

# Out, Creative and Questioning

## Reflexive Self-Representations in Queer Youth Homepages

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*Cet essai examine les pages d'accueil créatrices et bien pensées que des jeunes « queer » destinent aux leurs qui sont plutôt caricaturés et marginalisés dans les médias. L'auteure définit les diverses stratégies innovatrices que ces jeunes utilisent pour nommer leurs expériences et qui lancent un défi aux cybernautes qui questionnent les assumptions au sujet de la jeunesse.*

Homepages offer a window-like view into a space we might otherwise be blocked from seeing. Girls' homepages, in particular, provide a look at many aspects of girls' lives that often go unseen, especially "inappropriate" aspects, such as sexuality. (Stern, 270)

Communications researchers have begun to explore the subjective and cultural contours of youth homepages (Chandler *et al.*; Dominick; Stern). Susannah Stern is one of the few feminist scholars to detail and complicate the sexual desires of girls by looking closely at the content of personal homepages. Although she begins to explore the process through which girls articulate their fantasies, experiences and embodied differences online, Stern does not directly explore queer youth sites and selves. Against the heteronormative blind spots and biases of online research, I want to turn attention towards a rich

and diverse field of websites by for and about queer girls and trans youth.

Girls and trans youth are articulating young queer self-representations in boldly innovative ways. Queer girls complicate the very assumptions and categories of what it means to grow up as a girl, throwing into question binary gender and sexual norms that constitute and regulate youth subjectivities. In this way the very term "girl" is questioned and exceeded when framed through a queer process of signifying selfhood. I use the concept of queer to draw attention to an open-ended dynamic through which young people articulate who they are beyond heteronormative prescriptions. I want to hold onto the gender and generational specificity of "queer girl" and "transgender" subjects while opening up ways of thinking across boundaries of naming and interpreting youth self-representations.

I want to situate queer girl websites within an expansive array of queer youth online activity. From global queer youth networks to political community sites to zines and intimate personal homepages, an expansive range of online discourses is emerging through which youth come out, perform their identities, and connect with other youth. Internet sites offer queer youth chances to

produce self-expressions as mass media. Anita Harris writes that cyberspace

existing between public and the private, works well for young women seeking to combine a desire to organize and communicate with others with a need to avoid surveillance and appropriation of their cultures and politics. (61)

This dual need for public voice and protection from regulation and surveillance is especially crucial for marginalized youth. Moving back and forth between anonymity and self-disclosure, homepages create flexible spaces for youth to explore the very process of representing themselves as queer, unfolding the layers of their emerging identities with varying degrees of distance and closeness, fiction and reality, self-reflection and social dialogue. It is not only for the sake of communication that queer youth turn to cyberspace, but also to fashion sex/gender/sexual differences and cultural styles. In other words, youth make use of the Internet as a realm to try out, play with, and perform their identities and desires through provisional combinations of images, words, and narratives.

The proliferation of homepages by queer youth is part of a larger

grassroots movement of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media including zines, e-zines, music, and video, enabling “a creative use of border or liminal spaces for self-expression and cultural engagement” (Harris 161). Websites differ widely in their size, organization and style, their address, goals, and contents. Some pages are highly autobiographical, some are educational, some profile

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creative fictions and pop culture icons, and others focus on politics. Many websites support and supplement off-line sub-cultural projects, such as an Australian site for Flea’s zine *Thunderpussy*,

A zine for queer punk grrlz and the people that love ‘em!!!!

I’m a queer punk grrrl from Melbourne Australia. My zine is aimed at young alienated dykes/queers/grrls who don’t necessarily [sic] relate to what mainstream “gay/lesbian” publications or mainstream “girl/women” publications shove in their face! “thunderpussy” zine is not specifically a “queer” zine as such, it’s there for women/grrls of all persuasions, [sic] regardless of sexuality! (*Thunderpussy*)

DIY practices of self-expression and self-publication are key to the empowerment of queer young people who are largely invisible within mass media and who actively distance themselves from mainstream messages. These sites often have a global scope such as a site for *Trip-pers* zine, the self-described “first and only lesbian punkrock zine in Singapore. At least, for the moment.” Owned and published online by 17-year old Trent, this site provides links and references to dozens of other punk queer girl-related bands, groups, icons, and performances. The impetus for these sites is to build and connect around specific grrl punk queer scenes.

