as a woman with a man? Is she having sex as a woman-man with a man-woman? Is this a heterosexual encounter? Most likely, and I speak from experience here, they see themselves as doing something unnamed. Queer sex is about following the desires of the flesh into an unnamed, uncategorized, uncharted realm, and doing something that neither of you can "code." Probyn contemplates uncoded desire as the impetus for departure from conventional forms of containment (1995). These "points of departure" mark a frontier where embodied sensations seek definitional encoding, the imagination is roused and new forms are etched. Queers are, by definition, those for whom the conventional connections between desire/body/mind/self do not fit. In order to enact alternative forms, one must have comprehending partners. The dance of the queer is a generative improvisation at the same time that it is based on a shared experience of the "unnamed." In an appearance in Marlon Riggs' film, "Black Is...Black Ain't," dancer and choreographer, Bill T. Jones, describes "the woman inside of me." Dance critics, apparently captivated by Jones' attribution of his fluidity and grace to an essentialism he names as "female," cite the line repeatedly for the next several months. Meanwhile, a female performance artist is accosted by a group of lesbians following her impersonation of Elvis, the later years, in a San Francisco club. "You're portraying a man," they chastise the hefty Elvis. "Why are you bringing this into our space?" (*10 Percent* 1995). Presumably "our" refers to a space where women come to get away from men, in either the fictional or the factual form.

How are we to make sense of such seemingly complex gender fluidity in the first instance, above, and such apparent dichotomous rigidity in the latter? Or are we? There are rules for how we can bend gender. Rules that simultaneously allow for the possibility of multiple gender renderings within a single body unit, but reinforce the distinction between fact and fiction. My read is that current online gender dynamics are being conducted and interpreted in accordance with these conceptual clusters: disembodied/multiplicity/fantasy versus embodied/authenticity/reality. Therefore, the contest may be less about gender per se, and more about the emergence of signposts indicating allowable multiplicity. Online gender possibilities are likely to be channeled by the emergent rules for writing the line between fact/fiction.

In his piece titled, "The Black Lesbian Inside Me," *Village Voice* columnist Greg Tate wrestles the contradictions of what it feels like to have an ex-girlfriend tell him, "you were my great lesbian love affair, the man who solved the mystery of what making love to a woman would be like" with his understanding of himself as an embodiment of centuries of male oppression. In a follow-up to this essay, "Born to Dyke," he writes:

Just so no one thinks the irony and outrageousness of a man writing this essay escapes me, yes I do feel weird and conflicted...When I presented my conundrum to [fellow writer] Lisa Jones she said, "well I can't write about that scene [Black Lesbian life] because I'm too much of an outsider." And like, I'm not? To which she replied, "you're an insider by virtue of your desire to want to be inside it." You think I got a snappy answer for that rape-inflected colonialist reading, you got another thing coming (206).

For queers, the line between fact/fiction remains blurred among those who are continually writing themselves -- in this case, writing the relationship between the experiences of the body and the (non)possibilities for self in a culture that denies the authenticity of these experiences. I offer these observations as a framework for considering systematic conceptualizations and research on cybergender forms. The "alternative" experiences that are enacted in "alternative" or queer spaces are based on realities of the flesh: real, embodied experiences and/or fantasies cultivated through exposure to multisensory stimuli. The online relations that reflect these altered forms are generally enacted in spaces where there is a mutual suspension of the belief that "reality" is connected with one's gendered body.

Yesterday I stopped by the office of a colleague for coffee. I had been running in what turned out to be very humid weather.

"I smell disgusting," I mumble in apology. "Didn't have time to shower. Can you stand to sit with me?"

My colleague, a stylish, mid-30's white woman who insists on making a self distinction between being "of a very feminine gender persuasion" and preferring "acts of pansexuality" opens her desk drawer and pulls out a container of roll-on deodorant. She tosses it to me with a perfunctory look.

"I'm shocked!" I drawl. "I didn't think ultra femmes used deodorant, let alone kept it at the office."

"How do you think we maintain our no-perspiration reputation under pressure?" she asks, and then continues, "I'm surprised at you, I would have thought that readily available deodorant was a must for any self-respecting drag queen."

"I'm raunchy," I claim in defense. "I like to wallow in bodily fluids, especially sweat."

"I take my skin clean," she purrs, "I guess that lets you off the hook for today."

Whether enacted in RL or online, queer sexuality is rooted in and reflects the dialectic between existing cultural forms (as understood by the individual mind) and the desires of the body. I am not making an essentialist argument regarding the genesis of homosexuality. I am, however, privileging uncontained desire as an occasion of experiential sensation that may be one impetus for cognitive-emotive "reshuffling" or recoding. It is this "reshuffling" that has the potential to generate new forms, in this case, stretched gender lines. And, more consequentially, a reordering of the lines that designate single body/self units as the site of singular immutable personhood. Being queer is about desires that cannot be channeled through conventional scripts for self and body, whatever the bandwidth.

Queer expression involves attempts to give form to otherwise unformed proclivities. The lines between authenticity/multiplicity, fact/fiction collapse. Change occurs at the margins, across spaces in which there are no conventional names for very physical and emotive experiences. When are our experiences likely to draw us beyond the boundaries of our own preconceptions? As queers, the dynamics of online interaction may not be different than non-queers, but it is possible that we will bring to the encounters a repertoire stretching customary boundaries.

Nevertheless, a critical mass of queer bodies online may not be an answer, either. Although access to "alternative" gender communities has increased through online communication, for real change to occur, there will need to be considerable interaction between those who carry altered gender expectations and those who maintain traditional representations of both fact/fiction and male/female. Scholarly explorations of users within and across queer/straight spaces are nearly nonexistent in the academy at this time. Is there considerable cross-over between those in queer and straight spaces, or are the conventional ghettos being reproduced in emerging online communities? This empirical information is pivotal for considerations of the Internet as a realm for changing the subject. I find myself in disagreement with the statement, "there are no closets online." In fact, I wonder about which new closets are forming, even as I finger the fleshy advertisement from the Advocate. I imagine pressing my palm into the smooth curve where torso slides into hip. I need some action! Should I take a walk down to the bar or dial up one of the advertised chat rooms? Either way it's this boy's body I'll be holding in my head while I play today.

Notes

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