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L'Internet dans les rapports de lecture de lesbiennes et de jeunes femmes allosexuelles : recherches infructueuses et lectures illicites

Paulette Rothbauer
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, ON
rothbauer@fis.utoronto.ca

Abstract: In my dissertation research (Rothbauer 2004a), I explore the role of voluntary reading in the lives of self-identified lesbian or queer young women (18–23 years). The larger context of this inquiry concerns the negotiation of diverse meanings of alternative sexualities constructed by young people through the consumption of a range of self-selected reading materials, including lesbian and gay literature. Data collection and analysis were guided by qualitative principles of interpretive and reflexive research, and data are taken primarily from conversational interviews with 17 young women, conducted between November 2001 and February 2003. One area of significant findings encompasses the uses of the Internet by my participants as they sought lesbian and gay reading materials in a computer-mediated on-line environment. In their reading accounts, these young women variously conceived of the Internet as a search medium and as a site of access to digital and paper-based texts. However, their failure to locate desired texts, along with a reluctance to draw attention to unsanctioned reading preferences, invites contemplation of the role of public libraries in the creation of access to lesbian and gay materials.

Résumé : Dans ma thèse de doctorat (Rothbauer 2004a), j'examine le rôle de la lecture volontaire dans la vie de jeunes femmes (18 à 23 ans) se déclarant lesbiennes ou allosexuelles. Le principal objet de cette enquête concerne le débat touchant les diverses significations des identités sexuelles alternatives construites par les jeunes à travers la consommation d'une variété de matériel de lecture auto sélectionné, incluant la littérature gay et lesbienne. Des principes qualitatifs de la recherche méthodologique interprétative et introspective ont dirigé la collecte et l'analyse de données, et les données proviennent principalement des entrevues effectuées avec 17 jeunes femmes, entre novembre 2001 et février

2003. Un aspect significatif des résultats met en évidence les utilisations d'Internet de mes participantes lors de leur recherche de matériel de lecture pour gays et lesbiennes, dans un environnement en ligne accessible via un ordinateur. Dans leur rapport de lectures, ces jeunes femmes ont perçu de diverses manières l'utilisation d'Internet comme moyen de recherche et comme site d'accès à des textes numériques et imprimés. Cependant, leur insuccès à repérer les textes désirés, de même que leur répugnance à attirer l'attention sur leurs préférences de lecture illicites, invite la réflexion sur le rôle des bibliothèques publiques dans la création de l'accès au matériel de lecture pour gays et lesbiennes.

Introduction

I think I came upon [*Annie on My Mind*]¹ through the Internet or something like that. Because there really was no other way to find out about books (Barb²).

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger inquiry into the voluntary reading practices of lesbian and queer³ young women (see Rothbauer 2004a). I sought to examine the role of reading in their negotiation of alternative and non-mainstream sexualities. An argument is often made in the literature for librarians that libraries ought to provide access to a broad selection of lesbian and gay literature,⁴ especially for young readers who may turn to library resources as a way to explore what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, or queer (see Clyde and Lobban 1992, 2001; Hawkins 1994; Hughes-Hassell and Hinckley 2001; Monroe 1988). Reading is offered as a mode of escape from the pressures of mainstream notions of youth sexual identity and as a safe, private, non-risky way to explore alternative possibilities. When I began my project, I wondered to what extent reading did function as an escape in the lives of lesbian and queer young women.⁵ The initial primary research question was focused on the concept of "finding oneself in the text," as I wondered whether my research participants shared my own experience of the shock of self-recognition when I encountered a lesbian character in a novel for the first time.

Research design

My research approach was designed to explore the lived meaning of voluntary reading practices, thus directing me to begin with what readers say about reading and how they interpret its role in their own lives. Using snowball and purposive sampling methods (Morse 2004, 884–85) and with continual negotiations with social workers, teachers, listserv moderators,

LGBTQ campus groups, book groups, and librarians, I gained access to 21 self-identified lesbian and queer young women between the ages of 18 and 23⁶ who also liked to read. After an initial exchange of information clarifying the purpose of the research and whether basic eligibility requirements were met, I conducted flexibly structured, conversational interviews with 17 young women, from November 2001 to February 2003. All participants lived in Ontario at the time of the interviews. All interviews took place in or near the cities of Toronto and London, Ontario. I recorded and transcribed all interviews. Data analysis was ongoing from the initial interview as each interview and subsequent analysis suggested new areas of inquiry for each successive interview. Data analysis was primarily thematic, using grounded theory methods of open coding and constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and a style of analytical writing guided by the notion of hermeneutic reflection (Van Manen 1990, 91–93; Watson 2001, 142–45).⁷

