

Queer Belonging:

Digital, embodied and imagined community
at Autostraddle.com

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Declaration:

I certify that this thesis presented for examination contains no material previously published or accepted, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

The length of this thesis is 75,901 words.

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the imaginary and discursive borders of the 'queer women's community' online and what it means to relate to and with one another as queer women in the present. The contemporary reconfiguring of queer relationality has shifted the figure of the lesbian from one centred on non-normative sex or politics to one which gathers around common aesthetics and interests. Thus, this thesis examines queer women's navigation of contemporary communities that span across on and offline spaces and investigates how queer belonging is being constituted in the digital landscape. Drawing on the flourishing literature on digital intimacies and feminist digital cultures, the thesis focuses on Autostraddle.com, the world's most popular queer women's website to explore the negotiation of gender and queer belonging and the constitution of community online. The extensive Autostraddle 'community' extends beyond the website onto social media and indeed also offline, where members attend regular meetups including an annual for-profit 'camp' (A-Camp) in California. The ethnography of Autostraddle and A-Camp in this thesis includes several elements: in-depth interviews, participant observation, textual analysis, collage, narrative fiction and autoethnography. The thesis argues that Autostraddle exists as an imaginary queer utopia in which queer women are explicitly feminist, as well as sexy, dynamic, politically engaged and connected to one another through shared histories and literacies of gender, sexuality and popular culture. Constituting queer women in this way, as a 'taste community' (Bourdieu 1986), allows for new modes of access. However, the rhetoric and imperative of *belonging* reframes the continued asymmetry of cultural literacy as personal failure. It investigates how we might utilise new technologies to build a strong base for feminist and queer collectivism in order to challenge structural norms whilst also resiting notions of the

collective as *common* and critiquing belonging as a driving force that produces emotional attachments to borders and boundaries. Though this thesis is critical of contemporary digital queer relations, it acknowledges the possibilities of queer belonging as productive of valuable and meaningful moments of sociality and challenge to social norms.

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An Introduction: Why belonging?

From body image to belonging

The very first thing I wrote in the notebook I bought for my PhD, in March 2015, was a question: *What does it mean to recognise my body as queer?* And then, the answer, just below: *It means freedom, new restrictions, confusion.* I wanted to know, then, about the body narratives and discourses of recognition and representation that shape queer women's experiences of their lives, their communities, the fleshy extremities and the soft middles. I collapsed these questions under a single title, 'body image'. I had recently completed two research projects on women's body management and found the literature lacking in queer content. The implicit assumption seemed to be that queer women were not worthy of study because they could either be subsumed into the larger category of 'woman', or because they had already been liberated from the oppressions of that category.

I was interested in queer women's bodies because we come to understand our place within socio-political arenas through the physical, social and historical positioning of our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1976). That is, we are constituted *as* queer women through the categorisation and performativity (Butler 1990) of our bodily relations. Our bodies are not isolated, discrete entities though; they are made, remade and made meaningful in our relationships with other human and non-human bodies. Indeed, bodies, in all their fleshy aesthetic and affective glory, are integral to the production and policing of communal spaces and boundaries (Ahmed 2000). Bodies and communities are ontologically engaged, shaping and constituting one another in continual processes of communal embodiment.

The concept of women's bodies as both tool and symbol of gendered oppression has been a long standing theme in feminist theory. Cecilia Hartley writes that women are 'taught early to contain themselves, to keep arms and legs close to the body and take up as little space as possible' (2010, p 246-7), Millman argues that fat women are viewed as 'unfeminine, in flight from sexuality, antisocial, out of control, hostile, aggressive' (1980, p xi) and Bartky claims that women's bodies are socially mandated to 'betray no signs of wear, experience, age or deep thought' (1997, p136). While these theorists have provided valuable insight into the oppression of women, they do tend to reify *the experience* of women's bodies as universal. Kelly (2007), Rothblum (1993) and Fahs (2011) have each argued that patriarchal discourses about bodies impact queer women just as they do *all* women.

Surely, the bodily relations specific to queerness - that is, bodies that relate to one another in ways that defy normative expectations - experience specific criticisms and require particular negotiations of value. Yet, the literature on queer women's embodiment and related issues around 'body image' were scarce. The literature that did exist (in particular, see Atkins' edited collection *Looking Queer*, 1998) almost always centred on belonging *within* the queer community, rather than focusing on mainstream exclusion. Barron (1998), for example, writes about fat-phobia in lesbian communities, Stafford (2010) writes about misogyny and the denigration of feminine aesthetics within the same communities, Woolfe (1998) and Bullington (1998) each describe aesthetics as key to entrance and inclusion within lesbian spaces and Myers et al (1999), argue that exclusion from queer communities is often tied to appearance and performances of gender.

It became clear from the literature and existing research that the body cannot be neatly separated out from broader concerns around belonging and community. The 'community' and its embodied affordances are inevitably shifted and changed through prolific digitisation and increasing mainstream acceptance and incorporation of LGBT identities. A feminist focus on an effective subject/object paradigm with regard to public discourse and women's bodies has arguably been reductive and failed to recognise the ways in which bodies, identities and communities are made meaningful in terms of their constitutive relationality. That is, conversations that purported to be about queer body image were actually about *belonging*, and the complexities of navigating sometimes conflicting norms around gender and sexuality. Though the focus of my research shifted away from body image and toward belonging as a constitutive force, the interest in aesthetics and embodiment lingers in the tensions of visibility, representation, space and sex throughout this thesis.

Belonging

Much of social theory stems from a question of belonging. Our lives as social beings are structured and articulated in terms of our attachments - to each other, to discourse, to the world. This thesis examines queer women's attachments to belonging as a constitutive force in the imaginary of community at Autostraddle.com¹, a popular queer women's website. These attachments manifest as investments in a politics of visibility and representation, in the telling of historical moments, in laughter and in sex, and in the ways in which bodies might move through place and space. In the digitally intimate

¹ I have decided not to italicise Autostraddle throughout the thesis to aid readability, as it appears so often.

space of Autostraddle, post/feminist rhetorics of individual capacity and value sit alongside queer politics of community and resistance to produce the figure of the relatable and capacious likeable lesbian. The pop culture landscape of the website has produced a taste community around which the community imaginary coalesces.

Autostraddle, the focus of this thesis, self-describes as ‘a revolutionary online destination and powerful brand for lesbian, bisexual and otherwise inclined ladies’, which aims to ‘build community, report breaking news, promote talented artists and support progressive activists’ (Autostraddle 2017), and grew out of a fan blog for television show *The L Word* in 2009. The fan blog was called *The Road Less Straddled* and detailed founding editor Riese Bernard’s observations on bisexuality in the media. Now the most popular lesbian website in the world, Autostraddle serves as a cultural melting pot for all things relating to lesbian, bisexual and queer women. Though it is a website, rather than a forum, social media or microblogging platform (such as Facebook or Tumblr), it manages to maintain a level of continuous interaction and community connection not often seen on other sites. Andrea Long Chu describes Autostraddle as a feminist lifestyle magazine: a site in which feminism is institutionalised as a ‘fandom’ and ideological beliefs are held ‘primarily in order to produce belongingness as a habitual form for going about everyday life’ (2019, 67).

This thesis aims to imagine belonging beyond attachments to borders and collectivity beyond rhetorics of commonality. If belonging functions as a primary constitutive force for queer/feminist communities, and if, as Antonsich argues, belonging tends to be filled ‘with a rhetoric of sameness’ (2010, 650), the possibilities of rupturing and disrupting social norms within those communities are diminished and limited. New technologies have made new connections possible for queer people, creating bonds that

defy homophobia, isolation and normative gender expectations. In this work, I consider how we might utilise these new technologies to build a strong base for feminist and queer collectivism in order to challenge structural norms whilst resisting notions of the collective as *common* and critiquing belonging as a driving force that produces emotional attachments to borders and boundaries.

The central question of this thesis is: how is queer belonging constituted in the contemporary digital landscape? Through an ethnographic study of queer women's website, Autostraddle.com, my aim is to investigate how formations and negotiations of gender and sexuality happen through new social technologies of the internet. As new communities are being formed in innovative and exciting ways, I wonder how border technologies are being maintained or remade to fit against and with digital parameters and expectations. Online spaces were once considered safe havens for grassroots feminist organising, or utopic spaces, free from the gendered and raced 'baggage' of the material body, however, it is now clear that we cannot consider such spaces outside of the capitalist framework in which they are sustained. Given this context, what are the possibilities and limits offered by belonging as a constitutive force for queer women?

This project is comprised of an ethnography of Autostraddle and its annual event A-Camp, utilising textual analysis, online ethnography, participant observation, photo diaries, semi-structured interviews and autoethnography. This chapter begins by setting the epistemological stage and contextualising the methods used as creative, feminist approaches to online ethnography. This ethnography focuses on Autostraddle.com and its yearly community event in California, A-Camp. Autostraddle was the most fitting place to undertake this research, not just because it is the most popular Anglophone queer women's website, but because it braids together community

through on *and* offline spaces. Rather than a community with an online presence or an online space in which to instigate offline relationships, Autostraddle effectively ‘straddles’ both spheres in ways that demonstrate the porous, increasingly slippery and fictional boundary between the internet and the ‘real world’.

The title of this thesis, ‘Queer Belonging’, has a somewhat dual meaning. On the one hand, it is quite straightforwardly about the pleasures and tensions of belonging together as queer, or LGBT, people. On the other hand, the thesis explores what it might mean to *queer* belonging, to reimagine and appreciate attachments to one another beyond an imperative for commonality or sameness, while avoiding a reinscription of identity as fixed and stable. Belonging *feels* like an ethical aspiration, an attempt to locate one’s ‘place’ in the world. However, the politics of placemaking is always a politics of borders and boundaries that requires regimes of regulation that are perhaps antithetical to the political aims of *queerness* as resistant to regulation (Warner 1993, xxvi). Though a concrete definition of the many mobile meanings of ‘queer’ is impossible to offer, I am guided in this thesis by Sedgwick, who writes of queerness as:

‘The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically’ (1993, 8).

The thesis explores the possibilities and limits of a framework of ‘belonging’ in relation to queerness and intimacy. Belonging is often granted in exchange for uniformity, in ways that require ‘monolithic signification’; there is little room for gaps, lapses and excesses. Instead, this thesis aims to reimagine belonging as a practice of solidarity, or

collectivity - a mobile attachment to another way of living in the world, rather than an attachment to sexuality as likeness or generability (Muñoz 2009).

Straddle this

Autostraddle is part of my daily life. To the chagrin of screen-detoxers and social media sceptics everywhere, my phone is always my first port of call in the mornings. To begin: the usual social media haunts, facebook, instagram, twitter, then the news if I'm feeling brave and finally Autostraddle.com. Autostraddle comes last so that I can rest and laze in the content and begin my day by renewing my connection to a big, wide, queer world. I read shorter articles while laying in bed or waiting for my hair to dry, and earmark the longer ones for later in the day, when my thesis is languishing or I'm seeking solace from the patriarchal pains of moving through academia and the world as a queer woman. In this thesis, I 'straddle' dual positions as researcher and community members, and I find, in the words of Elspeth Probyn, that 'yearnings to fit in will always be diverse: at times joyous, at times painful, at times, destined to fail' (1995, 2).

Autostraddle became important to me over the last ten years, and as I have discovered, to many others, because of its potential to respond to a deep yearning for belonging among like-minded others. Belonging, however, is often a complicated mess that is most salient, clear, in moments of precarity. As Yuval-Davis notes, belonging is a 'dynamic process' (2006, 197) which here relies on the negotiation of cultural norms around gender and sexuality. Queer sites online like Autostraddle indeed serve as important and meaningful havens for queer people, but the process of belonging is also central to the boundary work that upholds cultural hierarchies (McCann & Killen 2019,

137). That is, the desire to belong produces emotional attachments to cultural borders that can be difficult to untangle and navigate.

This thesis investigates the community imaginary at Autostraddle as a central site of belonging for queer women in the present. Each year, Autostraddle hosts A-Camp, a meet-up event in the mountains near Los Angeles. The event is understood as a 3-D version of the website; a space in which the affects, relations and attachments of the Autostraddle community are heightened and intensified. My research sits across both spaces: the online and the off, to produce a rich, embodied account of queer life in the digital present.

The discussion of Autostraddle in this thesis happens within the context of postfeminism as ‘a cultural moment’ that has permeated debates and conversations of women, feminism and our engagement with media over the last 30 years. The term gained traction in the media in the early 1980s, proclaiming the success and then the death of an outdated and restrictive feminist movement (Gamble 2001, 44). Now that women had achieved equality, they were free to joyously unshackle themselves from the ‘tyranny’ of a feminist movement that demanded they relinquish femininity and heterosexuality. The emergence of terms like ‘girl power’ and media sensations and spectacles such as the Spice Girls happened within this hooray-feminism-is-over context.

Simultaneously, postfeminism was being used by the feminist academic community to invoke postcolonial and poststructural criticisms of earlier ‘hegemonic’ feminist movements. As Brooks explains, ‘postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference’ (Brooks 1997, 4). The ‘third wave’ and ‘postfeminism’ were

often used interchangeably to describe the expansion of a feminist ideology beyond gender as the defining axis of oppression (McCann 2018, 30). The battleground for this fight for expansion or redefinition was often focused on the media and on feminine aesthetics, particularly the question of whether femininity and representations of femininity were products of patriarchy, and women were simply its victims.

Though this thesis doesn't aim to offer new insights into the concept or utility of postfeminism, the theorists I engage with here, namely Gill, Dobson, Kanai and Banet-Weiser, use frameworks of postfeminism to explore concepts of self-production, self-representation and 'empowerment' in media. Autostraddle emerged as a queer media source and a feminist community in the context of a 'new cultural life of feminism' in which the tensions of representation, aesthetics, gender, identity and politics are especially fraught (Gill 2016). This is the context within which I deploy this term throughout the thesis.

Utopia

Utopia emerges as a consistent theme throughout this thesis and particularly in relation to the production of A-Camp as a feminist utopic space. There is a history of referring to separatist women spaces (discussed in more detail in chapter two) as lesbian utopias, for example, Kath Browne describes Michigan Womyn's Festival as a rural idyll and an 'imperfect lesbian utopia' (2011). Further, as Sanders has argued, feminism has long been shaped by utopianism as a mechanism and strategy for social change, which has been criticised for a lack of pragmatism or realism (2007). In this thesis however, I draw primarily on the work of Jose Muñoz, who describes utopia as a queer dreaming of new ways of being in the world, and of new worlds entirely (2009). He claims queerness

itself as a deep and material longing for a utopic (as in, different) future, unhinged from the restraints and structures of the present. Here, his work braids with Probyn's writing on belonging as productive yearning for something other than what is (1996). This is the framework through which I deploy the concept of utopia in this thesis, as expansive rather than restrictive, and as an imaginary rather than a practical guideline for 'perfect' social relations. Utopia is in this sense then, always an experiment, which sometimes fails but is never still or fixed.

Queer relationality online

In the time since beginning this thesis, the landscape of queer relationality has shifted dramatically. Over the last five years, same-sex marriage has been legalised in The UK, USA and Australia and mainstream media representation of LGBTIQ people has never been higher (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019). If you prescribe to a progressive narrative of life, there has never been a better time to be queer or an easier time in which to relate to one another. However, the election of Trump in the USA in 2016 also saw the rollback of protective measures for queer and trans people and in the same year, 50 LGBTIQ people were killed during an attack on Pulse nightclub, a gay club in Orlando, Florida. In the United Kingdom, borders have hardened and racism has heightened with the election of Boris Johnson and the passing of BREXIT. In Australia, conservative, evangelical politician Scott Morrison has been elected Prime Minister and the Liberal Party has instigated the Religious Freedoms/Discrimination Bill which protects the rights of many conservative groups to discriminate against LGBTIQ individuals, amongst others.

Research has also shown a significant increase in hate crimes targeting LGBTIQ people (Gooch & Bachman 2017). Trans women in particular have faced the brunt of this increase in vitriol, with a particular sect of the feminist lesbian movement declaring queerness defunct and trans women unwelcome in the fight against patriarchal governance. Navigating the world is especially complicated as a contemporary queer woman, given the disappearance of clubs and bars dedicated to lesbian culture and life. Considering the storminess of negotiating gender and sexuality in this context, the borders of the queer women's community (if such a thing can be imagined) feel especially precarious and untenable at the present moment. What does it mean then, to relate to and with one another as queer women online?

Given this context, it has been important for this project to step back and consider the ideological constitution of queer women's relationality in a digital era. Important research is being done on young women's communities and relationality online (Kanai 2019, Dobson 2016) and on LGBTQ life online (O'Riordan 2007, Byron et al 2019, Hanckel & Morris 2014, Hillier & Harrison 2007), but little work has been done on queer women specifically. The increase in acceptance of LGB² identities within mainstream institutions and culture has arguably lead to the dispersal of a central, geographically specific queer community across multiple digital sites. The internet as a main portal for social-connectedness then certainly affords a reconfiguring of queer relationality. Instead of a community centred on sex (or non-normative bodily relations more

² I use LGB here instead of LGBTQ to highlight that transgender and queer identities are not accepted as readily in mainstream institutions and cultures.

broadly) and the rejection of social codes of conduct, we are being constituted as taste communities, gathered around common aesthetics and interests.

Over the last 15 years, research on online sociality has increasingly focused on LGBT and queer uses of the Internet. Queer youth tend to turn to digital sites when seeking information regarding homophobia, relationships and sexual health (Hillier et al 2005, Byron 2015) and the anonymity of online interactions has proved useful for explorations of gender and sexuality, as well as access to educational resources (Byron et al 2019). Even as the cultural norms of online spaces have shifted from anonymity to authenticity, the internet remains and perhaps grows even more significant for the community building potential of LGBT people. This is especially true for queer people in regional or isolated areas (Gray 2014), but also for those in metropolitan areas, given the gradual disappearance of physical hubs (such as clubs, bars etc) in the western world.

A community framework is often at the heart of such work - for example, Burke's early exploration of lesbian communities in an electronic world (2000), or Hunter's research on lesbian mummy bloggers finding community online (2015). Though I certainly engage with community as a constructive concept in this research, I also question the value of understanding queer relationality online purely in terms of community. Though they are still governed by cultural norms, which are always informed by hierarchies and negotiations of power, online spaces are temporally and spatially porous and can afford new ways of connecting to one another in private and public ways. Like Lauren Berlant's *intimate public*, a queer online space can 'flourish as a pourous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging' (2008, p viii). Digital communities such as Autostraddle cannot

be understood outside a neoliberal context though, in which the self, and the ability to be relatable to other common 'selves' are constituted as potentially valuable assets. Indeed, the commodification of intimacy and the figure of the intimate queer is central to the success of this website and its associated community. That is to say, belonging is an inherently exclusionary process that can also produce valuable and meaningful moments of sociability and challenge to social norms.

Here, belonging can *feel* like an organic, ethical aspiration even though it is an achievement requiring the kinds of social capital and self-governance that are asymmetrically available and unevenly deployed. This affective identification of the intimate public, or the constitution of the communal as the common, produces disconnections as personal failures and conceals their systemic causes. Like Berlant, I am hopeful for the ways in which cultures of digital intimacy might afford a *queering* of queer women's communities by fostering connection and potentially unsticking and resisting stubborn ideas about bodies, sex, time and space. However, I am also wary of the ways in which such cultures are shaped, informed and limited by the realities of neoliberal capitalism that maintains a 'fantasy of generality' (Berlant 2008, 6) in which commonality is offered up as both salve and cause for the pains of social exclusion.

Chapter structure and outline

This thesis has been produced iteratively, and the following chapters are structured around emergent key concerns and themes. The writing of this thesis, rather than simply a report on research 'discoveries', was in itself a process of discovery and a central research method. Themes that emerged through the research process include: queer aesthetics, queer embodiment, queer memory, everyday queer femininities,

desirability, celebrity and popular culture in the queer landscape, and queer and feminist humour. Rather than a chapter dedicated to each of these themes, they emerge and appear throughout the thesis. Instead, each chapter is dedicated to a material or virtual 'site' of the ethnography. The first analytic chapter focuses on visual cultures on Autostraddle, the second on Autostraddle as archive. The third turns to humour as a community connective device on the site and at A-Camp through parody and playfulness, and the fourth examines columns and articles on sex, alongside sexual cultures at A-Camp itself. The final analytic chapter examines A-Camp as a material site and develops the concept of queer/fat as a specific experience of embodiment.

Chapter One, *Intimacy, belonging & community*, begins by situating the thesis in relation to four theoretical frames: the emergence of the luminous lesbian in post/feminist popular culture, belonging as a regulatory rhetoric within the lesbian and queer women's communities, the mobilisation and enactment of gender and sexuality online and the production of 'digital intimate publics' on social and online media (Dobson et al 2018). Through each of these frames, I focus on attachments to borders and boundaries and how the imaginary of community that flourishes at Autostraddle and online structures our relations with one another as queer women in the metropole³.

In this chapter I critically engage with feminist scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Rosalind Gill, Jessica Ringrose and Amy Dobson who each write on attachments to and negotiation of women's media, alongside theorists examining intimacy and queer life

³ Rather than defining the world in terms of the 'West', or in terms of the developed or developing world, Connell uses the terms 'metropole' and 'majority world', to speak relationally about global centres and peripheries (Connell 2007).

online, such as Brady Robards, Shaka McGlotten, Paul Byron and Mary Gray. As new communities are formed in potentially innovative ways, I wonder how border technologies and gendered attachments to community imaginaries are maintained or remediated to fit against and within digital parameters and expectations.

Chapter Two, *Heaven is a place online*, acts as an introduction to Autostraddle as a website, an event, a community, a utopian fantasy. The chapter begins by historicising Autostraddle and A-Camp as lesbian social spaces informed by separatist notions of gender and sexuality. The fantasy of queer, feminist utopias has structured lesbian social life throughout the 20th century, and in this work I consider the implications of neoliberal frameworks on the kinds of relationships made possible and limited within the digital landscape. The chapter charts the formation of separatist spaces through the early 20th century, the utopian land projects of the 1970s and 1980s, the women's festival cultures of the 1980s and 1990s, and the contemporary practices and modes of lesbian parties and tourism. The chapter ends with a thick description of Autostraddle and A-Camp as affective, embodied social sites that have emerged within a specific context of separatism and a postfeminist and neoliberal focus on lifestyle and taste.

Chapter Three, *Messy methodologies and digital responsibilities*, outlines the trajectory of my methodological approach to this work, which is underpinned by a feminist desire to disrupt notions of objectivity and impartiality in social science research. Each of the various methods used as part of this ethnography, conventional or otherwise, including interviews, scrapbooking, fiction and auto and digital ethnography, are informed by my involvement in and passion for the community I am researching. I write, as Sara Ahmed does, with 'partial hands' (2014, p18). I combine a queer commitment to 'undoing' the subject boundary between the researcher and researched whilst maintaining a critical

feminist attendance to the power implications of such a boundary. The feminist epistemology that drives this work is inspired by Bev Skegg's work on feminist ethnography, Ann Cvetkovich's writing on compelling descriptions and Eve Sedgick's call for reparative reading and hopeful, surprising research encounters. It is my hope that the 'messy' and creative methods used herein provide a particular, qualitative cut into the problem of queer belonging online.

Chapter Four, *Instagay*, begins with an overview of the shifting queer and lesbian celebrity landscape in the West and then critically examines two articles on selfie 'education' that appeared on Autostraddle in 2016. I consider these texts alongside interviews and participant observations about contemporary selfie practices in relation to queer visibility and belonging. Here, I explore the contemporary affinity between value and visibility, focusing on selfie-practices as a way of *marking* one's self as authentic and therefore socially valuable. Despite potential pleasures, the visibility economy awards value asymmetrically. Rather than approaching women's selfie-practices as either 'empowering' or the result of digital narcissism, this chapter approaches the desire for visibility as a negotiation of contemporary gender expectations within a neoliberal context in which the boundaries between work, leisure and identity have begun to collapse and women especially feel the need to extract value and capital from their intimate lives and relationships (Kanai 2019).

Chapter Five, *Queer IRL*, traces the possibilities of visibility beyond a politics of representation. Autostraddle is invested in discovering and recording accounts of queer and feminist history and in particular, offers a queering of archival work through its extensive user generated galleries. This chapter examines three examples of such galleries, the 'Lesbian Prom Gallery', the 'Queer IRL' series and the 'Lesbian Ken

Community Gallery'. Using these galleries and drawing on Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), I explore the ways in which online spaces, such as Autostraddle, might allow us to build accessible, queer and feminist archives of emotion and ephemera. Similar in some ways to the *Lesbian Herstory Archives* that began in New York in the 1970s, these galleries collect and curate the visual ephemera of queer life in order to emphasise the political and social importance of everyday mundanity and highlight the power of nostalgia and desire. Rather than focusing solely on the visual content of these galleries, this chapter explores how participation in the production of these archives might work to produce and bound a community that is otherwise largely geographically disparate.

Chapter Six, *Laughing Gayly* turns its attention to the *serious* work of humour online. Continuing a focus on aesthetics, embodiment and representation, this chapter examines the Autostraddle column 'Straight People Watch', alongside two galleries satirising generic stock photography of lesbian life and the playful ritual of bringing and wearing 'onesies' to A-Camp. Shared literacies of humour and playfulness facilitate critiques of heteronormativity and invite an enactment of politics on Autostraddle by revealing the absurdity of social norms (Highfield 2016, Hartley 2010, Driscoll et al 2013). Laughter is mobilised to establish the boundaries of the community, constitute lesbian relatability and enable a sense of belonging for *some* members of the community. Though shared experiences of laughter can offer a collective base for serious political resistance, humour relies heavily on distinct boundaries of social belonging, and the capacity to 'get' the joke is dependent on social capital that is afforded unevenly.

Chapter Seven, *Smashing, crushing squishing*, explores the role of desire and friendship in constituting the Autostraddle community. Just as laughter functions as a shared literacy

on Autostraddle, representations of sex and sexual practice are distinctly fun and playful. The 'Not Safe for Work' content and sexual imagery on the website emphasise intimacy and sexuality as *social* rather than private, and the ways in which sociality and sexuality are intertwined produce a deeply communal affectivity expressed as 'crush culture' at A-Camp. Camp crushes allow a queering of the imagined boundaries between feminine friendship expectations and romance and adolescence and adulthood. The chapter surveys some of the explicitly sexual content of the site alongside fieldwork notes from A-Camp to argue that the configuration of community here produces technologies of belonging that are erotically and affectively charged.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter Eight, *Flung out of space*, examines A-Camp as the 'real-life' version of Autostraddle. The chapter begins with a thick description of A-Camp and the pleasurable attachments that Autostraddlers have to the site as a manifestation of the community imaginary at Autostraddle.com. Drawing on literature in Disability and Fat Studies, I explore how space, place and bodies configure for contemporary queer belonging and relationality. The chapter demonstrates that the utopian idealism of online social spaces relies on a 'fantasy of generality' (Berlant 2008, p6) that is disrupted by the diverse and disparate experiences of material bodies moving through the physical world. I argue that the 'taste community' of Autostraddle produces a particular habitus that reinscribes rather than disrupts the imperative for cultural ideals of white, able-bodied, middle-class normalcy.

Chapter One

Intimacy, Belonging & Community: Theoretical frame

This chapter explores the shifting figure of the lesbian in relation to contemporary social norms and post/neoliberal feminist rhetorics of relatability, capacity and luminosity. As a new 'lesbian normal' emerges, sexuality is reconfigured as 'taste communities' - bound together by consumption practices and choices. In relation to belonging, this reconfiguration offers new affordances and limits to social connections for queer women. Rather than a natural sense of being 'in place', belonging acts as an intimate attachment to socio-spatial borders and boundaries, even as they shift to accommodate manifestations of social power or act to reify existing ones. The governing force of belonging is such that the imaginary of community works to produce commonality, rather than the other way around. The imaginary of queer community is increasingly deployed online, where discourses of risk and liberation converge to modulate sexuality and social-connectedness. Digital intimate publics, such as social media, forums and sites like Autostraddle, afford a remediation of intimacy, so that the conceptual public/private divide is collapsed and complicated. The implications of this collapse are significant for both women and queer people, for whom 'the private' often acts as a regulatory boundary. This chapter thus charts the literature on contemporary lesbian norms, belonging, gender and sexuality online and social and new media as digital intimate publics.

Luminous homonormativities

Over the last two decades, depictions of lesbian and gay life have flourished in the realms of popular culture (Marshall 2016, Beirne 2008, Peele 2007). The 1990s saw a gradual shift away from the ‘polluting stereotypes’ of LGBT characters (Seidman 2002, 140) and toward a new kind of normativity that included *some* deviances from heterosexuality as long as they were recuperated under the banner of white, middle-class norms. A boom in representation in the 2000s was expressly significant for queer women, as the introduction of ‘lesbian chic’ refigured the relationship between lesbianism, feminism and femininity (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017, McKenna 2002, Ciasullo 2001, Dove-Viebahn 2007). This recoded figure of the lesbian emerged amongst shifting political alignments in the West *and* the emergence of a post-feminist rhetoric (McRobbie 2004, Gill 2007, Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer 2006) in which feminism is both embraced ‘as a stylish identity’ (Gill 2016, 2) and disavowed and ‘relentlessly undermined’ (McRobbie 2009, 11). Though this new ‘lesbian normal’ (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017) simply shifts the borders of acceptable subjectivity only slightly, there is a ‘luminosity’ to her that perhaps illuminates a different imaginary of the queer feminine in the media (Kearney 2015).

The first lesbian kiss on television in an Anglophone nation was between two women on the Australian show *The Box* in 1974 (Beirne 2009). Two years earlier, lesbian activists also appeared on the Australian documentary series *Chequerboard* (Howes 1998). The first televised lesbian kiss in the United States aired almost two decades later in 1991 on the legal drama *L.A. Law*, and then in the United Kingdom in 1993 on soap opera *Brookside* (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017). In the first half of the 1980s, Australian show *Prisoner* featured regular and recurring lesbian characters with varying

degrees of humanity and moral turpitude. In the mid-1990s, occasional lesbian characters and storylines began occupying more mainstream television shows, usually as errant 'kisses' designed to attract ratings at particular times of the year. In 1994, a lesbian kiss appeared on *Roseanne*; in 1995, on *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*, and in 1999 on *Ally McBeal* (Salam 2019). Significantly, *Friends* featured recurring lesbian characters Carol and Susan for its entire ten year run beginning in 1994 and in 1997, Ellen Degeneres publicly 'came out', just before her titular character on *Ellen*, also came out. Though *Ellen* was swiftly cancelled, her visibility and 'saturation' of the public sphere (Moore 2008, 22) heralded a recoding of the figure of the lesbian and a remediation of the politics of gay normativity (Dow 2001).

The depiction of lesbianism and same-sex attraction in all of these examples was complex and did not always take the form of positive representation. In *Prisoner*, for example, lesbian characters were often portrayed as morally corrupt and predatory (Beirne 2009). In television shows like *Roseanne* or *Ally McBeal*, lesbian relationships were irreverent and shortlived, but the 'polluting stereotypes' of earlier eras had begun to wear away (Seidman 2002). Thus, the television and wider popular culture of the 1990s also signalled the emergence of 'the normal gay' (Warner 2000). Warner writes that in this era, 'those whose sex is least threatening, along with those whose gender profiles are least queer, are put forward as the acceptable face of the movement' (2000, 66). This 'folding' (Puar 2007) of lesbian and gay identities into the conservative fabric of social and political life happened in response to the reintensification of a heteronormative fantasy of familial intimacy under conservative governments both in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Berlant 1997). In order to maintain the civil rights that queer activists had fought for in the previous decade,

sexuality was reworked and depoliticised in the new public sphere such that gay and lesbian could become commercially desirable identity categories, rather than disruptions and stopping points.

This reworking made room for even more depictions of lesbian (and gay) life on television throughout the 2000s, with shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Glee* (2009-2015), *Transparent* (2014-2019), *Sense8* (2015-2018), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *The Fosters* (2013-2018) and of course, *The L Word* (2004-2009). GLAAD, an American LGBTQ media advocacy organisation, declared 2010 a record breaking year for gay and lesbian representation (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017) and these claims have only strengthened over the last decade. In GLAAD's 2019 'Where We Are on TV' report, Townsend and Deerwater write that more than 10% of regular and recurring characters on broadcast American television are LGBTQ, with half of those characters being lesbian or bisexual women (2019). These numbers don't include representations in cable network television, or on streaming devices such as Netflix, each of which also offer substantive representation of queer women. Given the amount of television content now available to viewers across the world, 10% is a significant proportion, that begins to reflect the reality of sexual diversity in the population.

Though queer women now populate television in droves, critiques have argued that their storylines are 'still played out for an imagined heterosexual gaze' (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017, 322). Characters are often a non-threatening mix of feminine and masculine, or as Kay Seibler puts it, 'caught between butch performance and highly feminine heterosexual fantasy' (2016, 65). This figure of the stylish, conventionally attractive lesbian was dubbed 'lesbian chic' and marked a pivot away from the politicised aesthetic of Michigan's lesbian. The rejection of femininity that had strongly

characterised earlier depictions and cultural understandings of lesbianism was eschewed in favour of a glamorous identity category that was easily packaged and sold (Ciasullo 2001). Indeed, *The L Word* was accompanied by a style guide and website where one could purchase each of the character's outfits (Dove-Viebahn 2007).

A disavowal of anti-patriarchal politics, coupled with an embrace of middle-class norms, and in particular, wealth as a signifier of value have opened a new avenue for sexual subjectivity. Writing on lesbian chic in popular culture in the 1990s, Dittmar argues that these texts have created 'a hospitable new space for self-definition whose "safety" was predicated on wealth' (1998, 320). The figure of the lesbian as resistant is thus neutralised through a mainstream recuperation of her image. Dove-Viebahn notes that 'lesbian chic allowed heterosexual women to play with lesbian desire as an unthreatening and affected fashion choice' (2007, 76), available only to those that could afford to 'experiment'. Much of the critical writing on lesbian chic focuses on the stylish aesthetics and lack of politics in *The L Word*, which has done much to normalise lesbian sexuality, but has also arguably defanged it. McNicholas Smith & Tyler assert that 'the lesbian is *made normal* through a rejection, a silencing, of this longer antagonistic relationship between lesbians, feminism and femininity' (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017, 323, emphasis added) in ways that disintegrate notions of the collective in favour of individual style and choice.

The new 'normal lesbian' (McNicholas Smith & Tyler 2017, 323) has arisen in a 'post-gay' (Warner 2000) landscape in the 1980s and 1990s, in reaction to conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the United Kingdom and the United States respectively, but also in relation to what has been termed postfeminism. Postfeminism describes the aftermath of feminist activism in the 1980s

that Kearney, following McRobbie (2009), describes as ‘a contradictory perspective on contemporary gender relations that takes feminist achievements for granted while repudiating feminism as a critical lens and social movement’ (2015, 265). That is, it is taken as an arena in which young women both benefit from and outright reject feminism as unnecessary and unattractive.

According to Gill, the postfeminist sensibility can be noted through several key markers: ‘femininity as a bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis on self-surveillance and self-discipline, a focus on individualism and the resurgence of ideas about natural sex difference’ (2007, 147). Other scholars have since noted that each of these features is amplified through a marketplace approach to gender (and femininity specifically) as constituted through consumption (McRobbie 2009, McCann 2018, Dobson 2016). Indeed, McCann links the ‘postfeminist climate’ with a turn to the ‘personal as *the* political’ (2018, 28 emphasis in original) in the 1990s, as the emerging ‘3rd wave’ of feminism embraced feminine stylings as political and resistant. A turn toward the celebratory feminine has been positioned by postfeminist scholars as an *uncritical* orientation toward consumer culture that sustains women’s oppression and neutralises resistances to that oppression.

Within the postfeminist and third wave milieu, the orientation toward the feminine and body stylings *as* politics facilitates a shift of emphasis from collective action to individualistic symbols of agency and transformative political power (McKenna 2002, 287-8). Sarah Banet-Weiser’s work surveys the commercialisation of women’s ‘empowerment’ in which popular feminism within the framework of neoliberalism demands that young women think of themselves as competent, capable, and confident (2018). McRobbie shares Banet-Weiser’s concerns about the neoliberal restructuring

and individuation of feminist response and suggests that a postfeminist politic is recognisable through its 'distinct modality of prescriptive feminine agency' (2009, 58). While affording women this level of agency and competence *feels* progressive, the individuated restructuring of responses to the 'problems' of contemporary life produces those problems *as* individual.

Dobson, following Gill (2007), asserts that the turn to the individual in the postfeminist cultural landscape accompanies a representative reorientation to women as subjects, rather than purely sexual objects arranged for the male gaze. She writes, 'women are now often represented as "subjects" with powerful and active sexual drives and desires' (2015, 30), whose subsequent objectification is taken as evidence of liberated sexual agency. Thus, femininity (and feminism) is taken primarily as an 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' (Kanai 2019, 7) that can be both freely chosen and leveraged for social value. Instead of the male gaze, women suffer under the tyranny of the internalised gaze, whereby the agentic self is fashioned through self-surveillance, self-discipline and self-regulation. Berlant's work in *Cruel Optimism* is applicable here as she describes our relations to normative oppressions as *attachments* to that which prevents our 'flourishing' (2007, 1). That is, postfeminism involves not a rejection of the political goals of feminism per se, but a rejection of the collective work of feminism, and an attachment to the fantasy of individually effected social transformation.

Similar critiques of a dissolution of collectivity are levelled at the 'thriving' cultural milieu of lesbian and gay representation in popular culture, and television especially. This landscape of visibility has been marked by a 'post-gay' sensibility in which the *bodily politics* of sexuality are no longer seen as necessary or relevant (Warner 2000, Green 2002, Reed 2011). Instead, same-sex attraction is regarded as happenstance and

neutralised, disconnected from its historical context and able to be taken up with the right consumption choices and aesthetic codes. Lisa Duggan describes this depoliticising process as homonormativity: 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them' (2002, 179). A homonormative framework, in *The L Word*, for example, means that discourses of wealth, beauty and social value remain undisturbed. Heteronormativity is seen as having no bearing on the structures of sexuality as embodied in daily life, and as McNicholas Smith & Tyler note, 'sexual democracy is presented as life-style choice, denuded of the political, economic, cultural and religious struggles that shape sexual subjectivities on the ground' (2017, 325-6).

In this instance, community is constituted in terms of lifestyle and *taste*, and individuals are bound together by common interests, rather than common locations or directives (Baker & Walsh 2018, 4564). Historically, communities are understood as 'stable populations' (Straw 1991) whose cultural objects are tied to particular geographic and historical narratives of place (Mondin 2017). However, digital and new media transformations in social life have meant that otherwise disconnected people can be tied together instead by taste and cultural spaces. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu writes of taste as that which 'raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions' (1986, 175). In the contemporary landscape, erotic differences are elevated as *distinctions in taste*. In one sense, this reframing of lesbian and gay identities as matters of taste, rather than pathological 'disturbances', is liberating and provides recourse for criticisms of *heterosexuality* as lifestyle rather than innate or natural state of being. As Bev Skeggs points out though, 'taste' relies on the accumulation of cultural knowledge and capital, which is unevenly distributed (2004a,

28). This reconfiguration also dampens the potential for political resistance to capitalist structures, given that queer women's identities and bodies are draw symbolic significance from the accumulation of cultural (and actual) capital.

The emergence of Autostraddle in 2009 took place in the context of these postfeminist investments in and attachments to women's sexuality as freely chosen lifestyle.

However, third wave feminism which is most often so closely associated with a postfeminist sensibility, has arguably been replaced with a *fourth* wave which emerged in the late 2000s and offers a new direction for feminist politics and theory (Munro 2013, Rivers 2017, Chamberlain 2017) . The fourth wave carries on earlier investments in identity politics and intersectionality, but has been chiefly concerned with the politics of sex, sexuality and power, with activism focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault (for example, the #MeToo movement). The new wave is also characterised largely by its presence on and use of social media to raise consciousness and build collective movements. This often involves the production of alternative media by and for marginalised groups of people, such as Autostraddle. Though the critiques of postfeminist scholars are not simply disappeared by a shift from the off to the online, new modes of connectivity offer new modes of *collective* potential.