When I began my research on queer youth online practices, I focused on examples of alternative subcultural youth community zines and homepages. I began to follow links away from collective projects toward a proliferation of self-representational sites by queer girls. My attention began to shift towards the quirky intimacies of personal homepages dispersed across the Net where fragments of virtual auto-biography begin to open up as an integral part of queer youth representation. I stumbled upon highly articulate, spontaneous texts by young people presenting themselves as dyke, queer, lesbian, femme, butch, transgender, bi, and fag that would otherwise be out of sight, tucked away, at the far limits of my reach as an adult queer researcher. In modest, unpolished, and sometimes wildly vulnerable personalized homepages, I was able to access texts combining political resistance, transitional identities and cultural creativity from a much broader range of young people. There are many doubts and questions as to how to approach these personalized yet public spaces of queer girls with as much respect and care as possible. I try to stay as close as possible to the words of youth

themselves using quotes and detailed descriptions rather than imposing rigid theories detached from the living story and image worlds of the website creators. Where possible I also talk to queer youth creators of websites to ensure that my prying eyes are not unwanted.

In this article, I am going to sketch how personal homepages by queer girls and trans youth aged 15-21 work to construct interactive and contradictory selves. Whereas many of the community service and resource-centered queer groups online tend to reinforce unified notions of sexual identity, individual sites go much further in disturbing and shaking them up, interweaving multiple aspects of experience into dynamic stories, graphics, pictures and quotes. In this way queer youth homepages contest static one-dimensional hetero/homo ways of thinking. What become interesting are the cultural processes of developing languages that resist the pervasive powers that work to reduce and normalize youth sexual identity. I came across many signs of resistance, of intelligent bold rejections of homophobic and hetero-normative pressures to conform. Amber writes on her homepage:

I am 15 years old and i live in Fair Haven, Michigan. It’s a little town with a lot of homophobes. I play guitar and i hope to be in a punk band someday.

I am a strong woman with many ideas about feminism... I am also anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-facist and an animal rights supporter (i’m a vegetarian [sic]). I support all of these causes but the one i support most avidly is anti-homophobia. I spend a lot of my time talking about homophobia and how to stop it.

Amber confronts institutional oppression as an active part of her

self-definition that begins from her little town of homophobes and reaches out toward intersecting global movements.

There is a continuous attempt by queer youth to refuse easy labels, to complicate and question how they define and present themselves in relation to specific real life contexts and symbolic online communities. It seems to me that queer youth personal homepages have a lot to teach us not only about young people but they also provide insight into new forms of representing the self that exceed institutional categorizations. It is because these homepages actively reach beyond the controlling gaze of parental, psychiatric, and educational authorities as well as the ridicule of peer scrutiny and shame, that queer youth risk taboo subjects and build their own queer cultural spaces and identifications. I venture to say that this representational activity pushes the leading edges of youth culture theories (McRobbie, Driscoll, Giroux, Miles) by connecting the feeling embodied lives of young people to their imaginative fantasy cyberworlds. Performative notions of queer identity are enacted in homepages through innovative repetitions of visual cues, cultural references, and biographical notes. In this way sex/gender/sexual identifications and sexual desires are denaturalized as part of an ongoing, digitally-mediated representational process composed by, for, and about youth.

When it comes to queer girls' homepages, presentations of selves are often unapologetically unstable and changing. This affirmation of a self-in-flux lines up with Sherry Turkle's idea that

the culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves. (249)

This way of thinking celebrates the mobility of self-identity in cyberspace that is particularly relevant for queer youth who are in the process of displaying themselves to a range of public audiences. The contingent and arbitrary relations of Internet media link up with the transitional self-formations of queer youth in ways that are mutually reinforcing. An indeterminacy of identity is at the forefront of many homepages. Carisha, an 18-year-old from Texas, opens her site with the headline: "Little Girl I Think You're Confused." Carisha uses the condescending words of adult judgment to speak back with irony. She talks back angrily to several different audiences throughout her site. On a page entitled "stereotypes," she appeals to other queer youth who dismiss her as not queer enough:

this is to everyone who has said "and you call yourself queer..." to me. How totally annoying is that...

i love to shop, i read fashion magazines ... does that make me shallow? romance makes me teary, i love dawson's creek... does that make me frail? i share my secrets with straight males, i listen to boy bands ... does that mean i'm giving in to patriarchy?

i'm sorry my "so you want to be a dyke" pamphlet hasn't arrived in the mail yet, and i'm sorry that if you made one for me, id throw it in the trash. because that's what your stereotypes mean to me. everyone outs themselves and says they're just the same as before. well, i meant it... i refuse to isolate myself. i'm sorry that i'm the same and i'm sorry that i refuse to fit your mold.