The Internet: Tool of access and site of texts

The findings presented here are not generalizations about reading practices that can be applied consistently to all young people or to other lesbian and gay library patrons, Internet users, or readers. My aim was to investigate a certain kind of reading, within a specific context: voluntary reading of self-selected texts, read outside of school requirements, in the context of the negotiation of alternative sexual identity and orientation. I wanted to know what, if anything, this kind of reading contributed to my participants' understanding of self and their relations with the larger worlds in which they lived. I anticipated that much of our conversations would focus on fictional and other narrative texts, but this emphasis was not part of the initial research design although it was soon clear that much of our talk would, indeed, end up being about novels with lesbian and gay content. I also wanted to know how participants found books and other desired reading materials, such as magazines, comics, zines, and essays. This came to mean, given the eventual emphasis on lesbian and gay literature, What role did libraries, bookstores, and the Internet play in the creation of access to lesbian and gay materials? Given my stated position as a researcher within the field of Library and Information Studies (LIS), I also anticipated that participants would describe their library practices to me during our interviews. However, it is against the surprising lack of interaction with actual "bricks and mortar" library environments (surprising, given participants' histories as lifelong and avid library users) that the Internet emerged in a central, if somewhat invisible, role in the reading

accounts of my participants. Two significant themes related to Internet use emerged from the interview transcripts: the everyday use of the Internet as a search tool and the Internet as a site of access to digital and paper-based texts.

In the remainder of this paper, I present a discussion of the place of the Internet in the reading accounts offered by my participants. There are two distinct threads of discussion. The first is the use of the Internet to access library catalogues and on-line bookstore inventories that provided an uneven array of desired reading materials, the acquisition of which was often impeded by lack of availability and prohibitive prices. The second thread takes up the routine practice of some participants, who used the Internet to access digital texts that did offer some satisfying representations of alternative sexualities although, as shall be seen, this kind of reading was perceived to be trivial and not really reading at all; thus, derogatory taste distinctions were reinscribed.

Searching the Web for reading materials

The uses of Internet and Web-based technologies are taken-for-granted, everyday activities among the participants in this study. Talk about home computers and school computer use is embedded in the interviews, along with jargon associated with digital media and their use. Only one young woman, Keri, contacted me via telephone to ask about the study; all other participants used e-mail. When asked specifically about their methods of locating reading materials—how they actually searched for books with lesbian and gay content—most participants began their explanations with a statement about “searching,” with a simple assumption that I would understand that they meant searching via Web access to library catalogues or on-line bookstore Web sites. Internet searching was the second step in what seemed to be unfocused and naïve searches for lesbian and gay literature. My participants did not expect their school and public libraries to have fiction with lesbian and gay characters, so they were not surprised when they did not often find what they wanted. Their next step was to go to the Internet, where they conducted time-consuming searches for book lists, new titles, and known authors. Information gleaned from Internet searches would then be printed off and used on future visits (actual and virtual) to public and school libraries. A micro-level identification and analysis of Internet searching strategies falls outside of the scope of this study, but in this paper, I shall address some common methods of on-line searching that emerged from the interviews. Three key methods of on-line

access to lesbian and gay literature were used: search engines, remote access to library catalogues, and on-line bookstore inventories.

Search engines

Comprehensive studies, within LIS, of Internet use by young adults present findings and discussion that subsume the activities of reading under Web searching or Web site evaluation (e.g., Agosto 2002; Fidel et al. 1999; Hughes-Hassell and Miller 2003), suggesting that the Internet has only an instrumental role to play in the reading lives of young people. In a brief overview of research on teenage users of libraries, David V. Loertscher and Blanche Woolls (2002) assert that teens do read and enjoy reading, but the authors do not discuss access to reading materials in their section on information literacy and the use of digital technologies in school and public libraries. Five years ago, in her call for more research into the informal information-seeking behaviour of youth on the Internet, Eliza Dresang (1999) criticized the current research paradigm in LIS, which studies the information-seeking strategies of youth through models of use and outcomes constructed and conceived of by adult researchers. Instead, she advocated a research approach that begins with “already-engaged and experienced youth” in out-of-school, self-directed information-seeking situations. In my study, I did take as a starting point the voluntary reading habits of lesbian and queer young women, all of whom were comfortable with popular digital technologies. Most participants were also familiar with at least a limited range of lesbian and gay cultural texts, such as novels, magazines, Web portals, music, film, and television programming; however, access to the Internet and previous knowledge of lesbian and gay texts did not result in more satisfactory on-line searching experiences.

“Kind of like a filtering down process”

The following interview excerpt⁸ functions as an exemplar that illustrates the frustration of participants as they ineffectively searched the Web for reading materials, using extremely naïve searches constructed around variants of the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” and “queer.” The sifting process that Nicky describes is representative of what many other readers in this study did in their attempts to locate lesbian and gay literature.