In Mary Kearney's (2015) work on the ubiquity of sparkle stylings in contemporary girls' media, she complicates McRobbie's (2009) constraint/agency approach to postfeminism, arguing instead that the spectacle of luminous femininity is part of a complex negotiation of empowerment discourses. She suggests that the 'sparklefication' of 'girlhood's visual landscape' (2015, 263) has overwhelmingly been taken by postfeminist scholars as an extension of the restrictive regimes of a heteronormative beauty industry and its unattainable ideals of heterosexiness. However, the glitter that

adorns contemporary fashion, magazines, television and celebrity is also deeply associated with *magic*, and the ability to imagine a world otherwise. Kearney names this imaging and negotiation of the contradictory messages of postfeminist culture (mandates of both empowerment *and* adherence to heterosexual matrices of power) as camp and as queer (2015). Affect is significant here, as she argues for an attendance to how girls are *moved* by postfeminist texts and whether that movement might be constituted as a resistant reorientation away from heteronormative mandates. Glitter and sparkle *compel* a DIY approach to media, in which must negotiate the complexity of agency and self-discipline in order to produce and commune with one another, in ways that sometimes 'reaffirm heteronormativity, postfeminism and patriarchy', but also in ways that 'complicate or refuse such interpretations' (Kearney 2015, 271).

The figure of the contemporary lesbian is also luminous in her own way, although she is tied up in discourses of consumption, lifestyle and value. Mikaella Clements, in her piece *Notes on Dyke Camp* for literary magazine *The Outline* (2018) argues for recognition of a new cultural movement driven by the tastes of gay women and marked by a 'specific brand of humor, manners, and sensibilities'. She references celebrities such as Hayley Kiyoko, Janelle Monae, Kate McKinnon and Kristen Stewart and suggests that their performances are not about selling a normative version of lesbian sexuality, but about playfully and overtly teasing at the edges of gender and sexuality. Their performances inevitably include a wink and a nod to an assumed *queer* audience, rather than a heterosexual one. *This* is the world of Autostraddle and its fascination with 'celesbians', pop culture and lifestyle. In some ways it relies on the commodification of sexuality and identity, but it also makes room for communing over texts in ways that

might build connections and collectivity - travelling allegiances facilitated by the sparkle and flare of the very visible contemporary lesbian.

The Aesthetics of Belonging

Belonging functions as a constitutive force for queer women's communities, however an imperative for commonality and relatability means that some people are always excluded. These exclusions manifest across a visual economy and so are most strongly felt in terms of aesthetic and embodied differences. Queer communities have a long history of entanglement with aesthetic discourse. Oram & Turnbull's *The Lesbian History Sourcebook* in fact, begins with a chapter on cross dressing women as signifiers of lesbianism through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Oram & Turnbull, 2001). Although accurate accounts of lesbian communities throughout history are hard to come by, the lesbian remains an aesthetically recognisable figure. Her visibility functions in two ways; as a sign of and warning against deviance, as exemplified in references to the 'hypersexual', 'mannish', and 'freak', but also as a mechanism by which members of the community might recognise *each other* (Atkins, 1998).

The butch/femme communities of the 1950s are perhaps the clearest examples of the ways in which aesthetic codes and embodiment become built into communal structures and organising. Kennedy & Davis write that at least in part, the distinctive fashion and mannerisms of butches were about making lesbians visible to each other as well as the wider social world (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 152). Kennedy and Davis' book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* and Nestle's *The Persistent Desire: A femme-butch reader* both explore queer women's communities in the 1950s and highlight the role that aesthetics and embodiment played in the construction of specifically butch or femme identities and

their resulting communities (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1992). Perhaps most significantly, these queer historians and theorists write about how the aesthetic codes of both butch and femme identities work to allow them to pass *through* social spaces unimpeded, either as men and/or butches or as heterosexual women and/or femmes. Harris & Crocker write about femme identity as ‘a way to strategically pass across, translate between, connect and complicate various boundaries of identity’ (Harris & Crocker, 1997). What makes queer embodiment so interesting in this instance is its multiplicity, its travelling allegiance and its continued reincarnation through social encounters.

More contemporary descriptions of queer women’s communities also contain references to particular aesthetics. In her paper on constructing a queer identity, Woolfe describes her process of identifying and then identifying with ‘The Lesbian Look’ in the 1980s and 1990s (Woolfe, 1998). For her, this *look* is not just about eschewing heteronormative appearance standards; it is about receiving recognition and acceptance from the lesbian and gay community. She writes, ‘I was in the club, and the secret password was my image’ (Woolfe, 1998, p. 88). This notion of being *in the club*, of belonging as aesthetically contingent, is also taken up by Bullington, who refers to ‘the lesbian uniform’ as a central part of her identity (Bullington, 1998). The discourse of a uniform evokes strong images of cohesion but also of boundary policing. Indeed, Myers et al and Stafford discuss the exclusion of particular women – femmes - from queer communities and the ways in which that exclusion can be tied to performances of gender and embodied aesthetics (Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1998; Stafford, 2010).

As explored further in the next chapter, separatist spaces also manifest exclusions of trans women and people of colour. These exclusions are felt all the more sharply because of the

imperative to *belong* and the expectation that the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) will dissapate in queer spaces. Rather, this matrix of belonging simply reconfigures. As Rooke argues, 'the contradiction between the promise and the actuality, the imagined and the real, makes negotiating the cultural matrix of the lesbian commercial scene particularly impenetrable' (2007, 249). The validating promise of belonging in separatist subcultural spaces only materialises for some, and in ways that obscure the structural foundations of these social arrangements.

While belonging *seems* self-evident, it is often under-theorised. In much of the literature on LGBTIQ community, belonging is assumed to be an ethical aspiration for social connectedness that has positive outcomes for mental health and general wellbeing. However, the most critical engagements with belonging as a concept tend to come from theorists of race, citizenship, and geography. These theorists, such as Yuval-Davis (2007), Antonisch (2010) and Fortier (199), posit that belonging primarily acts as intimate attachments to socio-spatial borders and boundaries.

In *Searching for Belonging*, Antonsich proposes two approaches to belonging; 'a personal, intimate, feeling of being at "home" in a place', and 'as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion' (2010, 645). These distinctions can be simplified as the personal and the political aspects of belonging and as the feminist adage reminds us, the two are ultimately inextricable. That is, a social 'sense' of belonging is distinct from the formal structures of belonging as citizenship, though each is informed by the other (Fenster 2005). For example, trans women were initially not explicitly banned from Michigan Womyn's Festival, but social norms around nudity and embodiment produced a sense of non-belonging. This 'sense'

then materialised as a formal declaration of non-citizenship on the land (this example is explored in more depth in the next chapter on lesbian cultural spaces).

Importantly, this distinction demonstrates that even while formal structures of inclusion are in place, intimate attachments that manifest as a sense of belonging continue to be restricted. Yuval-Davis positions this as the central difference between belonging and citizenship (2007, 10), with the former enacting the politics of boundary maintenance. Similarly, Anne-Marie Fortier argues that ‘practices of group identity are about manufacturing cultural and historical belongings which mark out terrains of commonality that delineate the politics and social dynamics of “fitting in”’ (1999, 42). Belonging constitutes the emotional attachments to border technologies that are produced in declarations of commonality, yet reframes these attachments as historical and naturally occurring.

Integral to this reframing is the belief that belonging is an ontological positioning rather than a social achievement. Vikki Bell instead argues for a performative framework of belonging in which the ‘ritualistic repetition of normalised codes makes material the belongings they purport to simply describe’ (1999, 3). Just as one does not inherently ‘belong’ to any particular gender or sexual identification, one cannot *naturally* belong to any given socio-spatial location. Indeed, as Butler notes of gender; ‘a construction that conceals its genesis’ (1990, 140), belonging too is both social and concealed as internal by way of repeated and stylised performance. Performativity, as Butler describes it, is always concerned with power and how institutional and social norms can enable and constrict the ritualised repetitions that constitute our identities as gendered beings. Similarly, critical concern with belonging is ‘with the ways in which technologies,

discursive deployments and power/knowledge produce lines of allegiance and fracture' within our various social matrices (Bell 1999, 1).

These lines of allegiance and fracture produce and sustain hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality. Belonging, then, is a regulatory system concerned with the maintenance of social power. When belonging is filled with a rhetoric of sameness, it produces attachments to commonality, that as Emily Grabham argues, are materialisations of uneven distributions of capital (2009, 67). Imagined communities, such as temporary separatist sites, are constructed and operationalised *through* belonging in order to reify dominant social ideals. As Sara Ahmed notes, 'likeness is an effect of proximity or contact, which is then "taken up" as a sign of inheritance' (2006, 123). In this framework, belonging works to conceal the mechanisms by which community produces commonality rather than the other way around.

In *Outside Belongings*, Elspeth Probyn writes that 'if you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside' (1996, 8). She goes on to say that 'belonging is situated as threshold: both public and private, personal and common' (13). It is these thresholds with which this thesis is concerned. That is, how does belonging function as a deeply felt, personal attachment to a sense of the common? Although belonging operates in an exclusionary and regulatory way, Probyn argues for an understanding of belonging as productive and affective yearning. Belonging is always an 'ongoing future orientated set of practices' and a desire to become more than the individual (Bissel et al 2019, 6). Belonging is a yearning to cross borders and boundaries, even while establishing the necessity of communal boundaries. As Probyn writes, 'desire is productive... and sets into motion different possibilities' (1996, 13). Many of these possibilities are

exclusionary and harmful, however they also produce queer responses that beg a rethinking of social relations, togetherness and collectivity.

Gender & sexuality online

The increased social and mainstream acceptance of LGBTI identities has perhaps contributed to the dispersal of a central queer community across multiple spaces. The lack of access to a distinct geographically bound community of queer women, coupled with a deeply felt desire to belong, has opened up the Internet as a central site of social connectedness. The field of research on digital experiences and remediations of gender and sexuality is increasingly vast, but can generally be understood in terms of several key categories: sex, identity, visibility and social-connectedness.

Literature on sex online includes work on risk (Dobson & Ringrose 2016, Ringrose et al 2013, Albury & Crawford 2012, Livingstone 2008), and health (Byron 2015, Evers et al 2013, Bien et al 2015, Landovitz et al 2013, Rice et al 2012), as well as new modes of sex education (Albury 2014, Hillier et al 2005, Hillier & Mitchell 2008, Simon & Daneback 2013, Grant & Nash 2019), and the transformation of sociosexual practices through technology, such as hook-up apps (Albury & Byron 2016, Byron & Albury 2018, Race 2015, McGlotten 2013, Newett et al 2018). Studies also focus on new and changing permutations of identity online and the ways in which emerging technologies afford, restrict and limit certain axes of identity and subjectivity (O’Riordan 2007, Hillier & Harrison 2007, Wakeford 2002, Cover 2014, Poletti & Rak 2014, Gray 2007). In a similar vein, the visibility politics of marginalised people (including but not limited to queer populations) makes up a significant proportion of the body of literature on gender and sexuality online, given the potentially DIY and seemingly democratic nature of the

Internet (Connell 2012, Pham 2015, Alexander & Losh 2010, Raun 2015). Each of these threads of research braid together into a concentration on social-connectedness, friendship and community (Gray 2009, 2014, Hanckel & Morris 2014).

Much of the public discourse on sex and technology centres on risks that are seen as inherent and inevitable, and women and young girls are thought to be the potential victims of these imagined digital dangers (Albury & Byron 2014, Ringrose et al 2013). Young people's use of technology to explore and experience sex and sexuality is overwhelmingly framed in terms of moral crises (Hasinoff 2012), with the potential for anonymity remediated as a potential for gendered corruption. Young women are produced as vulnerable and innocent *until* they encounter the too-public world of the internet, which threatens to 'expose' them (Dobson & Ringrose 2016). Conversely, as Albury has argued, populist anxieties posit the greatest risk for young men as criminalisation or 'exposure' to pornography (Albury 2014, Albury & Byron 2014). Though young women may face and experience real harms through online encounters, public discourses of risk as inevitable and inherent work to reify gendered logics of feminine sexuality as necessarily private and submissive.

Discourses of risk online occur in tandem with discourses of sexual health risks for young people such that, as Byron notes, young people's social media 'sex practices are pre-emptively *risked*' (2015, 323). The mobilisation of risk with regard to sexual health has materialised as increased intervention and surveillance through social media, *especially* for LGBTIQ men (Fries et al 2014, Albury & Byron 2016). Mobile hook-up apps such as Grindr are commonly utilised as methodological tools for mapping 'risky' queer populations (Delaney et al 2014) and for facilitating health communication (Gold et al 2011, Evers et al 2013). A sustained focus on risk for queer groups online means that

queer environments and social spaces continue to be imbued with a harmful sensibility that ignores the transformative and remediative potentials of queer sociality online.

Despite an overwhelming focus on health and risk in relation to apps and technology that facilitate sex, significant literature also points to the transformative elements of digital socio-sexuality. Indeed, as Race notes, 'digital devices are affording novel ways of arranging sex, intimacy and sexual community, with their own qualities and limitations' (2015, 496). Intimacy is being reimagined online, through emergent sexual practices and negotiation of new norms of sexuality and social-connectedness (Byron & Albury 2018). New queer freedoms and possibilities are afforded online, even while they are also limited and shaped by historical precedents and digital infrastructures that operate within neoliberal frameworks (McGlotten 2013).

One of the ways in which sexuality is transformed online is through new modes of sex education and exploration for young people. Given that school sexual education curriculums, particularly in Australia and the USA, are restrictive and contested, research shows that students have few institutional avenues to access information about non-normative sexualities, sexual health, stigma or pleasure (Hillier & Mitchell 2008, Grant & Nash 2019). Instead, as Simon & Daneback argue, the internet has emerged as a significant resource for 'sexual script building' (2013, 305), in which young people turn to emerging technologies to answer questions about sexual practice, to 'try on new identities and practice coming out as as gay' (Simon & Daneback 2013, 306). Young people routinely use online pornography as an educational tool (Albury 2014), and though critics and scholars are divided about the impact of such a tool, it is clear that emerging technologies are shifting the landscape of socio-sexuality. This is especially

true for non-heterosexual people, who now have access to a wealth of information, narratives and discourses about what it means to live queerly.

Contemporary identity work and social media are now inextricably linked. Rather than taking the Internet as a utopian and liberatory space for the free exploration of potential selves, *or*, as a tool with which to communicate pre-existing identities, social media is produced within specific social bounds (Poletti & Rak 2014). Social interactions are regulated within digitally constructed and enforced boundaries that draw and expand upon historically constituted norms and ideals. Internet affordances are structured to privilege the production of cohesive identities that are easily communicable and shareable, yet retain a neoliberal sensibility of autonomy and separation. Social media sites have, however, been naturalised as sites for the performance of individualised subjectivities, rather than providing what Cover describes as ‘discursively given categories or “co-ordinates” of identity which operate within a framework of limits and restrictions’ (2014, 65).

Online anonymity that was once both celebrated and feared gave rise to a utopian imaginary in which bodies were not limited by hierarchies of gender, sexuality or race and were thus granted participatory equality (Poster 1997, Willson 2006). The promised postmodern utopia of the internet offered ‘contradictory possibilities’ for marginalised groups (Wakeford 2002). Queer people were promised non-heteronormative space online and an uncoupling of bodies from identities in ways that were liberatory but also threatened the premise under which they collectivised. As O’Riordan noted, the internet sustained ‘queer community formations, *despite* and *because* of the assumptions of gender swapping and play which might have undermined such crucially embodied identities’ (2005, 28, emphasis added). Rather than orienting toward digital

disembodiment, cybersubjects became tangled up with technology such that the body could not be neatly separated out in encounters with digital platforms and infrastructures.

As researchers move away from a utopian understanding of social spaces online, it has been helpful to examine what gender and sexually diverse populations *do* online and how emerging practices might queer subjectivities and social relations, even within restrictive frameworks. Hillier & Harrison's research found that young people felt more comfortable experimenting with and 'trying out' same-sex attracted identities online, in spaces that *felt* more democratic or safer than their offline lives (2007). Similarly, in her study of queer youth in rural parts of the USA, Gray found that online personal narratives of LGBTIQ experiences were becoming more integral to processes of identification than fictionalised media representations in television and movies (2014). In this way, the internet affords an opportunity to approach sexuality playfully and in ways that emphasise social connection rather than isolation.

The Internet acts as an arena in which counter-publics are able to enact counter discourse through self-representation and critique of hegemonic narratives. In her work on fashion and race online, Pham argues that blogging and platforms such as Instagram are vehicles through which 'neglected histories are moved into the digital commons (2011, 23), and in which the embodied meanings of gender, race and sexuality can be contested and reimagined. Duguay emphasises this link between visibility and counter discourse by noting that taking and sharing selfies are a significant way in which LGBTQ people negotiate narratives of gender and sexuality to themselves, their peers and publics (2016, 2). These selfies act as 'sedimented identity texts' (Wargo 2015, 8) that

draw cohesive and sometimes resistant narratives about what it means to be queer in the contemporary world.

Although online visibility can 'mitigate social isolation and create a sense of community' for LGBTQ people (Connell 2012, 210), the potential for interrupting heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality is often limited to the bounds of the community itself and by platform specific narrative norms. For example, Sastre writes that body positive blogs and accounts, rather than expanding notions of valuable social bodies, simply replicate 'neoliberal paradigms of bodily compliance' (2014, 929). This is because of narrative norms that emphasise body positivity as the outcome of a disciplined project of the self in which members participate in rituals of disclosure and then work to overcome suffering. Similarly, Duguay argues that popular platforms (such as Instagram), favour a 'form of LGBTQ visibility marked by the depoliticised activity of consuming products and building lifestyles branded as gay' (2016, 3).

Regardless of what is mobilised and restricted online, it is clear that social media has engendered a new topology of sexuality and sociosexual practices. Discourses of risk and safety continue to plague queer people in this new topology, where social media is used both for maximising and transforming sexual availability and intimacy *and* for surveilling populations seen as sexually 'promiscuous' (such as gay men) or as vulnerable (such as young women or girls). Young and queer people are better able to access educational resources that expand possibilities for sexual identity making and exploration. The DIY architectures of the Internet have meant that queer people are more visible and despite the ambiguous politics of representation, this visibility has lead to more social-connectedness, at least for some people. Though platforms produce 'technological imperatives' (Herrera 2018, 313) to categorise and narrate the self, the

drives to connect and imagine ‘community’ through social media are productive and significant for envisaging new arrangements of gender and sexuality.

Digital intimacies

Each of the previous collections of literature converge within the blossoming field of *Digital Intimacies* which critically engages with the question of how the intimate public, as theorised by Berlant, might materialise through digital cultures. Like belonging, intimacy is deployed more than it is theorised in work on social connections and relationships. Classical sociologists such as Anthony Giddens have taken intimacy as mutual vulnerability, care, affection and disclosure (1992, see also Dobson et al 2018 and Jameison 2011) often confined to realms of familiarity and even more narrowly, to sexual relationships therewithin. This mirrors the cultural models of intimacy, sexuality and identity that arose with the new era of psycho-therapy in the mid-twentieth century in the western and particularly American world (Illouz 2007, D’Emilio & Freedman 1988). This era of changing social roles and contested hierarchies necessitated a rethinking of close relationships and their attendant attachments.

Importantly, intimacy is an event that happens between and through *bodies*, and like the body, intimacy often is thought to mark the boundary point between the private and public (Wilson 2016). Intimacy then, requires a transgression of the boundary of self in order to make a connection with another being. This vulnerable destabilising of subjecthood draws people together in projects and processes of shared narratives of what it means to have a life that is both *with* but distinct from other lives.

In *Virtual Intimacies*, Shaka McGlotten describes ‘a *feeling* of connection, or a *sense* of belonging’ as intimacy (2013, 1, emphasis in original). While such a sense or feeling is

deeply internal, and perhaps private, it is also a manifestation of attachments to and relations with/in the social and material world. As McGlotten further argues, the vast assemblage of intimacy, which includes discourses, fantasies, ideologies, institutions, everyday practices and rituals, 'exerts normative pressures on large and small bodies, lives and worlds' (2013, 1). Intimacy then, is both something we experience and act out in the world, but it is also a structuring and regulatory force. Dobson, Carah and Robards expand here, contending that intimacy involves 'the hierarchical ordering of relationships and psychic concerns in socially legible ways, in order to make sense of ourselves and those around us' (2018, 4). In making sense of ourselves in relation to others, we *get a sense* of where we might belong. In this way, the distinction between private, inner worlds and public systems and institutions is collapsed.

Contemporary feminist and queer theorising of the intimate in social worlds draws most heavily on Lauren Berlant's theorising of intimacy (1998) and specifically her notion of the intimate *public* (2008). According to Berlant, intimacy 'involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared' (1998, 281). An intimate public, she writes, 'flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging' (2008, viii). These 'affective scenes of identification' often centre on media and culture and the commodification of identity for women and other nondominant people. That is to say, an intimate public materialises when a new market emerges and mobilises and capitalises on assumptions about shared experiences and histories for a particular group of people.

Lesbian 'culture', for example, is predicated on the notion that we are somehow bound by similar sexual experiences and histories of social oppression. Berlant calls this a 'fantasy of generality' (2008, 6), in which the general is refracted as the personal in ways

that produce attachments to certain ways of life. Intimate publics, Berlant argues, 'provide a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an "x"' (2008, viii), as though "x", pre-exists these very discussions. There is an assumption then, when engaging with cultural texts, that there are other strangers, *just like you*, who will respond and resonate with these niches of the market in the same ways that you do.

Like Berlant's fantasy of generality, Akane Kanai similarly calls this process a 'utopia of sameness' (2019, 4) and Jasmine Rault refers to it as an 'affective uniformity' (2017, 586). The circulation of cultural texts, such as Autostraddle, perpetuate and mobilise this sense of emotional and aesthetic sameness. Thus, an intimate public is both a scene of affective identification and a system of regulation. Drawing on Berlant, Kanai further argues that such a fantasy of sameness only materialises and delivers for those that aspire to and attain social ideals and norms (of whiteness, heterosexuality, etc). Intimate spaces, she contends, 'tether marginalised people to the conditions that continue to prevent their flourishing' (2019, 5). As such, the fantasy of uniformity produces disconnections and non-belongings as personal failures and conceals their systemic causes.

Berlant remains optimistic though, for the potential of intimate publics to foster mobile attachments and porous borders. Like Probyn, Berlant is interested in the spaces that emerge through the *drive* for and practices that surround intimacy and intimate publics. In such spaces, intimacy is given leave to spread and disrupt, and is not foreclosed within the familial unit. In *Cruel Optimism*, she writes, 'intimacy seen in this spreading way does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it' (2012, 284-5). This thesis focuses on Autostraddle as a digital

intimate public, which in some ways perpetuates the fantasy of generality, but also opens up possibilities for mobile and disruptive attachments that resist inevitability.

Queer online spaces are a vivid example of 'digital intimate publics' in which strangers are intimately bound together by an expectation of relatability and assumptions of shared experience and history. Opportunities for intimacy abound online, with dating apps transforming practices, rituals and experiences of sex and intimacy (Race 2015, Carlson 2019) and social media changing the interface of political activism and social connection, especially for marginalised young people (Carlson & Frazer 2015). Indeed, as Dobson et al argue;

'Social media platforms are now centrally part of the process whereby pedagogies of intimate life as life itself are learnt, (re)constituted, (re)formed, contested and disrupted' (2018, xx).

Intimacy is remediated online, and the public/private divide is further collapsed. Though digital media has permeated almost all avenues of social interaction, the remediation of intimacy and personal relationships online are often framed in terms of risk, imitation and failure. Popular discourse surrounding sex and the Internet often suggests danger, especially for young people and women (Albury & Byron 2014). Concern often centres on the kinds of sexual coupling that fall outside of Gayle Rubin's famed 'charmed circle' (1993) - sex that is paid for, casual, non-monogamous, promiscuous or cross generational. The internet has come to represent a violent breach in the sanctity of moral sexuality and intimacy.

Even where narratives of technology and sex are not this bleak, they are still often framed as less intimate or authentic, or as McGlotten writes, 'if you had to get it online,

it couldn't be the real thing' (2013, 2). Sometimes this is framed positively, in instances where young people are able to 'practice' or 'try out' new sexual identities online before they get to the 'real' thing offline (Nash & Gorman-Murray 2016). The less desirable/less authentic rhetoric remains however, and digital publics are still viewed as the consequence of lost gay neighbourhoods, or rehearsals and replacements for inaccessible offline communities. Digitally facilitated sexual practices are often assumed to be about convenience, anonymity and carnality, rather than intimacy or collectivity.

Excessive focus on the 'inauthenticity' of online intimate publics can mean a lack of attention paid to the kinds of social capital that structure online experiences. Given that intimate publics are usually predicated on a sense of relatability or 'sameness', participation requires a certain emotional habitus for acquiring networks and building social capital (Illouz 2007, 66). For example, Alex Lambert's research on negotiating intimacy on Facebook found that careful modulations of intimacy and emotion were more socially rewarded, and therefore more valuable (2016). In their edited collection *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, Dobson et al argue that 'a classed, raced, and gendered emotional habitus' (2018, 13) proliferates online, and that the potential affordances and exploitations of social capital online are unevenly distributed.

Dobson et al conceptualise digital intimate publics in terms of the labour required to 'render intimate life, emotions, care, and social relations into private capital' (2018, 18). Indeed the infrastructure of social media is built on extracting value from our intimate lives and relationships, and selling the ideal of intimacy back to us. Following the vein of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012), affective labour (McRobbie 2011, Oullette & Wilson 2011), and aesthetic labour (Warhurst & Nickson 2007), our sense of belonging online is dependent on our reproduction of the social through careful management of

gendered and raced norms and ideals. Social media commodifies intimacy in ways that interrupt the radical potential of the intimate public, by *privatising* our social relations even as they breach the borders of the home and the familial unit.

Digital intimate publics are complex social spaces in which we expect to find others that share our emotional experiences and histories and in which we regulate our behaviour and emotional habitus to fit with those expectations. Our experiences are often recuperated and commodified through social media in order to reify particular norms and ideals as relatable and achievable (Kanai 2019). As Berlant argues about the intimate public of 'women's culture', this process is deeply pleasurable for some (2008), but contributes to ongoing inequalities and exclusionary practices for others. The production of queerness as lifestyle within the intimate public of Autostraddle.com is similarly pleasurable *and* exclusionary.

Chapter Two

Heaven is a Place Online: Autostraddle & lesbian social space

The focus on lifestyle and taste in the contemporary lesbian landscape has developed amidst a significant relational history of subculture, separatism and space. The main purpose of this chapter is to act as an introduction to Autostraddle as a website, an event, a community and a utopian fantasy. However it begins by tracing the emergence of lesbian specific social spaces, ideals and norms in order to contextualise Autostraddle as a website and a utopian imaginary of community. The fantasy of queer, feminist utopias has structured lesbian social life throughout the 20th century as queer women have navigated discourses of pathology, the rise of the second-wave of feminism and its associated sexual liberties and the reworking of sexuality as freely chosen lifestyle. It is in social spaces, which Skeggs defines as ‘the means by which the different forms of capital come to have value and legitimacy’, that the bounds of queer communities are imagined, negotiated and naturalised (1999, 214). The chapter charts the formation of separatist spaces in the lesbian bars of the early 20th century, the utopian lesbian land projects of the 1970s and 1980s, the festival cultures of the 1980s and 1990s and the contemporary proclivity for lesbian parties and tourism. The chapter concludes with a genealogy of Autostraddle as a business, brand and social space, within the context of a history of lesbian social spaces.

Subcultures as early separatism: lesbian bars and clubs

Documentation of lesbian social life before the second wave of feminism boomed in the west is scarce, but thorough. Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991)

traces a history of lesbian culture and life in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the 1980s. The book charts medical, institutional and social understandings of same-sex attraction and how those understandings have coalesced and been negotiated to produce and sustain communities and subcultures of queer women. Similarly, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis concentrate their history of American lesbian culture, in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993), on the communities emerging between the 30s and the 1960s. These communities, they argue, are constitutive of the contemporary imaginary of lesbian community as separate from the broader gay community. Laura Harris and Liz Crocker's edited anthology *Femme* examines a similar time period, but focuses particularly on articulations of femininity within lesbian subcultures (1997). Rebecca Jennings details this history as it unfolded in Sydney in *Unnamed Desires* and notes that the scene in Australian cities was much more secretive and sparse, without the critical mass needed to sustain a dense subculture (2015).

Toward the end of the 19th Century, medical discourses of lesbianism as illness and perversion meant that a social *identity* was born from the examination of sexual practices. Medical discourse also led to a proliferation of public information about same-sex attraction and sex, which meant that those practices became more risky as they were widely associated with deviance (Faderman 1991, 160). The ostracisation of lesbians meant they were cast apart and then out and thus had to seek new spaces in which to convene. The subcultural separatism of the mid-century was borne of necessity then, rather than political resistance.

In North America, and to a lesser but still significant extent in the UK and Australia, gay bars became the hubs of lesbian life in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these bars were

sustained through 'private social networks' (Robinson 2016, 55) and word of mouth, but operated secretively and were closely guarded. Bars were guarded primarily through aesthetic codes - butch and femme, but they also operated in terms of class signifiers as they were spaces that working class women frequented (Faderman 1991).

Lesbians maintained some alliance with gay men at this time and continued to frequent gay male bars as well as exclusively lesbian spaces. The gay bars were usually nicer spaces, as unlike the women, the gay men were often employed in well paid jobs and had more money to spend. However, as Kennedy & Davis argue, 'the dominant feeling was that lesbians were not welcome' (1993, 72). The strengthening association of lesbianism with assumed working class attributes such as violence and alcoholism meant that the discourse of deviance in lesbians was compounded and they were once again cast out.

Separatism & the feminist split: living on the land

As the so-called second wave of feminism gathered steam in the USA, UK and Australia in the 1960s and into the 1970s, lesbians began to critique the invisibility and outright rejection of sexuality as integral to the movement. At the annual Congress of United Women organised by the National Organisation of Women in 1970, the lesbian collective, Lavender Menace, staged a protest and proposed separatism as a central political strategy in the fight against patriarchy (Kulpa 2009). Approaches to separatism were varied - Valerie Solanas called for violent responses to male oppression in the SCUM Manifesto, whilst others such as Rita Mae Brown focused their efforts on establishing separatist press. Adrienne Rich argued that lesbianism could be understood as a spectrum, a composite of behaviours, political actions and theory

through which women could reorient themselves away from men, and toward other women (1980), and thus, as McConnell et al note, 'lesbianism was recast as a political identity that rejected patriarchal values and strategically employed separatism' (2016, 10; see also Kendall 2013). This positioning of lesbianism produced an essentialist, yet almost ironically queer imaginary that every woman possessed lesbian potential. Given the right circumstances, this potential could be enacted toward new political futures (Enszer 2016, 183).

For some groups of women (or, womyn as they were commonly known), separatism involved a full-time removal from the society of men. This often meant retreating to 'rural idylls' (Browne 2011b, 14), away from what they took to be urban manifestations of male violence and privilege. This retreat to 'the land' to live collectively was in part to escape men, but it was also about an imaginary of connection with 'mother nature' as a feminist force that 'could develop new sensual and social relations that are truly in tune with natural processes' (Sandilands 2002, 132). Where nature and women were denigrated and dominated in urban contexts, separatists argued that collective living allowed a reorientation toward a biologically essential 'predilection for nurturance, nonviolence and mutuality in all things' (Sandilands 2002, 133).

Many of these intentional communities collapsed or disappeared, largely due to internal conflicts about what should be considered and therefore rejected as 'the trappings of the man-made city' (Valentine 1997, 119). These communities were often critiqued from other vantages of the feminist movements as well, particularly for their tendency to 'fix' women as an essential and unified force. A central criticism was that separatism was generally a white and middle-class movement, especially as women were asked to eschew potential solidarities with men along race and class lines in favour of connection

with universal 'womanhood'. Despite the collapse of full-time separatist communities, the imaginary of lesbian space as rural and separate idyll continued to mobilise notions of utopia for queer women.

"Wombstock": Festival culture and temporary separatism

It was within this context that temporary separatist events became popular amongst lesbians and feminists. Collectively, these festivals were known as 'Wombstock' and involved music, feminist consciousness raising, overt sexuality and political and social workshops. In 1974, the National Women's Music Festival (NWMF) began operating on college campuses in the USA and regularly featured and centred lesbian performers. Two years later, in 1976, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest) - the biggest and most widely known of these events - began, and although heterosexual and bisexual women were allowed, many thought of the space as a separatist lesbian cultural space. Later, in 1983, Campfest started running in 'a cozy Jewish summer camp' (Morris 2005, 57) as another lesbian oriented, temporarily separatist music festival. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other similarly separatist festivals included the East Coast Lesbian Festival, the Gulf Coast Womyn's Festival, the West Coast Women's Music Festival, Rhythm Fest, and the Iowa Women's Music Festival. All of these festivals, apart from the NWMF (which no longer operates as a separatist or autonomous space), have since stopped running.

Aside from separatism, what characterised each of these festivals was a commitment to non-hierarchical organising and cooperative work ethics alongside a commitment to 'high play' (Dickie et al 2005) and the development of deeply personal relationships. MichFest, for example, was built from the ground up each year, on festival organiser

Lisa Vogal's property. Teams of 500-600 volunteers were organised into two groups - a long crew that was on the land for a month, setting up and taking down the festival, and a short crew that operated the festival and assisted for 10-14 days. These volunteers were responsible for building stages, paths, bathrooms, kitchens and community areas (Cvetkovich & Wahng 2001). Work crews also cooked and served food for the entire festival, provided shuttles, child care and health care, as well as maintained sanitation and support and organise performances.

In its largest year, MichFest had more than 10,000 attendees, but on an average year, there were around 5,000 women camping for the festival. Tickets were sold on a sliding scale, but all participants were expected to undertake several workshifts throughout the festival (this was also the case at Campfest), in order to encourage a sense of community connection to the festival, and to keep costs low. The general population of MichFest was highly educated women, many of whom were also academics and used the space to discuss feminist theory as well as politics (McConnell et al 2016). Participation at MichFest or a similar festival was a way of immersing oneself into lesbian culture and politics, even if for only a few weeks each year (Morris 2005). These spaces became a barometer for the issues facing lesbian culture throughout the 1980s and 1990s: S&M sexual practices, motherhood, race, class and trans inclusion.

Because wombstocks were often held on private, rural land, it became common practice for the festivals to be institutionalised as public sexualised spaces (Browne 2011a; Cvetkovich & Wahng 2001). A particular experience of nudity and gender was made possible by the 'elsewhereness' of the sites (Browne 2011b), which encouraged a 'shedding' of heteronormative expectations of feminine desire and a culture of public sex. Kath Browne argues that while this celebratory embracing of 'womyn's bodies may

contest heteronormative performances of femininity, they also reiterate normative and embodied versions of “women” (2011a, 13). That is, while MichFest makes room for an alternative imagining of ways to be in the world as women, the norms of the space reify particular exclusions and harden the boundaries around the concept of womanhood. Thus the spaces were often experienced as simultaneously ‘empowering and exclusionary’ (Browne 2011a, 21).

The issue of exclusion and where to draw borders around and throughout the lesbian feminist community eventually lead to the demise of MichFest in 2015. Protests about trans exclusion began in 1994, with Camp Trans setting up outside the festival each year. In the early 2000s, petitions started circulating, asking the festival to admit trans women and asking musicians to boycott until the issue had been properly addressed. Festival attendees and work crews all debated the issue at length and in 2014 Lisa Vogel released a statement saying that while they wouldn’t police attendees, the space was ‘intended to be for womyn who were born female, raised as girls and who continue to identify as womyn’ (McConnell et al 2016, 11). A year later, Vogel announced the closure of the festival.

The debates about whether to include trans women, as well as other discussions on how to increase the participation of women of colour at MichFest, were a manifestation of the rifts, tensions and border wars occurring in the academy between and within feminist and queer strands of theory. Where feminist theory had been concerned with gender and material and structural analysis, queer theory was concerned with sexuality, cultural analysis and deconstruction. Lesbian feminists sat at the nexus of the two strands of theory and many were anxious that a loosening of the borders around ‘womanhood’ would mean more difficulty in advocating against material harms, even

as they argued for a decoupling of womanhood and heterosexual norms. The idealised social space of MichFest and other temporary separatist spaces then, have been constituted as utopian through notions of essentialism, commonality and unity.

Circuits & cruises: Lesbian tourism

Although research interests in gay and lesbian travel and tourism have increased over the last two decades, very little of this research has focussed specifically on the travel interests of lesbians or queer women (Hughes 2007, Johnston 2007). The little tourism survey research that does exist suggests that queer women are less likely than gay men (or the heterosexual population) to own passports, spend money on holidays or enjoy traditional public leisure spaces such as bars or clubs (Hughes 2007). This is perhaps because lesbians have lower earning capacities than gay men and because of the perception that their feminist persuasions preclude them from capitalist pursuits of leisure time. Further, the tourism industry is dominated by white, colonial, hetero-patriarchial norms that position the ideal traveler as a heterosexual man, occasionally accompanied by his family (Puar 2002).

Despite disinterest from the tourism industry and researchers broadly, a market for temporary separatist spaces as manifest through lesbian circuit parties in the USA in particular and travel resorts internationally has emerged amongst the commercialisation of gay and lesbian life and space. As the womyn's music festivals began to disappear throughout the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian circuit parties began to pop up in their stead. For example, the Women's Weekend at Russian River in California, Aqua Girl in Miami and The Dinah Shore Weekend in Palm Springs each attract thousands of women each year for activities and parties (Miller 2002). In fact, Dinah

Shore, operating since 1991, is known as the biggest lesbian party in the world and lasts for five days of DJs, pool parties, celebrity sightings and sex. Though each of these events is touted as a lesbian or women's space, none explicitly exclude the presence of men; the Women's Weekend at Russian River welcomes allies as well as lesbians and Dinah Shore allows anyone over the age of 21 to attend, regardless of gender.

Alongside these parties, the travel company *Olivia* also runs cruises and resort holidays for lesbian women. Olivia too, had its origins in alternative women's music - it began as a feminist music collective in 1973 (Morris 2015), and eventually evolved into a travel company operating cruises in 1990. Now the company runs more than 25 cruises, resorts and family holidays each year catering to lesbians and featuring celebrities and lesbian entertainers. What sets Olivia and circuit parties like Dinah Shore apart from their separatist ancestry is not the potential presence of men, but rather the use of capitalism to demarcate cultural boundaries.

A 2002 special issue of *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* on 'Queer Tourism: Geographies of Globalisation', edited by Jasbir Puar, featured only a single article focusing exclusively on lesbian and queer women's travel experiences (Kantsa 2002). Kantsa's work examined lesbian pilgrimage to and occupation of the Isle of Lesbos, 'a seasonal lesbian community re-created every summer, a community with its own territorial and symbolic boundaries' (2002, 35), and the tensions between this community and the locals of the island. Though Puar stressed the importance of this inclusion, she also expressed frustration with 'the celebratory tone of queer visibility politics' that broadly characterised the submissions (2002, 935). That is, Puar is critical of neocolonial discourses that suggest the 'queering' of space is *always* liberatory, progressive and positive.

Social space, access and capitalism

What is clear from this brief historical examination of lesbian social spaces in the West is the ways in which capital (both financial and social) have shaped access and participation. Early subcultural separatist spaces were born out of necessity and women's limited earning power. These spaces were often alcohol centric and potentially violent. Access relied heavily on being 'in the know', fluency in the 'correct' kinds of aesthetic codes and strict adherence to butch/femme norms.

Feminist separatist spaces were decidedly anti-capitalist - with a focus on non-hierarchical community building - as evidenced by the women building homes on "the land" and the crews that built the sites at MichFest or CampFest each year. Although these sites were often populated by middle-class women who could afford time away from home and work, they were also significant sites for working class and union organising. Though the butch/femme aesthetic codes of the earlier era mostly disappeared, there was a significant level of antagonism towards displays of femininity as symbols of submission to patriarchal mandates.

Significantly, because these spaces were officially known as women's spaces rather than *lesbian* spaces, sexuality and sex while present were also ambiguous. This is in line with Rich's classification of lesbianism as a spectrum that extends beyond but does not preclude sex between women (1980). The matrix of belonging in these spaces emphasised the primacy of gender as definitive. The boundaries of these communities were cultural rather than absolute - trans women were kept out through nudity norms and discourses of womanhood as an embodied truth, which then manifested as overt

aggression toward trans women. Here too, aesthetic codes and discourses of bodily deportment guard the border of the lesbian community.

In the contemporary context, lesbian cultural spaces tend to be online or they operate as leisure and tourist spaces, including holidays, camps and circuit parties, all of which require significant financial capital to access. These spaces are distinctly different from earlier iterations of lesbian cultural space, as they are not overtly political, nor do they necessarily operate within a matrix of shame. In fact, the borders of these cultural spaces are less explicitly policed - trans women are no longer exiled, and some of these spaces even allow cisgender men to attend. That is, while financial capital has become more important for access to these cultural spaces, perhaps social capital has become *less* important. However, given that the people who cannot afford to attend these events are often people of colour, trans and gender diverse people and people with disabilities, particular aesthetic codes remain central - those of white, middle-class people.

