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Still queer -- or, what is queer Internet studies for those who don't study the internet?

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by Lisa Henderson

Abstract

The queer Internet is a cultural formation, not a technological outcome. It bears the marks of changes, uncertainties, and structures of feeling of queer and non-queer cultures at large. Our questions can be: what have we as queers chosen to do with the Internet? What will we choose to do?

Still queer

Every summer in early August I drive from Western Massachusetts to Southwestern Ontario — Alice Munro country — to visit elderly relatives. I was born there, though my family left for Montréal when I was six. Since then, especially since my parents died in 2010 and 2011, it has been a pilgrimage to people I am from, but places where I no longer live, physically or culturally. To recalibrate my sense of things after trips full of love, nostalgia and melancholy, I spend a day in Toronto on the way out, and on this most recent trip I stayed in the city with one of my brothers. His house was being used for a film shoot the following morning and we had to be out at the historically unseen (and somehow unqueer) hour of 7 am. I drove east on the Trans Canada highway, planning to turn south through Gananoque, Ontario, across the border into upstate New York and, from there, to the Mass Pike.

I've driven past Gananoque a hundred times, always curious about the "1,000 Islands" archipelago in the St. Lawrence River, which intersects with the Gananoque River. Since I was a kid I wondered — were there really a thousand islands? This time I drove into town, parked, walked around, noticing the familiar stone construction of Southern Ontario. I headed toward the river's edge, where tourists were boarding a small passenger cruise vessel, the kind used for ferries but with seats on the upper deck. For $24.95 (Canadian), you could cruise the 1,000 Islands for an hour. Some islands are the size of a modest backyard, some big enough for small farming. Most have cottages, and many of those are acquired only through inheritance. I was on the boat alone, under-dressed, a chronically dry-throated and pale-skinned white woman without sunscreen, a hat, or water to drink, but it was a short tour. Better-equipped people had come from all over to see these islands — from the U.S. (which the south shore of the waterway is a part of) but also from elsewhere in Canada, from East and South Asia, from the Middle East, from Europe. I couldn't identify all the languages people were speaking on the boat that day, save French and Arabic (and Arabic only because a bilingual family member confirmed it, in English). Were they resident tourists or holiday visitors to Canada? I didn't know; in my happenstance reverie, I didn't ask.

I'd never really cruised in public places in my queerest days, though I had always admired a social and sexual practice guided by informal rules and protections among people, mostly men, who were routinely vulnerable to outsider violence and official harassment. This cruise was a far cry from that cruising, but still there was the conviviality of a mixed group of strangers at ease in each other's company — one way of describing the queer Internet. Queerness had long ago taught me to recognize the experience of being at once in and out of place.

As we progressed through the islands, our trip was narrated by a recorded voice that sounded like a '50s television game show host — formal, modulated, outward-projected and groomed with cocktails and Brylcreem. The islands have a distinguished history, we learned, though the trade stories sounded mainly like unfair deals between indigenous people and British then Canadian governments and industrialists. The

narrator continued: "the cottages have been owned by members of parliament and the presidents of firms, by entertainers, diplomats, industrialists and professors, and by Mr. and Mrs. Ordinary Citizen."

As the boat glided my insides swerved, in this leisurely place whose habitus was and was not mine. "Members of parliament ... and professors ..." was an odd list, in which "professor" — which I am — like "member of Parliament" was to be understood as a lofty and distinctive métier, not a member of a crotchety labor pool to be managed in the university's neoliberal formation. Then there was the tumble down to "Mr. and Mrs. Ordinary Citizen." By the state's standard I was a Mrs., having married my sweetheart, a non-queer guy, a few years earlier, after six years together and 20 before that as a lesbian. The vocal inflection on "Mr. and Mrs. Ordinary" sounded vintage and wistful, out of step with modern times but in tune with the settled and peaceable idea of "cottage country" in the Canadian dream, notwithstanding Gananoque's hard-scrabble industrial origins in mining and milling or its land theft before that. Was I the only one thinking about this? About the anachronistic signifiers of marital relations and the academic profession? (We remain elites, some of us, but more removed than revered.) About where cottage country comes from? I presume there were other marrieds on board, and perhaps some of them, like I, buckle at the sound of the word "wife." And still others had to have noticed that somewhere-in-time voice. We were on a mobile diorama, a water-borne, diesel-driven and topsy-turvy amalgam of place, history, and language, the kind that begs you to speculate about what's behind the thousand closed doors of the 1,000 Islands. Alice Munro, never a queer author but the best observer of all that is strange and true about Southern Ontario, would understand, even though Gananoque is east of Munro's Huron County and no doubt banded — in ways I can't tell — by its own microculture. With its dislocations in time and space, its combination of ordinary and spectacular, its establishment façade begging queries about what transpires undisclosed in the region, the scene was as queer as a three-dollar bill. "More than you'd expect" turns out to be Gananoque's business association motto.