There’s some new books that I’ve been looking for, for a long time ... Various lesbian books. Like I don’t know—like with coming out and that whole process thing. I found lists on the Internet—lesbian books and things like that. I would get the lists, print them off, look them up on the Internet, try and find as many as I could

and then go to the library. I was just wanting to find more and wanting—and getting so frustrated 'cause I could never find—It was so hard ... I just remember being really really frustrated that things I really had been interested in weren't there—and how hard it was to track them down, like you get a list off the Internet somewhere. Like you couldn't just—how hard it was to type in “lesbian” in the search engine ... I think I find them [books with lesbian and gay content] kind of by accident or actually typing in “lesbian books” on the Internet—into search engines and just searching and searching and looking for lists all the time. It's hard because they're usually just grouped into like ... anything from “may have some sort of lesbian undertone if you're really looking” to “has a gay character in it” to is about, you know, actually “that's what the story is about or those are what the characters are doing.” They are all grouped together and so sometimes it's kind of—first you gotta get the list and then you have to find what books are actually in your library and then you have to find out of that small number that are there if any of those that actually interest you. Kind of like a filtering down process. (Nicky)

Book lists poached from Web sites were a prominent method of locating books, but one that rarely provided a satisfying outcome, as the lists frequently pointed to books that were not held by libraries, that were out of print, or that were prohibitively expensive to purchase. The failure to find desired books is a constant theme throughout the interviews. Web searches, in particular, were regarded as ineffective ways to find information about lesbian and gay literature.

Keri and Cole support the notion of the Internet as a taken-for-granted source of information about lesbian and gay literature, one utilized with haphazard searches:

Well, I would look up like keywords like “lesbian” [slight lowering of voice] or “gay” or something on the computer and see what came up. But like all this stuff I found that came up was like resources for parents who [were] dealing with having a gay child ... Doesn't apply to me. (Keri)

Depends on what the book is. Often it's like, often if I don't know like the author of a book, or like I'm having a problem finding it, I'll go to the search engine and I'll type in enough info about the book to be able to match pages ... to find out who wrote it ... (Cole)

Library catalogues: Background

There are few LIS studies of the information needs and uses of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Some of these are explicitly concerned with cataloguing, classification, and shelving practices that create or reduce barriers of access to library materials with lesbian and gay content (see Norman 1999; Raaflaub 1991; Rothbauer and McKechnie 1999; Spence 1999;

2000). Other studies emphasize the effectiveness and relevance of library services as perceived by lesbian and gay library patrons. Janet E.A. Creelman and Roma M. Harris (1990) published the first empirical study of the information needs of adult lesbians, who reported that the library was an important, but ineffective, resource for information that might help with coming to terms with one's sexual orientation. This finding was supported by a later survey with a much larger sample of lesbian participants (Whitt 1993). Steven Joyce and Alvin M. Schrader (1997) elicited the perceptions of gay male patrons of the Edmonton Public Library, who also identified the library as the most significant source of information about sexual orientation. In another study of the information needs of adult lesbians, Tanis L. Stenback and Alvin M. Schrader (1999) found that libraries and printed sources in general were more important sources of information than were other lesbians. Library use and non-use are also central themes raised by participants during the interviews as we discussed libraries in the context of their reading practices. This study and Steven Joyce's (2003) recent dissertation on the discursive construction of lesbian and gay identities are the only ones I know of that privilege the information behaviour of young people who claim lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexualities.

I have been unable to identify studies that provide substantive data on how lesbian and gay youth use library catalogues to search for reading material related to sexual identity and orientation. One study briefly discusses the influence of books, comics, and magazines in the context of the leisure activities of lesbian and gay youth; it includes an anecdote on library searching in the words of one young woman, who said, "I looked up stuff about lesbians ... [but] I never checked anything [books] out" (Kivel and Kleiber 2000, 222).

Remote access to catalogues

Although most participants recalled visiting public libraries on a regular basis as children, only 4 of 17 participants were regular patrons of the physical branch at the time of their interviews. The practice of using library *catalogues* to locate reading material with lesbian and gay content was common across participants, as was the almost uniform strategy of remotely searching the catalogues from home. The Toronto Public Library offers a remote reservation service, allowing patrons to log in, reserve, and request that titles be sent to their home branch (or any other branch of their choosing). Another participant employed a similar technique when she "recalled" novels charged to other borrowers using the University of

Western Libraries' digital interface. Cole and Anne provide typical comments on this type of library service:

More of what I've been doing with public libraries—like last night I was on trying to find books, and it was just like, go on-line, place a bunch of holds and wait till [they] come in ... I don't even have to worry about like which branch has what books ... a lot of the books I'm looking for are more obscure kinds of books to find. (Cole)