Autostraddle as queer utopia?

In 2016, the British speculative fiction television series *Black Mirror* aired a lesbian-themed episode titled *San Junipero*. The show is normally known for its dark outlook on the relationships between humanity and technology. The episodes are a series of short stories, each exploring the catastrophic consequences of humanity's increasing entanglement with digital technology. *San Junipero* however, offered a different sort of story – one where technology allowed a queer coupling that might not otherwise have been possible. The women in this story defied geographic separation, homophobia and eventually death to enact a queer utopia in which they could live together forever in a world free from homophobia. The end of the episode showed the two women dancing

happily to the sounds of Belinda Carlisle's *Heaven is a Place on Earth*. Early in 2017, Autostraddle ran its annual event, A-Camp, and chose *Heaven is a Place on Earth* as the theme for its closing dance. The theme was a reference to the queer friendly episode and an excuse to wear over-the-top 1980s fashion, but it was also an acknowledgement of the role that the online space, that Autostraddle itself, has played in constructing and imagining a queer, feminist utopia. If *Black Mirror* is a pessimistic reflection of the future of human/digital relations, Autostraddle, like *San Junipero* perhaps offers a more *hopeful* outlook.

In the rest of this chapter, I attempt to explain the phenomenon of Autostraddle in order to 'set the scene' for the analyses in the following chapters. I think of this attempt at explanation not as an act of 'uncovering' in order to experience a sense of authority or domination, but instead as a form of intimacy. Here, I offer what Cvetkovich calls a 'compelling description' (2012, 15) rather than a necessarily pessimistic critique of the site and its surrounds. In order to do this, I provide details about the site's traffic and their day-to-day operation and explore Autostraddle as at once, a business, a community and a queer, feminist utopian imaginary. Each of these potential forms for thinking through Autostraddle comes from its self-description: 'Autostraddle is a *revolutionary* online destination and *powerful brand* for lesbian, bisexual and otherwise inclined ladies. We aim to build *community*, report breaking news, promote talented artists and support *progressive activists*.' (Autostraddle 2017, emphasis added).

The website operates as a queer business that depends upon identity claims for success. The site also operates as a trans-national queer community, with engaged and active members who regularly meet-up in the offline world as well. For its members, the site is much more than an institution or a business. Here, I think through the set of

relationships that form the site – the relationships between members, between members and staff, between members and the site as a whole and the practicalities of attempting to enact social change while operating a business within a neo-liberal capitalist framework.

Figuring out how to describe Autostraddle, as an entity or as a universe unto itself, is tricky. Numbers abound - how many staff they employ, how many readers visit the site each month, the percentage of their revenue that consists of merchandise and membership sales - but the numbers do not tell the entire story. There are the ways in which the site describes itself - as a 'hilarious, intelligent & provocative voice', 'a serious labour of love' and as 'a very big thing running on a very small budget' (Autostraddle 2017), and there are also the ways in which the audience members (known colloquially as Autostraddlers or simply, Straddlers) describe the site, community members and staff as life-saving and 'literally responsible for (my) growth into a compassionate and strong individual' (see figure 1). Individually, none of these elements can explain the phenomenon of Autostraddle and its appeal to queer women around the world. In this chapter, I do as close and intimate a reading as I can of a text that is perhaps not really a text at all, but instead a vibrant, amorphous organism. Autostraddle is not simply the site itself, but also a shifting community and a fantasy of a queer utopian space that stretches and twists through space and time.

The community here is literally responsible for my growth into a compassionate and strong individual. The comment section, plus going to A-Camps, has introduced me to some of the most amazing people in the world, and not a day goes by that I don't reflect on the lessons I've learned through these portals. Riese saved my life – and everyone else here has enriched it beyond measure. It breaks my heart that I'm not an active member anymore because I feel like I've missed out on thousands of conversations, hundreds of new lessons, and dozens more friends.

Thank you for everything, Autostraddle ♡

Figure 1: User comment on 'Celebrating "Civil" with Seven Kinds of Civil Comments (As Seen on Autostraddle)' (2016)

The following information about the site and the entire Autostraddle project is taken directly from their website unless otherwise stated. Primarily, this information comes from the 'About Us', 'Meet the Team', 'Advertise' and 'Press' pages, which all fall under the 'About' header. Autostraddle was officially launched as a website in 2009 by co-founders Riese Bernard and Alexandra Vega, two US based women in their early to mid 20s. The project began earlier, in 2007, as a fan blog for the television show *The L Word*, a soap opera that followed the lives of a group of lesbian and bisexual women in West Hollywood. Each week, Bernard would recap episodes of the show on her blog, which had a growing audience of friends and fans from the various *The L Word* forums that she frequented (Pasulka, 2015). When *The L Word* finished airing in 2009, Bernard and her then partner, Vega, decided to launch Autostraddle and use the platform to explore a broader range of queer pop culture and everyday lesbian life and politics.

At writing, the site had 6 full-time and 3-part time staff and lists more than 100 current and former contributors. Staff structures are in transition currently though so those

numbers may no longer be accurate. The website is committed to paying writers and their current (2019) rate is between \$50-200 USD per post. The senior editors note that they are willing to pay more for long form content by experienced journalists and for pieces by queer and transgender writers of colour. The website's content is organised into streams of arts & popular culture, sex & dating, politics, community, columns (there are more than 40 former and continuing regular columns) and identity. Each of these streams has several sub-streams and covers content from food and recipes to in-depth personal essays on sexuality and gender. As of 2019, each quarter the site releases a new 'issue' - a collection of posts tied to a theme; the themes in 2019 were Birthdays, Outsiders, Travel and Power. These 'issues' are designed to mimic the format of a traditional magazine.

Autostraddle lists its values as: honesty, community, safe (but not necessarily comfortable) space, courage & integrity, laughter & fun, art and inclusiveness. Each of these values relates to the types of content the site produces but also sets the tone for the relationships that evolve and develop through the site. They write, for example, 'By living openly and visibly, promoting and endorsing genuinely and speaking frankly; we endear our community to do the same' (Autostraddle 2017). This is as much a statement about identity and community as it is a business model. The site also lists the following rules (figure 2) for content and discourse:

You will see the following rules applied to all our content and discourse:

1. Never criticize or make fun of a woman's physical appearance.
2. Always source, unless the source is like a Neo-Nazi website or Westboro.
3. Everything must have a point.
4. Quality over quantity.
5. Aim to be as diverse and inclusive as possible in imagery and written content.
6. We do not ever and will not publish paparazzi photographs of anybody. We occasionally will make an exception for photographs that suggest Lindsay Lohan and Samantha Ronson are getting back together as long as nobody appears intoxicated in said photographs.

Figure 2: Autostraddle content rules

The tone of these ‘rules’ reflects the sensibility of Autostraddle, which combines seriousness and humour in equal parts to affect a playful approach to deeply intimate and personal issues such as sexuality, homophobia and misogyny. This set of rules is much shorter and simpler than the rules governing how readers engage with the site through commenting on posts – which will be explored more extensively in the next section. Instead, these rules are deliberately broad, so as not to foreclose the breadth and diversity of content and opinion posited through the site.

Autostraddle boasts more than 2 million unique visitors and around 4 million page views each month. This number increases if you also consider Autostraddle’s 52,000 Twitter followers, 70,000 Facebook followers, 30,000 Instagram followers and 62,000 Tumblr followers. There are also numerous Facebook groups connected to the site, some of which are public and easily accessible and others of which are private and closed. I am, for example, a member of publicly accessible Facebook groups including the A-Camp unofficial social group, Autostraddle femmes, Autostraddle London, Autostraddle Sydney, Adelstraddle Collective (Autostraddle Adelaide social group) on Facebook. I am also a member of more private groups concerning body image and spirituality. I have also visited several other Autostraddle Facebook sites related to job searching, tattoos and Autostraddlers who came out as queer late in life.

As Autostraddle operates as a business, there is a significant amount of information available about the audience for potential advertisers. According to the page on “Advertising with Autostraddle”, the average visitor is a woman between the ages of 18-34, who is either single or dating (that is, not married) and college/university

educated. The site also claims their community members are heavy users of social media and regular online shoppers – ‘89% of which will seek out brands that are advertised to the LGBT market directly’ (Autostraddle 2017). Between 2011 and 2016, the site carried out semi-regular ‘Autostraddle Reader Surveys’, which add to the huge amount of data available on what constitutes the typical ‘Straddler’. The results of the surveys offer information on readers’ hobbies and free-time activities (more Straddlers own cats than dogs), eating and drinking habits (30.5% of Straddlers are vegetarian compared with a US national average of 2.7%), education levels (47% of Straddlers over the age of 25 have completed or are working toward a post-graduate degree), rates of employment and types of jobs worked (2% of the readership have been employed as sex workers, 57.4% have worked in office jobs) and geography – 64% live in the United States, for example.

The kinds of questions asked on the website surveys demonstrate a particular understanding of participants and the significance of sexuality for everyday life. Some of these questions are predictable – age, sexual orientation, gender identity and relationship status for example (figure 3); others are less so, such as what forms of transport the readers use to navigate their lives. What these surveys and the ways in which they are framed suggest, is that Autostraddle imagines its readership as a community. That is, they expect their readers to visit regularly and to be engaged with the site and with one another. Unlike other websites, where the audience might be thought of as invisible, anonymous or nebulously large and indiscrete, the Autostraddle community perhaps more closely resembles a social media network where members have identities and relationships within and extending beyond the site itself. Autostraddle is clearly also concerned with commonality, of its readership but perhaps

also within the queer community more broadly.

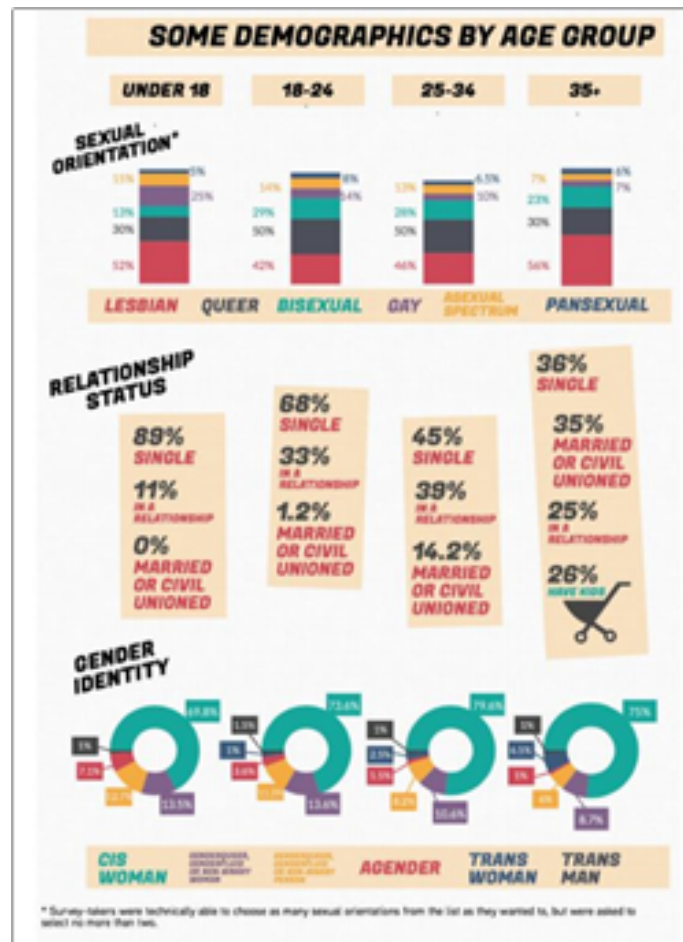


Figure 3: Autostraddle readers' sexual orientation, relationship status and gender identity, 2016 Reader Survey

The 2016 survey asked how readers were most likely to engage with the site (figure 4), with 38% of those who took the survey having read Autostraddle for more than 3 years and 20% checking in with the site first thing every day. The lively comment section of Autostraddle is often cited as indicative of a thriving and interactive community,

however the survey suggests that close to two thirds (65%) of readers never comment on articles. This is congruent with the scarce research on commenting online which suggests that comment threads are usually dominated by a few individuals, rather than evenly distributed amongst readers (Davis 2005, Anstead & O'Loughlin 2011). This uneven distribution could mean that the Autostraddle community is much larger than it first appears, but it could also mean that there is something about the structure of the site that keeps regular visitors from feeling comfortable engaging with the content and other members on the site. Research on comment motivation suggests that readers will often self-silence if they don't feel their opinions are in line with the whole group, thus producing and further cementing a sense of 'audience homophily' online (Barnes 2018). A core group of readers who comment frequently are easily recognisable as 'Straddlers' and come to symbolise the cultural norms of the community.

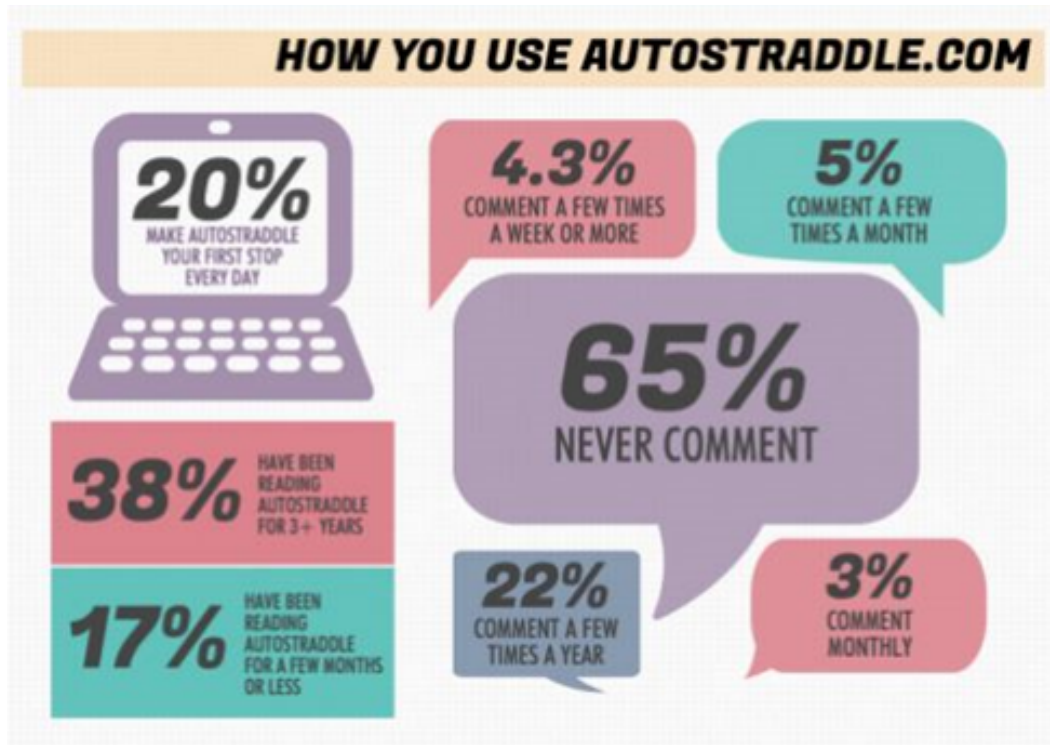


Figure 4: Autostraddle site engagement, 2016 Reader Survey

The site's comment policy is much more detailed than the list of core values and content and discourse rules. Users are required to login when they want to leave a comment and once logged in, they are reminded that all comments are moderated in line with Autostraddle's comment policy, which is linked above every comment box. The policy explicitly states that comments left on articles are the primary way in which the site encourages and engages with the community, which means that the staff are likely to read and respond to most comments. Indeed, they regularly mine the comment sections of the website to put together content for 'comment awards' every Friday, which recognise witty users but also serve as an opportunity to re-cap some of the popular

posts of the week. Users can also nominate one another for these comment awards, further encouraging community interaction within the comment sections of articles.

Also detailed in the comment policy are guidelines around how to enact respectful debate. Autostraddle states that they do not allow intentionally hateful or abusive content, nor do they allow what they call 'derailments'. That is, the comments on a post must respond to that post in some way, rather than become critically tangential. Staff will not respond to concerns or complaints about the site as a whole in the comment sections of posts, though they do invite users to email the senior editors if they have specific complaints. Similarly, they ask users not to point out article errors in the comments, but also to send an email to one of the editors. Perhaps this is in an effort to keep articles free of critique, but it could also be an attempt at fostering intimacy through critique in a more immediate way than a single comment that might be lost in a sea of anonymity. If other users want to complain about a comment, Autostraddle suggests that they email the moderator or tag them in a reply to the offensive comment. They suggest that users not engage in debate with comments they deem abusive or hateful, as that will result in the comment remaining on the site. Most of the regular commenters are well versed in moderating procedures and are able to get the attention of the comment moderator fairly quickly so that unwanted comments are removed.

The comment policy also outlines the things that Autostraddle understands are 'not up for debate' (figure 5). These points are geared toward reminding users to be more inclusive – specifically that trans and bisexual women belong *as* queer women and *in* the community. The policy also outlines that 'a member of the oppressor group is not qualified to tell a member of the oppressed group that they're not entitled to feel oppressed, offended, discriminated against, bothered or threatened.' The comment

policy explicitly references the US Declaration of Independence, underlining an investment in American values such as truth, liberation and freedom. This part of the comment policy particularly emphasises the ways in which identity markers become salient in relationships and social interactions on Autostraddle. The policy references the most frequent complaints dealt with while establishing a brand identity and comments that fail to adhere to these ‘truths’ are deleted and replaced with a message that the user has failed to comply with the rules.

C. On Truths We Hold Self-Evident

We’re really sick of having the same fruitless debates over and over again. So, if you’re commenting on this website, please keep in mind that the following facts are not up for debate here (anymore):

1. There is no such thing as “reverse racism.”
2. Queer trans women belong in the queer women’s community.
3. Bisexual and other non-monosexual women belong in the queer women’s community.
4. There is nothing wrong with being fat, nor is there anything inherently unhealthy about being fat.
5. There is nothing more “progressive” or “evolved” about any consensual relationship dynamic or sexual orientation compared to any other.
6. A member of the oppressor group is not qualified to tell a member of the oppressed group that they’re not entitled to feel oppressed, offended, discriminated against, bothered or threatened by something or someone. (Or empowered by something or someone, for that matter.) A cis person cannot tell a trans person that the trans person’s assessment of transphobia is wrong, a white person cannot tell a person of color that their assessment of racism is wrong. **Listen.**

Figure 5: Autostraddle comment policy

Point six of the comment policy reflects an increasingly popular, contemporary model of intersectionality in which subjectivity is the central site of oppression (Hekman 2014). In this model, readers are expected to be familiar with a discrete ‘matrix of domination’ onto which they might map themselves and others (Collins 2009). This approach

recognises and appreciates difference (in terms of race, sexuality, gender), rather than erasing it under a universal category of 'lesbian' or 'woman'. However, it also relies on requisite cultural knowledge to categorise the self and others as members of the 'oppressor' or 'oppressed' group. The comment policy assumes these categories are self-evident, rather than considering the ways in which overlaps, dissonances and interactions are what make them meaningful. The language here is successful though, as unlike other websites, deliberate antagonism and trolling are very rare.

In the comment policy, Autostraddle also explains that the site primarily uses the word 'lesbian' in headlines – not because they cater exclusively to a lesbian population, but rather because this is the best way to get traffic to the site. This is the only word that specifically and easily references queer women and distinguishes them from sites that cover LGBT issues more broadly. This is a clear example of the environment (the internet) placing constraints around the construction of the community and necessitating a minor violence through boundary production. In order to attend to the nuanced issues that arise from use of the word lesbian, the editors explain that they try to use the word to describe 'things' rather than people. That is, *sex* between two women is lesbian sex just as a *relationship* between two women would be a lesbian relationship without foreclosing the identity of the women participating in the sex or relationship.

Such an approach mirrors historical (pre 20th century) views of sexuality as oriented toward pleasure *or* procreation, rather than sexed or gendered objects of desire (Katz 2007). This can produce significant tension amongst Autostraddle readers who adhere to more contemporary understandings of sexuality as a fixed facet of identity, centred on erotic orientations toward members of the same sex. Thus, Autostraddle uses this point of its comment policy to defuse debates about language use and demonstrate that

the site is thinking through issues of identity and language but is not necessarily willing to open the discussion up to the entire community. The comment policy is highly detailed and perhaps gives the most insight into the ways the site positions itself politically, however occasional and new visitors are probably less familiar with the policy and therefore less fluent in the native language of this particular community. This means that readers' criticisms on language use in articles – especially around markers of identity such as the term 'lesbian' – threaten to reveal them as outsiders.

According to an article in online magazine *Broadly* (a subsidiary of Vice Media), Autostraddle earned approximately \$400,000 USD in 2014, around 80% of which came from community contributions, as opposed to advertising contracts (Pasulka, 2015). These contributions come in the form of merchandise sales, paid memberships, affiliate shopping and A-Camp attendance. The final part of the 2016 reader survey also asked about the ways in which readers showed support for the site, including whether or not they were planning to attend A-Camp, whether they had purchased merchandise through the site or one of its affiliate links or whether they had paid memberships. Regular readers are most likely to support the site by purchasing merchandise, including a range of T-shirts, most of which reference specific sexual orientations or gender identities, such as, 'Soft Butch', 'Tomboy Femme' or 'Lazy Femme' (figures 6 & 7).

The success of Autostraddle relies on a cohesive set of identity categories that are easily packaged and sold under the guise of community membership. That is not to say that community membership in this space is not meaningful or significant to the readership of the site, but rather that the community could not exist without its own commercial packaging. This packaging inevitably produces specific tensions around identity (which

ones are available for purchase and what size, shape and colours do they come in?) and raises important questions around the politics and economies of visibility operating at Autostraddle. What, for example, does it mean to wear a T-Shirt that proclaims your identity to the general public? Why might such an act be so pleasurable that it can financially sustain a queer community?



Figure 6: Soft Butch T-shirt from the Autostraddle website

Figure 7: Lazy Femme T-Shirt, author photo

In 2014, Autostraddle launched A+, a four tier membership program with prices ranging from \$4-\$25USD per month. Membership allows access to extra content and occasional merchandise discounts and perks. In January 2019, there were 3000 paid members, though a mid-2019 membership drive secured up to a further 1000 members. The membership program was introduced with an article entitled, 'The Future is Here:

Join Autostraddle Plus'. The language in the article was enthusiastic and upbeat and seemed to assume that the community would be excited to contribute financially to the site in a steady and committed way. The program was described thus; 'You'll be investing in the general creativity and badassery of Autostraddle and helping us to create a sustainable business model eventually more tied to our community than to *The Man*' (Autostraddle, 2014, emphasis added). A+ was framed as a progressive way to invest in the queer community and when it was first announced, there were three levels to choose from – Bronze (\$6USD p/month), Silver (\$12USD p/month) and Gold (\$15USD p/month). Each tier granted its members a different level of content on the site, such as access to the A+ Podcast or more personal essays that writers don't feel comfortable sharing with a broader audience. Paid members were made visible on the site with a gold circle around their profile pictures in the comment sections of articles. Members were not distinguishable across tiers. The article announcing the membership program had 360 comments. While most of the comments were supportive of the endeavour, some members of the community were highly critical of the move to monetise particular content.

Criticisms of the program largely centred on its production of a hierarchy amongst members – specifically, those that could afford to pay, and those that couldn't. Complaints also focussed on the ways in which the membership scheme would produce more pronounced boundaries around and within the community. One commenter wrote the following; "Unfortunately, for those of us who cannot afford to [contribute financially], it will serve as a constant reminder that we're not fully part of the community anymore" (comment by el, July 11, 2014, 5:25pm). Another commenter critiqued the site's suggestion that becoming a member would be reflective of their 'awesomeness': "Some people just can't afford to donate and that isn't in any way a

reflection of their inherent human value. So I think there's an implicit equality between worth and wealth here that is pretty problematic" (comment by D. July 11, 2014, 10:44am). Many of these critiques revolved around the recognition of paid members with a gold circle around their profile pictures.

The number of A+ members has grown significantly since the closing of *AfterEllen*, one of Autostraddle's biggest competitors in the queer women's online space, in 2016⁴. Slightly earlier, in October 2015, the site introduced a new tier to their membership program, - Cobalt (\$2.50USD per/month). Given that this works out to approximately 50c per week, it seems unlikely that this membership tier is particularly financially worthwhile for Autostraddle. Instead, the Cobalt membership acts as a symbolic gesture of inclusion in which the boundaries constructed through the A+ program are made more porous and flexible. To that end, the article introducing the Cobalt tier was more in-depth than the original article introducing A+ and included detailed descriptions of the ways in which membership money would be spent on the site (figure 8), with a definite focus on supporting queer artists and writers. The article quotes Tyler Reinhard of *Mask Magazine* in saying; "As shameful as it feels to ask for money on the Internet, it's how you develop a committed community" (Autostraddle 2015). Again, they attempt to re-frame the conversation away from capital and toward

⁴ Like Autostraddle, *AfterEllen* was a highly trafficked website that provided commentary on lesbian popular culture. In 2016, following an acquisition by Evolve Media, the editorial staff were fired and the website was reduced to a skeleton archive. Later in the same year, a new, very small editorial staff was appointed and *AfterEllen* was populated with articles exploring 'lesbophobia' and lamenting a trans 'invasion' into women's spaces. The new exclusionary politics of *AfterEllen* stand in stark contrast to the politics of Autostraddle which has resulted in a migration of readership (Hogan 2017).

investing in the community.

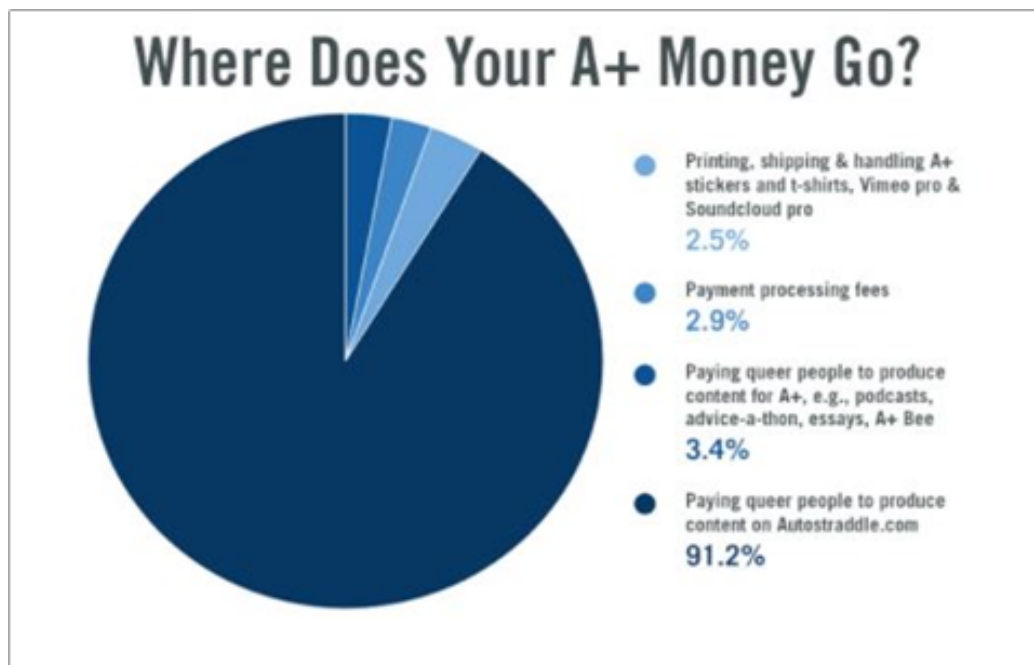


Figure 8: A+ membership expenditure

While most people might (and regularly do) assume that advertising must sustain the site financially, only eight percent of Autostraddle's income is accounted for by advertising accounts. A+ membership however, accounts for 38% and A-Camp (discussed below) accounts for 40% of the site's income. In mid-2019, an Autostraddle fundraiser raised \$150,000(USD) over two weeks from community donations. The site is kept alive by community contributions, despite the fact that advertisers tend to consider Autostraddle too niche to be worth utilising as a platform.

The debate about the progressiveness of Autostraddle's membership program has perhaps revealed an assumption among community members that queer politics and queer projects should be, or at least attempt to be, anti-capitalist. This is not immediately apparent, given the lack of complaints about the site selling advertising space and even merchandise. Community tension is apparent though, in the linking of *membership* or inclusion to financial contribution. Indeed, in response to the 'Future is Here' article introducing the membership program, one commenter wrote; "Compromising your morals is probably inevitable if you want an endeavour to survive in a capitalist system. But there is surely a way to do it which doesn't mark the difference between those-able-to-pay and those-unable-to-pay so clearly" (comment by Maria, July 19, 2014, 7:43am).

There is an inevitable sense of hierarchy and distinction here, in which those that can financially contribute to the site are more visible and therefore more valuable members of the community. Earlier attempts at ethical fundraising (including bake sales in which the CEO would post cookies to donors) were not financially sustainable and significantly limited the work that Autostraddle could do. Compromises are thus necessary to sustain the community, but those same compromises are seen to undermine the anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchical ideals of the community, which are so important to so many people.

A-Camp & contemporary offline utopias

Autostraddle supports offline as well as online socialising amongst its readership. The website hosts regular events but these are generally outnumbered by the events and meet-ups run by community members (Figure 9), which usually occur around large-

scale queer events such as pride marches but also around themes that Autostraddle sets, such as International Brunch Week. Meet-ups are usually free and of no direct financial benefit to the site, though meeting up in ‘real’ life can often make members more willing to interact online and more likely to contribute to the site financially. If bonding over collective identities online can strengthen offline relationships and momentum toward social justice goals (Vogt & Chen 2001 : 371), then encouraging social gatherings offline also works to reinforce the collective identities of ‘Straddlers’ online.

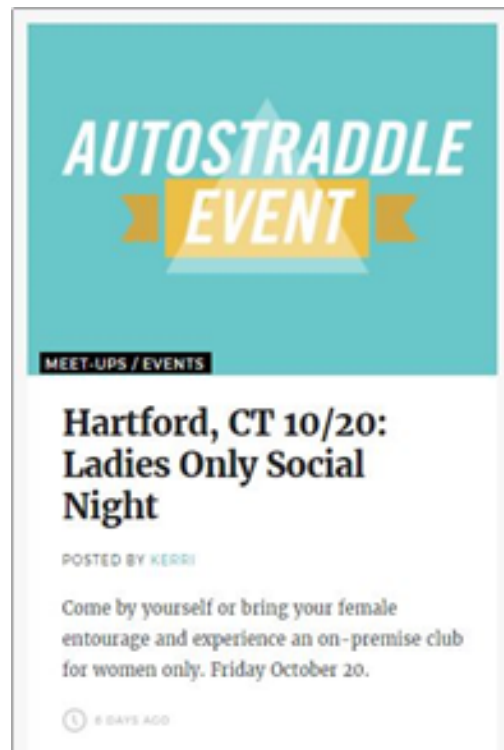


Figure 9: Example of Autostraddle Meet-Up, 2017

As I explore in Chapter 8, ‘Flung out of Space’, Autostraddle launched A-Camp in 2012, as a weekend retreat. In the years since, it has grown to a five day ‘summer-camp’ in California, with 300 participants. Attendees are provided with accommodation and three meals a day, as well as entertainment, workshops and panels each day. Past

activities have included: hip-hop dancing, pop song writing, resting bitch-face appreciation society, flower pressing, and intro to Japanese rope bondage. There is also a 'nightclub' and entertainment sessions in the evenings that usually feature notable queer celebrities, such as Roxanne Gay, Mara Wilson and Cameron Esposito.

Half of the attendees are 18-25 years old and half are over 25 (the year I attended, the oldest 'camper' was 75 years old), and the majority are between the ages of 23 and 35. The senior staff and team responsible for running A-Camp are each in their 30s. Trans and queer women are welcome, as are trans men and non-binary people, but heterosexual people and gay men are not allowed to attend. There is little data available on racial diversity or attendance by people with disabilities (though I discuss recent significant changes in these areas in the concluding chapter). In 2016, A-Camp cost \$685 (USD) per person to attend, for five nights of lodging and three meals per day. Approximately one third of Autostraddle's annual budget is spent on A-Camp, and A-Camp fees make up 40% of Autostraddle's income.

A-Camp is promoted as the 'real-life', 3-D version of Autostraddle and is often described by attendees in deeply affective terms as safe and welcoming. The 'slogan' of A-Camp is 'be right here, be real queer', a reference to the space as somewhere to foster queer authenticity and connection. Autostraddle CEO Riese Bernard describes the camp as a 'queernormative refuge from the burning hellfire of the rest of the world' (Bernard 2017) and suggests that once there, 'we (campers) will discover unicorns, slay dragons, swing dance and find all the horcruxes' (Bernard 2016). The event is imagined as a queer utopia (though they also make sure to point out that it cannot be a utopia for *everyone*), free from the homophobia and isolation that marks the lives of young queer people. A-Camp culminates in the aforementioned dance, which is designed as a queer

re-imagining of a high school dance, an occasion tinged with painful nostalgia for many queer people.

A-Camp is symbolic of the kind of community Autostraddle strives to be – a refuge from the many violences of the outside world. Campers describe the event thusly;

‘A-Camp was the first place where I’ve ever felt accepted and embraced wholeheartedly for who I am.’

‘For five magical days, I jettisoned all that bullshit. I didn’t just let my hair down - I dispensed with it completely. I could be my most honest self, without reservations or apologies. So basically, I was living my best life.’

‘At A-Camp, I felt so cool and appreciated and beautiful and important.’

‘In my 30 odd years of being on this planet, I’ve never been surrounded by a community like the one I encountered at A-Camp. From the very first moment that I met my fellow campers at LAX, I could feel the acceptance.’

(Autostraddle 2019)

A-Camp, often called ‘Mount Feelings’ by campers, is framed as an idyllic space upon which the evils of the ‘real’ world cannot encroach. Such a framing perhaps mimics early, much more hopeful descriptions of the Internet itself and its potential for queer and feminist gathering and organising. Similarly, the article introducing ‘Autostraddle Plus’ references the idea of queer utopia – of stretching forward to meet the ‘future’ in which queer community is not reliant on ‘the man’ (2014), or indeed, on capitalism or the state, but has become self-sustainable. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes that ‘the future is queerness’s domain... we must dream and enact new and better pleasures,

other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds' (2009, 1) and with Autostraddle and A-Camp, Bernard has tried to imagine such a world and invited readers to think of new ways of being in the world that are both material and digital. Of course, utopia is always an idea, an unrealised possibility imbued with failure. Utopia, like queerness, can never be fixed, never be finished, and never be achieved. The attempt to move closer to heaven though, to locate it in the here and now (to find it on Earth), requires a certain amount of compromise or even violence. What makes Autostraddle utopic then, is not its separatism from heterosexuality or even from 'the burning hellfire of the rest of the world', but instead its commitment to imagination and to the future. As Cvetkovich writes, 'the point would be to offer a vision of hope and possibility that doesn't foreclose despair and exhaustion' (2007). Similarly, Autostraddle doesn't shy away from exhaustion, but recognises it and locates hope for the queer community within and alongside that exhaustion. There is violence in the production of a community but perhaps there is also intimacy there and a new imagination of a way to be in the world. I too, have inevitably done some violence in order to produce this account of Autostraddle – to represent this amorphous and shifting community through text.

Chapter Three

Messy Methodologies & Digital Responsibilities

“It is intimate participation in life that makes knowing possible.”

(Wertz et al 2011, 1)

The central methodology of this thesis is a feminist ethnography that has involved an extended and immersive time in the ‘field’ of Autostraddle. The feminist epistemology that underpins this research is drawn primarily from three sources: Beverley Skeggs’ work on feminist ethnography (2011), Ann Cvetkovich’s writing on compelling descriptions that ‘do not reduce lived experience to a list of symptoms’ (2012, 15) and Sedgwick’s work on reparative reading that calls for surprising and hopeful research encounters (1997, see also Heather Love’s extension and analysis of Sedgwick’s work in ‘Truth and Consequences’, 2010).

Skeggs’ standpoint on ethnography will be examined more fully in the section on feminist ethnography below, but it is important to begin with a commitment to ethical and political engagement with the field site and the subject of the research. I am not impartial and I do this research with the belief that experience and relationships can be mobilised as lenses through which to view and analyse power and subjectivity.

Ethnography relies on experiences, drawn out in descriptions, analysis extrapolated from in-depth writing about the ‘scene’. It is for this task that I turn to Cvetkovich’s

theorising of the public life of depression, in which she searches for ‘forms of testimony that can mediate between the personal and the social’ (2012, 15). Compelling descriptions are an avenue to explore the ‘affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present’ without turning away from structural and institutional forces that shape our relationships with ourselves and the world around us (2012, 11).

In her essay, ‘You’re so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you’, Sedgwick similarly calls for a turn away from ‘paranoid reading’ and toward reparative reading, arguing that a standpoint of suspicion and widespread critical imperatives have had an ‘unintentionally stultifying side-effect’ and have foreclosed the possibility of surprising and relational knowledge (1997, 4). Instead of reading for critical effect, Sedgwick asks us to consider affect and love in our research projects. As Love notes, ‘paranoid reading is described as a way of disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth’; reparation on the other hand, champions ‘multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity and love’ (Love 2010, 237). That is not to say that reparative readings are never critical, or that my work uncritically celebrates Autostraddle. The methodology employed here leaves room, though, for pleasurable surprises in research encounters and for loving critiques that might be mobilised toward solutions for the problems of belonging I explore here.

The ethnography on which this thesis is based has involved a lengthy period of participant observation and textual analysis online at Autostraddle.com, as well as at A-Camp in May, 2016. The Autostraddle website contains varied content including arts and popular culture, sex and dating, politics, community and identity. The comment sections of the website are thriving and lively and the community regularly extends beyond the website to social media and offline sites as well. My observation of and

interactions with Autostraddle 'officially' began in 2015 and continued till 2018. However, my own interest in the website precedes and extends beyond this timeline, and the temporality of a website is not straightforward or linear (though something might be posted in 2012, it can still be encountered and actively engaged with in 2016), so the thesis refers to events and posts outside of 2015-2018. Online engagement also involved regular participation in social media, including Instagram and the A-Camp Unofficial Social Group on Facebook. This group is primarily for past camp attendees to connect and discuss A-Camp. Participation at A-Camp occurred in May-June, 2016 and I became a member of the Social Group a few months prior in preparation for attending camp.

Though I have been working on the thesis for approximately four years, I have been visiting Autostraddle regularly for about eight years and have been connected to social media and offline communities through the site for about six years. I have invested time and emotion into this fieldsite beyond the requirements of the PhD. This level of closeness is often pitched as an obstacle to the kinds of objective knowledges valued in Academia. My closeness to the topic and the fieldsite have made this research painstaking, but thorough. Jodie Taylor describes this as the work of an intimate insider, which involves 'cultural spaces with which the researcher has regular and ongoing contact', as well as being 'privy to undocumented historical knowledge of the people and cultural phenomenon being studied' (2011, 9). The intimacy of this work has undoubtedly made critical engagement harder, but has also deepened that engagement so that I might offer nuanced accounts of attachments to an imaginary of community at Autostraddle. Following Love's argument that the closeness of reparative reading

always makes space for ‘deidealization’ and critique (2010), I have borrowed Taylor’s term, but rather than an intimate insider, I take up the mantle of a ‘critical insider’.

Approaching online feminist research

The advent of the Internet instigated and reinvigorated a number of theoretical excavations around the meanings of identity, embodiment and reality. Across the 1990s and 2000s, feminist theorists in particular explored the ways in which ‘cyber’ culture might offer new gender possibilities, divorced from dominant discourse about the relationships between bodies and identities (Wakeford 2000, 2002; Haraway 2006). Such a divorce allowed for imaginings of feminist and queer utopias, free from the constraints of the patriarchal ‘analogue’ world. Contemporary research debunks the myths of the Internet as a gender/free playground (Pham 2011), however the world of the web remains significant in the minds of many feminist theorists, not least because it has become so omnipresent in the everyday lives of women in the West.