Short of the boat's on-board communication or navigational system, there was nothing computer-mediated about that tour, but its diffuse queerness offered a sense of displacement that I want to preserve in thinking about the articulation of queerness and the Internet. Like the boat's recorded voice, my queer dispositions and intellectual desires feel a little out of step, but I'll hold the space between old and new and see where it takes me.

The Queer Internet Studies Symposium was a gift, peopled by authors I depend on, like Adrienne Shaw, Shaka McGlotten, and T. L. Cowan. At the close of things, with group-generated paper lists taped to the walls about what is and could be queer about the Internet, the boundaries were formed, figuratively, of dotted lines — tentative, experimental, open. Despite a common practice of referring to "the Internet" as a thing, in conversation the thing dissolved and resolved like scenes in a movie. In its place arose many connected things and practices — a platform, a network, a space, a capacity, a target, a system, a set of codes, affordances and risks. These are possibilities for queers, and others who would queer their worlds, to find, use, make and change, Internet possibilities inconclusively distributed like the cultural voices and histories on that Gananoque boat. They signified a disposition to approach the Internet in the manner that queers have long approached physical spaces not already queer — provisionally, bravely, inquisitively. In the early weeks after the inauguration of the forty-fifth U.S. president and in contrast to his arsonist's approach to social media, conveners Jessa Lingel and Jack Gieseking had organized the day the way so many of us would like to organize the world.

Queer Internet studies can preserve a history and future of the Internet that recognizes its cultural roots and branches, not only its narrowly technological formation. Media historian Thomas Streeter has made this case persuasively against the grain of popular fantasies of technological salvation, describing dramatic shifts in how the Internet was imagined and projected between 1992 and 1996. In that time, Streeter argues [1], "internetworking technology" came to be imagined as interactive, not transmissive, and as a system that was supposed to be surprising, not a means to a predetermined end. It was "imagined through a spatial metaphor, as a forum rather than a conduit, a cyberspace rather than an information highway." And it was imagined to "embody a telos of change and progression, a kind of agency attributable to the technology without human agency or design." "The recurring question about the future," says Streeter [2] "became 'what will happen on the Internet next?' instead of, say, 'what will we as a society choose to do with computer communication?'"

Streeter's purpose in uncovering the cultural investments (especially the *longue durée* of American Romanticism) that have structured the Internet isn't just to resist the analytic straw man of technological determinism, though indeed he resists it. It is to understand that the tradition of democratic hope popularly attributed to the network as technical form is in fact in and of the culture. Democratic possibility is something we make and hold, not something brought to us by even the most complex technological forms. In our collective uses amid the constraints of systems and resources we don't control (and some we may, at least modestly), we can rephrase Streeter's question: "what will we as queers choose to do with computer communication?" Despite reverence for the radical uses of social media, queers and queerness will not control Internet design, capitalization, financialization, state-sanctioned surveillance of all kinds or even the terms of address to queers, any more than queers and queerness control other platforms, systems, idioms, and voices, save our own (and then, only sometimes). But, as we have done with just those resources, we will claim pieces and moments for our own purposes — to find people, to tell them we're there, to configure our work and leisure as gamers, artists, lovers or activists, to build and protect our archives, to launch the queer school of soft knocks, a dense set of communicative pathways through which people of all kinds learn to counter convention and suppression with invention and expression, and to know that there are always queerer ways of being — ways open to sexual and affective variation, protective of delicacy and of those who suffer and those who rebuild, suspicious of true love and true selfhood in favor of true community and solidarity; who'll be funny, clever, and exposing.

Many queer Internet authors, some present at the Queer Internet Studies Symposium, have joined communities of users to ask that queer variant of Streeter's question, "what will queers do with the Internet?" Their work underscores uses, places, and a queering worldview. To begin, the queer, largely rural-dwelling youth Mary L. Gray (2009) rode and wrote with in Eastern Kentucky depended simultaneously on live and online social scenes in the early 2000s. They blended both with family and community cultures and with adult advocacy that queer young people neither felt they could leave behind nor wanted to. Theirs was neither metrosexual queerness nor an online world disconnected from local social life, where "The Internet" is projected as the agent of change. Gray answers in collaboration with queer youth. We would create resources for survival in a social relay system equally dependent on old media and old people as new media and new friends. We would configure ourselves as best we could to make our times and places respond. We would surprise those in our communities with personal blogs of gender transition where our first interlocutor — counter to most public pronouncements on the subject — would be our mothers. We would convene impromptu drag shows in the aisles of Walmart, decked out in costume items dripping with retail tags, then rally online and off-line support when harassed. We would draw the Internet into our modes of living as we lobbied state houses, launched skate parties and hardcore band nights, and gossiped about school. The Internet would not save us but it would become a linkage, a bridge, a screen — a Swiss Army tool we would use to communicate in and beyond our everyday.