Yeah I do use [the library catalogue]. Well, sometimes I think of someone I want to read, then I go and I'm crazy—I'm sure I'm putting this big burden on the system by requesting *everything*. And then having them send it to my home branch ... (Anne)

All participants in this study used the public library catalogue accessed via library Web pages to search for lesbian and gay reading materials. In many cases, they did find suitable materials, but their satisfaction eventually gave way to frustration as they exhausted finite book lists. My chief recommendation to librarians and library workers is to implement a complete and consistent classification of fictional works, including cross-referencing through subject terms that identify salient lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, and queer content. If readers can find at least one book that they like that contains content of this nature, then they should be able to build a search using the subject headings from this single title to find additional materials.

A need for contextually relevant subject headings

Over 10 years ago, Yvonne Raaflaub (1991) cited the following problems of access to lesbian literature: heterosexist and homophobic attitudes, a paucity of selection tools available to librarians, as well as various problems with indexing language, classification schemes, and exclusionary standard indexes. She also noted a continuing problem mentioned by the participants of my study—broad indexing terms tend to provide access primarily to male-oriented materials. Sanford Berman (1993) and Ellen Greenblatt (1990) have been advocating for years, with varying degrees of success, for more inclusive, less heterosexist Library of Congress subject headings. However, as Grant Campbell (2000) points out in his exploration of the implications of queer theory for the design of gay, community-based subject-access systems, assigning meaningful subject headings is a complicated task that negotiates between universalizing and constructivist viewpoints. Drawing on his interpretation of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, Campbell writes, "The critical task is no longer to find content in

the text, but rather to identify and articulate the ideological, social and cultural positions from which others find content in the text” (2000, 127).

Laurel A. Clyde and Marjorie Lobban declare that a library “catalogue can be a powerful tool in bringing together readers and books. But equally, the failure to assign a subject heading such as Homosexuality—Fiction may mean that a book never connects with a potential reader” (2001, 27). However, as the participants in this study illustrate, the heading of “Homosexuality—Fiction” does not go nearly far enough to provide access to reading materials. Not once did any participant indicate that she used “homosexuality” as part of her search queries—“lesbian,” “gay,” and “queer” were, on the other hand, mentioned frequently, suggesting (and as argued by Campbell) that a deeper, more contextually relevant subject classification is required in order to provide access through the library catalogue to materials with lesbian and queer content.

On-line bookstore inventories

Clyde and Lobban (2001) note in their review of library services to lesbian and gay young people that the on-line bookstore Amazon.com assigns relevant subject headings to fiction titles with lesbian and gay content; they also state that the research record has thus far failed to ask young people if they use this resource to locate reading materials. Martin Garnar (2000) reports that members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community of Denver, Colorado, found speciality LGBTQ bookstores more useful than public libraries when looking for information about alternative sexualities. Participants in my study used three on-line bookstores to search for texts with lesbian and gay content although purchases were rare. Two major companies—Amazon.com (and its Canadian affiliate Amazon.ca) and chapters.indigo.ca, operated by the Canadian corporation Indigo Books and Music—featured prominently in our discussions of how participants found books with lesbian and gay content. The on-line site of the Toronto Women’s Bookstore (www.womensbookstore.com) was searched less often, but this seems mostly due to geographic location and lack of familiarity with the “bricks and mortar” store: Participants from outside of Toronto knew of the store but had not visited it at either its virtual or physical sites. Participants also sometimes mentioned searching other on-line bookstores for reading materials and information about them but were unable to recall the names of such stores and, in some cases, were quite clear that they had simply followed a series of links to end up at an unknown bookstore location that they then proceeded to browse.

On-line bookstores are an important source of information about lesbian and gay reading materials. Participants seemed to find them easier to search, trusted their results (which did, after all, offer books for purchase), and used them on a repeat basis, sometimes as the starting point for a search that eventually led to their public and school libraries. Participants skirted the commercial imperative of such bookstores, especially when most insisted that they did not buy from them. The selection of interview excerpts below highlights some of the prevalent themes of this mode of access. Cole recounts her failed search strategy for finding a book by a known author: She looked on the Internet via the Web sites of used and specialty bookstores. Tellingly, she does not mention library catalogues or reference sources and, as was the norm in my participants' reading accounts, she did not consult a librarian.

The book is out of print ... and I've been looking on the Internet for all these used book sites and I'm finding all sorts of copies of her other book which is about lesbian nuns ... no copies of this one ... I've checked with the Women's Bookstore, I checked with like looking up on-line, and I've signed up for these search things with four different used book sites ... (Cole)

Madeline performed a kind of pearl searching, as she began with a known author and built her on-line search around it. Her primary source of reading material was the academic library at her school, but she raises another salient feature of on-line bookstore use: the ability to browse through the reviews and recommendations of other readers. Other participants also referred to this review service offered by Amazon.com.