Sociologists and feminists have responded to the possibilities and pains of online research in innovative ways. For example Otron-Johnson & Prior’s collection on Digital Sociology (2013), Deborah Lupton’s book on the same (2014) and Christine Hine’s work on Virtual Methods (2005) each demonstrate a rigorous interest in exploring the benefits and limitations of applying new digital and virtual methods to conducting social research. Robards & Lincoln (2017) have used social media ‘scroll-backs’ to facilitate and historicise storytelling in interviews, Jorgensen (2016) similarly conducted social media ‘go-alongs’ during research encounters and Light, Burgess & Duguay (2016) mobilised a ‘walkthrough’ method to contextualise app use in the material, everyday world. Amy Dobson (2016) and Akane Kanai (2019) have theorised online cultures and

performances of gender and Hickey-Moody & Willcox (2019) have experimented with creative methodologies in order to analyse community and belonging online. A growing body of theorists is examining the emergence of queer culture online, embedded as it is with new technologies (Albury 2015, Byron et al 2019, Gray 2007, 2009, O’Riordan 2007). Each of these examples is notable for their mobilisation and interrogation of method as central to addressing questions of online/digital life. Similarly, *this* thesis ‘braids’ together creative, digital and traditional sociological methods in order to account for the enmeshed ways our on and offline selves are braided together in the everyday (Watson 2019).

In order to account for the twisting together of media and life, the thesis takes guidance from Ashleigh Watson’s theorising of ‘methods braiding’ (2019) and Halberstam’s methodological approach in *Female Masculinity*, which he refers to as a ‘scavenger methodology’ (1998, 10-13). Halberstam ‘scavenges’ and cobbles together queer readings of cultural texts alongside anecdote and interview material in order to provide a non-definitive narration of an event or a moment in time. Similarly, this thesis comprises multimethod research to ‘put texts or people into contexts’ (Reinharz 1992, 213) and resists a singular approach to research (Dahl, 2010, 150), in order to make room for the congruent and contradictory moments of queer life in the digital landscape without becoming reductive. Though there is no such thing as a definitively queer or feminist method (Browne & Nash 2016), I maintain a commitment to queer ‘mess’ in method (Law 2004) and to a feminist ‘ethics of witnessing’ (Skeggs 2011, 437).

Online ethnography

The internet has transformed the face of qualitative social research. Digital technologies have facilitated innovative research methods, as well as granted access to new and

diverse populations. The resulting research is now more accessible to other researchers and the general public, with data, archives and research outputs widely available online. It is tempting, in this age of access, to turn to 'big data' in order to address social problems. 'Big Data' is a vague term that can be used to refer to 'all the techniques used to analyze data at scale' (Crawford, Miltner & Gray 2014, 1663), but generally references the fact that new technologies have increased our capacity to produce and analyse large information sets, and to do so 'quietly', potentially without the 'fuss' of informed consent and careful ethical consideration. Researchers relying on these kinds of data-sets tend to harbour expectations that data alone 'will be enough' (Hine 2014) and that new technologies simply facilitate 'more observation at less cost' (Crawford et al 2014, 1665). What new challenges might this imperative for 'data' pose, with regard to feminist frameworks and approaches to research that value 'reciprocity, honesty, acountability, responsibility, equality' (Skeggs 2011, 13)?

The ethical implications of big or 'fast' data are complex and difficult to navigate, and the imperative for *more* observations ignores the ways in which observations are constituted as knowledge through and because of relationships between researchers, participants, the material world and research tools and technologies. For this project, ethnography was a way in which to 'slow down' the research (Millei & Rautio 2017) and 'stumble upon' (Brinkmann 2014) surprising moments, ideas and theories. This extended 'dwelling' in the field was well suited to contextualising and situating online practices as always enmeshed in the offline and the material. Ethnography has been useful here because it allows a tracing of the meanings and movements of participants and relationships between and through their interconnected on and offline worlds.

Ethnography as a viable method for researching online social spaces began in the mid 1990s as researchers began to realise that as well as using the internet as a trove of knowledge and information, social formations were emerging online. People were developing meaningful attachments to the social spaces being born and proliferated online in forums and chat rooms. Much early virtual ethnography examined subcultures that gathered around science fiction and fan groups (Hine 2008, Baym 2000). Baym's work in particular, on a group of soap-opera fans that collected on a bulletin board forum, was influential in shaping virtual ethnographic norms and in defining online groupings specifically as communities (2000).

'Cyber Ethnography' mirrors traditional ethnography in many ways and usually involves immersion, participant observation, interviews and extensive field notes that include anecdotes and critical reflections by the researcher (Fay 2007). Unlike traditional, offline ethnography, online ethnography allows the possibility of researcher invisibility, which is troubling in light of feminist obligations for reflexivity and accountability in research encounters. In offline ethnographies, researchers are usually marked by their equipment (recording devices, notebooks, etc) and often by their distanced participation. Online, researchers are unidentifiable because their tools are either invisible or built into the encounter itself. The ethnographic differences between Autostraddle and A-Camp were significant, not because the social spaces were radically different on or offline, but because my subjectivity as a researcher was disrupted and shaken as I moved between the two.

In her writing on virtual ethnography, Christine Hine (2000) discusses the specific difficulties of assuming a researcher identity online. Authority and legitimacy largely depend on initial performances of researcher identities, and as such, introductory

emails and forum posts can take on heavy significance. The internet can strip a researcher of their 'costume' and interrupt the assumed researcher/researched dichotomy in uncomfortable yet generative ways. Such an interruption allows for a feminist interrogation of the ethical dimensions of research relationships if one is attuned to the nuances of subjectivity in research encounters.

Some ethnographers celebrate the opportunity for covert research online (Paccagnella 1997, Magnet 2007), which they argue offers an opportunity to observe social relationships 'in the wild', without interruption or intrusion by the researcher.

However, I argue that such 'lurking' does not constitute ethnography which requires active engagement and participation in emergent knowledges, nor does it value feminist principles of 'honesty, accountability and responsibility' (Skeggs 2011, 13). That said, silent participation is useful in so much as it reflects the reality of participation itself. It would also be naive to imagine that the 'average' community member is not 'surveilling' the community and making critical assessments and appraisals about the ways in which relationships, power and everyday ritual shape and are shaped by the imaginary of the community itself. As Hine argues it, 'lurking is, however, a useful part of the virtual ethnographer's repertoire when it mirrors the practices of ordinary members of a group' (Hine 2008, 12).

When participating in Autostraddle comment threads or Facebook groups for the purposes of this research, I identified myself explicitly as a researcher. For example, when theorising representation as/for the politics of sexuality, I began a thread asking why people do or don't like taking and posting selfies and outlined that the resulting conversation would form a part of my research and that participation was strictly optional. A commitment to informed consent is central to the feminist politics of this

research, though I recognise that processes of consent are more nuanced in an online context where participants can be both invisible and identifiable in equal measure, and where the bounds of the 'field' are more fluid and porous.

Feminist ethnography

This thesis utilises a feminist approach to ethnography, drawing heavily on Beverly Skegg's (1994, 1999, 2011) work on transformative and immersive research and expanding from Geertz's notable work on 'thick description' (1973) as the cornerstone of ethnography. While ethnography has been used to describe a range of methodologies, it generally involves *immersion*, *participation*, and *time*. That is, ethnography uses the lens of experience to produce knowledge, or, as Ortner describes, ethnography is 'the attempt to understand another life world using the self - as much of it as possible - as the instrument of knowing' (1995, 173). This process involves a deep, and usually long, immersion within the context of the research, usually a material field site. My participation at A-Camp was immersive, but not lengthy, however I consider A-Camp to be part of the larger field site of Autostraddle, in which I spent several years.

Details of the research do not 'speak for themselves', instead, they need to be made to speak through an intimate and prolonged examination of context and situation. It is to this sense of context that Geertz's 'thick description' (1973, 9) refers. Drawing on Geertz's call for thick, nuanced descriptions and Cvetkovich's work on 'compelling descriptions', this thesis provides an account of Autostraddle as an event, situation and imaginary of community. Compelling descriptions aim to avoid 'reducing lived experience to a list of symptoms' (Cvetkovich 2012, 15) and provide for everyday affects that might otherwise be lost with the use of different methods.

Though particular methods (such as participant observation) are not inherently feminist, they can be used to feminist ends when they are utilised to emphasise the production of and responsibility affixed to knowledge. As Longino writes, knowledge should be understood as an 'active relationship, charged with ethical dimensions, rather than an uninvolved representation of objects' (2010, 735). That is, researchers must attend not only to how truth is constructed or understood, but also to the ways in which particular constructions of truth impact lived realities and materialise within circulations of power. Indeed, in her germinal text on feminist methodologies, Sandra Harding notes that feminist research requires the researcher to appear 'as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests' (1987, 9), an appearance that is made possible in ethnography through thick and compelling descriptions.

Bev Skeggs' (2001) chapter on *Feminist Ethnography* is an apt starting point for considering how best to situate community ethnography within a feminist context. She acknowledges that ethnography involves a diverse and changeable set of practices, though it usually includes temporally extensive fieldwork 'within the settings of the participants' (Skeggs, 2001, p. 426). Whichever ways it is carried out, ethnography reflects on communal context and relationality and is largely concerned with everyday experiences, both for the participants and the researcher. Ethnography has varied historical roots, many of which are deeply dubious and have aimed to paint pictures of 'others' in aid of colonial projects and establishing 'norms' of morality and civilisation. Kirin Narayan's (1993) work, for example, demonstrates that the project of anthropology has predominantly been centred on mobilising the category of 'the native' in aid of whiteness and masculinity in particular and Skeggs agrees that ethnography 'is

well known as a legitimating source of the colonial endeavour' (2011, 4). Desires to 'know' the other are often thinly veiled attempts to 'fix' the other, to pin down difference and order it within moral hierarchies.

Despite a markedly colonial and anti-feminist history, researchers have stayed with the messy method and used it to critically interrogate categories of subjectivity (Abu-Loghod 1990) rather than reify them. For example, Visweswaran's ethnographic research considers how subjectivity emerges 'out of a series of performances and positionings' (1994, 76) but resists singularity or fixity. Thus, ethnography can mobilise experience as a lens from which to develop theories of subjectivity as historically and contextually located within specific socio-political arenas. As Skeggs writes, 'it is not individuals who have experience but subjects who are constituted through experience' (2011, 433). In transformative research frameworks (Mertens 2010, 473), ethnography is employed not to observe 'truths' about participants but to observe structure, power and relationships in order to better understand how people are produced within subjective categories and hierarchies.

Despite its disciplinary incoherence, feminist ethnography can be informed by ethical and political positions that value participatory *and* reflexive research praxes.

Recognising that power relationships within the research environment are complex, many feminist researchers design projects with an attempt to equalise power in mind. However, Skeggs argues that this is impossible and we should instead take responsibility for the reproductions of power that do occur during our research encounters. She writes;

‘There cannot be a fully feminist ethnography, there can only be ethnographies that are partially feminist, accounts of culture enhanced by the application of feminist perspectives’ (2011, 435).

It is my intention that the ‘messiness’ of the mixed-method approach employed here lends itself well to an ‘ethics of witnessing’ (Skeggs 2011, 437) that critically reflects on power and subjectivity in ‘the field’ and in representations within the thesis.

Creativity

All social research is inherently creative because the desire to *understand* often stems from a desire to *create* change. Political and feminist underpinnings to social research are about an investment in inventive ways of imagining new futures. By including this section, I do not mean to imply that the intimate work of ethnography and interviews are not creative. Indeed, the creative work of weaving together the layered methods of ethnography is central to this research and creativity itself is hard to define or measure (Kara 2015, 15, Villalba 2012, 1). However, there are certain methodological elements that are *seen* as more creative, or perhaps simply more feminine, and it is to those that I now turn.

Arts based research (ABR - Leavy, 2015) emerged as a significant methodological genre between the 1970s and 1990s and grew out of therapeutic techniques being employed in feminist and community based counselling and therapeutic groups. These methods often focused on the ‘therapeutic, restorative and empowering qualities’ of creative qualitative research practice (Leavy 2015, 11) and the researchers that employ these methods are often simultaneously invested in innovation and ethical responsibility for research participants. Though I am critical of ‘empowerment’ narratives and suspicious

of the powerful/disempowered dichotomy often applied to the researcher/participant relationship, I believe it is important to attend to ethical responsibilities in research, including an investment in the researcher's own capacities to be touched, moved and weighed by the research content.

Arts based research can be understood as a response to methodological calls that 'collect in the body: an ache, a fist, a soup' (Pelias 2004, 11). That is, research is not something that happens 'out there', but rather something that happens within and between us as researchers and social beings in the world. Methodology, and perhaps more significantly, method, is often understood as somewhat abstract, objective, determined prior to evidence collection, rather than an ongoing process of knowledge relationality. 'Objective' in this sense is usually used as a code for 'unaffected', detached, separate. However, research is always necessarily an intimate process, and creative or arts based research methods afford affect in ways that might otherwise be dismissed or overlooked as experimental shortcomings.

Embracing affect in this way also works to unsettle the ways in which we might understand or experience knowledge. As Kara avers, 'creative methods can more accurately reflect the multiplicity of meanings that exist in social contexts' (2015, 8). Rather than uncover an inherent truth about contemporary queer relationality (as if such a thing could exist), the creative methods used here highlight the often contradictory and multiple meanings ascribed to social experiences, relationships and identities. Eisner argues against the concretisation of knowledge: 'we prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as a process, a temporary state, is scary to many' (1997,

7). The creative methods detailed below act as a lubricant, designed to keep knowledge slippery and temporary.

Social media data and ethical anxieties

Research in online and social media spaces requires special consideration with regard to ethical questions of consent, privacy and anonymity. This thesis is informed by the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) ethics committee guidelines (franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess et al 2020) which advocate for contextual and situated approaches and require critical engagement with questions of privacy, and participant expectations. Similarly, privacy, confidentiality and consent are key ethical issues identified by internet researchers over the last decade (Hokke et al 2019, Gelinas et al 2017, Henderson et al 2013, Busse & Hellekson 2012, Hine 2008). Social media researchers tend to focus particularly on ensuring confidentiality and privacy, rather than informed consent, however there is much debate about what privacy entails, especially given the blurring boundaries around what constitutes public and private space online.

Privacy is often framed in terms of ‘protection’ from harm, and this is a legitimate concern for social media research, where quotes and images can be searched and traced back to participants with serious consequences. Researchers have responded to this concern through processes of anonymisation and confidentiality, however our understanding of privacy should extend beyond safety and be reframed in terms of dignity and agency. Zimmer argues that covert social media research is ‘an affront to the subject’s human dignity and their ability to control the flow of their personal information’ (2010, 321). Given that personal information is increasingly taken as a digital ‘footprint’ of identity itself, its use should be rigorously considered. As Zimmer

further notes, 'just because personal information is made available in some fashion on a social network, does not mean it is fair game for capture and release to all' (2010, 323).

Alongside the ethical guidelines of internet researchers, this thesis is primarily shaped by transformative feminist research ethics. This approach values reciprocity, accountability and research that works toward transformative rather than explanatory ends. Queer research, regardless of where it takes place, often requires a critical rethinking of the private and public dichotomy. Similarly, feminist theory necessitates an emphasis on how power materialises because of and within that binary. This can make the appraisal of ethical online research tricky when one is hesitant to declare spaces public, given the designation of the category 'public' is often used to maintain oppressive borders around that which should remain 'private' (sex, femininity, deviance, etc).

The notion of public data as 'freely' available data rests on a colonial and patriarchal logic that public space *is* freely available. In their work on fan studies, Busse & Hellekson (2012) note that 'to a humanities scholar, the notion that something is unpublished and freely available means that permission to critically discuss the work is implicit' (npn). Decolonial scholars however, particularly those working in digital spaces, such as Cowan & Rault (2018, 128) argue that 'publicness' and 'accessibility' are not synonymous, rather accessibility to and use of knowledge is dependent on social positions and relationships. Brown & George (2012), Dietrich & Bell (2011), Velden (2013), and Zaman et al (2013) similarly argue for approaches to 'public' knowledge that centre relational situatedness and don't reinscribe colonial logics of knowledge or data as infinitely amassable and shareable.

Instead of public or private spaces then, online arenas can be considered in terms of intimacy. Hine (2008), for example notes that although online spaces may *appear* public, they are often *experienced* as deeply intimate and personal. This is because of the ways in which ‘affect travels through digital infrastructures’ (Dobson et al 2018, xix), tethering users to aspirations for shared narratives. These narratives have to be critically considered when conducting social media research. That is, the researcher must come to understand the ‘rules’ that govern emotion, behaviour and culture within the particular site. Some of the field sites I ‘visit’ during the course of this research are more intimate than others and require more careful consideration of how to engage with data. The main site for example, while certainly experienced by some as a community, is less intimate than some of the secret Facebook groups I have been invited to join. In these spaces, I have had to maximise my transparency as a researcher whilst also communicating in intimately and emotionally appropriate ways.

Methods

Interviews

For this thesis, I conducted three semi-structured in-depth interviews with A-Campers and countless more research conversations in the field, both at Camp and afterwards, online. These ‘conversations’ are detailed throughout my research journal and inform my insights and ‘dramatisation’ of the ‘scene’, though they are only quoted verbatim within the thesis when informed consent was awarded explicitly. Interviews and field conversations have been essential for understanding the site and its meaningfulness for participants (Devault & Gross 2007). They have provided rich, nuanced narratives that both celebrate and critique Autostraddle. The complexity of these narratives would

have been impossible to capture or explore without the intimacy provided by interview data. Two of the participants were recruited before A-Camp began and one was recruited in the weeks after Camp had finished. Two of the interviews occurred over Facebook messenger, as the participants had been recruited via various Autostraddle related Facebook groups. The final interview took place over email.

Conducting interviews online produced specific kinds of data that might not have been collected had we done the interviews offline. For example, the online format meant that the interviews felt less personal at times and I had to work harder to demonstrate my engagement as a listener; I could not rely on body language - nodding, smiling, to convey my own participation. The interviews over Facebook messenger often came out reading as poetry - short lines held together by a thematic thread, and I was often almost invisible, just a blank page onto which the participants could scribble their experiences and opinions. Arguably, the medium thus provided for a more distanced or 'objective' research encounter - one where I interfered very little. However, there is a strange intimacy about 'connecting' to participants through Facebook, which I also use to communicate with family and close friends. This strange intimacy *queered* the assumed power hierarchy of the research encounter.

I intended at the outset to interview more A-Camp attendees, but it quickly became clear that online interviewing, while seemingly 'convenient', offers a number of challenges. Participants agreed to be interviewed, but then failed to return consent forms, citing technical difficulties ('I can't download and/or sign the form from my phone'). Three interviews cannot represent the experience of 300 attendees but each allowed a particular 'cut' into the Autostraddle imaginary, a thread that could be

followed and expanded through the work of participant observation, textual analysis and creative approaches.

In fact, my 'failure' to procure more participants illuminated a significant tenet of this research. My anxiety about 'pushing' for research participants is in part due to my acute awareness of allowing for subjective agency within feminist research but also because I was afraid of jeopardising my own position within the Autostraddle community. I can presume that this same fear might have also contributed to the hesitance some Campers felt about engaging in research about Autostraddle but not commissioned by Autostraddle. Being critical of a space that provides a much needed haven of community made some campers hesitant to be included in this research.

The use of pseudonyms in social science research is not universal, though many scholars consider it mandatory for issues of confidentiality. Reflecting on the expectation of confidentiality has been important though, given the specificity of my queer cohort. Femme-inist methodology scholar Ulrika Dahl (2010), for example, insists on collaboration in ways that actively resist the use of pseudonyms. Rather than seeking out *participants*, Dahl argues that we should work with others within our communities in ways that disrupt notions of researchers as knowledge 'miners', who excavate value without overt recognition of the ways in which relationships with others in the field *produce* knowledge. How can we, as feminist researchers, render our conspirators visible if we also work to render them confidential? And, what does it mean to disappear the identities of those participants who are often marginalised or hidden in conversations of the social?

The 'protective' urge to 'rename' participants derives from white masculinist research protocols in which identities are freely malleable and openly adoptable rather than

tethered down through the experiences and oppressions of the raced and/or gendered body (Lahman et al 2015). There is power in the act of naming and erasing of a name (see also Hurst 2008), especially with regard to non-white or gender diverse participants. Queer participants in particular are more likely than the general population to have put careful consideration into their own name such that it reflects the relationship they have with their gender and sexuality. However, the Autostraddle community is quite close-knit and queer people do still live parts of their lives in secret, so I gave each of my participants the option of using their own name or a pseudonym and they each chose to use a pseudonym of *my* choosing. This hopefully allowed them each some space to critically reflect on their experiences of camp without fear of social exclusion or incidental outing. My aim is that the transparency of the process by which I chose these names will help to mitigate some of the power dynamics inherent in social research and the use of pseudonyms.

Each of my participants had names that are commonly coded as white in the English speaking world. Two of these names are regularly assigned to women and one was a masculine name. I have no information about whether these were 'chosen' names or 'given' names. Throughout my field notes and research journals, I refer to each participant by their initials, so I have chosen to assign pseudonyms that are letters of the alphabet (that are not necessarily the participants' initials) - Ess, Em and El. I remain anxious that these names attempt a neutrality that does not and cannot exist, both in terms of gender and race. However, as these names are not in common usage, my hope is that their strangeness will interrupt readers' inclinations to automatically assign identity through the name, without also considering the thick description that accompanies each participant. Further, as the interviews are intended to provide cuts

into the fieldsite, rather than concrete and separate depictions of individual experiences of A-Camp, I've deliberately made the names quite similar.

Ess was nearing 30 when she attended camp and it was her first time there or at any Autostraddle event. Although she didn't mention race, Ess was my only non-white participant and also the only participant to discuss in some detail her sense that she wasn't sure she 'belonged at A-Camp' or in the Autostraddle community more broadly. She described this non-belonging viscerally - it was too loud, too crowded, too overwhelming. Ess had come out only recently and felt as though she was still trying to 'figure out' her queer identity and coming to A-Camp had been a part of that process. At the time of my fieldwork, Ess had a new girlfriend who was not attending camp with her and she was living in a medium sized city in a southern state of North America. She was employed full-time in an administrative role at a private university.

Em, in her early 30s, had been attending A-Camp every year for several years. She was also very involved in other Autostraddle events and commented regularly on the website and shared Autostraddle content in her own social media feeds. In our initial conversation, she also implied that she was regularly involved with non-Autostraddle related queer culture in the big American city where she lived. She had also attended the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and offered her insights into how the two compared. Em also had a girlfriend at the time of fieldwork, who also did not attend A-Camp, which Em suggested was because she wasn't sure how she would be received as a trans woman. Em frequently described A-Camp as a queer 'family reunion' - although there were plenty of 'cool cousins', there were also 'problematic uncles' to contend with. She

emphasised that it was not a utopia but was of immense value in her life. Em worked primarily precarious jobs in the arts that were either insecure, voluntary or paid very little.

El was in her early 20s and also attending camp for the first time, though was more involved in Autostraddle culture and community than Ess and had previously attended meetups and events. They were especially excited to finally attend A-Camp but also melancholy that they would be returning to their somewhat conservative family home afterwards in a medium to large city on the East Coast. Before camp, El had been dog sitting for three months in a large, progressive city in North America but was having to return home after not being able to find employment. El did not have a romantic partner at the time of fieldwork. Much of our conversations centred not on A-Camp itself, but on the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting that happened shortly after camp ended. Their reflections of A-Camp were refracted through their experience of collective grief at a memorial they went to in their hometown.

Photo Diaries

As part of the ethnography, I asked interview participants to make photo diaries of their time at A-Camp, and the period immediately preceding and after A-Camp. The diaries were self-directed but I asked that they include at least one 'selfie' in the collection of images, as well as at least one image considering their packing motivations before the event. It was important to include images because they are better able to evoke affective responses and because they can engage with material experiences in ways that spoken or written accounts may not (Bates 2013, 29). The use of participant images also attends to concerns about power and 'voice' in the research process,

allowing space for participants to contribute to and shape the narrative of their camp experiences without the powerful gaze of the researcher 'looming' over them.

Visual sociology has developed in response to concerns and critiques regarding the potential power imbalances between researchers and participants (Packard, 2008).

Although visual methods have limitations and don't always address those power imbalances, they can make research more participatory and accessible for those 'being studied' by turning them into co-collaborators in the research. Ulrika Dahl mobilises imagery queerly to this end, for example her text *Femmes of Power* is a collaboration with photographer Del LaGrace Volcano that uses images and *relationships* with/in images to 'explode' and explore queer femininity (Volcano & Dahl 2008).

The aim of these photo diaries was not to achieve a more objective or 'accurate' representation of the experience of A-Camp, though this is often how photographs are imagined. As Skeggs argues, photographs are central to 'the scopic economy of Western knowledge in which the observable is semiotically rendered into meaning' (2011, 2). Given the scopic economy of contemporary western knowledge systems, photography and video are able to centre embodiment and affect in research processes (Bates 2013, see also Williams & Bendelow 1998, 125).

Selfies also emphasize the significance of embodiment in constructions of the self. Although self-photography may appear to produce a 'staged' or overtly 'performed' version of the self, those performances reveal and produce identities and social worlds (Uimonen 2013:122-3). Examining the ways in which people perform and frame their identities online can provide significant information regarding the cultural and political landscapes from which they stem. Participants were surprisingly hesitant to complete the visual diaries, perhaps because the process took them out of the expected presence

of A-Camp. As explored in Chapter 3 specifically and broadly throughout the thesis, the A-Camp slogan is 'Be Right Here', prompting participants to 'be' in the present rather than reflective. This narrative usually involves 'disconnecting' from digital devices such as mobile phones and cameras.

Em told me that she did not want to take a lot of pictures because she knew friends who couldn't make it to camp and she felt guilty capturing her experience and not being able to share it with them. Though the photo diaries were intended to address concerns about power dynamics in research relationships, sometimes our assumptions and carefully considered ideas about consent and power are disrupted by material encounters with participants. In this case, the extra 'work' necessitated by the photo diaries was not worth any extra agency they may have afforded.

Instead of the diaries, El and Em each shared their Instagram streams with me and selected several photos to guide our interview. In this way, they each curated their camp experience *through* the photographs which met the intended aim of evoking affects and engaging with the materiality of bodies at camp. Even though the pictures were all publicly visible on Instagram, the participants asked that I not include their photographs within this thesis. Though content on the internet might be *public*, it is almost never fixed in meaning - context is always shifting and changing as elements are added, edited or deleted. In contrast, a thesis is decisive and ultimately affixes meaning to images. Similarly, Ess described the images she had taken at A-Camp but declined to share them with me. In this way, my participants have declined offers to become 'co-collaborators' in the research, preferring to remain nameless and 'invisible'.

Participant Observation

A significant portion of this research draws on fieldwork conducted at Autostraddle's official A-Camp event in May-June, 2016 in California. In early 2012, A-Camp was launched and for its first few years ran twice a year. The summer camp style event, which now runs only once a year, involves '200 queers on a mountain for a week chock-full of panels, activities, performances, feelings and love love love' (Autostraddle 2015). A-Camp has since grown to approximately 300 queer women, non-binary people and a few trans men and runs once a year, during the American summer. Activities include craft and sports as well as style workshops, and panels on beer, gender, the media and selfies. Autostraddle holds a number of 'meet-ups' and regularly encourages their readers and members to develop and extend their offline relationships as well as reading and commenting on the site, as is covered in more detail in Chapter Two.

Participant observation involves living in close quarters with research participants and moving through the world in similar ways, following the same routines. Listening and engaging with participants within their own social contexts allows the participant-observer to explore the meanings of everyday happenings and assumptions, as well as the cultural rules that organise social life (Lichterman 2002, 121). Participant observation has made space for thicker descriptions of the fieldwork site than interviews alone as it is in the daily minutiae that collective identity is formed, ruptured and reified, rather than in some 'abstract spirit of the times' (Whittier 1995, 17).

	Sunday May 29th	Monday May 30th	Tuesday May 31st	Wednesday June 1st	Thursday June 2nd
		WOLF MEETUP Sunrise Jetlag Hike	WOLF MEETUP Daniel's Hike	FC 2 All-faths Morning Prayer Circle WOLF MEETUP Daniel's Hike	
		WOLF A-Café	WOLF A-Café	WOLF A-Café	
9:00	BREAKFAST	BREAKFAST	BREAKFAST	BREAKFAST	BREAKFAST
10:00 - 11:00	Activities marked with a ★ can earn Rainbow Wars points	EAGLE It's Never Been A Better Time to be Bisexual On A Mountain ★ WOLF Hogwarts: A History ★ OUTSIDE WOLF Music Hike DEER Brown Babes Write the Future FALCON Bound: Coptic Bookbinding FIRECIRCLE 2 Selfie Care BENCH CIRCLE Mountain Mindfulness	EAGLE I Like That! Talking About Our Bodies & Sex WOLF Destigmatize Your Size DEER Queer Resting Bitch Face Appreciation Society and Photo Shoot FALCON Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose ★ TENT A-Camp Dance Team #2 ★ FIRECIRCLE 2 How to Outdoors CAFETERIA Queer Astrology 101	EAGLE Youth Culture Forever: An All-Ages Media Roundtable and Discussion Group WOLF Juliet Takes a Breath on top of Mt. Feelings DEER Shibari Rope Bondage FALCON Rose, But, There: An Art Activity OUTSIDE FALCON Fallen Tree Image Crafts CAFETERIA Mountain Solidarity: Cards for Incorporated Queer & Trans People	CAMPX CAMP CAMP
11:30 - 12:30		EAGLE Live Your Best Life WOLF Geek Trivia DEER Parties of One: Inward Feelings Album FALCON What Do U Mean? OUTSIDE FALCON Essential (w/ Castle Crafts) ★ TENT Dance Team #1 ★ FIRECIRCLE 2 Stranglestock Photography	EAGLE Thank You Lesbian Jesus ★ WOLF Songwriting 101 ★ DEER Strip for Your Honeydop TENT The Bitter End FIRECIRCLE 2 Alcohols BENCH CIRCLE Babes on Babes SWINGS Mountain Mindfulness	EAGLE Queer Music History WOLF DIY Writing Rituals For Fun and Profit (Or No Profit) DEER Bulb-free Camp Collages FALCON Learn to Magi!t OUTSIDE FALCON Summer Herbalism BENCH CIRCLE Poly Party People	
1:00		LUNCH (Tent: Lunching Outside the Binary)	LUNCH (Tent: Trans Ladies Who Lunch)	LUNCH	
2:30 - 4:00	Arrival & Registration	EAGLE Racial Justice and White Allyship facilitated by Sylvia Raskin & Sammy Lyon DEER Speaker's Hearing Session facilitated by Sofia Rose	2:00 - 4:00 EAGLE Getting in Bed with A+ Podcast WOLF Queer Safer Sex DEER WitchCraft #1 FALCON Collaborative Utopia Zone ★ FIRECIRCLE 1 The Belle Jars: A Camp A Cappella Group ★ CAMPX COURSE (Tent: Meet at 10:00) ★ CANOPIUS (Meet at 10:00)	★ EAGLE Queer Camp ★ WOLF Toys Toys Toys DEER DIY Oracle Cards are What's In Your Future FALCON Mixed Race Zines TENT Advanced Potion Making FIRECIRCLE 2 Queer as Food	
4:30 - 6:00	Drop-in Activities in Deer, Falcon, and Eagle Lodges	WOLF 90s Paper Crafting Slumber Party Time DEER Speaker's Social Session FALCON Klub Dear V5 TENT Birchies Brew #1 CAFETERIA Take A Brain Break	★ EAGLE The Truth Is In Here: An X-Files Viewing Party and Bingo Contests ★ WOLF Raging River DEER WitchCraft #2 TENT Birchies Brew #2 FIRECIRCLE 2 Small Stories Spanish Spanish Bubble Pop Pony Party (2:00 - 5:00pm)	EAGLE Daddy Tissues ★ WOLF Sex Bar Trivia ★ DEER A-Camp Custom Cocktails FALCON Chicagoan Crafts TENT Chair Dancing 101 ★ POC Sharks and Minnows ★ BASKETBALL COURT Basketball	
6:30 PM		DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER
7:30 - 8:00	DINNER (7:30)	FALCON AA Meeting FC 2 Open campfire	FALCON AA Meeting FC 2 More Smores campfire	FALCON AA Meeting FC 2 Open campfire	Diary readings campfire (8:00 - 9:00)

Figure 10: A-Camp program, 2016

Program Activities and Descriptions

ONGOING ACTIVITIES

A-Camp Barbershop Didn't have time for a fresh cut before heading up the mountain? The Barbershop at A-Camp has you covered. Resident barber Kip Reinsmith will be snipping & buzzing your queer woe away on the daily. Haircuts will be given on a lottery system, with daily winners announced each morning at breakfast. Please arrive with clean & dry hair and be prepared to emerge as your better self.

Photography 101 Robin Roemer will be available throughout camp for photography one on one mentoring and lessons. If you are interested in learning about running a photography/media business, learning more about photography, or having Robin do a portfolio review of your work to help you learn to show your work, there will be a sign-up sheet at Wolf!

AA Meeting An Alcoholics Anonymous meeting will be held every evening, after dinner in Falcon.

Board Games Come join us in Wolf every evening after dinner for some rad games including Scattergories, Clue, Rummikub, and more!

Monday May 30th

PRE-BREAKFAST

7:30AM | WOLF | A-Café (Crystal, Cameron) We're making freshly brewed coffee courtesy of a different daily sponsor! Hours are 7:30am until the supply runs dry.

5:15AM | WOLF MEETUP | Sunrise Jetlag Hike (Maddie) We'll be taking a short hike up to the lookout to watch the sun rise over the mountain and greet the first day of Camp! This is for the jet-lagged East Coasters and anyone else who wants to get up at the literal crack of dawn and see something beautiful. Bring your headlamp and wear comfy shoes. The sun rises over Alpine Meadows at 5:38am, so we'll be leaving from Wolf at 5:15am!

MONDAY BLOCK A | 10 - 11AM

EAGLE | It's Never Been A Better Time to be Bisexual On A Mountain:

ACTIVITIES MARKED WITH ★ CAN EARN RAINBOW WARS POINTS!

WOLF | ★ Hogwarts: A History (Heather & Ali) ★ This is Harry Potter Jeopardy! Come represent your house and test your knowledge of the magical world! (Audience members who do not want to participate are also welcome.)

OUTSIDE WOLF | Music Hike (Jenny Owen Youngs, Mal Blum, Julia Nunes) Join Jenny, Mal, and Julia on a casual stroll through the wilderness! This gentle hike will reach its figurative and literal peak at a glorious mountain lookout point, where we'll conduct a mighty singalong. YEAH!

DEER | Brown Babes Write the Future (Gabby, Carolyn W, Carmen) Yo, are you a radical person of color super down to explore the importance of sharing our stories? Do you have a jones to write with other POC and talk about the written works left to us by folks like Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, and Cherrie Moraga, to name a few? Then please come join us, Gabby, Carmen, and Carolyn W., as we share space, write cool shit, and invest in the written legacies of queer people of color.

FALCON | Bound: Coptic Bookbinding (Laura) Learn the seriously ancient art of coptic binding and make a blank book for all your journaling needs at camp and beyond.
LIMITED TO 30 PEOPLE BY SIGN-UP

FIRECIRCLE 2 | Selfie Care (Ara, Gabby, Mey, Trent) Seen your friend's precious selfies on instagram and wondering how they manage to have their selfie-face look like their real-life-face? Or maybe you are that precious friend with the magical selfie skills—either way, join us to have a conversation on how to use selfies to celebrate our lovely selves, and also practice what to do to take some of your own! Rest assured that the facilitators have varied degree of expertise, from the seasoned selfie rockstar to the newbie that needs about 2 hrs to come up with the perfect pic to post.

BENCH CIRCLE | Mountain Mindfulness (Liz Castle) Whether you're curious about meditation, want to get in touch with your inner-hippie, or just need a little break from a-camp awesomeness-overload, come take some time to re-center yourself in nature. On each day of this multi-part workshop, we will be exploring several different ways to practice mindfulness and ending with a guided meditation. Please feel free to come to either session or both! No experience necessary.

MONDAY BLOCK B | 11:30AM - 12:30PM

EAGLE | Live Your Best Life (Danielle Owens-Reid, Julia Nunes, Grace Kim) We're all, individually, working toward living our best lives and we think everyone deserves

Figure 11: A-Camp program activities, 2016

Figures 10 & 11 are samples of the A-Camp program the year I attended and conducted my fieldwork. I participated in the following workshops: Coptic Bookbinding, Straddlestock Photography, 90s Paper Crafting Slumber Party Time, Destigmatise your Size, Babes on Babes, Collaborative Utopia Zine, Witchcraft, DIY Writing Rituals, DIY Oracle Cards and Daddy Tissues, as well as the performance content in the evenings and meet-ups over lunch. My decisions about which sessions to attend were in part dictated by personal interest, in part by the themes of the research (queer utopia, embodiment, collectivity) but at times I also went along to sessions with other members of my cabin. Had I attended a different set of sessions, this thesis would likely look quite different.

Textual analysis

Alongside participant observation and interviews, I have conducted several pieces of textual analysis of articles appearing on Autostraddle. As Patricia Leavy argues, 'cultural artefacts do not simply reflect social norms and values; texts are central to how norms and values come to be shaped' (2007, 228). These texts - artefacts - are *anchors* for the community, reflecting, shaping and tying together the norms and ideals of the digital space. My intention is not to ask, *what does this text mean*, but what, instead, does this text do, what *might* it do? Textual analysis thus is a project of sense making with revelatory aims about the context and process of the text, rather than any objective 'truth' that it might convey (Leavy 2007, Reinharz 1992).

The texts chosen for this thesis are not the most widely read or the most popular on the site, but they are demonstrative of moments when community or belonging are called upon to reify Autostraddle as a cohesive group. These texts are deeply interactive. Not only are social media texts inherently interactive because their meaning is mediated

through an interactive audience, but the work that I do as a researcher is interactive because I string together pieces of text to build a map of the social space that constitutes Autostraddle as a community. That is, the texts are meaningful only in relation to one another and to the community that produces and receives them. These texts are products of community investment, but also cultural norms and technological affordances.

Rather than thinking about the effects of these texts on a potential audience, I want to think about the constitutive relationality of texts and communities. A focus on an effective subject/object paradigm is reductive and misses the ways in which subjectivity is made meaningful through, rather than because of, texts (Coleman 2008). I am inspired instead by the art of queer reading, and 'turning the queer lens on texts, subjectivities, social practices' (Green 2002, 522). Though queer reading is usually about re-reading the 'normal' in ways that emphasise and highlight its construction (Sedgwick 1993, 3), I am reading texts which are in many ways, already queer. Just as ethnography aims to make the familiar strange and become intimate with the alien, queer readings take the mundane, everyday underpinnings of heteronormativity and shine a spotlight on them. The texts I analyse, particularly in chapters five and six already do or attempt to do this work of queering, however I remain committed to the potential of texts for inspiring queerness. That is, I return to the question of what these texts might *do* in and with the queer hands of readers.

Autoethnography & Creative Writing

This thesis uses autoethnography as a central method, though never in isolation from other methods; autoethnographic reflection occurs alongside interview and textual analysis. Autoethnography is *not* a way of flattening the researcher's experience into a

generalisable account of an entire social world, but rather it is a feminist method of critical self reflexivity and a way of accounting for affect and intimacy within the research process. Creative writing has thus functioned in this thesis in two distinct ways - as a tool of analysis, and as a medium of representation. Writing is central to the entire research process (Kara 2015, 4) and is significant for coming to understand participant narratives, theory, observations and the ways that all those pieces might sit together, sometimes incongruously and provoking discomfort.

The tension between critical analysis and personal experience is the central focus of autoethnography (Ellis 2008, Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autobiography has been an important method for feminist research in making space for 'alternative' histories and marginalised voices. Autoethnography builds on this trend, though more directly aims to highlight the cultural and political specificities of the author and her experiences. Autoethnography is the research equivalent of the feminist mantra, 'the personal is political', in that it attempts to provide 'cultural analysis through personal narrative' (Boylorn & Orbe 2013) as well as uncovering structural orientations toward personal or private phenomenon. Such an approach is particularly significant for social science research as it aims to highlight the meanings, relationships and tensions between personal experiences and socio-political discourse (Chang 2015; Neumann, 1996).

Maintaining a level of self-awareness arguably allows for more reflective interactions with participants and a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2001). Though researchers who are primarily concerned with self-awareness might actually diminish their capacity to be self-critical (Sangster, 1994), the space between self-awareness and self-criticism is perhaps the ideal space for

feminists to occupy. Autoethnography is a practice in vulnerability, which echoes Skeggs' argument that a researcher's capacity to enact feminist research lies in her openness to critique (Skeggs, 2001).