In her interview and participatory study of "gaming at the edge" of gender and sexuality, QIS speaker Adrienne Shaw (2014) credits the multi-racial community she spoke with as unself-consciously challenging media studies' long investment in representation as life/screen comparison, where the adequacy of images on screen is a matter of IRL resemblance. Those Shaw interviewed used fantasy game content and play to imagine not resemblance but alterity — how *else* could the world be? Good question. Shaw (2017) has carried on to develop an LGBTQ game content archive, to preserve for players, scholars, and community members the record of wild and conventional imagination by, for, and about queers and aligned others.

Partly inspired by Shaw's work, Brian Myers (forthcoming) is curious about how solitary game play and social withdrawal enable some queer players to ground themselves, despite their experience of hostility and privation. They need separation, not normative involvement, a possibility Shaw also explores in charting the attributed values of game play. Shaw does so by borrowing Gayle Rubin's (1984) "charmed circle" and "outer limits" model of sexual value in dialogue with Huizinga's (1949) theorizing of *homo ludens*, a species who thrives on play, if not play alone. Why reject solitude in favor of unsought sociality? What is the value of solitary play, of solitude's place in queer life online? In Myers' study, young people made vulnerable by queerness, poverty, overexposure and misrecognition have queered the Internet by staying in, where they can, mapping life in their terms day by day and queering the conditions of interaction by quietly refusing the sociable forms they experience as assaultive. Such queer conditions may not be others' ideal states, but survival is the first gesture in a thriving life, and sometimes withdrawal is resistance. Myers' solitary gamers have learned this the hard way. It would be incorrect to imagine their play as disembodied when in fact it is their deeply embodied experience — its feelings, threats, and relief — that enables their queer discoveries online.

Even the queer variants of contemporary hipster profile have their roots in Internet *cultures*, not technical affordances, as we are mercilessly asked and re-asked to produce a brand and circulate it online, sometimes, say, as queer scholars aspiring for employment and recognition, other times as wage workers looking for service jobs, or chronically underpaid freelancers in the culture industries (Banet-Weiser, 2012). How are queer structures of feeling repeated and naturalized in online self-branding? How does queer Internet branding practice move among queer and non-queer sectors, creating a relay system of queer formation in the culture at large? In 2013, I theorized constant movement between queer and non-queer sectors in cultural production as a form of "queer relay" [3]. Ferrying that idea to cultural life more broadly reminds us that through work, school, friendship, participation and social dependence (on services, family, or communities of faith), we all inhabit more than one circle. As we move, we take our queer selves to new stations, queering the world one resettlement at a time. The small transformations of public culture produced by queer relay happen online, or can, even as we also hunker down in news bubbles and niche markets. The historical appropriation of queer style, moreover, is amplified as workers and citizens brand ourselves in terms at once idiosyncratic — or "distinct" — and "relatable." Online, with infusions of queer culture (whether as fashion bloggers, say, or other aspiring cultural influencers) we are not only gaming at the edge but branding at the edge, or trying.

This is a short list of places people have gone to ask what queers are doing with the Internet and what the Internet is doing with queers. From bullying to selling to salvation there's more. But with this short list I want to join Kara Keeling's impulse to imagine the Internet in broadly queer terms through queer practice grounded in everyday queer life. In a speculative essay on the encounter between queerness and new media titled "Queer OS," Keeling (2014) envisions a practice in which the network of networks can be used to dislodge common sense in favor of a new commons whose hallmarks are eccentricity and justice. For Keeling, a queer OS is an "operating system of a larger order," not just something that runs our computers. The queer pathways and resonances that emerge on a boat trip in Gananoque emerge, too, from the Internet's queer use.

In February 2017, I was grateful to the Queer Internet Studies Symposium for welcoming sexual, racial and gender variance and eccentricity, for preserving a piece of the commons, for bringing three historical (not only academic) generations to the conversation, and for renewing faith in a vertiginous relationship to the world as it is conventionally known — for filling a smooth waterway with more currents than typically appear on the surface, and for receiving that multiplicity as strength. There is no grand march of Internet history, no technological telos that will take us to redemption or revolution, nor any activist guarantee against the political strong-arming (like the FCC's jettisoning of Internet neutrality) that seeks to remake the Internet as oligopoly. But even then the Internet is diffuse, intended, accidental, full of threat and possibility, commercial,

non-commercial and in between. It can be queered, can be made responsive to our uses even as we can't remake it, whole cloth, in our queer, multi-racial, gender-variant or class-non-dominant image. It can be unconforming — if we see it for what it is — despite normative desires and narratives of destruction. Like the Gananoque river cruise, it is a place we can go and bend to our view. Such a disposition won't be accepted by everyone, but it can be recognized and held by those of us who have never been served by certainty, those better served by Keeling's OS, by a larger order of queers making history, just not under conditions of our own making. **FM**

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Notes

1. Streeter, 2017, p. 84.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Henderson, 2013, pp. 101–128.

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