... When I found a niche of what I would like, I would kind of stick to those authors and sometimes if you go, like if you do a little search on-line and you go to Amazon and search for a book and they say, people who like this book also liked— And they give you a list and that sometimes works too. (Madeline)

Hilary Potts (2003) recently compared the search results from three on-line catalogues—Amazon.com, the Library of Congress, and the British Library—using queries related to the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” and “homosexual.” She found that Amazon.com is easier to use, applies objective headings such as “lesbian fiction” more consistently, provides informative abstracts that the other catalogues lack, and provides access to a broader scope of recent material, especially non-academic works. She writes,

... Amazon does provide to not particularly skilled searchers a reasonably comprehensive list (who could possibly say when it would be complete?) under objective headings, of books published in recent decades for and about the gay community,

consistently applied and with relatively little “noise” or false drops ... In the form of brief but friendly abstracts and reviews, it conveys vastly more information about the books than any straitlaced public catalogue could attempt. Naturally, since it is hoping to sell the book, not preserve them for all time. One cannot guess the number of Internet virgins to whom Amazon’s listings provided definite proof that They Are Not Alone. (168)

While a more analytical, comparative study along the lines of James V. Carmichael’s examination of the records listed under “Homosexuality,” “Gay Men,” and “Gays” (“Lesbians” and “Lesbianism” were omitted)⁹ in WorldCat (2002) may be in order to fully test Potts’s argument, her work does support the search strategies offered by the participants in this research. For novice, and perhaps discouraged, searchers, on-line bookstore catalogues, especially ones like Amazon that include out-of-print titles as well, offer a quick, easy, approachable, and satisfying search for lesbian and gay reading materials. It is interesting to note, as well, that Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (1998) recommend Amazon.com as a standard selection tool for librarians (one might say expert searchers) seeking to improve their lesbian and gay collections.

The absence of human intermediaries in the search process

Reijo Savolainen (2002) has put forward a conceptual model of network competence that posits that information seeking in a networked environment (such as the Internet) is influenced by a person’s expectations of the search outcome. It is a reciprocal relationship that can lead to enhanced search skills when searches are successful and weakened incentives for use in the face of failure. Savolainen’s model can be mapped to the evidence of Internet use in the context of finding lesbian and gay reading materials. In particular, the positive relationship between outcome and expectation seems to be at play in the search accounts offered by my participants. The young women in this research were all savvy library users who came of age with the growth of computer-mediated communication. In this context, their reliance on the Internet, especially Web-based access to lists of reading materials (whether library collections, bookstore inventories, or single lists of titles posted by individual agencies and people) is not surprising. However, the sheer lack of interaction with experts who might be able to aid in their search for desired reading materials points to a basic barrier of library service at all levels. The library itself, with its shelves of books, its computer databases, and its catalogue, is perceived as a promising venue, but librarians and all the work they have done to create access to lesbian and gay materials remain untapped and invisible resources. Participants in

this study relied primarily on their own searching skills and information-seeking strategies. They accepted the failure of access as part of the status quo—they did not expect to find what they wanted, so when this was the outcome, they were not surprised. Furthermore, the repeated failed modes of Internet access may have resulted in discouragement or demotivation to enhance and improve their searches.

Reading digital texts: “This is going to sound really stupid”

My participants may have been largely unsuccessful in their quests to find lists of lesbian and gay literature, but many did regularly read digital texts. On-line material for school assignments and research papers is not included in this discussion, although it should be noted that library catalogue searches did lead students to various electronic books (e-books) and electronic journal articles that participants mentioned from time to time throughout the course of the interviews. In relation to digital texts with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer content, three main genres emerged as common sites of interest: fanfiction, comics, and electronic zines.

A definition of fanfiction

Fanfiction is a genre of texts largely created and distributed by fans, using a variety of media, appearing in both print and digital formats. It is produced on the Internet in myriad forms—electronic newsletters, chat groups, comic sites, encyclopedias, reviews, guides, or fiction. Fan literature has been described as a “largely unexplored branch of grey literature” that is further defined as follows:

Grey literature is by definition difficult to define and to locate. In general it refers to materials published outside the mainstream of publishing, although some items may be recorded in certain abstracts and indexes or other bibliographic sources. Conventionally, grey literature is taken to include reports, conference proceedings, theses and other research publications, trade literature and community information (Hart et al. 1999, 82).

The authors conclude that fans may not need libraries to access fan literature; yet they urge librarians to increase their awareness of this kind of grey literature to better “make links between the esoteric world of fan literature and the resources of public and academic libraries (Hart et al. 1999, 88).