My own experiences as a queer woman who moves (sometimes forcefully, sometimes peacefully) in and out of the Autostraddle 'community' have inspired this research and afforded me the passion, perspective and insight with which to carry it out.

Acknowledging that I am a member of the group I wish to study but that I do not *represent* this group has made it possible to access and work with women in more interactive and collaborative ways, through active listening and encouraging shared discourse. In particular, autoethnography has been useful for drawing connections between my personal experiences and the wider socio-cultural discourses being explored with this project (Ellis, 2008).

The autoethnographic components of this research are drawn from my fieldwork journal which I analysed through arrangement in a scrapbook. Though the autoethnography directs the avenues of further research throughout the thesis, it is most prominent in the final analysis chapter, *Flung out of Space*, where it affords a reflection of the research journey (both metaphorically and literally) and informs a fictional account of the research site. This creative 'unveiling' of my standpoint as a researcher is an attempt to respond to anxieties about internet researchers as 'sneaky', 'lurking' (Fielding et al 2008) and inherently disconnected from that which they wish to study. Instead, autoethnography grounds me within the research site and makes clear the routes and relationships that produce the 'knowledge' presented here.

The scrapbook/fieldwork journal (figure 12) is sparkly pink and I have scribbled notes into it, printed out captions from online encounters, drawn maps and visual reminders

of the research process. I have turned to the scrapbook every time I have felt 'stuck' in the data, and the joy of cutting and pasting and *mulling* has always provided new and intriguing cuts into the research. The scrapbook is not always a 'pretty' endeavour, in fact it is quite messy and fails to follow any kind of 'proper' sequence - chronological or thematic. The scrapbook is decidedly feminine, not least because of its 'sparkly brilliance' (Kearney 2015, 263), but also its association with women's domestic crafts (Hof 2006).

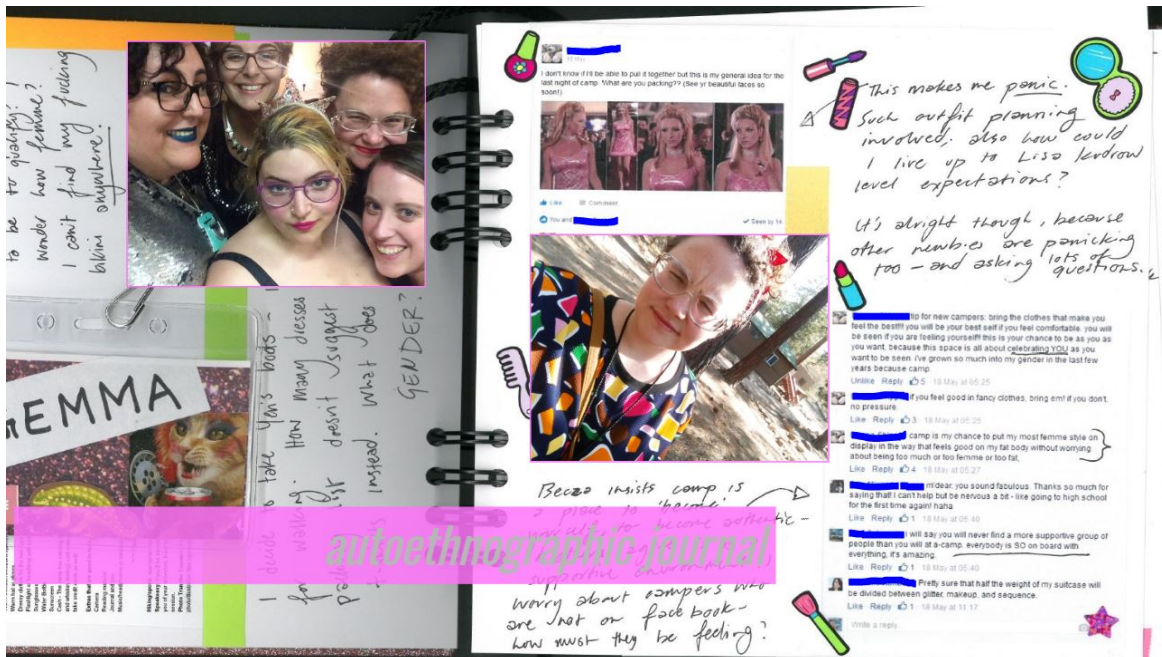


Figure 12: Autoethnographic scrapbook

The process of scrapbooking materials and data together within the sparkly journal is somewhat akin to the curation projects that proliferate online, an analogue version of Instagram itself. Although collage often works to 'bring diversity into unity', I have used these methods to reflect on the ways in which the assemblage of methods used

within the thesis produce data, knowledge, affects that butt up against one another yet still belong together (Seiden 2001, 103). Through the 'sticking down' of fieldwork ephemera, the scrapbook highlights the contradictory relationships that have developed throughout this work. Collage making and scrapbooking have here allowed for 'inconsistencies, ambiguities, ruptures and discontinuities' (Chilton & Scotti 2014, 163).

Scrapbooking is usually littered with carefully curated ephemera and in this way can be understood as a queer archive (Killen 2017) of everyday research moments as special and meaningful, turning the sometimes mundane into 'magnified moments' (Hochschild 2003, 17). Ruminating on the everyday as 'magnified' is central to ethnography, which generally involves a process of making the familiar strange (Buch & Staller 2011). Collages from this scrapbook have also been used in this thesis to visually evoke the experience of navigating the field sites and moving through the resulting materials.

As well as the autoethnographic components, the final analysis chapter, 'Flung out of Space' includes a fictional segment titled *Ollie Goes to Camp*, which is designed to 'portray a complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in a theoretical explication' (Frank 2000, 483). The piece of narrative fiction is comprised of and inspired by participant observations, interview materials and autoethnography. Fiction is used here to animate the 'spirit' of the fieldsite and breathe performative life into the 'affective components' of the narrative interviews that have informed this work (Cavanagh 2013).

The story is a 'respectful forgery' (Gallagher 2007, 105) that reveals the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the participants' (and my own) approaches to Autostraddle and A-Camp. Fictionalising has been a helpful way to disidentify participants in this

research (Willis 2019). However, the narrative assemblage offered here has not simply been a way to represent the data within the thesis. Instead, it has offered a pathway for analysis by drawing together sometimes discongruent phenomena of the research and offering further space for considering the affective dimensions of negotiations around community and belonging.

Conclusion

In order to address the nuanced intricacies of the public, private, and intimate lives of queer women online this thesis employs a range of critically creative methods.

Qualitative interviews are combined with anecdote, observation, fiction, collage, textual analysis and autoethnographic reflections to account for material, emotional, embodied and affective investments in the imaginary of the Autostraddle community. This work, for me too, is both public (in the sense that the research is of and in the world) and personal.

At the beginning of this project, I was anxious about critiquing a community where my membership felt both formative and precarious. Reparative readings and compelling descriptions within a feminist framework have made room in this thesis for loving critique, and for surprises. The richness afforded by these methods facilitated a careful attendance to the tensions, pains and pleasures of queer social life in the present without foreclosing the possibilities of enacting 'new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world' into the future (Muñoz 2009, 1). Rather than reflective of a world 'out there', which might be discovered and recorded, these methods are concerned with enacting a queer world that is 'future-oriented' (Coleman 2016). It is my hope that these

messy methods provide a sharp, yet generative cut into the 'problem' of queer belonging online.

Chapter Four

Instagay: Mediating celebrity, selfies and visibility online

Queer celebrities, and specifically, famous queer women known as ‘celesbians’, are more publically visible than ever before. Indeed, there are enough celesbians to fill an Autostraddle column each week, titled ‘No Filter’. This ubiquity of queer celebrity could indicate a reduction in social acceptance of homophobia, misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, the influx of celesbians ‘coming out’ as lesbian, queer, bisexual in recent years (including Kristen Stewart, Janelle Monae, Cara Delevingne, Miley Cyrus, Amber Heard, Evan Rachel Wood, Sara Ramirez, Stephanie Beatriz, Ellen Page) fits well within the current popular lesbian landscape, bolstered by narratives of visibility as the politics and practice of belonging. However, this landscape flourishes within a neoliberal framework in which the boundaries between work, leisure and identity have begun to collapse and in which women especially feel the need to extract value and capital from their intimate lives, relationships and identities.

In this chapter, I explore the contemporary affinity between value and visibility and how the increasing equation of the two arrange queer life in the present. The chapter focuses on the ‘No Filter’ column, two articles on ‘selfie education’ that appeared on Autostraddle in 2016 and on community discussions and interviews about what selfie practices are for and what they *do* to constitute belonging within a queer milieu. Selfie practices facilitate marking *and* negotiating the limits of the socially acceptable self in ways that *feel* organic and authentic. Rather than a binary approach to authenticity in which one is either out or closeted, selfies allow a playful negotiation of ‘queer realness’ (Halberstam 2005) and a way in which to connect to others. This playful connection

however, is contingent on the 'right' bodily displays and the attainment of certain cultural literacies.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first examines the continuities and tensions between the figure of the celesbian, representation and social value in an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018). The second explores technologies of visibility, such as the selfie, as vibratory social practices that affect a sense of belonging and of being in place. Finally, the chapter investigates the labour of representation online and at Autostraddle specifically and critiques the practices of self-regulation and self-branding that produce Autostraddle as an authentic, legitimate and valuable queer space.

Social arrangements in the Western scopic economy lead us to expect that visibility, legibility and legitimacy will fold easily into one another and to believe that representation always signifies progress. As Bev Skeggs argues, 'visibility is about an empirical recognition of being in or out of place' that is important for our sense of belonging, especially as marginalised people, but that also fixes us 'into an authorised map of power and meaning' (1999, 220). Despite the potential pleasures of visibility and representation, the social value afforded through technologies of visibility such as selfies, is asymmetrically distributed. Rather than approaching selfie practices as either empowering or the result of digital narcissism, this chapter examines selfies as ambivalent negotiations of contemporary gender expectations within a neoliberal context. Although they produce feelings of belonging and authenticity, selfies solidify structures of inequality that position the commodifiable body as the central site of political action and queer women as valuable in so much as they have the capacity for visibility.

Celebrities, representation and the economy of visibility

As evidenced by the ever expanding content of the No Filter column and other Autostraddle 'Vapid Fluff'⁵ content, queer women as celebrities are increasingly popular. This is especially true on social media, where the celebrities are able to offer up their day to day lives as part of the celebrity 'package'. The rise in celebrity popularity sits not coincidentally alongside the rise in popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018) and celebrity feminism (Taylor 2016), both of which have significant stakes in the politics and economics of visibility as impetus for structural change. Representation of this magnitude is significant for the politics of sexuality and for the arrangement of our social lives, because of its capacity to cast light on inequality, demonisation and pathologization (Duguay 2016, Berlant & Warner 1995). However, the narrow frame of visibility in commodified online culture tends to legitimate certain subjectivities while further concealing others. Even as No Filter has grown over the last four years and positively attempted to expand beyond representation of predominantly white, rich, cisgender bodies, the danger of investing in an economy of visibility that privileges the visible *as* the legitimate remains. Given that the boundary between visibility and surveillance is precarious (Phelan 1993, Skeggs 1999), especially so for marginalised people, a queer politics that turns to representation as activism is fraught. Queer audiences are not static dupes though, and No Filter is not necessarily an uncritical site of struggle over the tensions and markers of sexuality and subjectivity.

⁵ In 2014, writer Diana Clark wrote an article on Autostraddle for online magazine *The Baffler*, titled 'Cosmo for Queers, or how to sell a woman to herself'. In the article, she accused Autostraddle of imitating the 'breathy, hyperbolic tone' of women's magazines and declared much of their content 'vapid fluff'. The site added the 'vapid fluff' tag to all of their subsequent celebrity or 'silly' content.

Autostraddle began running the 'No Filter' column in May 2015 and this first iteration was called 'In Which We Survey the Week in Celestrian Instagram'. In the introduction, writer Stef writes, 'in our endless quest to bring you more celebrity gossip that does not matter (but matters so much), we have developed this weekly series to share the latest in celebrity instagram' (No Filter 2015). The name refers to the popular Instagram hashtag that suggests photographs are unedited and is also arguably a nod to the concept of queer authenticity and 'out' celebrities who don't feel the need to hide behind heterosexual 'filters'. This first column included Instagram content from Kate Moennig (actor), Samira Wiley (actor), Angel Haze (rapper), Ireland Baldwin (model), Brittani Nichols (actor), Annie Clark (singer), Cara Delevingne (model), Janelle Monae (singer), Miley Cyrus (singer) and Tegan and Sara Quin (singers). Each photo is accompanied by a one sentence humorous caption, for example in figure 13 below, Samira Wiley's picture is coupled with the comment, 'Samira Wiley lived out my actual dream and got to hang out with Detective Benson, maybe got to touch her hair'. The column has run near weekly for the subsequent four years and there are currently close to 250 editions featuring Instagram content from queer actors, singers, musicians, athletes, influencers, writers and politicians.



Figure 13: Screenshot of Samira Wiley’s Instagram that appeared on No Filter

In 2019, Stef resigned from the No Filter ‘beat’, telling her devoted Autostraddle audience: ‘You guys helped make queer celebrity gossip into an actual viable thing! I will never stop caring about what Kristen Stewart ate for lunch and neither should you’ (No Filter 2019). Although the column continues with a new writer, several commenters responded to say that the column was their favourite part of visiting Autostraddle each week. One commenter wrote, ‘You made Vapid Fluff into the better, queerer, thirstier version of People Magazine’ (No Filter 2019). The popularity of No Filter is indicative of an investment in celebrity and representation as queer politics in which the power of

visibility is self-evident. As Gever writes, 'to be seen is to be represented, to be accorded social agency, while to be refused such recognition is to be denied personhood' (2003, 17). The queer recognition that takes place when reading No Filter is arguably a pleasurable moment in which the reader also recognises their own personhood as legitimised.

Each edition of No Filter contains approximately 10 Instagram excerpts from various celebrities, each hyperlinked to the original content. Some figures feature regularly (Samira Wiley and King Princess are current favourites, for example) and others only appear once or twice. The featured celebrities are of differing levels of fame and followership. Actor and model Ashley Benson has 20.2 million followers, for example, and actor and former Autostraddle writer Brittani Nichols has 7,400 followers. Almost all of the celebs featured in the column are American, and a majority are white, though that ratio has been shifting in more recent posts. The content is often personal, rather than promotional, for example, figure 14 shows actress Bella Thorne partially naked and in bed with her girlfriend. These personal pictures produce a sense of proximity and intimacy between celebrities and their fans (Iqani 2018, 212) which works to collapse the distinction between work and leisure as well as between the public and private. The aesthetic of the posts featured in No Filter is usually celebratory, with short, upbeat captions, rather than lengthy expositions on queer sociality or politics. There is a sensibility in these posts that constitutes queerness as mundane, yet regulated, rather than excessive or verbose.

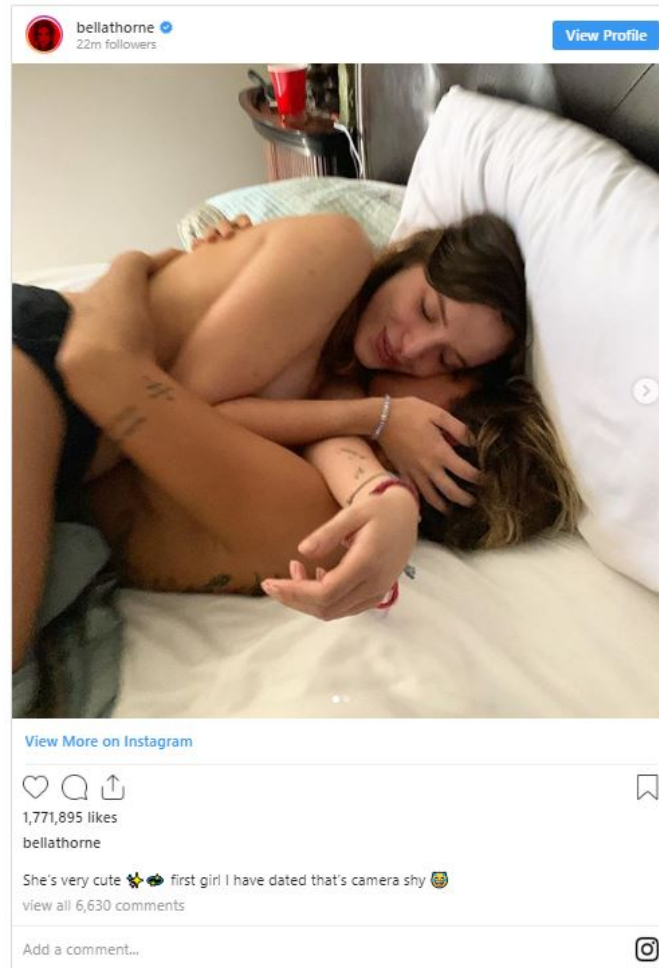


Figure 14: Screenshot from Bella Thorne's Instagram as it appeared on No Filter

The curator of the series usually focuses on pictures of people, most often selfies. This is unsurprising given that selfies and photographs featuring groups of people are two of the most prevalent categories of images on Instagram (Hu et al 2014). However, it is significant that the column features so many bodies, especially aesthetically 'normal' bodies. The celebrities that appear on No Filter are usually thin, able bodied and often white. Indeed, in the first five editions of the series, white celebrities are featured approximately 28 times and non-white celebrities are featured 15 times. Of course, it is

impossible to determine race from an image, but given that these are well known celebrities, it is reasonable to make an approximation in this case. Importantly, trans women feature in most editions of the column. The focus on *famous* queer women and non-binary people, means that the representative range is limited and coded according to white, wealthy norms, given that celebrity and value is usually bestowed upon those who are able to demonstrate nearness to socially determined 'perfection' (McRobbie 2015, Kanai 2019).

The celebs began appearing in popular culture over the last three decades alongside her sister, the celebrity feminist. Historically, feminism was thought of as antithetical to the requirements of celebrity, with the few 'media stars' of the second wave - Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan - accused of commodification and 'selling out' (Gever 2003). However, celebrity women are now increasingly expected to publically espouse support for feminist goals such as gender pay equality and an end to sexual harassment. These expectations align with broader expectations of the new 'capacious female subject' (McRobbie 2015) whose entrepreneurial 'spirit' is able to overcome personal bias in order to achieve status, fame and success. Feminism is now taken in part as signifier of a 'can-do' attitude that contributes to success and celebrity for women.

Though women are now able to achieve high levels of notoriety and fame through an association with feminist identity, there remains an expectation of careful gender management and emotional regulation, especially on social media platforms such as Instagram. For example, oversharing online is sensationalised as symptomatic of personality disorders or at the very least a signifier of inept social skills and a marker of non-belonging (Kennedy 2018, Buehler 2017). The celebs that appear in the No

Filter column must approximate a sense of intimacy with fans that hinges on coded displays of non-heterosexuality, but must also avoid 'oversharing' or appearing emotionally 'needy'. This non-sharing norm effectively depoliticises much of the content that becomes popular and gets reshared in places such as Autostraddle, as the politics of sexuality are discursively linked with the excess of emotionality.

The celesbian then is a key feature of the neoliberally regulated landscape of the 'perfect', which McRobbie describes as 'a horizon of expectation, through which young women are persuaded to seek self-definition' (2015, 1). Queerness, like popular feminism, is increasingly expected to operate within a politics of the individual, rather than the collective, and to strive for success through self-regulation and modulation. Following McRobbie (2015), Kanai describes the perfect as 'a heightened mode of neoliberal self-regulation that is centred on a fantasy of the good life' (2019, 30). Self modulation here is mobilised by an infinite delaying or prevention of the actualisation of the fantasy. That is, 'the good life' never actually arrives. Importantly, imperfection is a distinctive attribute of the realm of the perfect, primarily for women for whom as Kanai puts it, 'affecting the appearance of perfection would be *unbecoming*' (2019, 31, emphasis added). Failure to achieve the 'perfect' is then co-opted into the fantasy of the perfect, neutralising critiques of its fallibility. For the celesbian, *non-heterosexuality* is the mark of imperfection, the failure that must be overcome through demonstrations of attachments to 'the good life' (Berlant 2011), personal success and wealth as liberation. Discomfort with heterosexual norms may be expressed or recounted, but only within the bounds of social acceptability (ie, not through excessive oversharing) and only whilst demonstrating an individual propensity for the gendered management and modulation of emotion.

In November 2019, Autostraddle hired Christina Tucker to cover the No Filter 'beat' and within three editions she had radically changed the proportion of non-white celebrities that featured in the column. In each of her first three posts, non-white people appeared more often than white celebrities, which was a distinct change from the posts that came earlier. Trans women of colour particularly featured more often in this new imagination of No Filter, as the frame of representation shifted and expanded. However, the column still operates within an economy of visibility in which 'visual representation becomes the beginning and end of political action' (Banet-Weiser 2018, 23). An increase in public depictions of sexuality and lesbianism are thought, as Gever argues, to 'provide evidence of our existence, refute stereotypes and provide role models for those who suffer from inadequate self-esteem' (2003, 4). Visibility can also work to illuminate structural barriers and the resistant movements that oppose institutional power and oppression. However, when a *politics* of visibility is recuperated into an *economy* of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2015), the political process is halted and re-routed.

Representation and visibility are usually cited as progressive and empowering, however the machinations of marginalisation are always intensified within a scopic regime. Indeed, visibility 'summons surveillance and the law', as Bev Skeggs notes, and 'provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonist appetite for possession', (1999, 228). Visibility is a central tenet of the functioning of social power (Foucault 1995, 201) that regulates how we each may move through the social and material worlds. There is power in being able to remain unmarked (Phelan 1993). Historically, the legal status of homosexuality has produced an antagonistic relationship with medicine and police that LGBTQ people have managed through technologies of invisibility. As Banet-Weiser

avers, 'marginalised subjects are punished and disciplined precisely *when* the spotlight falls on them' (2018, 25). This is the danger of relying on visibility *as* political action, as it dehistoricizes our relationship with visibility and obscures the ways in which being seen can subject us to the mechanisms of surveillance, discipline and normalisation (Gray 2013). The celebs on No Filter do not experience homelessness, police harassment or poverty, yet the glamorous depictions of their lives are taken as self-styled and universal experiences of sexuality.

The adage, 'you can't be what you can't see' may be true, but the expectation that *seeing* and *being* operate in tandem or simultaneously is erroneous and harmful. Though No Filter makes the *figures* of marginalisation visible, the structures and processes of that marginalisation are obscured. In this instance, visibility is legitimated through wealth and the aesthetic codes of normative, thin, whiteness. What a column like No Filter inevitably obscures is the bodies and subjectivities that are deemed unworthy of the authentication of the 'light' (McRobbie 2009) of visual representation. What is also missing is a critique of the ways in which visibility is operationalised as legitimating authority. Instead, the column functions by 'consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity' (Hennessy 1995, 32) for an assumed (and *common*) lesbian audience. 'You can't be what you can't see' is explicated as 'you *can* be what you *can* see', which ignores the structural relationship between visibility and marginalisation and emphasises an individuated, neoliberal response to the problem of oppression. If one can manage herself, her body and her brand in the right ways, she can approximate social change as self-capacity without disrupting social norms of heterosexuality and whiteness.

Selfies, the social self & belonging

Attachments to visibility are not without their pleasures, and audiences that seek out such pleasures are not passive dupes of popular culture. Rather, popular culture and fan culture are sites of tension and struggle over definitions, discourse and experience. In a digital landscape in particular, queer women are able to produce their own media, which shines spotlights on marginalisation in continuity and in tension with social norms. Encountering lesbian culture arguably generates affective responses that make room for new imaginaries of visibility and value. Engagement with technologies of visibility are pleasurable because of the sense of belonging they can engender but also because of the ways that they afford a marking of the limits of the socially acceptable self. This part of the chapter turns to two articles on 'selfie-education' that appeared on Autostraddle in 2016; 'Be your best self, with or without filters, and make Instagram your new favourite dating app', and, 'Be your best self(ie): tips from our faces to yours'. These articles are analysed alongside community discussions and interview data about the mechanisms of selfie practices as vibratory social forces that affect a sense of belonging in everyday queer life *for some people*.

Selfie practices, like a fervent interest in lesbian culture, demonstrate an attachment to visibility as liberation (Banet-Weiser 2018), affirmation (Vivienne 2017) and authenticity (Gever 2003). These attachments are complex, contradictory and productive, even when they fail to transform life as intended. Selfies amongst the Autostraddle community are often described as aspirational (*Be your best selfie*, for example), which fits within a postfeminist milieu that McRobbie (2009), Kanai (2019), and Gill (2007) describe as marked by girlhood's realignment with capacity, competition and perfection. However, the border between the aspirational self and the emergent self is often ambiguous, and

participants in this research referred to selfies as a way to think through who they *could* be, rather than who they *must* be. For these queer women, selfies opened up, rather than foreclosed their identities and acted as mobile, wandering attachments to subjectivity. Most significantly, selfies were named as a mode of social connection, a way of producing 'queer publics' (Berlant & Warner 1995, 344, see also Duguay 2016, 3). Taking photos, sharing and adding hashtags offered a way of adding to a shared imaginary of queerness as common and universal. These practices were pleasurable and affirmative for only some members of the community though, as they relied on adherence to visual norms, as well as the attainment of the necessary social capital to position oneself as valuable within a queer economy of visibility.

The two 'selfie-education' articles were written by Cecelia Kyoko in March and April, 2016. The first 'Be Your Best Self...', offered advice on how to utilise curated images of the self as a dating tool in the contemporary digital age, and the second, 'Be Your Best Self(ie)', expanded to offer more general advice, from Kyoko and other writers on how to take the most 'effective' selfies. In 'Be Your Best Self', Kyoko writes;

I think how we interact as queer people on social media is tangled up with how we relate to authenticity. We've all been forced to be inauthentic version of ourselves at some point in our lives. Once we finally figure out who we are and pursue that entirely, we become sceptical of anything that fragments the new identity that we've worked hard to earn... But if you're in the process of figuring out who you are, if you know who you want to be but you aren't sure how to get there, social media can be a really **empowering** tool. Social media can be a positive challenge that helps us figure out how

we hope to be seen, and help us make that a reality. (emphasis added).

Similarly, in 'Be Your Best Self(ie)', they write;

It's an **empowering** task to take selfies. They are a visual record of the days you work hard to feel your best. They are a collection that allows you to look back and remember what you felt, what you were afraid of, and what you were hopeful for, in the moment of growth that you took the picture... **It's important to see people who deserve to be celebrated** - especially queer people and POC - using selfies to celebrate another day for themselves. (emphasis added).

With each article, Kyoko asserts a strong relationship between constructing the self, valuing the self and attracting 'like-minded' peers. Each of these processes relies on a carefully curated project of the self that requires self discipline, makeup, social literacy and branding. Kyoko suggests 'purging' social media of all images that don't fit with a self-designated brand and instead posting pictures of things that 'you would enjoy doing more with someone else who also enjoyed doing that thing' (2016). This process involves producing an identity text that is consistent, readable and shareable and editing out the parts that don't fit within this tight narrative of the self. In this instance, becoming a socially valuable and 'relatable' (Kanai 2019) version of yourself hinges on visibility. If you can't be what you can't see, then you must transform yourself into something that *can* be seen.

Selfies are often approached as self-evident, even though academics, popular press and individuals theorise them in vastly differing ways. Tiidenberg & Gomez Cruz describe

a selfie as 'a self-portrait made in a reflective object or from arm's length' (2015:2). Nemer & Freeman offer a more in-depth description of selfies as 'nonverbal, visual communication that implies one's thoughts, intentions, emotions, desires, and aesthetics captured by facial expressions, body language and visual art elements' (2015:1832). Frosh marks selfies as 'gestural images' (2015), and Vivienne approaches them as 'photographically mediated self-representation' (2017, 127) that diverge and align with other forms of daily self-representation and modulation. Wargo expands on the theme of self-representation to suggest that selfie practices are a kind of material story-telling that collectively constitute identity texts (2015). Selfies can be private or public (Albury 2015), shared or personal, online or not, and include other people or just the self. They might be of the whole body, or just a fragment. This research is not concerned with how we might define selfies, but rather with what is mobilised, enabled or limited through the varied and diverse practices that constitute the selfie.

Kyoko's attachments to selfies as part of a politics of visibility are not unwarranted. Queer selfies, along with other 'self-telling' technologies are often described as micro-activisms in the everyday (Vivienne 2016, Vivienne & Burgess 2012), that have the potential to foster 'greater social acceptance, legal reforms and increased positive mainstream representation' (Vivienne 2017, 128). Queer people have frequently used visibility strategies as part of a politics of social transformation, through public coming out videos (Alexander & Losh 2010), the chronicling of gender transitions (Raun 2016) and the use of hashtags to highlight particular campaigns, such as bathroom access or mainstream media obfuscation (Duguay 2016). Kyoko, however, advocates for selfies as a 'celebration' of queer people and POC as though the politics of visible celebration were self-evident. They argue, as several scholars do (Pham 2015, Connell 2012) that

selfies are empowering for marginalised people, but ignore the ways in which visible resistance can be neutralised in a platform economy (such as the Instagram/Facebook conglomerate) which privileges coherent and easily packaged identities. While Kyoko suggests social media is a good place to *play* with identity, they also recommend routinely deleting any pictures that don't 'fit' with one's current imaginary of the self. Perhaps instead of a queer destabilising of identity, Kyoko's selfies are the product of a precarious economy in which the aesthetic self is one's most valuable asset (Warhurst & Nickson 2007, Witz et al 2003).

The social affordances and limits of selfies have been widely debated across academia and the popular press. In their text *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge & Campbell argue that digitally enabled self-portraiture has amplified narcissistic tendencies throughout Western societies but especially amongst young women (2010). Cultural commentary seems to agree with the narcissism discourse surrounding selfies, as evidenced in Erin Ryan's article in *Jezebel*, where she describes selfies as 'a reflection of the warped way we teach girls to see themselves as decorative' (2013). Here, selfies are seen both as an unhealthy attachment to the self and as the perhaps inevitable consequence of social relations that position girls as hyper-feminine, hetero-sexy, spectacle (Projansky 2014, Dobson 2016).

Instead of a process of objectification, Kyoko positions selfies as the ultimate tool in *subjectification*, and the rendering of the self as real, significant and socially valuable. In 'Be your best self', they write that selfies afford you 'the opportunity to be your most authentic - or *maybe most aspirational* - self' (2016, emphasis added). Similarly, Ess explained that she took selfies at A-Camp in order to 'capture those moments where I was my best and most authentic self', while she 'played' with a more androgynous look

than she would in her everyday life at home. Thus selfies are a way in which to mark out margins of intelligibility of the self and demonstrate one's ability to recognise, categorise and evaluate appropriate displays of queer identity on social media.

At first, El also adhered to this narrative of selfies as transformative. During our interview, she wrote,

'I took selfies to feel better abt (sic) myself, but then I stopped because I found it didn't make me feel better about myself, did make me feel like a narcissistic stereotype, did make me get kind of Too Focused on whether I looked a certain way and definitely made me feel like absolute garbage every time I saw candid pictures of myself'.

El acknowledged the potential for self-transformation through selfies, but also recognised the painful possibility for failure to transform in the *right* ways. In the field, another Straddler echoed El's concerns about this failure, telling me she once took selfies, but no longer does, due to 'transmisogynist violence'. The selfie as an aspirational tool simultaneously works as a self-improvement imperative (Sastre 2014, 932), in which working on the visible self is seen as a necessary step toward self-actualisation and empowerment. Selfies become a way in which queer women are 'attributed with capacity' (Kanai 2016, 18) and valued as self-made, entrepreneurial subjects (Harris 2004) for whom power and capacity are contingent on visibility and the production of the self as available spectacle. The production of queer women as self-made, entrepreneurial, and saturated with capacity and able to affect self-transformation ignores the unchallenged structures that continue to prevent their thriving in the present.

Other participants noted that selfies were a helpful way to track the self through significant life changes such as gender exploration, transitioning and/or body dissatisfaction. Ess cited selfies as a way to 'hold' and 'keep' the good feeling of 'playing with a more androgynous, sporty look' at A-Camp, such that she might imagine a new self in her everyday life. Relatedly, in a Facebook discussion on selfies, another participant noted the importance of selfies as tracking as one searched for the most 'comfortable' material expression of sexuality. In the same discussion, someone recommends selfies as a useful response to 'bad body image days', suggesting that the process of taking and sharing the image can help one to 'move through' feelings of the self in the present and re-orient toward a future identity imaginary. Here, selfies (and visibility more broadly) were approached ambivalently, rather than clearly affording or limiting self-capacity.

Selfies allow an exploration of the queer self and in this way are entrenched in a politics of the *possibilities* of visibility. Rather than offering a performance of a predetermined self, the images allow new selves to emerge, usually in relation to other emergent selves within the given social scene. In reflecting on curating their social media presence, Kyoko writes, 'I even started to believe I was the person I looked like online'. For Kyoko, curation offers a sense of self-determination and a shift away from pathologisation and toward joyful and generative depictions of queer life online. However, their narrative about the possibilities of queer visibility suggests an infinitely open framework from which a new, better self may emerge. This ignores dominant social structures and power relations that constitute gender as recognisable and categorisable and prevent particular selves - non-passing trans selves, for example, from emerging or flourishing.

The significance of Kyoko's emergent self lies in a connection to a broader social scene and to others that relate to a certain way of 'seeing the world'. That is, selfies offer a connection to an imaginary of queer life and community through hashtags and visual codes and cues. Kyoko's self-appointed 'brand', glitter witch femme, not only invokes feminine empowerment but also constitutes queerness as a certain lifestyle that others share and that can be marked by consumption (Moseley 2002, Kearney 2015). Kyoko uses pictures of pink sprinkle donuts and glittery photo shoots to signal their embedness in a fantastic queer landscape. Ess' selfies at A-Camp were more private and not shared on social media, though these too afforded Ess a sense of self as situated within a queer milieu. Similarly, in Autostraddle community Facebook discussions on body image, selfies were repeatedly offered as a way to signal the body's connection to queerness and to recall a sense of the self *as connected* to other queer selves.

Certainly, selfies function as a technology of visibility in contemporary queer women's lives. Rather than simply signalling an attachment to visibility as politics or representation as inevitably transformative and progressive, selfies were understood by the Autostraddle community to be generative and vibratory, but not always in positive or pleasurable ways. These practices afford an ambivalent negotiation of queerness as daily practice and as lifestyle, and they offer a seemingly cohesive constitution of the queer women's community. This imaginary of queer cohesion enables meaningful social connection for some, but generates uncomfortable and painful feelings for others, emphasising the ways in which they are already outside the bounds of social value. Technologies of visibility that presume a self-evident politics of inclusion and radical transformation can actually highlight feelings of non-belonging and obscure the structures that produce (and rely on) those feelings in the first place.

Self-branding and authenticity at Autostraddle

Technologies of visibility employed by Autostraddle participants afford nuanced imaginings of the situated self and connections to community, as well as highlighting inequities and marginalizations. However, these strategies risk becoming co-opted into an economy of visibility, which Banet-Weiser describes as signalling 'acquiescence to a demand for a specific kind of visibility, one that is economized and bounded by corporate logics and desires' (2018, 25). While the sense of community coherence afforded through the networked visibility of selfies and celebrity can secure a sense of authenticity for queer people, it also produces an imperative for identity coherence and improvement. Thus the valuable self, within the context of the market in which Autostraddle is situated, continues to be positioned as one who adheres to a linear life narrative and who can be offered up for easy consumption online. This imperative for coherence is often framed as self-branding, which becomes necessary for successful interactions online, but also collapses distinctions between work, leisure and identity. Though the self-as-brand appears liberatory, limited only by imagination and technical ability, it is in fact bound by the logics and moralities of the market in which it is produced and which necessarily reproduces structural inequalities. On Autostraddle, depictions of authentic queer life, social connections and community are political, but they are also sources of income that rely on uneven demands of the neoliberal market.

Given popular anxieties about online interactions as, at worst, deceitful and at best, exaggerated, authenticity has become central to successful marketing of social media and interactive websites. Sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Tumblr all construct themselves (to varying degrees of success) as 'platforms for authenticity' and self-expression, and they each mobilise community produced images and testimony to

this end (Salisbury & Pooley 2017). For Autostraddle, markers of authenticity are significant in this context, but also in relation to social understandings of sexuality as natural, innate or fixed (Hennessy 1995). Not only must the site be a 'platform for authenticity', it must also be free from the social stigmas and barriers that prevent congruence between action and self-awareness for queer community members. Thus the narrative, aesthetic consistency and curation of intimacy required for engendering authenticity online is particularly significant in the Autostraddle context (Salisbury & Pooley 2017). Queer visibility is a cornerstone of this project.

Visibility as authenticity is particularly celebrated and significant within the Autostraddle context. The A-Camp slogan, for example, is 'Be right here, be *real* queer' (emphasis added, see figure 15) and while this tagline refers to the lack of internet connection and phone reception at the regular campsite, it also highlights the community as one that affords queer 'realness' and authenticity. In pre-camp Facebook threads, camp veterans advise new-comers to attend as their most authentic and real selves, with one offering that A-Camp 'is your chance to be as you as you want, because this space is all about celebrating YOU as you want to be seen'. Similarly, an attendee's testimonial on the A-Camp website reads, 'the community at camp and the friendships I've developed are the support that makes me strong and brave and *authentic* in the real world' (A-Camp.org 2016, emphasis added). Unlike day to day life, A-Camp is constituted as a space to be really, finally queer. Throughout promotional materials and community member comments, a strong relationship is constructed between authenticity and visibility. That is, if one can be *seen*, or recognised as queer, then one must authentically be so. This is consistent with a broader social focus on representation, recognition and visibility as the central locus of identity. As Gever

asserts, 'visibility confers authority and it *guarantees authenticity*' (2003, 17, emphasis added).

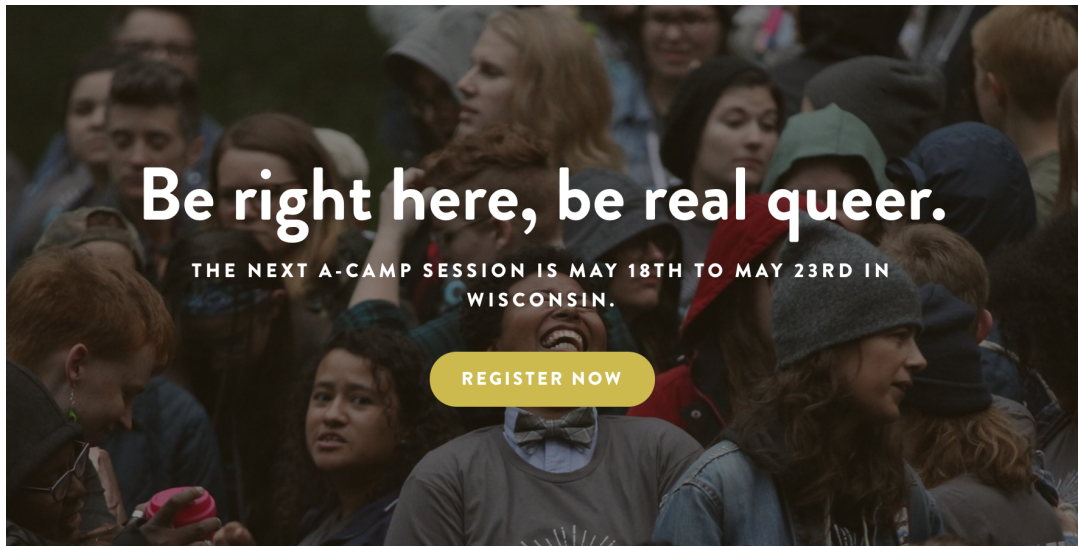


Figure 15: A-Camp homepage, 2016

This relationship between authenticity and visibility is congruent with contemporary understandings of sight as truth and of gender and sexuality as discernable on the surface of the body. As Butler notes, 'the *appearance* of gender is often mistaken for its internal or inherent truth' (2015, 32, emphasis added). The authenticity of gender and sexuality are dependent on careful management of visibility in social contexts. That is, authenticity is made legible *through* visibility, rather than the other way around. Historically, navigation of LGBT spaces, relationships and communities relied heavily on the conference of authenticity through negotiation of visibility. The legal and social status of homosexuality has meant that queer people have had to negotiate antagonistic relationships with police, the law, and society by remaining invisible in some

circumstances whilst still being able to recognise one another through aesthetic and gestural codes (Hutson 2010).