Carisha refuses to fit into a predetermined box of queer identity. She claims the right to watch mainstream media and enjoy consumerism and

feminine fashions. At the same time she writes on her opinions page that "I personally am not begging to belong to a society where I am looked down upon for a single characteristic of mine." There is a tension between performing a self that is the same and different from normative ideals of girlhood. While she embraces popular adolescent pleasures of shopping she also speaks with a critical consciousness about the injustice of those excluded from dominant rights and privileges when she states under a section called "love knows no gender":

They should add something to the constitution "Warning: freedom subject to change if you are not white, straight, and Christian."

Carisha asserts a fiercely opinionated individualism that rejects labels, embracing contradictions and difficult ideas. In her artwork pages she offers a place where she directly explores personalized acts of resistance.

Revolt.

People tell me that I'm too defiant, but defiance is all I have to fight back with. Kathleen

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**"i'm sorry my 'so you want to be a dyke' pamphlet hasn't arrived in the mail yet, and i'm sorry that if you made one for me, id throw it in the trash. because that's what your stereotypes mean to me."**

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Hanna wrote, "Just because someone is not resisting in the same way as you does not mean that they are not resisting. Being told you are a worthless piece of shit and not believing it is a form of resistance." This is a statement that I constantly apply to my life and I know that it's the truth.

In a different vein, offering a more playful indirect style of self-presentation, an anonymous 20-year-old queer youth constructs a web page profiling a mocking girl-persona introduced through the comic character "tina the troubled teen" asking viewers the question "What makes homegirl?" This question is followed by elliptical clues... listing her age, status, ethnicity and religion with teasing ambiguity. Signs of political awareness and cultural savvy enter her bio with an edge of ironic humour, this site refuses to present a simplified picture of who she is. Self-definition is performed through hybrid and ironic use of categorizations:

- occupation: student/reformed media whore
- ethnicity: party mix. caribbean, irish, spanish
- religion: former catholic school grl
- star: gemini (Sangre)

This website creator builds her own glossary of words that includes serious terms like "feminism" and "homophobia" along with playfully made up words that enact queer theoretical awareness, as when she defines "Genderfuck" as a

way to fuck with peoples [sic] preconceived notions of gender. a somewhat drastic way to blow apart the dichotomy. acts outside the generally accepted norms of gender behavior, usually by dressing without caring about what people think... I'm a HUGE fan. (Sangre)

Wordplay and redefinition become crucial aspects of this site's activity.

Creating a hypertextual arrangement of queer cultural concepts, popular cultural texts, and poetic passages, this personal homepage explores a girl's intellectual and erotic worlds with a whimsical inventive style. Queer sexual desire is staged through visual and verbal references to "babydoll" (her girlfriend) and also through links to porn sites such as *The Suicide Girls*—filled with sexy images of tattooed, pierced, naked girls. And it is here that the most transgressive elements of queer youth culture are displayed—calling attention to the sexual fantasies of girls desiring other girls. While official discourses warn of possibilities of youth coming across sexual materials on the web, queer youth sites reverse the gaze, insisting upon their own interest in showing and talking about sex. Suzanna Stern writes that

sexual discussions and representations on adolescent girls' homepages are especially intriguing because of the amalgam of private authorship and anonymous global readership offered by the WWW enables girls to speak both confidentially and publicly about a conventionally taboo topic. (266)

Personal homepages frequently use kissing shots to signify queer girl physical attractions. Jennifer, a 17-year old from the US, opens her site with a photo of herself kissing her girlfriend along with the text "Corruption at its finest." Jennifer offers the following explanation:

"Corruption At Its Finest" comes from a Kittie song, No Name, from the Oracle CD. I was reading the lyrics one day and came across that phrase and knew I needed it for my web site. I guess it has a hidden meaning to me. I am gay and I guess that is where

the *Corruption* comes in since that is seen as a sin amongst other things. I don't see it as anything wrong and I step back and look at the world today and all the problems that teenagers have with drugs, violence, alcohol, and every other problem and I see my "sin" of homosexuality as not a problem, and that is where the *At It's Finest* comes in.