Web-based fanfiction related to popular television programs

I talked with several participants about secondary texts generated by fans related to two television programs that were popular during my data collection period: *The X-Files* and *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. Both shows had lesbian storylines; this was overt in *Buffy*, as its creators developed a same-sex relationship between two female characters. Willow, one of the main characters, came out as a lesbian in the fourth season when she fell in love with Tara. Their relationship spanned two-and-a-half seasons until Tara was killed off at the end of the sixth season of the program. According to many fan sites dedicated to the show, theirs remains the longest running lesbian relationship on television (see Warn 2003). Participants also referred to the subtle suggestion of lesbian subtext presented in *The X-Files* with the introduction of a new female character in the program's eighth season. The speculation among viewers and fans is evident, even in the following brief "celebrity update" found in a mainstream newspaper (Duvall 2001):

X-Files Agent Dana Scully, played by Gillian Anderson, has had her share of alien encounters—but never with another woman. *X-Files* producers have considered pairing Scully with Agent Monica Reyes, played by Annabeth Gish, in a lesbian story line this season. "We talked about it, but it's the kind of baggage that we didn't want to deal with this kind of character right now," *X-Files* executive producer John Shiban told *TV Guide On-line*. "On the *X-Files*, anything can happen," he said.

Ellen was an ardent fan of *Buffy*, and she was quite clear that one reason for its appeal was her attraction to the main character and her interest in the developing lesbian plot between Willow and Tara. She browsed magazines that featured the show and its characters, and she acknowledged that she liked to visit Web sites that featured fanfiction devoted to the show.

Ellen: I'll read like fanfiction.

Interviewer: What do you mean by fanfiction?

Ellen: ... that stuff written ... ok, let's say you're a fan of like, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, somebody will like write a story about it ... So, I'll read it which is bad but true ...

Ellen's negative evaluation of this genre comes through and it raises interesting questions about the genre as an unsanctioned, invisible, yet everyday reading practice.

Keri also struggled with the appeal of fanfiction and its assumed inferiority to "real" literature. She read on-line fanfiction related to *The X-Files*. She

has difficulty talking about this kind of writing as a genre and is unable to give it a recognized status as “a book” although, from her description, it could accurately be described as a serial novel:

I actually read some fantasy books about like—this is going to sound really stupid but I read this for a long time, and it was on the Internet, it was like, it wasn't a book, but it was like a serial type thing—that people have been posting. It was an *X-Files* romance type of thing ... It was called like *The Magician* or something like that. And it was really long, it was the length of a full-length novel, you know. And it was actually really cool. I really enjoyed [it] just because I knew the characters already and it was just putting them into a different, you know, scene where they got into this parallel universe. They'd post, you know, there'd always be new ones. I'd go to the Web site and be like oh do they have new one out yet? ... I read it on-line. It was way too long to print off. (Keri)

Privileging fan-based literacy practices

There have been calls by youth researchers and educators to privilege the fan-based literacy activities of young people, including their preferences for music, television, games, films, and comics. For example, Donna E. Alvermann and Margaret Hagood (2000) ask researchers to privilege the mass media preferences of youth so that we can begin to see the role that diverse textual forms play in their lives as they make sense of the world and their places in it. Elizabeth Birr Moje (2002) claims that much educational research on literacy fails to critically examine “how and why youth use and make sense of a wide range of print and mass media.” It is argued that by learning about the appeal of a diverse range of mass media texts and about the various uses of them, educators will be better able facilitate meaningful “literacy events” in the classroom (Alvermann and Heron 2001). Librarians are seldom included in these visions of advocacy, and fanfiction is rarely seen in library and information service suggestions for young people in general, nor for those aimed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, and queer populations. However the growing body of research into multiple literacy practices tells us that young people construct meaning through unsanctioned literacy practices that occur in both school and out-of-school contexts,¹⁰ such as the much derogated reading of fanfiction described above by Ellen and Keri. These two readers enjoyed following the threads of lesbian subtext from the television programs into another medium. They experienced an affinity with the fictional characters and wanted to extend the story worlds beyond what was available through television viewing. However, both young women apologized for and ridiculed their reading preferences, thus underlining their recognition of this genre as unsanctioned and unsupported.