In the contemporary digital age, being able to access queer media *anywhere* - at work, at school, when visiting homophobic relatives - enables queer users to feel a sense of coherence and continuity about their identities. Rather than being 'authentic' (openly LGBT) in some spaces and 'inauthentic' (closeted) in others, social media users can be *recognised* as queer at all times, though this remains dependent on a negotiation of the parameters of their own visibility. The online space allows people to braid together incongruent aspects of their lives in such a way that they are intelligible. At A-Camp, for example, several campers were not 'out' in their daily lives, with co-workers, friends or family, or even on their main social media accounts. These campers asked not to be tagged in group photos or posts and kept their selfies private, however, they maintained a connection to the queer community, and to their queer identities, through visits to Autostraddle and by participating in threads and discussions on related Facebook groups. Participation in these spaces, which sometimes included posting selfies, lessened the imperative for definitive declarations of sexuality in everyday life, even whilst also reinscribing a need for identity coherence.

Kyoko's selfie articles position Instagram as a self-discovery tool, rather than a practice in self-display or narcissistic indulgence. This approach is alluring because seemingly, in the open landscape of queer social media, one can sidestep the cruel realities of the heternormative world and build an identity that is untethered to gendered expectations and confinements. Kyoko advocates for living one's 'best brand' on Instagram, and suggests selfies and social media as a way to discover, construct and refine 'your brand/style/niche/identity/special thing' (Be Your Best Self 2016). A capacity for unfixing

and endlessly changing the self could be understood as a queer approach to the self as unstable, unintelligible and socially constructed. However, Kyoko's repeated references to authenticity and insistence on deleting old photos that don't 'fit' with the brand suggest an exigent demand for the self as valuable only so much as it is consumable as an intelligible product.

The conflation of style, brand, identity, and value reflects the assertion by Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer that for young women, 'appearance *is* one's character and capacity for achievement in all aspects of life' (2006, 268). The neoliberal system that values and demands women's 'capacity' relies heavily on bodily discipline and markers of racial and gendered difference (Dobson 2016). Online, these demands expand to include technological discipline, such that the valuable woman's data/online presence is authentic, congruent, and relatable. As Kanai argues, relatability online requires access to dehistoricized identity categories, which are only available to some (2019). In the digital context, self-branding produces the individual as at once removed from *and* responsible for social structures and inequality. That is, this process individualises queer belonging as something that can be achieved with the 'right' skills, knowledge and aesthetics and conceals the ways in which authenticity is mobilised within a 'visual economy' (Ahmed 2000), which always already privileges some bodies as more authentic and valuable than others.

The branding of Autostraddle as an authentically queer space is key to its success as a website and its constitution as a community. This process relies on the visibility of queer women on the website and the associated social spaces of Autostraddle, such as A-Camp. This visibility in turn relies on aesthetic coherence among community members, such that queerness can be readily identified and packaged for consumption.

The 2016 A-Camp program included a session called 'The Stock Photo Shoot', in which participating campers enacted 'scenes' that could accompany various articles on the website. These scenes included two people kissing in the back of a ute, a group of 'angry femmes', someone looking sad and jealous as two other people held hands and flirted and a group of friends laughing together. The session was an attempt to save money on stock photography as well as a political criticism of the way in which heterosexuality is positioned as neutral through the assumed universality of stock imagery. In contrast to the satirised stock images that I discuss in Chapter six, *Laughing Gayly*, the images taken at A-Camp are imagined to be more authentically reflective of queer aesthetics and experience.

The experience of having one's image reflected in a queer context is certainly pleasurable, however, the process relies on discourses of queer authenticity, which can always be mobilised to exclusive ends. For example, femmes have historically been positioned as inauthentically queer by virtue of association with feminine aesthetic norms (McCann 2018, Harris & Crocker 1997). Other groups that sit on the margins of queer intelligibility and acceptability (trans queers, poor queers, queers of colour, etc) are also harmed by assumptions of queer authenticity that strongly rely on visual cues and codes that in turn rely on attainment of specific sets of cultural literacies. Though projects such as The Stock Photo Shoot attempt to shift the borders of queer acceptability to include those on the margins, they cement the need for borders in the first place. It is interesting to note that since the photo shoot at A-Camp in 2016, only a handful of Autostraddle articles have used the resulting photographs. Instead, most of the header images have continued to be sourced from traditional stock photography, stills from television and cinema and pictures of celebrities.

A politics of visibility ‘highlights dynamics of power’ and the systems and structures that position marginalisation as natural or common sense (Banet-Weiser 2015, 55). An economy of visibility however, centres the individual simultaneously as potential commodity and consumer in the marketplace of visibility and representation. A politics and an economy of visibility are not exclusive, and I am not arguing that Autostraddle is cruelly commodifying images of its readership without serious commitment to political action. The cultural landscape of neoliberalism and post/feminism produces an imperative for visibility though, that operates outside of an attempt to draw attention to structural inequality. Here, women’s bodies are represented as commodities in ways that construct gender as a ‘wholly visible affair’ (Wiegman 1995, 8) and attach social *and* monetary value to capacity for visibility that is unevenly distributed.

The politics of visibility at Autostraddle, which aim primarily to highlight disparities in media representations of queer life, are mediated through an economy of visibility in which depictions of those lives are sources of income, bound ‘by corporate logics and desires’ (Banet-Weiser 2018, 25). In this economy, the visible is mobilised as the legitimate. Queer women are implored to overcome social disconnection and suffering by investing in themselves as marketable commodities. Then, when visibility fails to actualise social change, the failure is individualised. This system of ‘cruel optimism’ that binds us to structures and relations that contribute to our suffering (Berlant 2011), operationalises visibility as an imperative for self-evaluation and regulation disguised as self-construction and self-*branding*.

Conclusion

The ubiquity of queer celebrity broadly, and lesbians specifically, across social media and Autostraddle is indicative of an investment in visibility as a legitimising force. Queer women are more visible than ever, and more capable than ever of producing their own media to political ends. The No Filter column, and similar attention that Autostraddle pays to queer celebrities helps to draw attention toward representative disparities and reframe narratives of pathologisation. However, privileging the visible as the legitimate and valuable is risky when capacity for visibility is limited by market forces that in turn privilege gender intelligibility, whiteness and middle class attributes. Further, the line between a politics of visibility and surveillance is precarious, or in some cases non-existent. A celebration of lesbian visibility *feels* progressively political but also fosters further scrutiny and emphasises individual, neoliberal responses to the problems of oppression.

Attachments to lesbian culture and associated investments in queer visibility are not without their pleasures. Queer women are now more able than ever to produce their own media, rather than relying on television, cinema and celebrities to speak for them. This enables an enactment of visibility politics by spotlighting marginalisation in innovative ways and generating new imaginaries of queer life. Queer selfie practices also act as a way of marking, redrawing and negotiating the limits of the social acceptability in ways that invoke a sense of authenticity and coherence. Beyond a narcissistic focus on the self, selfies also work to position the self as connected to a queer milieu. That is, though a reliance on representation as politics is fraught, the practices involved in seeking visibility, such as taking, sharing and hashtagging selfies can offer new modes of social connection. This process is only pleasurable for some though, as

belonging is still contingent on coherence, intelligibility and the attainment of particular cultural literacies that constitute the 'normal' LGB body.

While networked technologies of visibility such as selfie practices and sharing lesbian imagery can secure a sense of queer authenticity for some, it also cements a neoliberal approach to the self as valuable in so much as it can be 'content'-ified or commodifiable. That is, these practices produce an imperative for identity coherence as a form of social currency (Marwick 2013). Capacity for visibility is highly valued in the contemporary digital landscape in ways that dissimulate the gendered and raced logics and moralities of visibility itself. An economy of visibility operates within this context to produce Autostraddle as an authentic, legitimate and valuable social space for queer women but also to reify queer identities as intelligible, relatable and shareable. Autostraddle's success as a website *relies* on 'acquiescence to a demand for a specific kind of visibility' that is broadly marketable, which in turn structures the limits and affordances of the community (Banet-Weiser 2018, 25).

Chapter Five

Queer IRL: making archives, making community

Just after leaving A-Camp in 2016, I travelled to London for a conference. While there, I attended an Autostraddle meet-up at the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA). In honour of Pride Month, the LMA was holding an exhibition on the queer history of London, which included local court and hospital records as well as an extensive and growing oral history project. In the back room of the building, we were allowed to pour through boxes of lesbian ephemera that the curator had gathered together, just for our group. One set of boxes contained responses to a survey that appeared in a 1992 edition of queer women's periodical, *Lesbian London*. The survey responses drew our small group together in a tight circle, giggling over answers to questions like, 'are there any advantages to being a lesbian?' (answer, 'yes - WOMEN'), and 'what do you dislike about being in a relationship?' (answer, 'having to look after them emotionally'). The room felt like a time machine, and we felt connected to one another and to a sense of ourselves as rooted in history, coming from somewhere. The court or hospital records did not have this effect.

Clearly, representation *does* something that endures. When I asked Straddlers about their selfie practices, some answers reflected an investment in representation as politics, or visibility as a valuable sign of individual capacity. Others though, suggested technologies of visibility might offer temporal connections to community and queer historical experiences. Tongue in cheek, one Straddler told me, 'I take them (selfies) so that one day my progeny will know what fashions I was wearing while slaying life in November 2014, for example'. Beyond representation, visibility in a queer archive offers

participation and ties community members together in a temporally specific project of collectivity and agitation of dominant notions of historical significance.

This chapter examines three user-generated galleries on Autostraddle, the 'Lesbian Prom Gallery', the 'Queer IRL' series and the 'Lesbian Ken Community Gallery' to explore the ways in which online spaces like Autostraddle might foster accessible, queer and feminist archives of emotion and ephemera. Similar in some ways to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) that began in New York in the 1970s, these galleries collect and curate the visual ephemera of queer life in order to emphasise the political and social importance of the quotidian and mundane and highlight the power of nostalgia and desire. More than just a recording or a collection, the *project* of compiling an archive cements an imaginary of a community as coherent. Rather than simply focussing on the content of the Autostraddle galleries, this chapter explores how the work of producing and curating these pictures, as well as making them accessible online, works to produce and bound a community that is largely geographically dispersed.

As queer women, our experiences of social isolation and historical exclusion can produce a profound desire for a visceral trace of history. Certainly, queer women's voices are often lost or diminished in historical accounts of social life. Our absence in official archives is representative of a larger dismissal of the significance of women's lives but also of a tendency to medicalise queer bodies in a way that sterilises, isolates and negates the political and personal meaningfulness of our intimacy. For queer women, involvement in the kinds of public life that usually attract historical attention has always been tainted with secrecy. Our mundane moments are often political and our political moments are often necessarily private, which means that traditional methods of archiving are not always adequate for recording queer life (Muñoz 2009,

Cvetkovich 2003, Love 2009, Halberstam 2005). Instead, the queer archive must be shot with desire and filled with feeling - as Heather Love writes, 'the longing for community across time is a critical feature of queer historical experience' (2009, 31). In this chapter, I am interested in how a dual longing for community and history can become *generative*, rather than representative, online.

Queer archives

Archives can be imagined in a number of ways – as curations or arrangements, as collections or even as maps (Manalansan 2014). Central to conceptualising the archive though, is its longstanding institutional role in legitimising and preserving particular social and legal hierarchies (Edenheim 2013). Indeed Derrida (1996) speaks of the archive as a dwelling for political power and privilege. In this dwelling, archivists have been endowed with the authority to pull cohesion from chaos, to produce order and social narrative from seemingly random objects and documents. It is in this way that we can begin to think of an archive as something that we *do*, rather than something that is simply available for discovery (DeVun & McClure 2014). If the archive is a site in which social power is enacted, then it must also be a site from which social agitation and change can occur. Vosloo stresses this (2005), arguing that archivists must be imbued with ethical responsibilities and readily engage with marginalised voices and highlight the exclusionary boundaries of existing knowledge about social life.

Queer archivists build on work from feminist theorists and historians, as well as from lesbian and gay studies to argue that stories about the past are never politically neutral and actively contribute to uneven power structures in the present (Pollock 2007). Rather than taking history as fixed events that are in the past, feminist historians aim to think

through how communities' understandings of time might interrupt or resist dominant narratives of linear progression. Similarly, queer historians also attempt to 'recover' missing queer voices and produce stories about queer history that resist the medical and legal discourses within which they have traditionally been shrouded. Queer archivists interrogate grand narratives of time as regulatory systems of normativity (Freeman 2010) and push for a rethinking of how to *do* history. In particular, they ask us to pay attention to loss and the generative potential of queer nostalgia (Juhasz 2006, Love 2009).

That is, queer archivists have recently begun to shift away from a 'discovery' model of historical investigation and instead are focusing on how desires for queer history might become manifest. Jose Muñoz, for example, writes about such desires as figured around hope and of queerness itself as a persistent push toward utopic potential (2009) and Carolyn Dinshaw describes queer desire for historical inclusion as 'relationality even across time' (1999, 35). What this means is that when queer people have not been able to find one another, they have sought refuge in historical materials and have attempted to connect to and politically empower each other through archival intimacy (Love 2009, 37). Queer archivists then, are interested in producing and curating historical stories that can enable critiques of dominant social paradigms, but also strengthen community bonds and propel social change.

The institutional and historical neglect of queer life has necessitated grassroots archival activism through community groups such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). The LHA began in 1973 when founders Sahli Cavallaro, Deborah Edel, Joan Nestle, Pamela Oline and Julia Stanley met at a conference of the Gay Academic Union (Thistlethwaite 1998). At that time, the founders recognised that a lot of material was being produced

about and for lesbian life – zines, publications, activist paraphernalia, but that much of it was being lost as quickly as it was produced. The LHA began as a sanctuary for this ephemera and any significant objects of queer women's lives that were at risk of being lost. The archive was built on donations from queer women and its plethora of materials reflects the historical significance of women's everyday lives and intimate relationships. This collection was first housed in Joan Nestle's apartment and then shifted to a larger home in a Brooklyn townhouse, paid for by community donations.

In building the archive, the founding women did not simply want to preserve invisible or unacknowledged pieces of lesbian life. Instead, they wanted to radicalise processes of archiving. One of the ways in which they attempted to disrupt traditional approaches to archiving was by placing the archive within the community. The LHA is housed within the community, rather than a university or government funded institution, but it is also staffed and built by community members, many of whom have no specialty knowledge in history or archiving. The LHA is staffed largely by volunteers and interns who are guided by co-ordinators as they learn about how to make sense of the large collection of lesbian debris housed within the brownstone. The key principles of producing a radical archive, according to the LHA's founders, are, accessibility, community control, political investment and struggle, skill sharing and nourishment (Nestle 1979, 11).

Of the project, Joan Nestle wrote;

'The archives is an act of mothering, of passing along to our daughters the energies, the actions, the words we lived by. It is a step in reclaiming a place in time; our response to the colonizer who makes us live on the periphery or not at all' (1979, 11).

Nestle's references to mothering and the collective's commitment to 'nourishment' both evoke a sense of domesticity and homeliness. Indeed, the archives are often referred to as 'cosy' and comfortable, a welcoming, living home, rather than a mausoleum that only those with grave digging skills can truly engage with (McKinney 2015, 10). This approach to archiving means that potential archivists and amateur history detectives become enmeshed in a community network of queer women as they look to the past. In turn, they help to strengthen the community in the present and build a strong foundation for queer prosperity in the future.

Photography as archival material

Photography is important for the queer archive because of its capacity for multiple, contradictory, and partial meanings and its tendency to 'resist attribution' (McKinney 2015, 117). On Derrida's theories of archival authority (1996), Tim Schlack writes that 'photographic meaning is always conditional, without ultimate or absolute authority and always plural' (2009, 93). Like queerness then, photography has an especially vexed relationship to evidence and history. Photos have long been a part of historical work; though in recent decades there has been a significant shift away from viewing them as evidentiary fact and toward understanding their functional context as illusory and necessarily partial text (Schwartz 2000, 2004). Photography is not so much concerned with preservation as it is with creating and moulding new life or even a 'perpetual after-life' (Thomas 2013, 39). Rather than fixed recordings of moments in time, photographs are ephemeral and evocative (Schlack 2009, 85), their meanings ever shifting and always produced in conversation with imagined and actual audiences. In

this way, images are highly collaborative, a mixing of the experiences of photographer, subject and viewer – and in the case of Autostraddle galleries, the curator.

Images are an especially interesting phenomenon through which to record queer life as they nostalgically recall the past while at the same time evoking new emotions and thoughts (Roberts 2011). Susan Sontag wrote that as an artist and meaning maker, ‘the photographer both looks and preserves, denounces and consecrates’ (1977, 64-5) as every image recalls another image, another moment, another feeling. In this way, photography is not simply a recording but also a reworking of meaning, a temporally specific mixing up of strangeness and familiarity. This mixing up of the strange and the familiar, is particularly acute in visual spaces online, where strangers are able to glimpse and peer into one another’s lives with relative ease and a deep level of intimacy. This is apt, given the air of intimacy that surrounds and infuses queerness itself.

Digital archives & history on Autostraddle

As well as reporting on popular culture and making space for queer memoir, Autostraddle is invested in discovering and recording accounts of feminist and queer women’s history. This is evident in their series of ‘Herstory’ articles as well as their ‘Vintage Vapid Fluff’ column, which approaches historical relationships between women with the levity and tongue-in-cheek-ness of contemporary tabloid journalism. The style of these series is a playful twist on traditional modes of writing up historical discoveries, however, the website also offers a queering of archival work through their extensive online, user generated galleries.

The advent of digital spaces and social media affords researchers and archivists unprecedented possibilities through increased accessibility to existing archives – I can, for example, browse the annals of the LHA from my desk in Canberra – and through enabling cross-archival searching (Fielding *et al* 2008). Like queer young people, archives were often geographically disparate and isolated before the internet managed to connect them in loose and ever-shifting networks. As exciting as this sounds, the archiving potential of digital media goes beyond new storage and reference systems as it enables processes of continual and everyday archiving. Through social media, event photography and the kinds of co-ordinated galleries this chapter explores, the queer community is better able to address their ‘desire to be in the archive’ (McBean 2013, no p.n.) and effectively historicise their everyday practices.

Clearly, Autostraddle is committed to presenting queer historical moments alongside contemporary news stories. The site runs a series of *Herstory* articles that centre on feminist history and politics, such as pieces on the Lesbian Avengers, or indeed, The Lesbian Herstory Archives. They also publish shorter, wittier listicles on history, such as ‘12 Lesbian resorts you could visit this summer if you have a time machine’. These articles are not necessarily concerned with telling the story of a particular event or place, but rather with drawing the past into the present and using the digital arena and lexicon to make history accessible to a new audience. Similarly, The Vintage Vapid Fluff (VVF) series approaches the past with the levity and humour of the contemporary digital arena, with articles such as, ‘BREAKING: Olivia Wyndham and Edna Thomas are in love and it’s f*cking adorable’. The tagline of the VVF series is;

‘We take a step back from Kristen Stewart and kd lang into a wire-tapped time machine and bring you all the gossip our people required in the late

19th and early 20th century, but alas often had to go without' (Autostraddle 2017).

By using 'Breaking!' headlines, the site cheekily reminds us that for many people, the existence of queer women throughout history *is* breaking news, brand new information. The reference to 'our people' suggests an inherent connection, not only between queer women in the present, but also throughout history. Though the tone is playful, the mandate for similarity and likeness is emphasised.

In June 2012, Autostraddle ran a month-long lesbian history series called 'The Way We Were'. The series produced articles about particular women in history, such as Vita Sackville-West (poet and Virginia Woolf's lover) and Anne Lister (a 19th century diarist who kept detailed records of her lesbian affairs), but it also offered broader articles on the language, arts and culture surrounding lesbians in the 20th century or earlier. As part of the month long celebration of queer history, the website published an article called, "The Lesbian Herstory Archives: A Constant Affirmation that You Exist". The piece included a brief history of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) and excerpts from interviews with founding member Deborah Edel and then-coordinator Gabrielle Korn. About the LHA, author Vanessa writes:

'The more I learn about the Archives, the more I can't help comparing it to Autostraddle. The parallels are obvious, though maybe this is a given for any large project taken on by a group of lesbians or queer-identified women. Both projects are entirely volunteer based. Both projects have relied on the community for funding, and this has worked because the community has both seen a need for the project and has respected and admired the projects' missions. Both projects use words and creativity to

bring women together, but both projects also foster community in a physical space (not just on the page and/or screen). Both projects want to give women a chance to say, “This is who I am because I say so,” as opposed to allowing outside sources to tell us who we should be. Both projects offer constant affirmation that you exist, I exist, we exist.’ (Autostraddle, 2012).

Notably this post, and other history posts on Autostraddle, highlight historical continuities rather than dissonances. In terms of feminist politics, theorists and historians tend to emphasise the differences and tensions between second and third wave movements (Grey & Sawyer 2008, Dickie et al 2005), such as a turn toward the individual and the body as the central site of politics (McCann 2018). Autostraddle, however aligns itself with the (second wave) politics of the LHA, which it does not see as incongruous with a contemporary politics of visibility and representation. Both Autostraddle and the LHA are concerned with representing a future-orientated, coherent imaginary of community. One of the ways in which Autostraddle has done this is through the production and sharing of contributor galleries.

The Prom Gallery

In March 2010, a Mississippi county school board cancelled its annual high school prom after a graduating teenager petitioned them to allow her to bring a same-sex date (USA Today 2010). The girl, Constance McMillan, had been working with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to convince the school to overturn its ban on same-sex dates and to allow her to wear a tuxedo instead of a dress to the dance. Instead, the school cancelled the prom and the story was reported in news outlets around the world.

Autostraddle followed the developing story and decided to launch a photo gallery of lesbian prom photos to ‘celebrate those photos everyone is so f*cking afraid of!’ (Autostraddle 2010). The aim of the gallery was to promote visibility and point out that queer women had been taking each other to proms and wearing menswear for quite some time, without dire consequence to the entire system of education in the USA.

Photos were submitted via email with the subject line “PROM”. Submission guidelines for the gallery were broad – submitters were asked to provide the date and place that the photo was taken but no other information was required. Queer women who submitted photos in the first week were also entered into a draw to win a \$25 Amazon gift card, however submissions remained open on a rolling basis. It is impossible to know which photos were submitted when, but the latest update of the gallery includes 110 queer couples attending prom or other high school dance events together. On the website, the pictures exist in several locations – in the initial call-out post asking for submissions (the post was edited each time pictures were submitted), in a gallery specific post from 2010 and in an updated version from 2015. The 2015 version contains captions with places and dates, and occasionally names, though this information is absent in other posts. The dates of the proms range from 1985 to 2015 and all except for 3 of the photos are from North America (including Canada). The original post from 2010 has 210 comments and the updated post from 2015 has 72 comments.

Visually, the photos are largely what you would expect from a gallery of American prom pictures. That is, they are almost all of couples, smiling and dressed in formal attire. Several of the pictures are clearly ‘official’ photographs, taken by professional photographers at the event. Other pictures are taken at home before the event, and the convention of such photography suggests they were taken by a parent or family

member wanting to mark a significant moment in their child's transition to adulthood (Figures 16 & 17). Flowers feature heavily, as do sequins and pictures of the couples kissing. The photographs are curated in order of the dates of the proms (from 1985 to 2015) and the style of the pictures and the posing diversifies as camera phones become more accessible and selfies become more commonplace. Overwhelmingly, the women in the pictures are wearing feminine attire, long dresses with lots of accessories and detail. Occasionally one member of the couple is wearing menswear, though I noted only one picture in which neither woman was wearing a dress. There are a few group photos in which the couple in question is lined up (usually outside) with other couples and in all but one of these photos, the other couples are heterosexual. Everyone in the pictures is smiling, which makes sense as part of the motivation for submitting to a gallery like this is probably good memories associated with the event pictured.



The comments on the Prom gallery are positive. Most of the commenters express joy at seeing the young women being so comfortable with their sexuality in a public setting and then reflect on their own experiences of coming out and experiencing adolescence as a queer person (figure 18). Other commenters talk about how the photographs have given them the confidence to attend their own proms with same-sex partners. Each of these types of comments reflect the belief that looking back in a particular way allows us to move forward as well. That is, looking back at pictures of women attending Prom together makes it easier for women to continue attending prom together.



Figure 18: Comment on Prom Gallery post

A few commenters seemed surprised to see their own picture included in the gallery, such as Ciarra, who wrote, 'Just a quick question, who submitted my prom photo? I wasn't even informed this was on here or how it got on here'. In response to Ciarra's comment, the Autostraddle team suggested that she talk to whoever was in the photo with her as that was probably who submitted the picture. This response suggests a possessive quality to the archive - once documented, the moment is rendered public

and 'belongs' to the community rather than to any particular individual. There were also a very small number of comments criticising the whiteness of the people in photos. This sort of criticism was reflective of a broader criticism aimed at Autostraddle at the time but perhaps also speaks to the content of the galleries. The theme of 'Prom' is inherently normative, leaving little room for representing those that fall too far outside the 'charmed inner circle' of sex acts and couplings that are deemed socially acceptable - heterosexual, married, same generation, procreative, etc (Rubin 1984).

In many ways, the project of the prom gallery is similar to the foundational aims of the LHA. In acknowledging that Constance McMillan's desire to go to prom with a same sex partner was political, the site also recognised the political aims of other queer women attending formal events with same sex partners, especially when those events are designed to facilitate and mark heteronormativity (Hubbard 2008). Attachments to these kinds of markers (proms, weddings) are complex, both political and deeply personal. Autostraddle contended that the visibility afforded by the gallery would ease the access barriers for queer women into the future. Following the LHA's commitment to 'tracing and advancing the political struggles of lesbians' (Thistlethwaite 1998, 1), Autostraddle's community galleries locate political tension in the everyday for queer women. In allowing women to submit photos themselves, the site produced a communal archive with explicitly political goals – to encourage more women to feel safe and secure enough to attend formal events with a partner of their choosing, but also to recognise that queer women were already been present in traditionally heteronormative sites (such as prom) despite their formal exclusion.

With the Prom gallery, Autostraddle has produced an accessible archive committed to furthering a queer politics of visibility and critiquing the under representation of queer

life in mainstream narratives about adolescence. Although the gallery does afford new avenues of access to the archive of queer life, the conventions of the digital space and curation of the photographs reproduces conventional narratives about identity, sexuality and linear progression through life. The focus on couples emphasises the social value of certain romantic arrangements. Further, the act of 'coupling' is, in this instance, marked as a central milestone between adolescence and adulthood, or as 'a unique moment in an individual's life narrative marking access to "manhood" and "womanhood"' (Illouz 2001). This focus is in part motivated by Constance McMillan's story, but it is also structured by archival norms that privilege progressive narratives of history and social life.

For this reason, and because the archives are also 'content' on Autostraddle, the pictures are organised chronologically. This arrangement is the most packagable and shareable because it conforms to expectations about the passage of time and the inevitability of monogamous coupling, without seriously disrupting the constitution of prom as 'a ritual that legitimates a heteronormative future' (Smith 2011, 156). The charting of time in this way also suggests a progression of queer life over the last three decades, or at least a re-drawing of normative values to include *some* non-normative sexual identities.

The number of photos increases with each decade and without commentary, viewers might assume this is because social attitudes toward homosexuality have improved over time. The increase in prom photos might also be attributed to higher access to digital cameras, though, or more problematically, a strengthening North American attachment to the social ritual of the 'prom'. Indeed, research by Oxford Dictionaries shows a steady increase in references to 'proms' in written work since the 1980s (Slate 2014). Historically, proms ritualise the exclusion of lower-class and non-white people

from full membership in society and adulthood (Smith 2011). Class norms and biases are thus inculcated in heteronormativity, such that heterosexuality accrues social value and working class people are 'tainted' with an association with the deviancy of non-dominant sexualities. As Smith notes, 'prom is a sphere where regulating adults from dominant social agencies try to guard white middle class privilege and sustain heteronormative space' (2011, 158). The inclusion of same-sex couples in the 'rite of passage' of prom certainly indicates resistance to this heteronormative narrative, but it does not represent a disruption to the institutionalisation of wealth and whiteness as valuable attributes.

Prom is also closely associated with perfection, given the expectation that dresses, flowers, themes and romance will all be spectacularly 'perfect' (Zlatunich 2009). Perfection, which 'constitutes a commonplace understanding of how women's lives ought to be lived', is typically the responsibility of young women, whose capacity for nearness to social ideals determines their value within a neoliberal framework (Kanai 2019, 30, see also McRobbie 2015). The extension of the pleasures of prom perfection to queer women, while seemingly inclusive, operates as a mandate for normative orientations toward romance, partnership, adulthood, class and life in general. Nearness to the white, middle-class, monogamous and largely still heteronormative ideal is celebrated at prom and thus in this archive, which has no way of recording more radical resistances or refusals to participate.

Queer IRL

The Queer IRL (stands for 'in real life') galleries are a monthly community photo series on Autostraddle that 'gathers little clips of lesbian, bisexual, queer and otherwise-

identified women, trans and non-binary folks, just living our lives' (Queer in the Kitchen, 2017). The series began in January 2017, with the theme 'Queer in the Kitchen'. Like the prom gallery, each of the galleries in this series is made up of user submitted photographs. Unlike the prom gallery, submission times are fixed rather than ongoing, usually for between two or three weeks. To be involved, photographers need to identify as 'not straight' (Queer in the Kitchen 2017) and email the site with a picture that fits the theme. For example, to be included in Queer in the Kitchen, they would need to send in a photograph of their kitchen, preferably with themselves included. Along with the photograph, submitters are also encouraged to include their names, ages, locations, occupations and a sentence or two that responds to the theme for the month (for example, what is your favourite food to prepare in your kitchen?). The photographs can be taken with smartphones, digital, film or disposable cameras but they need to be of high enough resolution that they translate well to a full screen.

Other galleries in the series included, Queer in the Bedroom, Queer on a Friday Night, Queer on the Outside, Queer at Work, Queer on Holiday, Queer in the Stacks (featuring books or bookshelves), Queer with Pets and the final gallery, Queer Celebrations (mostly same-sex weddings). Each of these themes revolves around every day, regular, ongoing practices. Each 'chapter' of the series has more than 100 submissions and unlike the Prom gallery, participants are from a more diverse range of backgrounds, though the global north is still dominant. Prom has strong roots in American history, whereas bedrooms, kitchens and holidays have broader international appeal. For this chapter, I focus on Queer in the Kitchen and Queer in the Bedroom. These galleries were chosen because they are sites at which the tensions, pleasures and expectations of contemporary femininity come into sharp focus. Each of these spaces is associated with

domesticity (Rodney et al 2017, Hollows 2003, Genz 2008). These are also typically intimate, private spaces, made public by inclusion in the online archive.

Queer in the Kitchen

After the initial call for photographs, the gallery post containing pictures of queer women in their kitchens proclaimed, 'I hope you scroll through these many, many pictures and feel like FUCK YES, WE ARE ALL OVER THE PLACE AND WE WILL NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT' (Queer in the Kitchen 2017). This statement proclaimed the everyday domesticity of the kitchen as both queer and powerful and admonished the concealment of queer life as aberrant. The submissions for the kitchen gallery were open for 2 weeks, which resulted in 172 submissions. Queers appeared in kitchens in a broad range of (mostly white) places; 142 of the pictures came from North America, 22 from Europe, 3 from Australia or New Zealand, 3 from Asia and 2 from unspecified locations. The age range for submitters was 18-44. At the time of writing, the gallery had 132 comments, largely positive.

Some of the pictures don't feature the photographers. Instead, the pictures are of empty kitchens (figure 19). Other shots are classic selfies, with the photographer's arm extended to capture the image. Many of the pictures though, are carefully framed and structured, with the camera on a tripod or a phone carefully balanced on a shelf. This suggests that the photographers planned and structured their pictures in order to express a facet of their identity and reflect the way they live their lives. Aside from the presence of the kitchen, the photos are visually diverse. Most are of single people, rather than couples, though some also feature groups, or pets. Occasionally children appear in the photos. As you might expect, many photographs feature cooking or food preparation.



Figure 19: Queer in the Kitchen - cow mat (2017)

Figure 20: Queer in the Kitchen - cupboards (2017)

The captions and details accompanying the pictures also vary. For example, the picture of the empty kitchen (figure 19) lists the photographer's name (Rachel), age (22), location (Ithaca, NY), and occupation (Psychology lab manager). Responding to the

theme, she writes, 'I really love my cow mat. I live alone, so I named her Genevieve'. In figure 20, Jen (27, Ontario) describes her occupation as 'finally not a cashier' and offers the following statement to accompany her picture; 'I couldn't boil a potato before my wife got her hands on me. I tell people my brain is like a well-stocked kitchen, where all the cabinets are open'. The affective attachment to domesticity and home life varies in each picture, but they are tied together by discourse of the archive as legitimating force and by the imaginary of the Autostraddle community. The curation of the Prom Gallery highlighted the significance of social rites of passage for the constitution of sexuality and social value, whereas *this* gallery emphasises Autostraddle's role in producing lesbian and queer women as relatable. After all, almost everyone has a kitchen.

Reflections on the 'ordinary affects' of kitchens include, 'what this photo doesn't capture is the smell of a hair tie burning on the bottom of my oven (how did a hair tie make it into my oven?!) and the sound of the fan trying to blow away the burning hair smell'; 'I fell in love with someone in this kitchen. Now, I'm learning how to be alone again' and;

'I am a huge rage baker, when the systems and constructs of the world matched with the intense vibration of community woes press down on me. As of late I made cookies for the revolution, bourbon banana bread for hope, fruit pies to fuel upstarts to continue to rise up, and had a cookie decorating party for nothing other than because community and chosen family matters. I also cook savoury meals in my kitchen, but baking is my passion, and it truly is one of my favourite ways to practice self-care.'

Others simply provide a favourite recipe. Ordinary affects are the sensations, relations, compulsions and encounters that bestow meaning on everyday life. As Stewart describes;

‘They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*’ (2007, 2).

The gallery both records these everyday ‘ordinary affects’, and produces them. The participation, compilation, curation each mobilises the everyday of queer women’s lives as *something* meaningful, fostering an attachment to a queer community ideology.

In this gallery, the photographers do not reflect on the progression of queer life, rather they offer up a snapshot, a temporally specific moment. Here, politics is bundled up with the mundane, the everyday, and infused with the smell of spices and the warmth of home. This gallery, and the other galleries in the series are apt for inclusion in a queer archive of everyday ephemera that, according to Cvetkovich, ‘insists every life is worthy of preservation’ (2003, 269). Like the prom, the kitchen is often associated with heteronormativity, evoking images of women cooking and caring for their male partners and their children. Instead of insisting that queer women also do this work, can also be included in this picture, the gallery affords a critical reflection on the multiple tensions and pleasures of the private and intimate sphere. Just as those that tend to the Lesbian Herstory Archive describe it as homely and as cosy, this gallery redraws the home and the kitchen as the centre of our political and intimate lives as queer people.

Queer in the Bedroom

The gallery of queer women in their bedrooms begins with the statement;

‘Remember the feeling of seeing your new friend’s bedroom for the first time – like there’s a *whole entire world in there* and they’re letting you into it? That’s how this gallery feels’ (Queer in the Bedroom, 2017).

Again, this archive hinges on sensation, relations, intimate affects. Notably, the intimacy on offer here is not necessarily sexual - we are invited into the bedroom as new *friends*, not as lovers. As I explore further in chapter seven, the blurring of the lines between friendship, family, romance and stranger is distinctly queer, however, in the world of Autostraddle, community ‘happens’ in the bedroom, as well as in the streets (or in the kitchen). The reference to ‘how this gallery feels’ indicates that rather than an authoritative archive of historical narratives, this project is an archive of queer ‘ephemera’ (Killen 2017).

Similarly to the kitchen gallery, this gallery had 170 submissions. The geographic breakdown of the gallery was also similar, 134 were from North America, 20 from Europe, 10 from Australia and New Zealand, 1 from Asia and 5 unspecified. Of the 170 submissions, 33 contained no people at all; photographers preferring to let curation of their bedrooms speak for and about them. The age range here was 17-42, though on average the submitters were younger (under 30) than those in the kitchen gallery. The bedroom gallery has 102 comments, all of which were once again, positive.



Figure 21: Submission to Queer in the Bedroom - 'The memory of being 13' (2017)

Only 17 of the photos featured couples and only 12 intimated sexual practice either visually or with the accompanying statement. Instead of referencing sex, people talked about their bedrooms as representative of their identities, and as their sanctuaries. The space of the bedroom was conceptualised in terms of the complicated navigations between adolescence and adulthood, as well as between intimacy and the 'outside' world. In figure 21, a 25 year old assistant preschool teacher writes;

'I hate clutter. I bought this bed when I first tried to escape, and could fit all of my belongings into eight banker boxes. I sleep on it now that I'm back – two times over – because the memory of being thirteen under this roof doesn't leave room for anything bigger'. (Queer in the Bedroom 2017)

The bedroom is a site of tension between the potential homophobia of the outside world and the queer intimacy of the photographer's private space. Inclusion in the archive connects these private spheres as 'scenes of identification among strangers' in which a shared narrative of queerness as relational might flourish (Berlant 2008, viii). Similarly, 26 year old English teacher in Poland writes of her photo;

'I live in a pretty conservative town and I'm not at all out here, so my one-room flat is my queer sanctuary. I surround myself with pictures and trinkets that remind me of my favourite humans and my community'.

(Queer in the Bedroom, 2017)

Again, the bedroom sits at the threshold between the possibility for homophobia and connection to other queer people in the world. The shared narratives of community, intimacy and safety are more prevalent here than narratives of sex or sexual practice.

The lack of sexual references in these pictures could be because people are wary of the consequences of posting such content so publically to the internet. In the call out for the gallery, Autostraddle offered guidelines for submission that warned against posting nude photographs; 'we shan't show nipples, genitalia, or simulated or actual sex. Sex toys or nude art throughout your room are totally permitted'. This warning is not reflective of Autostraddle's position on sexual practice, but rather their interaction with advertisers and the restrictive world of capitalism and classification.

The lack of sex or references to sexuality in most pictures means that the sex stands out in others. In figure 22, a 25 year old from Vancouver, (who describes her occupation as 'lesbian of an accounting department') stands at the entrance of her bedroom in a revealing top. Behind her on top of a chest of drawers is a dildo. She describes her top

five favourite things in her bedroom, including '2. Beloved dick in a jar':



Figure 22: Submission to Queer in the Bedroom - 'Dick in a jar' (2017)

The inclusion of the dildo in the photograph is not sensationalised. The image is not explicit, and her sexuality is only one element of the identity assemblage as seen through the lens of her bedroom.

The evacuation of sex from sexual identity is concerning given the ubiquity of narratives of lesbian and queer women as 'sexless' (Nichols 2004). Myths of 'lesbian bed death' perpetuate the essentialising idea that lesbians (like *all* women), value emotional closeness over sex (Iasenza 2002). It's not that the images of queer people in their

bedrooms are *sexless* per se, but rather that sex practice and sexual identity are separated in ways that suggest an individualising view of sexuality. As McCann notes, the focus in queer communities increasingly is ‘*not* on sexual practices or the relationality between bodies, but rather on gender presentation and individual identity’ (2017, 114). This approach to sexuality as identity rather than practice obscures the ways in which the practices of our bodies are tightly regulated, and regulated unevenly. That is, a focus on identity conceals the fact that some bodies are more ‘safe’ and able to engage in shared narratives of intimacy in bedrooms than others.

The kitchen and bedroom galleries are clear examples of community archives (Flinn et al 2009, 73). Members of the community work separately but collectively to produce content that can be shared and discussed to widen and strengthen the community itself. This process continues beyond the formation and curation of the galleries themselves. In the comments on the posts, people reach out to one another, saying, ‘hey, I noticed you live here, I live here too’, and ‘let’s catch up sometime’. The images are a record of a particular moment in the queer women’s community that surrounds Autostraddle, but they are also a vehicle for it. With these galleries, the website makes space in the archive for ‘the emotionality of the everyday’ (Kuntsman 2012, 7) and the deeply intimate ephemera of queer life.

Inclusion of these moments of connection and collectivity in the archive are significant for combatting narratives of queerness as deviant, isolating and pathologized. However, the galleries also reflect an increasing neoliberal propensity for mining women’s digital intimate lives for ‘content’ that is relatable and shareable. The emphasis on the everyday ephemera of queer bedrooms and kitchens produces a ‘loving’ community archive of queer life, but also mandates a turn toward affect and

emotion and away from the regulating politics of bodies and sexual practice. In this way, though the pictures are less uniform than in the Prom Gallery, they reference a shared imperative for assessing one's social value and producing one's self as 'content' in a marketplace of emotion and aesthetics.