By responding to dominant discourses degrading homosexuality with an image of an embodiment of her desire, this homepage represents a queer adolescent sexual self as both a personal statement and a political act.

Websites provide relatively safe places to publicly present actively sexual grlrs pursuing other girls. Charles Cheung writes that a "personal homepage can be emancipatory because it insulates the author from direct embarrassment, rebuff and harassment" (48). The problem of harassment is heightened for queer youth who express their sexuality publicly, making cyberspace expressions all the more significant.

Some queer youth go further than a kiss, imaging and writing about kinky realms, in which they explore sexual role playing and s/m as part of their sexual self-profiles online. Here I glimpsed one of the few places in which youth are able to challenge desexualized and hetero-normative ideals of "innocence," enabling youth to speak about their sexual lives outside the moral panics of adult society. On a homepage shared by a transgender couple, we are offered a view of youth taking on s/m personae as important parts of their identities. Eryc and Avery have built their site around their trans-fag daddy-boy relationship.

Eryc is a queer ass, punk rock/hip-hop, dykie-faggy gender queer Daddy top Im super political, tough and loving.

Avery is a punk faggy tranny

boy, not an orphan boy cause i have the greatest Daddy in the world. i try very hard to be obedient, but sometimes i don't succeed at that.

They offer experiential narratives about their transitioning and their s/m role-playing. Part autobiographical and part educational, this homepage details the lives of trans youth in ways that engage the viewer to become receptive to a world that would otherwise remain hidden from public recognition. Eryc and Avery's homepage is centered on a dialogical style of self-representation calling for active engagement, responses, and respect. Many queer youth homepages present difficult information in the form of dialogues. The complexity of the identities and desires of queer youth are performed as an invitation to converse, staged as an encounter between self and others. In this way, interactivity goes beyond the guestbook and email features and is inscribed into the creative texts. On Eryc's writing page he includes a poem called "The Adjective Game":

Let's play a game  
 When you look at me what do you see?  
 Go on tell me I dare you  
 Black  
 Brown  
 Nigger  
 Colored  
 African-American  
 Mixed  
 Half Breed  
 Zebra  
 Oreo  
 Person of Color?

Punk  
 Criminal  
 Drug Addict  
 Anarchist  
 Drop Out  
 Intelligent  
 Street Rat  
 Good for Nothing

Delinquent  
 Anti-American?

Dyke  
 Fag  
 Bisexual  
 Straight  
 Perverted  
 Unnatural  
 Beautiful  
 Sinner?

Ever just see human? Yeah right.

I realize my dare was no threat to you. cause you already had me figured out. Long before I asked.

Eryc lists the ways elements of his racial, gender, class and sexual identifications become misunderstood and separated from the integrity of his whole human self, calling upon the reader to question assumptions and take a fuller look at the whole picture being presented.

Studying the homepages of queer youth raises many difficult questions and provokes ethical and self-reflexive examination. Am I welcome into these worlds? What is the best way to approach the uniqueness of the selves represented by marginalized youth online? How might I be of useful to these youth, give back something in return for their risky revelations? Do I have a role to play in expanding access and Internet competence to broader groups of queer youth? At this point it is clear to me that the homepages of youth need to be taken seriously as a process of resistance against forces that seek to control the sexual and gendered bodies and imaginations of youth. The challenge becomes learning how to leave open the parameters of DIY queer youth self-expression on the web while also raising public awareness and support.

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*versity. She is working on a book on Queer Girls in Popular Cultures and an anthology of essays about Queer Youth.*

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## FARIDEH DE BOSSET

### My children

My children are getting  
older  
and my leash is getting  
longer.

Their feverish eyes do not  
raise  
so often to stab my heart.

Their demands may rest  
for a while.

My nights are less dis-  
turbed.  
I am gathering strength  
and dreaming of the joys  
of liberty.

*Farideh de Bosset's poetry appears  
earlier in this volume.*

## LGBT Positive Space Program

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*Rural Feminism:  
A Site for Queer Activism and Social Change*

Training Manual Available at:  
<http://www.stfx.ca/campus/stu-serv/equity/LGBT.htm>

LGBT Community Safety Initiative  
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Antigonish Women's Resource Centre  
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