Web comics

On-line comics and electronic zines (e-zines) possess some of the same features as television fanfiction: the development of a textual relationship with a favourite character or author, a departure from mainstream storylines, and the potential for the participatory creation of texts. Their use might also be seen as unsanctioned literacy practice. Ellen and Francesca were regular readers of on-line comics, and while other participants mentioned this kind of reading, they had trouble remembering specific titles or Web sites. Their reading was characterized as a kind of routine browsing of sites, usually accessed through links found on other Web sites, whereas Ellen and Francesca read Web comics on a routine basis:

Sometimes I'll read ... once again anything with Buffy. There's a Buffy comic that someone puts out sometimes. It's really bad though ... I'll just look at it though. It's only like four panels. (Ellen)

A lot of the [inaudible] comics that I read are on-line ... and actually a lot of them, now that I think about it, are sort of queer positive. *Boy Meets Boy*—pretty obvious. *Venus Envy* about a transsexual. Umm. *Unicorn Jelly*,¹¹ which is one of the weirdest things I have ever heard. It has a number of—it has a transsexual character, it has a number of gay men characters, like sexual characters. I'm trying to think what else there is now. Yeah. Just things like that. There's a number of others ... (Francesca)

Madeline, on the other hand, rejects comics and is unable to view the genre as “actual literature” (her words) worthy of her attention, thus emphasizing her disparagement of the genre and the novice's failure to appreciate the artistry and skill brought to many comic works:

... Comics disappoint me. You know [a] five-year-old who can draw stick figures, you know, and then their 10-year-old brother fills in the dialogue. It's horrible! (Madeline)

Web zines

Web zines are another form of on-line reading material for some participants in this study. Fanfiction as described above constitutes one form of zine, but paper-based fanzines have been a popular phenomenon since the 1930s science fiction fan magazines (Duncombe 1997). Web zines are a digital format, sharing with their print counterparts the following features: They are non-professional, have low circulation numbers, and are published and distributed by their creators. Aside from the Web-based fanfictions discussed above, the types of Web zines read most frequently by participants in this research are one of the following categories of Dun-

combe's (1997) taxonomy of zines "personal zines or 'perzines' that are personal notes on the daily experiences and thoughts of the creator (i.e., *Grrl.com*; various Weblogs available at lesbian and gay Web portals such as *gaycanada.com*; *lesbian.org*, etc.); political zines associated with identity categories such as feminist and queer (e.g. *Soapboxgirls*)" (11–12).

Francesca, an aspiring comic artist, and Diane, a self-published, paper-based zine creator, routinely read Web zines, but Keri's perspective on zine reading shows that, for her, it is more her geographical isolation from communities of other young queer people and from forms of lesbian and gay literature that leads her to on-line material. This on-line reading declined when she moved to a larger city in southern Ontario:

I like reading a lot, like, like the kind of on-line zines and stuff ... I'm kind of down with that right now too. I don't know if they have it at *Grrl.com* but they've got, kind of Web sites like that, where there's kind of like, writing and stuff, I don't know, I like it [laughs] ... I do it on a pretty regular basis, actually. But, actually I haven't been reading recently though. I was doing a lot more in [northern Ontario city] when there wasn't a whole lot to do. (Keri)

Other Web-based texts

Camille and Barb recalled reading material from on-line magazines that were structured more like their traditional print counterparts, with tables of contents, feature articles, regularly contributing columnists, and commercial operations. *Nerve* is now a multi-media company, with active film, television, and publishing projects. *Soapboxgirls* began as a Web forum and e-zine for discussion about social and feminist issues. Today, it exists primarily as a Weblog, with regular entries by its two female "twenty-something" creators.

Well I read *Nerve.com* I think that's the one that used to be a magazine ... It's kind of this, their slogan is intelligent smut. It has a lot of like feminist things, issues mostly to do with sex, and that's what kind of interests me ... They have all kinds of opinion pieces ... They do have some fiction but it's short, or just kind of you know criticizing things like why so many women today are ashamed of their bodies, different things like that ... (Camille)

It's mostly, it's not fiction, it would be mostly just like social commentary or just ramblings. Like there's a few sites that I visit. One of them that I really like is called *Soapbox Girls* and they're just, they're based out of the West Coast and one, it's one lesbian and one straight girl. I don't know how old they are—older. But just writing on various things and um, let me think of what else. It's usually more for procrastinating and I'm bored or I'm at work or *Techbodyke*, they're ok. I'm kind of drawing a bit of a blank ... It depends on how much time I'm actually in front of my com-

puter. (Barb)

The Web portal *TechnoDyke.com* was visited by many participants in this study, but Kathy was most articulate about how she used it: She searched for stories of other lesbian and queer women, she read poetry and stories on-line, she looked for information about homosexuality, and she sought connections with others through common cultural interests:

I looked for lesbian poetry. It was like Sappho? I guess she was a great lesbian poet ... I didn't really like her stuff, her stuff wasn't really translated and it was chopped up ... but I what I did before I did that is I joined a lot of like gay—I joined *gaycan-ada*. I'd go to gay chats or just—oh *Technodykes* I joined that ... That's pretty cool. It's American based. So I would join a lot of, I don't know, communities on the Internet. Then I'd read message boards ... I mean the questions ... lot of the questions I was always concerned with, people would ask ... and there was always people always supportive. It was always the same people talking. You might have got to know their personality ... I lurked a lot. I talked on text with it for a bit. Because they have just general topics, like they have different areas of message boards. Like they have a music board and—[it wasn't always about] lesbian or gay issues.
(Kathy)