Lesbian Ken



Figure 23: New Ken Dolls - New York Times (2017)

In June 2017, Autostraddle published an article called '75 Lesbian Ken Dolls, Ranked by Lesbianism'. Popular toy company Mattel had recently released a new range of contemporary Barbie dolls with a more diverse range of body sizes and skin colours. Along with the Barbies, a new range of Ken dolls were also released. These new Ken dolls came 'in seven skin tones, three body types, eight hair colours and nine hairstyles (including cornrows, fade, shaggy dog, quiff and buzz cut)' (New York Times 2017,

figure 23), and were dressed in a new range of fashionable and hip clothing such as skinny jeans. The release of the new 'fashionable' Ken dolls is the result of shifting discourses of masculinity and hybrid masculinity, which are increasingly centred on style, aesthetics and capitalism (Alexander 2003). Autostraddle marked this re-branding of Ken as an important moment in queer history, and declared that the new dolls looked like 'a creepy group photograph of all your ex-girlfriends' (Autostraddle 2017).



Figure 24: Moda Jeans Ken & Great Shape Ken, '75 Lesbian Ken Dolls Ranked by Lesbianism' (2017)

To celebrate Ken's new look, Autostraddle ranked 75 Ken dolls, both contemporary and traditional, in terms of their lesbian likenesses. For example, about 'Moda Jeans' Ken, they write; 'I think I saw her at the big gay block party Ohio Straddlers hosted last year' and about 'Great Shape' Ken, they write; 'Says she got her outfit at Goodwill, actually got it at Urban Outfitters' (Autostraddle 2017, figure 24). In this way, the article reclaims a normative version of masculinity as queer and blurs some gender boundaries (using female pronouns for Ken, for example), but they also playfully tease at nostalgia in a way that recalls the covert double readings that queer people do when they encounter popular culture. Instead of the model of heteronormativity, Ken becomes the lesbian role model of our childhoods. This kind of re-reading also critiques the idea that gender socialisation in children is straightforward such that heteronormative role models like Barbie and Ken replicate gendered ideals in the children that play with them (Connell 2002).

The article went viral and garnered more than 100 comments, many of which focused on which dolls resembled the commenters themselves or their current or past romantic partners. For example, one commenter wrote; 'I aspire to be Gianfranco Ken but in reality I am Concert Date Ken', and another wrote 'Ken Model 15 is literally me in doll form' (75 Lesbian Ken Dolls, 2017). In response, Autostraddle put a call out for submissions to a Lesbian Ken Doll community gallery. The submission rules were simple – choose a Ken doll, imitate their outfit and then email in a photo. The gallery aimed to prove 'once and for all that Ken is very, very gay' (We are all Lesbian Ken 2017). Less masculine parts of the community were reassured that they could also dress

up as 'Barbie and Skipper and whoever the fuck else from the Mattel Plastic Dreamworld' (We are all Lesbian Ken 2017).

Submissions were initially open for one week, but then the gallery remained open and accepted submissions for the rest of the month. As in the 'Queer IRL' galleries, community members also sent in their names, ages, locations and occupations with their photos. There were 116 submissions to this gallery, 101 of which were from North America, 6 from Europe, 3 from Australia and 6 that were unspecified. The age range for this gallery was much wider, with submitters between the ages of 17 and 54, perhaps because the initial post reached a much wider audience. The gallery has 111 comments, all but one of which are positive.

The singular critical comment was short and said; 'It's a really cool idea I just wish I saw more diverse skin tones. It was overwhelmingly white and light skinned, with a few exceptions' (Lesbian Ken Community Gallery 2017). Given the association of children's toys (especially dolls) with whiteness, the lack of diversity in the gallery is unsurprising (Miller 2014). Though the gallery celebrates the queer potential of adolescence broadly and children's toys in particular, it is important to note that these associations mean that the toys are only available for queering by *some* members of the community.

What is most notable about the Lesbian Ken community gallery, in comparison to the Queer IRL and the Prom galleries, is its facilitation and provocation of humour. This kind of humour is not unusual for the Internet, indeed such silliness is a central part of how citizenship and belonging operates online (Baumgartner 2007, Hartley 2012, Highfield 2016). Humour is not often discussed in the context of the archive though, perhaps because it seems at odds with the seriousness and sobriety of the Past (with a

capital P). Laughter, as an ephemeral affect, is rarely recorded in the archive, because it is assumed to be too subjective, too slippery for 'serious' consideration (Swart 2009). Queer approaches to the archive however, take the *body* seriously, with all of its impulses, experiences and outbursts. Both Cvetkovich's archive of depression (2012) and Muñoz's theorising of the dancefloor as queer archive (2009) respond to a need to include embodiment and emotion as central to the history of queer life. *This* project, with its imagining of queer Ken dolls, offers a participatory, playful opening into a queer archive.

The kinds of participatory humour that circulate on social media have become political gateways for those who have traditionally been excluded or disengaged with social commentary (Davis et al 2018). These memes (highly shareable, funny content) can perhaps also function as a critique of dominant modes of doing important political or historical work. Lesbian Ken offers queer women a chance to render their masculinity visible, but also to poke fun at it in a way that reveals the performative aspects of gender. The resulting images are *joyful*, locating pleasure in alternate displays, performances and embodiments of gender and disavowing fatalistic discourses of queer life as painful and despairing.

The use of humour to parody the absurdities of gender stereotypes and paint the normative as bizarre and strange (for example, Ken as a lesbian) is decidedly feminist (Barreca 1991, Gallivan 1992, Shifman & Lemish 2010). Which is explored in more detail in the next chapter (*Laughing Gayly*). The Lesbian Ken gallery's campish, feminist humour is a novel way of picking at and undoing notions of archival legitimacy. That these (mostly) women are 'dressed up' and performing (as Ken, as masculine *toys*) in these shots points to the creative aspect of doing history work. That is, queer archives

are also about producing critiques of social structures, not just capturing ‘authentic’ moments from the past.

The playfulness of this gallery also evokes nostalgia. These are not just images of women dressed as men. They are images of women dressed as toys *that they once played with* designed to look like men. Surely, the high level of interest that the post received and the number of people who responded relates to the feelings that the toy evokes in the Autostraddle community. The gallery, somewhat cheekily, suggests that these lesbians turned out the way they did (gay, masculine) because of their interaction with their childhood toys. This mimics claims from conservatives playing with the ‘wrong’ kinds of toys might produce homosexuality as pathology, but it also mimics feminist debates about the harms of the feminine body ideals of Barbie (Collins 2011, Rogers 1999, Driscoll 2005, Vered & Maizonniaux 2017). The parody here also operates as a moment of affection (see example below). Instead of being irreparably harmed by the presumption of heteronormativity that accompanies Barbie & Ken, these queers can look back with a smile. This reaching backward with the intention of forging contemporary resistances, can be conceptualised as nostalgic activism, where joyful collectivity is born out of social regulation (Juhasz 2006, 326)

“We are all lesbian Ken” is a good example of the way humorous, shareable content such as memes can become important sites for collective identity construction (Gal *et al* 2016, 1700). Creating these pictures requires a community and temporally specific intelligibility. That is, by participating in this gallery project, Autostraddle members let themselves in on the joke and further cement their place within the community. If we can conceive of meme production as a performative act that cements collective identity (Gal *et al* 2016, 1710), it is easy to see how *archive* production can function in a similar

way. Indeed, we could imagine this gallery as a cultural snap action or a digital flash mob, which fits well within the scope of queer archiving as potential activist tool, rather than just a facilitation of visibility or recording of history.

Conclusion

Archival representation is important for a sense of collective belonging and community identity. However, queer women have often been left out of archives altogether, or only included in moments of scrutiny or as objects of medical and legal surveillance.

Organisations like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, or, the Lesbian and Gay Archives here in Australia, are committed to recording, discovering and sharing the missing stories of queer life with the community and with the public in general. Autostraddle, like the LHA, also asks us to think critically about what we understand as worthy of historic inclusion. Instead of replicating an institutional approach to archiving, the site works toward building accessible, queer and feminist archives of ephemera and emotion.

Community galleries, like the ones discussed here, offer us the opportunity to seek out, convene with and create queer life. Through these projects, queer women are awarded the possibility of recording their everyday emotions and the associated ephemera, and to make it all available to a wide and diverse audience. In this way, an intimately queer archive is constructed, one that documents and contributes to the culture and community of our everyday lives. This archive is also accessible in a way that enables engagement and critique. The accessibility and contestability of an archive that can potentially house *everything* that could or might be deemed significant (something that would not be possible in a physical archive) fits squarely within the wheelhouse of

queer historians' visions of community-driven archives. Indeed, the Internet is a deeply affective space, driven largely by emotion and an obsession 'with saving, recording and storing' (Kuntsman 2012, 5) – which makes it perfect for collecting and constructing a queer archive of emotion.

Beyond the collection of snapshots of our daily lives and the queer mundane, these galleries tie us together in a temporally, if not geographically, specific project. The community archive is both embodied and performative; by participating in its production, we also produce ourselves as a bounded and intelligible community. As McBean writes, 'the past is not something that is over, but something that has unexpected life in the present' (2013, no page number). It is perhaps our teasing and tickling of the past through the production of archival spaces that brings it to life and to power in the present.

Chapter Six

Laughing Gayly: Critique, relatability & belonging

‘And if reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, and a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change?’

(Willet et al, 2012: 218)

Lesbian Ken is not the only example of humour and playfulness that came up through this research. Indeed, humour, in various guises, has ‘interrupted’ this research so consistently that it has become impossible not to dedicate an entire chapter to its functions within the Autostraddle community. In 2014 Autostraddle was accused, by writer Diana Clarke in an article for *The Baffler*, of being ‘the queer online equivalent of *Cosmopolitan*’ because of its investment in ‘vapid fluff pieces’ and its use of ‘breathy, hyperbolic tone’ alongside more serious ‘deconstructions of gender identity and social expectation’ (Clarke, 2014). Autostraddle senior editors responded by implementing a regular ‘vapid fluff’ column and declaring: ‘Our “breathy, hyperbolic tone”, often employed ironically, helps us transcend the often self-defeating reality of our daily existence’ (Autostraddle 2014). This combination of irony and hyperbole references a recognisable and arguably ‘relatable’ playfulness in content and a distinct ‘language’ shared amongst writers and regular commenters.

Sociological research has recently begun to pay serious attention to the *serious* work of humour. That is, we have turned our attention to the ways in which humour can be subversive and an enactment of politics by revealing the absurdity of social norms and critiquing social dominance (Highfield 2016, Hartley 2010, Driscoll et al 2013). The

political work of humour is perhaps most evident online, where satire, playfulness and witty banter have become native languages of digital contemporaries (Phillips & Milner 2017, Leavitt 2014, Miltner 2014, Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014). Arguably, it is through the shared experiences of laughter that a collective base for serious political resistance can be forged. Drawing on examples from Autostraddle, and from my fieldwork notes at *A-Camp*, this chapter explores the ways in which the imaginary of the Autostraddle community is constituted through shared literacies of humour and playfulness and in turn, how those communities might use those languages to resist social dominance and critique harmful social structures.

Examples of the humorous and ‘weird’⁶ content circulating on Autostraddle include articles published in November 2018, such as;

- Is she a lesbian or just from the midwest?
- The bisexual bob: a bold haircut for a beautiful future .
- Blobs Get Dressed.
- Lesbian and bisexual women of history who were obsessed with their dogs, part 3 .

The comment sections of these articles, and others, include comments that are demonstrative of a capacity to wield the insider language of Autostraddle, such as ‘That duck for sure has an alternative lifestyle feather cut’ (No Filter: Tegan, Shane,

⁶ Phillips & Milner (2018) argue that much of the language and content that comprises the popular internet can be categorised as ‘weird’ - irreverent, ambivalent and playful.

Alice & Dana ring in the Holigays, Nov, 2018), or, 'Personally I prefer sentient potato hominid but blob is good too' (Blobs Get Dressed, Nov, 2018). The distinctively 'relatable' linguistic markers of 'Straddler speak' produce Autostraddle as an intimate public through which shared fantasies of queer commonality might flourish. While humour functions to constitute relatability and define the community, it relies on particular cultural literacies that are asymmetrically ascribed. As Akane Kanai argues, content that is usually deemed 'relatable' is often coded as white, middle-class and heterosexual (2019). Clearly, Autostraddle content is not promoting heterosexuality, however the humour used here does rely on cultural capital and the ability to assess, classify and categorise sexuality, race, gender and class.

Continuing a focus on aesthetics, embodiment and representation, this chapter examines the column 'Straight People Watch', two examples of galleries satirising generic stock photography of lesbian relationships and sex and the ritual of bringing and wearing 'onesies' to A-Camp. Humour functions in three central ways on Autostraddle. First, as a vehicle for criticising heteronormativity and casual homophobia and transforming 'a politics of resentment into a politics of joy' (Willett et al 2012, 228). Second, laughter is mobilised to establish the bounds of the community imaginary and constitute lesbian relatability, and finally, to enable a sense of embodied belonging for *some* members of the community. While humour works to emphasise the borders of the Autostraddle community, laughter also destabilises binaries and affords critique of that same border. That is, humour functions queerly in this deeply affective space, by simultaneously constituting the community and troubling its borders.

Laughing at gender

Sexist humour objectifies and humiliates women by reifying gender differences and naturalising women as unintelligent, needy, sexual objects (Bergman 1986, Shifman & Maapil Varsano 2007). Humour, being the domain of the 'intelligent', is also understood as unavailable for use by women, despite the regularity with which we feature as punchlines. Gender norms also dictate that bodily displays of emotion and pleasure, such as laughter, are, for women, kept private and contained (Barreca 2013). Even where women have taken up humour as a technology of gender, the expectation remained that they not use it *against* men, nor in defiance of the cornerstones of feminine comportment. Feminists and lesbians in particular are constituted by the mainstream as distinctly *unfunny*.

Despite this, feminists have long theorised the production and agitation of gender norms through satire, laughter and humour (Abedinifard 2016, Auslander 1993, Finney 1994, Willett et al 2012). Feminists and other social activists also regularly take up the mantle of comedy in order to 'poke fun' at dominance and social power (Franzini 1996, Fraiberg 1994, Lauzen 2014). Barreca, for example, borrows the term 'fumerist' (a portmanteau of fuming and humour) from lesbian comedian Kate Clinton to describe the familiar feminist feeling of 'being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at once' (2013, 178). Willett et al (2012) point to the work of Roseanne Barr, Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes as examples of laughter work that has worked for and with feminism. Shifman & Lemish use the word 'fun(ny)mism' to explain the way they approach challenging sexism and gender norms through humour. Jane explores the ways in which humour is taken up in online 'digilante' (digital vigilante) feminism as a pointed part of political protest (2016) and Rentschler

& Thrift (2015) examine networked feminist humour, whereby feminist humour acts as a connective device *and* a vehicle for critique and agitation.

In 2016, on her way home from A-Camp, Autostraddle senior editor Heather Hogan shared a story on Twitter about a homophobic interaction with the passenger next to her on the plane while she watched the film, *Carol*, on her laptop. As an example of feminist humour, her story is copied here:

This old white guy in the seat next to me on the plane paged the flight attendant and told her I was watching “homosexual pornography”. And I was like, “Sir, this is the Academy Award nominated film, *Carol* (dir. Todd Haynes). Known also as the greatest love story ever told.” And he was like, “I don’t want to see it!” And I was like, “Well, close your eyes.” The flight attendant gave him an eye mask and so obviously once she was gone I started whispering all the lines out loud. Kind of. “You think you can handle a redhead, in terms of finger-banging?” “Do you miss Richard?” “I haven’t thought about him all day because lesbian sex activity is on my mind.” “Dearest, tits and fanny.” Anyway, he called the flight attendant back over and told her I was saying the movie out loud and I said I wasn’t. And then I paused it on Waterloo and left my laptop open and went to sleep.

Humour functions in this example, as with other examples of online feminist humour, as a weapon of cultural criticism, but also as a marker of cultural capital (Rentschler & Thrift 2015). Indeed, Henefield attributes this kind of blending of humour and politics to the proliferation of ‘cultural economies of laughter’ online (2016, npn) in which humour becomes a significant element of ‘shareability’ because of its capacity to

efficiently generate, foster and signal 'group intimacy and comfort' (Moran et al 2003:112).

Hogan's twitter thread ends with a GIF⁷ of Cate Blanchett as Carol smiling seductively while holding a cigarette (figure 25). The GIF functions as an affective 'caption' of the event, but it also works as a nod to an imagined audience who can easily identify with Carol's affection for women and distaste for men, as well as Hogan's overt and public adoration of *Carol* - 'the greatest love story ever told'. Hogan's reference to the 'Waterloo' scene interpellates a particular audience; we (as queer women) are expected to already share in the knowledge, or at least be able to quickly acquire the knowledge, that Waterloo is *Carol*'s infamous sex scene. Those that understand and 'get' the joke are ushered into the collective fantasy of contemporary queer womanhood that constitutes Autostraddle as a community. Thus, this brief anecdote from Twitter demonstrates how laughter might function as part of a broad online vernacular that also demarcates a specific community within that environment.

⁷ Graphics Interchange Format - a short video of 2 or 3 seconds played on a loop.



Figure 25: GIF capture from Carol accompanying Heather Hogan's Twitter story (2015)

What makes Hogan's twitter thread so immediately apparent as a *feminist* moment, is the way that it troubles the gendered expectations around humour. As Willett et al (2012) note, when women wield humour it is seen as a violation of the norms of femininity, a stubborn interruption of expected social interactions. Conversely, women are pronounced 'funny' (in either a comedic or a queer way) when they fail at femininity in such a way that the potency of their resistance is concealed. That is, as a lesbian, Hogan is supposed to be humourless yet still available as an element of someone else's humour. Further, her lack of humour should denote a lack of intelligence and a lack of power - it should reinscribe her as Woman, and Woman as naturally inferior.

Essentially, Hogan should be the butt of the joke, rather than its instigator. Think here, of the figure of the 'frumpy' lesbian or the 'dumb' blonde. Each refuses to perform femininity appropriately, the lesbian by not having enough sex with men, the blonde by alluding to *too much* sex with men. Through misogynist humour, this refusal to

perform is recast as accidental, irrational, powerless. Hogan's performance and Twitter storytelling are the kind of feminist humour that 'reveals and ridicules the absurdity of gender stereotypes and inequalities' (Gallivan 1992, npn). Here, Hogan positions her flying companion as childish, which works to highlight the absurdity of his assumed position as the rational, mature 'grown-up'. Interestingly, Hogan also casts herself as childishly playful in this scenario, which works to trouble the association of maturity (and therefore, perhaps, masculinity) with power. The joke relies on our ability to recognise the flying man's immaturity, but also the childishness in our own laughter. This, coupled with the original suggestion of 'homosexual pornography' or *adult* content, results in an destabilisation of the gendered hierarchy in which maturity and naivety are dichotomised.

This kind of narrative humour is not unique to the digital era but it is an increasingly definitive feature of online communication (Davis et al 2018). It operates as part of a shift toward narrative storytelling on Twitter (Dayter 2015, Alexander 2017, Holmes 2013) and as part of a trend toward 'doing politics' on Twitter and through social media more broadly (Highfield 2016, Vaccari et al 2015). Indeed, this thread could even be understood as part of 'call out culture' (Nakamura 2015, Munro 2013, Stewart 2016), in which transgressions against progressive norms are made public and visible online in an effort to humiliate and shame perpetrators (Vitis & Gilmour 2017). What is most apparent here though, is the use of the kind of witty retort and playfulness that have found a natural home amongst the irreverent, ambivalent and silly languages of online spaces (Phillips & Milner 2017).

While campish, gay humour has largely been brought into the mainstream over the last few decades (through the mainstreaming of drag culture as in *RuPaul's*

Drag Race), lesbian humour remains distinctly linked to ‘angry feminist politics’ that interrupt rather than facilitate humour. Rather than a subjective matter of taste, humour is indicative of social milieu and operates as a form of fellowship (Kuipers 2015). Humour affords a playful negotiation of social meanings, and jokes are mobilised to relieve anxiety and fear (Zijderveld 1983, Palmer 1994). Misogynist humour, and jokes about gender reveal social anxieties about gender and sexuality and the ease with which they might be disrupted.

Destabilising heteronormativity

Autostraddle abounds with the kind of content that Abidin & Ots might call ‘subversive frivolity’ (2016), including the Lesbian Ken Doll phenomenon explored in the previous chapter. Some of this humorous content is overtly critical or subversive, while other examples fall into a more gently playful category. Others still could best be described as ‘weird’ content. In this chapter, I look specifically at ‘Straight People Watch’, a regular column that explores products and rituals associated with heteronormativity; the lesbian stock photo galleries - a series of stock images that are captured, curated and captioned on Autostraddle in such a way to highlight misrepresentations and misunderstandings around lesbian desire; and finally, the ritual and practice of wearing ‘onesies’ at A-Camp.

Straight People Watch is a satirical series that Autostraddle runs quarterly. Each edition of the series examines news stories and consumer goods that uphold and emphasise heteronormativity. Writer Erin Sullivan uses the column to craft a narrative of mock ‘concern’ over the wellbeing of heterosexual women and to criticise heteronormativity. The first iteration of the column ran in March, 2017 and was titled,

“Are Straight Women Ok?”. As of mid-2019, this article had 183 comments, which were largely positive (though I will discuss some of the criticisms), and prompted the continuation of the series. A follow-up article was published in June 2017 and was called, “It Appears That Straight Women Are Not Ok”. The series transitioned into ‘Straight People Watch’ in February, 2018. The column writer, Erin Sullivan, introduces the first edition with;

Performative heterosexuality will never not stun me into silence. And how? It’s an every day, all day experience. From a.m. to p.m., it’s engagement photos of women in camo training their rifle at their man buck this, and “lock up your daughters” bibs on your infant sons that.
(Sullivan, 2017)

She continues;

When you further investigate this phenomenon, as I did, things get real dark, real quick. The items themselves are worrying enough on their own as they reveal a prison of what women are allowed to be and should want, but then you dive deeper and the culture that lurks just behind these items reveals itself. I’ve seen the depths of this landscape and I need to ask a question: are straight women okay? Like, not in a joking way - do they need assistance? (Sullivan, 2017)



Figure 26: Mr & Mrs Mugs

Items featured in this first edition of the column are decidedly kitsch⁸ including a pack of '88 great conversation starters for husbands and wives', an inflatable 'husband', a book of prayers for a future husband and a set of interlocking 'Mr & Mrs' mugs that accurately, though presumably accidentally, depict the gender pay gap, as the 'Mr' cup 'cuts' into the space of the 'Mrs' cup. (figure 26).

Each item is captioned with a question, for example; 'Straight women who are fine with less coffee because at least my husband's cup fits into mine, are you okay?', or, 'Straight women who maybe feel scared that being alone is the worst thing you could

⁸ Exaggerated sentimentality; in poor 'taste', but still aesthetically pleasing (Botz-Bornstein 2015, Linstead 2002).

possibly be and so you confidently lean into the overbearing, possessive wife trope for some semblance of control in this increasingly terrifying world, are you ok?'. Each caption also includes a link to where the item can be purchased. Heterosexual women are the target of this humour which works to highlight the mechanisms of heteronormativity as an uneven system of power. This critique of heterosexuality lays the responsibility for its pains at the feet of heterosexual women who are painted as 'deluded' or mentally unwell for choosing to participate in relationships with men.

Sullivan ends the second article (*It Appears That Straight Women Are Not Okay*), with the following:

I'm not sure where we go from here. Do we put up flyers? Wear a special pin? Maybe when you see them at a Pride event this month crowding the very bar you're trying to get a drink from, make sure to remind them that we are their allies in this fight and then wait for instruction. Until then, RT (retweet) to save a life (Sullivan 2017b).

A mockery of the pathologised history of homosexuality (Foucault 1978, Jagose 1996) and the constitution of sexual categories and identities through the positioning of homosexuality as a 'problem' is the basis of this humour. The simultaneous hyperbolic concern and dismissal of *heterosexuality* as disastrous stands in stark contrast to historical approaches that have reified heterosexuality not only as natural, but also as normative and 'healthy'. Historically, homosexuality has been positioned as the dirt, or 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1968) against which heterosexuality's cleanliness is measured in ways that have produced material harms within our communities. Just as Foucault (1981) argued that a close, medical focus on the relationship between certain sexual acts brought forth the 'homosexual' as a category,

Straight People Watch draws together consumption practices and rituals to offer up the figure of the heterosexual as available for troubling. This overt ethnographic parody denaturalises heteronormativity by establishing its basis in the social arrangement of gender, rather than any sort of specific sexual desire or biological reality.

Of course, each item in the collection could be understood as part of a larger collection of 'weird' content that seems to proliferate online, rather than solely referential of the potential trappings of heterosexuality. In terms of the internet, weird is often the term used to describe irreverence, ambivalence, mischief and silliness, as well as content that is dehistoricised or unanchored from intent, such as with memes (Phillips & Milner 2017). Indeed, journalist Eric Limer (2013) notes that there is twice as much 'weird' content online as there is 'normal' or sincere, and that strangeness has become commonplace on the digital stage. The 'weird' stuff of online culture works to reveal and agitate expected social norms. That is, weirdness highlights the construction of the norms against which it is constituted.

In this series, Sullivan shares an article about 'passion dust' (vaginal glitter), alongside an article about women using wasps' nests to 'tighten and clean the vagina' (Sullivan 2017c), and a large number of stories about gender reveal parties (Sullivan 2018), some of which end disastrously and some of which go exactly according to plan. By bringing the collection together in this way, Sullivan suggests that the online marketplace makes space for and trades in the inherent 'weirdness' of compulsory heterosexuality. This clearly illustrates Balirano & Chiaro's claim that humour is about 'queering the scene' (2016:2) and rendering the normative as completely outlandish. Heteronormativity is destabilised through satire.



Figure 27: T-shirt featured on Straight People Watch (2018)

Figure 28: Family with guns featured on Straight People Watch (2018)

What is thrown into the most disarray throughout the series is not necessarily sexual orientation, but the concept of harm. In posting stories of gender-reveal parties that leave party-goers scarred, screaming or running for their lives alongside pictures of gender-reveal cakes that say ‘Guns or Glitter?’, Sullivan asks us to consider what kinds of violence we might miss or admit in the everyday processes of normalising gender. Further, when she posts pictures as below, with captions like, ‘Do straight people want to... fuck guns?’ (figures 27 & 28), she points to heterosexuality’s inherent failure to live up to its own expectations of sexual purity or ‘cleanliness’. The humour makes the potential material violence of heteronormativity overtly visible. The critique of heterosexuality here, is also a critique of the cultural positioning of queerness as abnormal and dangerous, and of queer people as vulnerable to harm. Although Barreca argues that humour is ‘a show of both strength and vulnerability’ (2013, npn), Sullivan eschews queer vulnerability in favour of revealing a heterosexual

fallibility, and instead of speaking directly to the harms facing queer communities, she offers an eye-roll and a rhetorical question; who are *they* to pity *us*?

Inevitably, a clear *us* and *them* emerges in the mobilisation of this kind of humour.

Here, the Autostraddle 'community' is constituted through a shared dislocation and a reminder that as queer people, our occupation of the 'weird' position can bind us together in a politics of resistance. Readers of *Straight People Watch* and Autostraddle members are encouraged to, and regularly do, submit stories and items for future inclusion in the column. For example a search of the hashtag on Twitter reveals several examples of images tagging Autostraddle and #straightpeoplewatch. For example, one Twitter user⁹ shared figure 29 with the caption, 'I really don't think str8s are okay', another tweeter (@Krytella) recounts overhearing someone in a donut shop ask, 'what flavours would you recommend for boys', and attaches the #arestraightpeopleokay hashtag. Similar suggestions for inclusion appear on other social media channels and in the comments on the posts themselves.

In figure 29, the use of the hashtag shifts the weight of the humour from a misogynist frame toward a feminist criticism, in which the figure of the violent misogynist is recast as the butt of the joke. While this frame-shifting may not have material consequences in the fight against domestic violence, it does work to constitute the tweeter as part of the Autostraddle community. If, as Sara Ahmed argues, eye rolling can be understood as feminist pedagogy (2017), we might see the attachment of these hashtags to violent, homophobic or sexist posts, as a digital eye roll. Here, Straddlers are offered the opportunity to reposition themselves as contributors to a shared

⁹ Tweet has since been deleted.

laughter rather than potential victims of social violence. Indeed, Ringrose & Lawrence (2018) suggest that shared humorous literacies (like memes) work as shorthand communicative tools, and these kinds of codes have a long history for queer people navigating potentially dangerous situations, even as they express or celebrate their own queerness. Vulnerability is reframed as agency through recognition and participation in the ongoing 'joke'.



Figure 29: Image submitted to the #straightpeoplewatch hashtag

The initial, 'Are Straight Women Okay' post garnered some criticisms for its

disparaging of men's bodies. For example, in her introduction, Sullivan writes, 'I mean, "his and hers" towels I get. A piece of material that collects whatever excretes from a man's skin even after he's showered should never come in contact with another human being' (2017a), and, next to a set of mugs that proclaim, 'I like his beard!' and 'I like her butt!'. she writes, 'straight women who fetishize a trend of facial hair - that has been proven to contain ample amounts of fecal matter (...), are you okay?' (2017a). In response, one commenter writes;

'Articles like these always seem to devolve at some point from a starting point of "heteronormativity, what the hell?" (which I totally agree with) to jabs like "male bodies are gross. why would you go near them?" which is so disappointing and sends the message that queer women with male partners are somehow less enlightened queers.' (2017a, comment from March 23, 2017).

Another commenter offers a similar criticism; 'The genuine critique would probably have been more powerful if not covered in bizarre biphobic microaggressions' (2017a, comment from March 23, 2017). Again, the portrayal of men's bodies as especially 'gross' or undesirable, paints heterosexual women (and queer men) as crazy for expressing any desire toward them. The joke also essentialises the violences of masculinity as the polluting effect of 'male' bodies.

A refusal to laugh at the joke signals an uneasiness in the composition of the community and a refusal to take up the invitation to belong. The humorous potential of these kinds of comments about the gender and 'gross-ness' of particular bodies relies on an assumption that those bodies are always already outside of the community. The laughter is generated in the naturalisation of the lesbian as repulsed

by 'male' bodies in a way that could obscure the construction of heteronormativity as socially mandated. The joke ignores that women might have beards, or that they might 'excrete' similar contents from their skin, because humour is perhaps necessarily reductive, even while it challenges normative ideas (Holmes 2000). This kind of exclusion is how brands like Autostraddle become so successful - by positioning themselves as for a collective *someone*, rather than a generic *everyone*, in order to be financially viable, but also politically effective. However, the 'collective someone' must *seem* specifically relatable in the community context whilst also remaining broadly generalisable and accessible. Thus, humour facilitates a fantasy of generability and a utopia of sameness (Berlant 2008, Kanai 2019). As Gail Finney (1994), and others, have argued, a certain level of homogeneity is required for laughter, which is antithetical to queer politics that champion fluidity, diversity and collective difference.

Humour, relatability & the lesbian imaginary

An analysis of the function of humour at Autostraddle demonstrates that belonging is not always, or even centrally, figured around sexual desire or practice. Indeed, we might read the collective identity not as gay, or even queer (in the umbrella sense), but as a collective political standpoint. Instead of a collective identification with a specific expression of desire, what the shared literacy of humour on Autostraddle suggests is a collective disparaging of the norm and thus a collective identification with 'not the norm'. At the same time, in series such as Straight People Watch and the stock-photo galleries, that which has stood as the 'norm' in wider society becomes troubled and made weird. If, for example, heteronormativity did involve 'fucking guns', would

heterosexuality also be considered queer and violently disruptive? The margins of normativity are unclear and unstable, and humour does the important work of illuminating that instability.

Some theorists worry that feminist humour, such as memes that mock gender relations, while cathartic and powerful as a tool of activism (Bing 2004, Case & Lippard 2009, Weaver, Mora & Morgan 2016), might ultimately reify gender as fixed, dichotomous and essential (Ringrose & Lawrence 2018). That is, in mocking heterosexual norms, we risk cementing heterosexuality as a naturally occurring phenomenon and potentially depoliticise the practices associated with maintaining that normativity.

However, I read the humour here as critical and unstable. The joke, in both Straight People Watch and the stock photo galleries discussed below, is not that there are two kinds of people who are fundamentally opposed, but rather that *everyone* is a bit queer, but some have yet to realise how queer their practices really are. The humour, then, relies on an uncovering of the ways in which heteronormativity is naturalised and its own construction is concealed. In this way, queer humour acts a 'border activity' (Mallan & McGillis 2005, 1) by revealing the ways in which borders around sexual citizenship are rigidly yet almost arbitrarily enforced.

Over the last 10 years, Autostraddle has featured a number of 'stock-photo' galleries, where they gather together images marked as 'lesbian content' from Shutterstock or Getty Images. These images are captioned with the shared vernacular of 'Straddler speak' to highlight how little they resemble the reality of daily queer life. Examples of these galleries include, 25 Pictures of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography, 25 Pictures of Lesbian Kink According to Stock Photography, 27 More Pictures of Lesbian

Sex According to Stock Photography, 55 Lesbians Having a Bad Time in BDSM Stock Photos and 25 Pictures Technically Not of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography. These galleries were published between 2010 and 2018 and as well as being humorous commentary on the heteronormative imagining of lesbian sexuality, they expressed a frustration with the inabilities of digital media to avoid reproducing gendered and heterosexist norms, especially while smaller media outlets have to rely on and circulate the products that are made for the markets of larger outlets. Here, I examine the galleries 25 Pictures of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography and 25 Pictures Technically Not of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography.

In the gallery, '25 Pictures of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography', senior Autostraddle editors Riese & Laneia lament the abundance of the 'misguided photoshoots' available on Shutterstock. They write, 'Seriously though, who knew the primary lesbian sex act was standing breast-to-breast, staring at the camera?' (Autostraddle, 2014). The images in the gallery feature scantily clad femme women who stand or lie close to one another in a series of somewhat odd scenarios - at the beach, in the rain, covered in paint, and holding a snake. In one image, the two women are dressed as nuns and in another they are dressed as presents, nude except for the red ribbons covering their genitalia and breasts and the matching bows on their heads.



Figure 30: Stock photo tagged as lesbian sex, captioned 'WHO'S UP FOR PONY PLAY??!!!' - Autostraddle (2014)

On their own, the pictures might not 'count' as humorous (though they are laughable), but rather an overt critique of the absurdity with which lesbian sex is imagined by a heteronormative public, as exemplified in the shot of a single woman wearing a horse's head (figure 30), or in the image of two giraffes. As a collection, the images suggest the market for pictures of thin, white, feminine women in lacy

underwear is stronger than any market for 'authentic' or diverse lesbian images could be.

Stock photography is clearly illustrative of a rhetoric of sameness that perpetuates through popular culture. Markets are dependent on attachments to commonality that are expressed in generic representations such as with stock photography. This kind of imagery is designed to act as an empty signifier with the capacity to fit with and speak for multiple texts at once, without being anchored to any particular material or historical formation of the social world. The assumed audience is heterosexual, white, and likely male, given that this is usually the default expression of the 'common'.

When the 'general' images are combined with witty captions, as they are here, they are digitally remixed to produce queer sentiment and humour (Horwatt 2009, 76). This humorous recalibration of the images, reveals the 'fullness' of the stock photo signifiers and highlights what is missing from the frame. For example, the caption on figure 31 reads, 'Watching "Game of Thrones" in upward-facing dog lesbian sandwich pose is probably the best idea we've had since we bought these matching nude bodysuits on the internet' (Autostraddle 2014). The caption suggests that this absurd situation is much more plausible, *and recognisable as lesbian culture*, than the vision of lesbian sex that the image offers. The narrative of a life beyond the image highlights the way that the picture objectifies its subjects, but it also mocks the construction of lesbian sex as both impotent and sexy, ironically palatable as a commodity, even as Autostraddle struggles to engage advertisers. The humour emerges because of the mismatch between the image and the words, but also because even in providing a criticism of mainstream representations of queer sex, the captions also impose queer life onto the photographs. In this context, the image is both queer

and not queer.



Figure 31: Downward dog stock photo categorised as lesbian sex - Autostraddle (2014)

This simultaneous queer/not queer positioning is best seen within the gallery '25 Pictures Technically Not of Lesbian Sex According to Stock Photography' (2018). Here, Riese writes,

Often the more compelling lesbian situation occurs not where it is intended to exist, but in the spaces between. I realised all the lesbian sex photos were hiding where they usually do: in Close Female Friendship City, population "Thousands of Lesbians Having Actual Sex in Photographs That Are Not Tagged with Lesbian".

Within this gallery, the captions similarly 're-write' the images in a humorous way, to highlight the ubiquity of queerness. This process of constituting and imposing queerness relies on the use of common language and shared linguistics within the Autostraddle community that are irreverent, yet endearing. That is, the language often acknowledges the stereotypes surrounding lesbians (emotional, sexless, overly dramatic) and then teases and plays with those stereotypes in a way that is critical, but also wonders why these characteristics are presumed negative. Again, it is as though the writers are simultaneously claiming we are, we aren't, and we are also, in order to constitute queerness.

Hence, what was once recognisable as heteronormative (the stock image), suddenly becomes recognisable as queer, through the text. For example, figure 32 is accompanied by the caption; "Lesbian Couple Finds the Perfect Erotic Third".

Understanding the joke depends on a shared literacy and understanding that an 'erotic third' constitutes a non-monogamous approach to relationships. There is also a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Autostraddle community members, and maybe lesbians more broadly, might relate to the *queerness* of 'shopping' for a third. Thus, the common association between femininity and retail therapy is interrupted in favour of a queer interpretation that centres on desire and non-normative sex.

The remediation of stock images constitutes a rejection of the authority of scopic markets in defining and depicting sexuality. This rejection is not 'snarky' though. The captions of the images are not designed to purely criticise stock photography or the companies that produce and sell them. Instead, the images invite a celebration of relatability from the readers. That is, the humour combines 'knowingness' (how

should I read this image?) with *sincerity*. Reading the images in this way is not about snide criticism, but about playfulness and about belonging.

However, the ability to 'remix' and re-associate imagery is dependent on an 'ideal reader', who can take up the 'historical meanings of bodies as a resource rather than as structures of containment' (Kanai 2016, 1). That is, bodies-as-memes (as they are here, and across the internet), are divorced from their material conditions in ways that make it difficult to critique those conditions and accompanying constraints. Further, the literacy required to 'read' the joke, or to see the queerness, is part of a 'collective identity practice' (Kanai, 2016, 2) that is not equally available to everyone. The joke is perhaps funniest for those that can relate to the thin, white, young femininity invoked by shopping as leisure. Thus, the joke invokes an imagined audience, that are able to read together, cohesively.



Figure 32: Stock photo captioned as 'Lesbian couple finds the perfect erotic third' - Autostraddle (2018)

The joke occurs because we (as an imagined audience of lesbians) recognise the tensions of the images. As viewers, we are expected to recognise the subjects as *strangers* who threaten the aesthetic cohesion or imaginary of the lesbian community as masculine, angry, inherently political (Ahmed, 2000). What is important here is that the sense of cohesion itself is recognisable as imaginary, or arbitrary. Unlike Kanai's descriptions of the bodies of memes and gifs finding themselves seemingly divorced from their historical contexts (2016), the joke here is that they cannot be separated from historical constraints - these bodies can never be free of their heteronormative history, but they can be reclaimed all the same.

The humorous acknowledgement of women's bodies trapped within the diorama of heterosexuality and the recognition of these women as 'not queer' is not based in any sense that these women are undeniably heterosexual, but instead in a critique of 'authentic' representation as a fallacy and an unattainable and problematic goal. After all, even as stock imagery diversifies, as per *Broadly's* publication of an explicitly LGBTQ+ stock library, the expectation that images be broadly representative *and* intimately relatable remains (Schrupp 2019). The images in Autostraddle's stock photo galleries tell us only what we as queer Straddlers are expected to already know - that gender operates within a rigid heterosexual matrix. Thus, the boundaries around the community are established through the constitution of a lesbian cultural imaginary that shares the literacy required to 'understand' the humour.

Playfulness & belonging



Figure 33: A unicorn onesie like the ones commonly worn at A-Camp

It would be reductive to assume that humour operates dichotomously as either affording or limiting a sense of belonging. Instead humour functions as a critical negotiation of community bounds. To explore this positioning of humour as a negotiation, I turn to the example of 'onesie culture' at A-Camp. A onesie is a loose fitting, one-piece jumpsuit garment that is often designed to make the wearer look like a particular kind of animal or mythical creature (such as a unicorn, see figure 33).