Conclusion

The participants in this study used the Internet to search for information about reading materials, especially novels with lesbian and gay content. They also attempted to locate books themselves through remote access to library catalogues and, more satisfactorily, through on-line bookstore inventory lists. Some participants read a variety of Web-based digital media on a regular basis and found it a rewarding extension of their enjoyment of texts in other media. Participants expressed an intensity of engagement with the “textual other” (Pearce 1997) in their accounts of reading on-line, whether perceived as a character from television and comics or an imagined community of like-minded readers. Fanzines, Web comics, electronic zines, and other digital texts accessed via the Internet provide new options for readers' advisory services and library collections. Furthermore, in an echo of the call made by educational researchers, I believe that the LIS community needs to take better account of the invisible and unsanctioned literacy practices of all young people. In particular, we ought to look more closely at the reading interests and practices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and—as their visibility increases—also transsexual and transgender youth, who like the young women in this study may remain largely frustrated in their search for relevant, popular, entertaining materials that provide positive, complex, varied, and sophisticated repre-

sentations of non-mainstream sexualities. As I report elsewhere (Rothbauer 2004b), encounters with realistic representations of viable possibilities for the enactment of alternative sexual identities are far more than personal and individual processes of finding oneself in the text. This kind of reading holds the potential to augment and build powerful social connections among readers and members of lesbian and queer communities.

I conclude with the words of Camille and Joyce, whose comments underline well the common expectation held by the young women who participated in my study that they would find something useful, satisfying, and even entertaining on the Internet but rarely in the reading materials supplied by their school and public libraries. Joyce, one of four regular patrons of the physical library branch, encapsulates the potential of the Internet to fill the vacuum of “nothingness” with information regarding non-mainstream sexualities, simply by virtue of being a holding place for information about what it means to be gay.

I think I kind of did that on the Internet ... I didn't get it, like I didn't even really know what it was ... Like no one ever talked about it near me. Ever. Like it was just nothing. It was like not even around. (Joyce)

Camille also found stories on-line, a reading event that offered her a sense of positive space in which to explore her ideas about bisexuality and feminism. She compares this positive experience with the failures she had at libraries and bookstores:

Reading on the Internet and reading when I got on-line, just reading those being queer and being depressed or whatever, there was so much kind of positive space on the Internet where those kind of things were not found in the bookstore, were not found in the libraries. (Camille)

Notes

- 1 *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (1982) is an early, American, young adult novel that sympathetically features a passionate same-sex relationship between two female high school seniors.
- 2 The names of all participants are pseudonyms. Other identifying characteristics have also been altered or removed in order to protect their identities.
- 3 The term “queer” has a varied history of use as a descriptor of human sexuality (see Hogan and Hudson 1998). In this study I deploy the term to honour the preferences of my participants many of whom selected “queer” over other descriptors such as “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual” citing its properties of inclusiveness, multiplicity, diversity and instability regarding the heterosexual/

homosexual binary. Furthermore, my use of the acronym LGBTQ to correspond to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- and queer reflects its actual occurring usage rather than an attempt to reduce the awkwardness of the lengthy linguistic construction.

- 4 I choose the phrase “lesbian and gay literature” to refer to those works with lesbian and gay characters and themes.
- 5 My initial research plan proposed a wider sample of participants that would include young men who claimed alternative sexual identities. However, I decided to limit participation to young women, thus reducing differences in reading practices across participants that might be attributed to conventional understandings of gender.
- 6 I realize that the age range of 18-to-23 years positions my participants well past the conventional ages associated with childhood. Readers should note, however, that much of the interview data related to the search for lesbian and gay texts is given retrospectively—that is, participants recalled search strategies and outcomes from their earlier adolescence. This study received ethics approval for interviews with participants as young as 14 years of age, but I was contacted by no one younger than 18 years, thus supporting the recurrent claims by researchers that it is extremely difficult to gain access to sexual-minority youth (see Miceli 2002).
- 7 Please see Rothbauer 2004a and 2004b for more detailed outlines of research methods.
- 8 The following transcript conventions are used throughout this paper: Ellipses represent omitted dialogue of the nature of false starts, nonsensical utterances, interviewer prompts, or other content that does not add to the meaning of the speech; dashes represent natural and actual pauses; square brackets contain comments added for clarification.
- 9 See for example Finders 1997 and Moje 2000.
- 10 See Appendix for details and location of Web comics and zines mentioned throughout this paper.

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