Numerous posts on the A-Camp Facebook page asking what first-time campers need to make sure they pack are met with responses that suggest a onesie is essential A-Camp regalia (figure 34):



Figure 34: Advice on Autostraddle Facebook group re: packing for A-Camp (2016)

Several of the posts about onesies have comments requesting an explanation for the phenomenon but these requests always go unanswered. Thus, the origins of camp onesie culture are unclear and the phenomenon might best be described as a meme, even though the word is now usually associated with the digital, rather than the offline. The concept of the meme was developed by Richard Dawkins (1976) in his

work on genes and cultural transmission and Nooney & Portwood-Stacer describe it as 'a self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon analogous to the gene as a replicator of biological data' (2014:249). That is, the onesie functions as a 'self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon' that works to reproduce and replicate cultural norms of fun and irreverence and a bizarre or idiosyncratic sensibility within the A-Camp community.

The onesie meme, acts as a cultural shorthand at A-Camp, with bonus points for 'special' or obscure onesies, such as unicorns or pokemon characters. Here, the costumes operate as a code, in similar ways to the 'hanky code' of past queer societies (Reilly & Saethre 2013) that lets other campers know that you are in on the joke, or at the very least, that you have been paying attention to cultural expectations that are clearly laid out online before camp. During our interview, El sends me a selfie that they mark with #campfashion. The photo (which El asked I not reproduce here), is a mirror selfie in which El holds a red cup in one hand and the phone in the other. Just as the red cup is a North American symbol for parties, alcohol and fun, the presence of the onesie in the picture points to the particular kind of *queer* fun expected from A-Camp. Above the bathroom mirror is a set of marquee lights that spell out the word 'GAY'. The letters are not a permanent fixture of the bathroom, but were clearly added for precisely this purpose, taking selfies at camp.

Of the photo, El tells me; 'that is a jean jacket vest over a seal onesie over a crop top and bike shorts'. The 'weirdness' of the outfit is not weird at all, given the context and the weirdness of the Internet broadly and Autostraddle specifically. By taking the selfie and sending it to me with the attached hashtag and the matter-of-fact description, El is participating in the playfulness - a joke - about the absurdity of queer style in a way that is referential of Thomas' description of camp as 'a particular kind

of performance in which the overt meaning of what is performed is subverted or inverted by drawing attention to the fact that it is a performance, and thus a kind of lie' (1996:103). We might take the photo as a comment on the assemblage of 'weirdness' that produces a sense of sexual subjectivity, but also as a subversion of the idea of homosexuality as somehow 'authentic' or normalised. Instead of camp being somewhere you can 'be yourself, authentically', it is somewhere that you can be as made-up, or as fictional as you like; this is part of the fun.

Onesie practices at camp reveal *style* as a key marker of belonging. Though, this marker no longer necessarily hinges on context appropriate displays of gender, as butch/femme tensions of earlier eras clearly did, visibility remains significant for producing an imaginary of lesbian identity. The subcultural capital required to assess, categorise and finesse aesthetics as communal stylings is unevenly distributed, and not everybody has the same access, confidence and skills needed to adopt and manipulate subversive tropes in order to participate fully in the community (Bourdieu 1986). Style becomes a shorthand for authenticating and naturalising membership, and a resource for establishing identity boundaries. The imperative for visibility that is enacted through the onesie reaffirms the lesbian imaginary as a *taste* community, dependent on the acquisition of cultural knowledge and consumer goods.

Understanding the need for a onesie is only something that can be achieved through immersion in the site itself or in the various Facebook groups dedicated to camp life. That is to say, one cannot negotiate the technologies of belonging until one is already within the culture. For example, when I asked Ess whether preparing for camp had made her nervous at all, she told me she had realised last minute that the onesie was 'kind of a THING you needed to have'. The knowledge that a onesie was 'essentially

required' made her anxious enough to pay for express shipping so that she would have one in time for camp. Ess didn't necessarily *understand* the need for a onesie, nor did she necessarily find the experience of wearing one pleasurable or humorous. For Ess, the process of buying and wearing the onesie didn't translate to an immediate sense of belonging within the wider 'weirdness' of A-Camp. In fact, of her first night at camp, she recalls; 'I really, really wanted to go home and I felt I'd made a big mistake. It was absolutely horrible'. Although the onesie didn't necessarily have its desired humorous or playful effect, Ess was grateful for its presence because it kept her warm and plush when she was chilly or lonely at night.

Although humour didn't function in this situation as a 'refuge' for 'the building of safe and congenial relationships' (Watts 2007, 259), it still served a purpose that was part of the assemblage of community constitution in this context. That is, the onesie reflects and constitutes norms. If we think of memes as Lunenfeld (2014) does, as complex and ambiguous, with an unfixed set of meanings, we can see how participation in 'onesie culture' is emblematic of how members of the community negotiate norms rather than find themselves entirely bound by those norms. It is important to consider how different bodies negotiate this particular cultural norm. A 75 year old camper may not be expected to 'rock a onesie' the way that a 22 year old would *precisely* because they are already outside the prescribed norms of A-Camp. That is, the onesie reflects *and* constitutes norms of youthfulness and of the body as a canvas upon which to freely paint identities.

In fact, the 'playfulness' of the onesie works specifically to undermine the agency of bodies that already sit at the margins of acceptability. For example, wearing a onesie threatens to further infantilize fat and disabled bodies which are strongly culturally

associated with helplessness and childishness (Robey, Beckley, Kirschner 2006; Keller & Galgay 2010). In this way, the onesie works to emphasise or further highlight those that fail to fit in, whilst concealing and individuating the structural mechanisms of exclusion. A-Camp is marketed as somewhere to playfully try-on identities as one might try on a series of onesies, but identities, like onesies, are unevenly accessible or available. In fact, the trope of the onesie assumes a 'neutral' body that can be depoliticised and dehistoricised in order to be made the matter of humour and fun.

Conclusion

Of course, not everybody, or even every queer person gets to be in on the joke. For some people, the experience of vulnerability is in itself deeply connecting and motivating for effecting social change. We should, therefore, be wary of positioning laughter as a more powerful response than tears or anger, or even as necessarily separate from other affective responses to social violences. For others still, the almost banal or trivial violence of compulsory heterosexuality is not a central concern. Further, Dağtaş argues that political humour can be both 'emancipatory and disciplinary, unifying as well as exclusive and divisive' (2016, 13), and clearly, these jokes have the power to exclude as they establish the bounds of the community.

Humour functions to produce the site as relatable, thus constituting the community. This process produces a common imaginary of Autostraddle and lesbian culture which is ultimately exclusionary as some bodies fail to meet certain ideals and attain culturally specific literacies. However, humour also produces an uneasy sentiment about the borders of the community by revealing some of the mechanisms that bind

people together in this deeply affective space, potentially affording a more porous boundary.

Playfulness, satire and 'weird' content operate in a number of ways online, as markers of community membership and as forms of political participation and critical agitation. As in other online spaces, humour is ambivalent (Phillips & Milner 2018) and has multiple feminist and queer functions across Autostraddle. Most significantly, humour at Autostraddle produces a collective around a particular aesthetic style of language that rejects vulnerability. This is interesting, given how vulnerable writers can be in other parts of the site, where deeply personal narratives are encouraged and celebrated. Humour is a central way that the queer writers of Autostraddle eschew and negotiate narratives of vulnerability in order to establish a stronger sense of agency, even while recognising and responding to victimisation and material harms. Thus, playfulness becomes a central aspect of community identity participation and a key way in which members negotiate the borders and boundaries of the community.

I wanted to be able to write this chapter about humour and queer resistance and somehow find a way to make it funny. I wanted my points to be barbed and my wit to sting as I described the ways in which the Autostraddle community is constituted through shared laughter and terrible puns. At the same time, all of my attempts at humour felt too flippant, too simplistic to convey the nuance of identity negotiation that is at play here. Sarcastic retorts felt entirely insufficient, not least because of the tense and troubled relationship between humour, knowledge and power. Can academic work be taken seriously if it is also funny? What counts as *knowledge* amongst the laughter? If a critical interrogation is humorous, who is doing the laughing and what is the object of the joke? If the joke must have a victim, then

perhaps the work would somehow be both *too* pointed, and too *impotent* as a piece of sociological research. Is laughter too intimate and does it assume the wrong kind of ideal audience?

The thing about humour is that it can be pointed, but it is often not precise. In fact, much humour arises in the incongruous, the disjointed, the misunderstanding (Ross 2005, 7). There is something distinctly queer about communicating in a way that effaces clarity and directness and prefers instead to offer multiple meanings simultaneously. The ability to determine which meaning is correct and therefore why the joke is funny, relies on the attainment of specific social literacies and capital. As Akane Kanai writes, those shared understandings about why jokes are funny are ‘embedded in ideological, social and cultural contexts where power and authority regulate meaning’ (2016:2).

In each iteration of humour examined in this chapter, an imagined audience is invoked, and is expected to already have obtained the necessary knowledge to ‘get’ the joke. The criticism of heteronormativity in *Straight People Watch* relies on an ability to categorise bodies in terms of gender and sex (men’s bodies as ‘gross’ and ‘disgusting’, women’s bodies as valuable and desirable) and be familiar with the pathologising history of homosexuality that is being mocked and satirised throughout the series. The stock photo galleries are humorous because they ‘re-write’ heteronormativity as queer, however they also reinscribe expectations for aesthetic cohesion within the lesbian community. Finally, the ritual of wearing animal onesies at A-Camp signals a playful, non-essentialist approach to identity, but requires a dehistoricised and depoliticised approach to bodies. That is, in this example, camp participants are expected to be able to mould and adapt their bodies as key resources

for marking out membership in the community. Each of these 'jokes', in some ways, reinscribe a rhetoric of sameness to the imaginary of lesbian culture and community. Yet, humour also allows room for troubling the rhetoric and for a different imaginary. As Barreca notes, 'humour doesn't dismiss a subject, but rather often opens that subject up for discussion, especially when the subject is one that is not considered "fit" for public discussion' (2013, npn).

Chapter Seven

Crushing, Smashing, Squishing: Queer Desire & Friendship

“I asked Chloe about her camp crush last night and she asked if I was going to write about it and then laughed and told me, ‘of course, of course you can write about it!’ I got drunk last night too, and watched my cabin mates make out with all sorts of people. Went to Club Deer (what a name!) and danced. In many ways, it was like a queer night at any club but in some ways it was different. People were in pjs! Fat girls wear crop tops with gay abandon here on the mountain! Sad girls wear the remnants of last night’s makeup unceremoniously cried down their faces as a ‘look’. Everyone leans into everything.” - *Fieldwork notes*, A-Camp, 2016

Just as onesie culture at A-Camp indicates the significance of playfulness as communal affect at Autostraddle, the representations of *sex* at Autostraddle are distinctly ‘friendly’ and fun. The sex-education programs, the ‘Not Safe for Work’ content and the sexual imagery on the website all emphasise intimacy and sexuality as social and playful. The relationships that spring forth from this approach to sex mean that the Autostraddle community abounds with *crushes*. The deeply communal affectivity made possible by the intertwining of sociality and sexuality mirror the ‘romantic friendships’ of women’s colleges and communities in the USA and the UK in the late 19th Century, and Adrienne Rich’s theorising of political lesbianism and the lesbian continuum, yet are distinctly desirous and erotic.

In this chapter, I draw on Gayle Rubin's 'Thinking Sex' (1984), Adrienne Rich's theorising of the lesbian continuum in 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' (1980) and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) to think through the forms of desire that are made possible at Autostraddle. Using examples of sex and desire from Autostraddle columns, *Lesbosexy Sunday*, and *Lesbian Sex 101*, as well as examples of 'crush culture' at A-Camp, this chapter investigates how online social spaces can allow a queering of the imagined boundaries between friendship and romance, but also between adolescence and adulthood, by emphasising the erotic sociality of intimacy and sex. In this context, desire and desirability are also embodied technologies of belonging.

The intertwining of sexuality, sociality and technology make possible a specific communal affectivity that emphasises and celebrates the crush, rather than normative, linear romance trajectories. As explored throughout this chapter, theorists argue that the intimacy of female friendships in a postfeminist milieu repudiates queerness and reaffirms heterosexual mandates through close and careful monitoring of friends' behaviours, feelings and relationships (Winch 2013, Kanai 2017). Instead of the surveillance imperatives that structure contemporary female friendships, the crush repositions 'girlfriendship' as sexual orientation. Though such a repositioning risks reifying and essentialising feminine desires as impotent, adolescent and harmless, the technologies of belonging at Autostraddle are charged such that they disrupt notions of the crush as a temporary 'stopping' point en route to heteronormative maturity. Instead, the crush invites a collective wallowing in 'adolescent' desires and privileges an orientation toward an erotic community imaginary over heteronormative romance narratives.

‘Girlfriendship’, postfeminist intimacy and heteronormativity

Young women’s relationships with one another have been the subject of much research and writing on postfeminist sociality (Winch 2013, Kanai 2019, McRobbie 2009, Jermyn 2004). This writing however, largely emphasises the heteronormative and neoliberal mandates of feminine friendship, in which ‘girlfriends are both a commodity to be consumed and a lucrative market to be exploited’ (Winch 2011, 360). The figure of the postfeminist ‘girlfriend’ is constituted as a governing ‘expert’ on normative femininity, whose gaze regulates the behaviour, stylings and gender performances of the women in her midst. What happens when the regulating gaze of the ‘girlfriend’ becomes the desiring gaze of the *girlfriend*? What possibilities and limitations arise here, in the intersection between the postfeminist sensibility of a feminist lifestyle magazine and the ambivalent potential of online queer culture? In this instance, friendship affords a new articulation of sex as social and of desire as a communal affect.

In the neoliberal, postfeminist landscape, the emphasis on individual capacity has meant that reliance on heterosexual marriage and relationships with men are increasingly seen as socially distasteful. Independent, ‘empowered’ women are discouraged from relying on men for material and financial security. In this contemporary articulation of women’s friendships, it is women’s intimacies, Winch argues, that are seen as providing the central ‘source of love, resolution and belonging’ (2012, 26). This reconfiguration of gender relations means that feminine identities now centre on women’s relationships with other women, rather than with men.

For postfeminist theorists, women's sociality replaces the tyrannical 'male gaze' as a system of mutual governance. Women are encouraged to see their friends as 'mirrors', and to modify their behaviour accordingly, contributing to the rhetoric of sameness that characterises belonging in women's culture (Kanai 2019). Though women are encouraged to enact sameness through their friendships, they are also expected to be *spectacular*, to stand out, to be luminous. The focus on aesthetic luminosity and spectacular capital means that women look at one another with a critical gaze.

Women's friendships are often ambivalent, both necessary and potentially painful, structured as they are friendship rules and 'goals' (Bachmann 2014). These friendships and the imperative for sameness they engender often enforce feminine norms, including those related to heteronormativity. Though boyfriends and marriage are no longer central to identity, they do act as 'accessories', with which to mark the self as distinct and valuable (Winch 2012, Kanai 2019). However, women's relationships with one another also provide resources to critically examine and resist these norms. For example, Bachmann's research found that feminist awareness could *become* a norm to which feminine friendship groups aspire.

Contemporary research on queer women's friendships indicates that shared identities and sexualities no longer matter as much for friendship (Forstie 2018). That is, queer women are increasingly comfortable being friends with heterosexual women, or at least not hooking friendship to identity in ways that have historically characterised queer women's lives. Very little, if any, research examines how the centrality of women's friendships for feminine identities in the neoliberal postfeminist landscape might *disrupt* rather than reinforce heteronormative mandates.

Sexuality as social

Although the 'born this way' narrative of sexuality as an innate, essential and individual characteristic proliferates in contemporary Western culture, it is a relatively new way of thinking about sex and the relationality of bodies. Current arrangements of sexuality and identity have been historically and politically shaped through discourses of citizenship, family and economics. It is through complex negotiations of social power that sexuality has become central to subjectivity and desire has been mobilised as a facet of identity and social stratification, rather than a fact of practice (Epstein 1994, 192). The rendering of sexuality as 'natural' is a key part of this complex process of social ordering, as it makes invisible the social meanings, and consequences, ascribed to particular acts and behaviours. However, the essentialist narrative has also played a central role in resisting the violences of social exclusion through anti-homophobic collectivising and activism. Arguably, this is why, unlike gender or other markers of identity such as class, sexuality has been especially difficult to uncouple from assumptions about biological imperatives.

The emergence of critical sexuality scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s aimed to highlight and critically engage with assumptions about the 'naturalness' of sex and sexuality identity categories. In particular, Foucault (1978) and Weeks (1977) each trace the history of social, legal and medical regulation of sexual practice to demonstrate how sexuality came to be seen as an individual quality. Although only certain sexual practices (usually procreative) were socially or legally permissible in Western societies, the idea that those practices were the product of psychology or physiology only came about in the 19th Century when sex came to stand at the centre of a social, medical and legal nexus of 'concern' and social control. Early sexologists, psychologists and medical

doctors worked to 'uncover' the figure of the 'homosexual' in an attempt to preserve and protect the morally upright family from the corrupting potential of the underclass. If 'morally reprehensible' behaviours, commonly known as vices, could be contained within the individual, they became much easier to police and persecute. Thus, sex and desire are not biological imperatives that are inherently meaningful but are made so by 'historically specific social practices' (Rubin 1984,10).

In her key text, *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin (1984) analyses the ways in which sexual 'deviance' became a marker for social disorder. Using a diagram of two nestled circles (figure 34), she argues that a narrow set of sexual behaviours have been deemed good or moral in contemporary Western society and that everything else is 'understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile or politically reprehensible' (1984,14). The system by which sex acts are hierarchically coded as good/evil is rationalised by linking the behaviours in the outer circle to psychological 'deviance', violence and declines in economic and state power. Here, she gives the example of simultaneous hunts for homosexuals and communists during the Cold War such that the homosexual came to represent a national threat, as well as a threat to the nuclear family and in particular, the figure of the vulnerable child. Thus a hierarchy of sex acts is produced in which 'marital reproductive heterosexuals' (Rubin 1984, 11) sit at the top and everyone else falls in various positions below. Rubin argues that this system for organising sexual value 'grants virtue to the dominant groups and relegates vice to the underprivileged' (1984, 15) in ways that reify power discrepancies in social relations as simply the product of biology or individual psychologies.

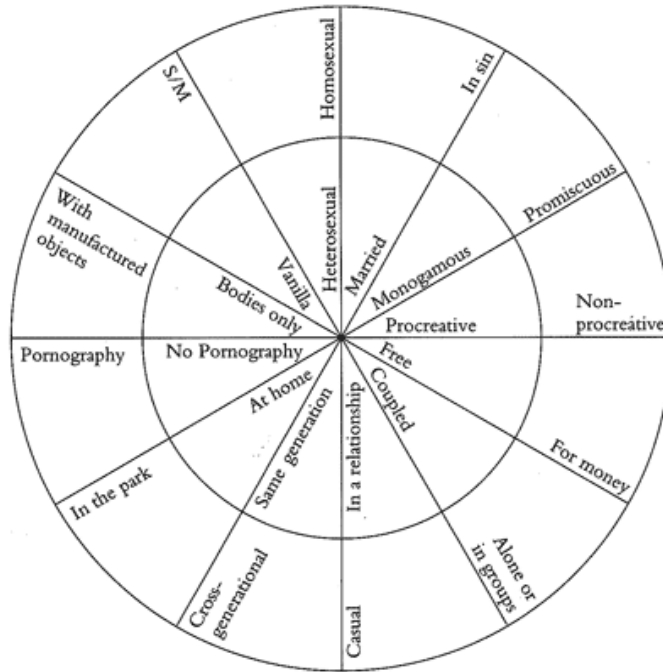


Figure 34: Gayle Rubin's charmed inner circle and bad outer limits

Rather than 'natural' or even stable, this hierarchy is continually contested. For example, recent movements to legalise same-sex marriage in Western countries represent a shifting of the boundary between what Rubin would call the 'charmed inner circle' and the 'bad outer limits' of the sexual hierarchy. Married, monogamous homosexuals are increasingly seen as socially permissible or acceptable while other more promiscuous, cross-generational or financially profitable forms of sex remain on the outside. The struggle over the social stratification of sexual acts produces experiences and relations that we now regularly take up as part of the mantle of our identities. That is, the conditions of our lives within this structure produces a set of meanings that constitute our sexualities.

The theorising of sexuality *as* identity became most apparent through Kinsey's work on the scale and spectrum of human sexuality. Historically, Kinsey's work is significant and included large scale interviews which determined that male sexuality in particular lay across a spectrum, rather than as a binary of preference (Kinsey et al 2003 - originally published 1948). Though Kinsey maintained that focus in this framework should remain on *behaviour*, rather than identity, the scale has been used ubiquitously in western culture, and now online, as popular shorthand for communicating about the nuances of one's sexual subjectivity (Drucker 2011).

In contemporary Western societies, the concept of sexuality as an integral part of identity is often described in terms of orientation. This description suggests that our sexual identities are formed in relation to the object of our desire. So, homosexual people identify as gay because they are attracted to members of the same sex. However, this description conceals the ways in which our lives, and therefore identities, are shaped by social forces that constrict or enable certain behaviours. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed writes that queerness is not simply about a shift in the focus of our desire but involves 'differences in one's very relation to the world' (2006:68). What she means here is that queer life does not follow the same imagined trajectory as expected of heteronormativity and that desire is not simply a line that progressively moves toward an interchangeable, but fixed, point. Instead, the material conditions of queer life bend and twist the line, rendering the markers of maturation along the way as effectively meaningless or arbitrary. Orientation then, is not simply about one's *sexual* activities, but as Ahmed argues, 'orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds' (2006:68). If we inhabit

different worlds, or at least move through and navigate the world in different ways, it makes sense that we relate to and within communities in non-hetero-linear ways that produce specifically queer forms of intimacy and friendship.

Sexuality as political

For queer women, the emphasis on sexuality as identity that strengthened throughout the 19th century was accompanied by a critical feminist interrogation of heterosexuality as an oppressive social institution. In the 1970s, at the height of the second wave, lesbian groups became vocal about their objections to being ignored and marginalised within mainstream feminism. The National Organisation of Women, lead by feminist Betty Friedan, routinely argued that the inclusion of lesbian voices and concerns within the women's movement would 'muddy' the waters, confuse the message and limit the political effectiveness of the movement. Friedan was especially suspicious of the lesbian agenda, and claimed queer women were likely sent by government enforcement institutions to infiltrate and destroy feminist organisations (Faderman 1991, 212). In response, lesbian feminists broke away and began forming movements and collectives that centred on the rejection of men, and more significantly, the rejection of heterosexuality and heterosex as a betrayal of the feminist cause (Segal 1994).

'Women-identified women', as they were known, saw lesbianism as a political *tool*, rather than just an expression of sexual desire or an identity category. Under the framework of political lesbianism, a 'true' commitment to feminism would entail a shunning of men in public institutions and in private spaces, such as the bedroom. For these feminists, heterosexuality was not simply a sexual orientation, but a 'political institution' (1980). Feminists were encouraged to adopt lesbianism as an identifier of

political orientation, rather than of desire. This identification did not necessitate sex or romance with women though, just a redirection of 'energy' toward other women and a privileging of relationships with women over men (Albury 2002).

At the time, Rich's germinal article on compulsory heterosexuality argued that social relations and power structures produced heterosexuality as the only viable option for women, who faced violence, poverty and marginalisation if they turned away from men (1980). Here, she theorised a lesbian continuum in which any woman could take up lesbianism as an identifier so long as they privileged women as 'passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe' (1980, 632). For Rich, 'genital sexual experience' or the desire for such was not a defining feature of lesbianism, but simply one of many ways in which women could connect with and support one another. Further, this framework aimed to de-centralise sex altogether, as lesbian feminists began to theorise sex as inherently aggressive or masculine.

Claiming political lesbianism in part signalled a feminist turn away from sex, whether with women or with men. Political lesbians argued that women *couldn't* consent to sex with men, but also that penetrative sex was always symbolic of a kind of 'castration' of women's power, a reifying of their sexual difference and inferiority (Koedt 1970). This approach to sex meant that even lesbians who regularly engaged in sex with women were considered 'suspect', and the term came to refer to a *set of practices* (not penetrative) rather than a configuring of relations. As Segal notes, 'the new feminist homoeroticism was defined in terms of its *difference* from what was felt to be the objectifying, exploitative sexuality of men' (1994, 52). Lesbian writers and theorists lamented that framing lesbianism as a 'pure' expression of feminism foreclosed

opportunities for theoretical explorations of lesbian desire and limited examinations of the complexities of lesbian relationships in the material world.

Sex and desire in the Autostraddle assemblage exist in relation to this history of lesbian politics and separatism but also in relation to the tensions that arise in feminist theorising of sexuality and intimacy. As contemporary feminisms centre increasingly on identity, belonging and relationships, rather than 'pure' activism, the question of whether sexual practice can be understood as political becomes even more pertinent. Andrea Long Chu argues that the feminist lifestyle magazine genre - in which she places Autostraddle - is pedagogical in this regard, describing 'not just how to have sex, but how to make the sex one has contribute to a fashioning of a feminist self' (2019, 67). Long Chu is sceptical of a feminist politics that operates *as* identity, but recognises that for many people, a feminist identity is entrenched in a politics of belonging. Sexual practices both stem from and constitute feminist identities because they necessitate critical attention to the ways in which we live with others in the world.

Sex on Autostraddle.com

Popular discourse surrounding sex and the Internet often suggests danger, especially for young people and for women. Indeed, writing about sexual activity online often centres on pornography (and its corrupting potential), exploitation and vulnerability (predators/young people), or the increasing availability of hook-up apps like Tinder or Grindr, and their radical reconfiguration (or denigration) of our social relations (Griffiths 2001, Grov et al 2008). Literature on the risks associated with the availability of sex online emphasise the kinds of sex that fall outside of Rubin's charmed inner circle (McGlotten 2013:2, Rubin 1984). That is, discussions about sex and the Internet focus on

pornography or sex that is paid for (sex work, cam-girls), casual, non-monogamous, or promiscuous sex (hook-up apps), or cross-generational sex (predatory behaviour toward young people). Indeed, Hillier & Harrison note that the Internet is often understood as facilitating a 'breaching of boundaries between the so-called sanctity of the home and the "dangerous" outside world' (2007:84). In this example, the danger of the 'outside world' represents the danger of slipping, or deliberately stepping, beyond the boundaries of 'good', socially acceptable forms of sexual citizenship.

Framing digital tools of desire in this way arguably reinforces the 'sanctity' of the inner circle and of normative approaches to sexuality. The kinds of sex available online are often thought of as *less intimate* or less authentic than those available offline. As McGlotten writes, 'if you had to get online to get it, it couldn't be the real thing' (2013:2). More recently however, scholarship on the Internet and sexual activity has focussed on queer sociality and freedom. For example, Nash & Murray argue that 'cyberspace offers a place of liberation, celebration and triumph' where people are released from the shackles of heteronormative gender expectations and are better able to 'foster community and reduce social isolation' (2016, 396 see also, Chiou 2006, Kendall 2000, 2002, Turkle 1999). In their study of Australian same-sex attracted young people, Hillier & Harrison (2007) found that the internet could offer a 'democratic and safe space for young people to explore issues around identity politics at a time when accessible public space is diminishing' (83). Further, young people could utilise the Internet to 'rehearse' sexual situations and learn to stretch their agentic muscles (Nash & Murray 2016), in preparation for more 'risky' offline encounters. Although researchers have begun to explore these liberatory potentials, the *less than authentic/less desirable* rhetoric remains, in that digital spaces are viewed as the *consequence* of lost gay

neighbourhoods or *rehearsals* and *replacements* for inaccessible physical communities. This approach arguably underlines a failure to get ‘the real thing’, and even if that failing is structural rather than individual, it still stands in the way of normative and ‘safer’ approaches to sex and sexuality.

Most writing about online sexual practices or the Internet as a tool of desire often focuses on gay men or on heterosexual people. This perhaps reflects an assumption that gay men (or men in general) are more sexually motivated than queer women. Regardless of the truth of such an assumption, work in this area posits a certain view of digitally facilitated sexual practices - that they are about convenience, anonymity and carnality. This approach glosses over the ways in which sex and desire have always figured as linchpins of belonging for queer communities and specifically, for queer women. If queer spaces are those which vibrate against the grain of sexual propriety (McGlotten 2013:4), then many online spaces are also decidedly queer. The queer configuration of Autostraddle, both on and offline (as well as everything that passes between), produces processes of belonging and distinct social relations that are erotically and affectively charged.

There is an enormous amount of sexual content on Autostraddle and sex is apparently one of the main search terms that brings readers to the site¹⁰. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive overview of ‘sex’ on Autostraddle in one chapter, however a large scale reader survey carried out in 2015 provides insight into the sexual possibilities available for readers on Autostraddle. ‘The Ultimate Lesbian Sex Survey (for women

¹⁰ Autostraddle releases a fortnightly newsletter to A+ members, and each edition includes recent search terms used to navigate to Autostraddle. These often feature mentions of sex.

who sleep with women)', received more than 8,500 responses. The results of this survey are regularly mentioned in more recent articles on the site, as well as cited on other websites. Autostraddle has since published many articles based on the results of the survey, including the gayest places participants had sex, how often they were having sex, how often and who was most likely to experience orgasm from sex and sex advice that was offered by survey participants. This information has since been used to tailor the site's sexual content to the demands of the readers. In January, 2015, they ran a series called "Autostraddle's Masters of Sex Cure Month Experience", in which weekly articles were posted with exercises and 'homework' designed to incite critical thinking and ultimately improve the sex lives (whether partnered or single) of those that participated. The series also offered 'moral support' in the comment threads, where participants could discuss their sexual improvement projects.

In this chapter, I focus on two regular, long-running series that relate to sex: the 'NSFW (not safe for work) Lesbosexy Sunday' series, and the 'Lesbian Sex 101' series. These series are the focal point because of their distinct aesthetics and content, which are relevant to my account of belonging as predicated on taste, consumption and a fantasy of sameness. Both of the series are primarily written (or edited) by Carolyn Yates (who was a senior editor at Autostraddle until mid-2018) and focuses almost exclusively on sexual content. Charting these two long-running series, authored by a central member of the team, provides insight into the sensibility of sexual culture and norms at Autostraddle.

Lesbosexy Sunday

NSFW Lesbosexy Sunday is a news link round-up of content that pertains to sex, sexuality, relationships or gender. Each Sunday, a collection of articles from around the

web are gathered together and interspersed with softly erotic images. 'Lesbosexy Sunday' has been a staple of Autostraddle since its inception 9 years ago and its format has not changed significantly in that time, although the original format did not include pictures. The articles gathered in this series are not usually related other than being broadly about sexuality. For example, the March 18, 2018 edition is titled "NSFW Lesbosexy Sunday is into tantric masturbation" and includes links to reflective memoir, sex and dating advice, political and sociological essays, trans specific articles and how-to guides for using social media as a relationship tool. Not all of the articles are specifically about the act of sex and not all of the articles are specifically about queer or lesbian women. Together, the links provide a networked archive of contemporary sexual culture (in the West).

The images in the series are unrelated to the links and usually come from Shutterstock (a free stock photography provider), artist contributed projects and often from RodeoH - a company that sells strap-on and packing underwear and whose marketing is largely community driven. That is, members of the queer community submit photos of themselves wearing the products and these end up on the website alongside professional model images. It is these community photos that often appear in *Lesbosexy Sunday* posts (figure 36). The pictures are provocative and definitely sexual, but rarely contain full frontal nudity and never actual sex acts. Autostraddle clearly tries to champion diversity with these photographs - they feature a range of body shapes, sizes and individuals of different races. The source of each image is noted (Shutterstock, RodeoH or specific artist) at the beginning of each post with the following disclaimer; "The inclusion of a visual here should not be interpreted as an assertion of the model's gender identity or sexual orientation."

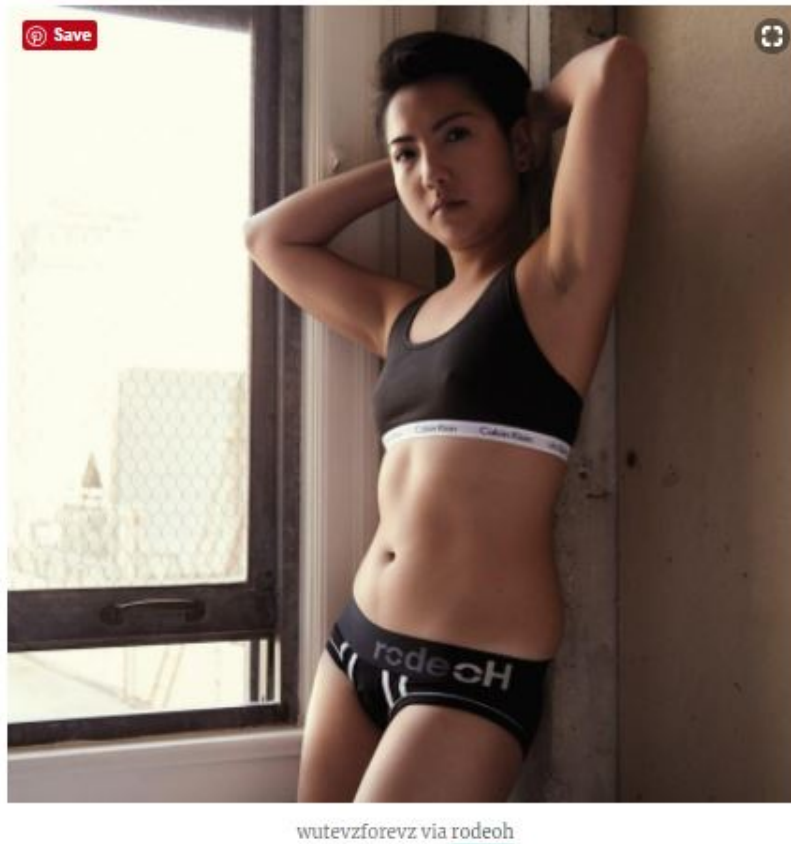


Figure 36: RodeoH model photo on Lesbosexy Sunday - Autostraddle

The common use of community photography and erotic imagery here is significant. These images interrupt the assumption of the male gaze because they are constructed by queer women for queer women and because they explicitly reference queer sex acts that involve tools, toys and accessories. The styling in these images publically expresses desire and in many ways it suggests that sex itself is about community relationships, rather than private, monogamous intimacy. Some of the articles linked in this series are explicitly about sex - how we have it, who we have it with, the accessories we use and how it affects our health. However, many are less about sex and more about our

identities, our relationships, friendships and breakups, and the ways that sexual practices and sexuality affect the shape and scope of our movements through the world. In part this is because it would be easy to run out of things to say about particular sex acts over the course of nine years, but perhaps more importantly, because it can be hard to pin-point (especially for queer people), where sex begins and ends. The coupling of such articles with sexually evocative imagery under the title of 'Lesbosexy Sunday' speaks to an understanding of sex and desire beyond the erotic smashing together of bodies. Sex here, is not simply an isolated event, but rather, a social process.

Lesbian Sex 101

Articles on the practicalities of lesbian sex have been appearing on Autostraddle for quite some time. In 2018 the series on lesbian sex was consolidated into a column titled Lesbian Sex 101 with its own graphics and aesthetic style. It is important to note here that Autostraddle refers to any sex between women as 'lesbian sex', regardless of the sexual identities of the participants. This also optimises their search engine results. Each of the articles in the series is accompanied by the following disclaimer:

Lesbian Sex 101 is Autostraddle's series on how to have lesbian sex for queer women and anyone who finds this information applicable to their bodies or sexual activities. Sex ed almost never includes queer women or our experiences, so we're exploring pleasure, safety, relationships and more to make that information more accessible. A lot of the language in these posts is intended to make them easy to find on search engines. Some of the body parts we talk about will be yours or your partners' and some won't. Some of the pronouns will be yours or your partners' and some won't. Some of the language will be yours or your partners' and

some won't. Take what you want and what applies to you or what you can make apply to you and your partners and your experiences, and leave the rest!

This disclaimer acknowledges the simultaneous stickiness and porousness of the lesbian label, hints at the political implications of naming bodies, and emphasises the complexity of the lived reality of queer sexual relationships. Here, language is both a limitation and a possibility. It expands the potential for accessibility (search engine results), and highlights the importance of diverse sexual education, but also ties certain activities to certain identities. However, by including the disclaimer and avoiding body-specific language in the body of the articles, the series attempts to *untie* particular identities from specific body configurations. For example, in the post, *How to masturbate like a champ*, Yates writes, 'If you have a factory-installed clitoris, it has about 8,000 nerve endings. If you have other genitalia, it has about 4,000 nerve endings. If you have a surgeon-installed clitoris, the details vary, but it might still be fun to touch' (2018). Each version of genitalia is rendered legible in the lesbian context because of assumptions about social relationships, rather than assumptions about gendered bodies.

Other articles in this column cover the practicalities of sex acts - such as fisting or anal sex, and the complexities of navigating social relationships as a lesbian, for example 'How to write a non-monogamous dating profile' or, 'How to be friends with your ex'. The focus of the series extends beyond the ins-and-outs of sexual practice. Instead, dating, breaking-up and communication are all considered important parts of the sexual encounter. In this way, sex extends beyond the bedroom and the series acknowledges that sexual encounters are an ongoing social process. Given that the act

of sex is social rather than purely biological, the series emphasises the social mediation of sexuality *and* identity, rather than prescribing them as individual qualities. Although recent research suggests that queer identity has shifted toward individual presentation and visibility and away from sexual relationality (McCann 2018, 114), the inclusion of these articles within a Lesbian Sex 101 column indicates a constitution of sexuality as social. Here, the lines between what counts and doesn't count as sex become blurry and arguably, this ruptures the boundaries around socially valuable and desirable forms of sexuality.

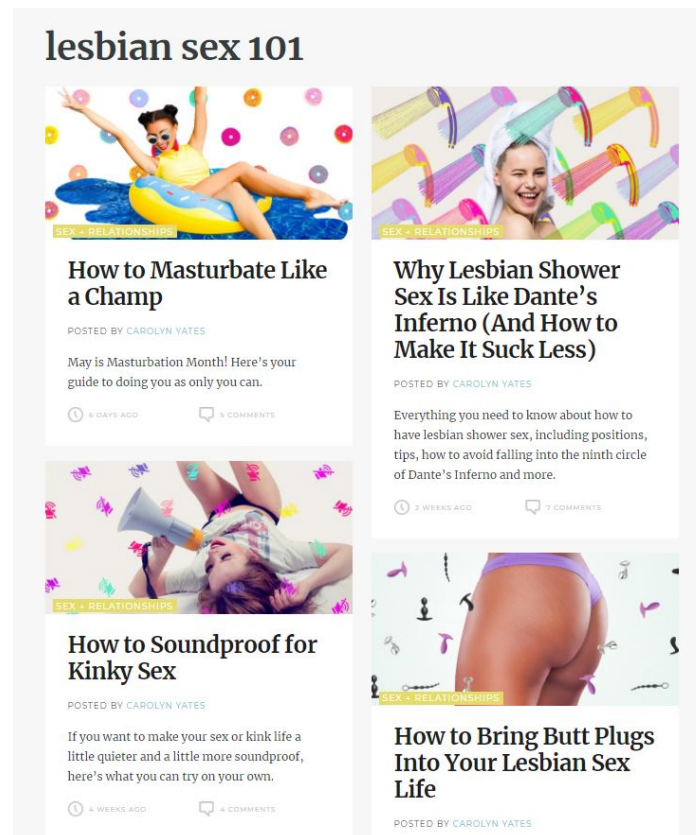


Figure 37: Screenshot of Lesbian sex 101 column - Autostraddle (2018)

The language and content of the articles is clearly designed for accessibility and reach.

The tone is usually straightforward, with an emphasis on the practicalities and material realities of 'doing' sex in ways that are not often depicted or represented in educational or cultural mediums. For example, a commenter on *Butt Plugs for Beginners* writes, 'Wow. I love the way you write this series, it's so accessible. Thank you!'. The images accompanying the posts also contribute to their accessibility. The feature images for each *Lesbian Sex 101* post are all in pink and purple colourways, with 'fun' iconography in the background, like donuts, or sex toys (figure 37). The pictures, which are decidedly feminine, also feature young, thin women, usually wearing makeup and smiling at one another, or for the camera. The feminine aesthetics stand in visual contrast to the radically queer content of the articles, but perhaps make the articles more approachable for young queer people, just starting out on their alternative sex education journeys.

There is a tension in these images, between the desire to dispel stereotypes of lesbians as unfeminine, butch, crass and rough, and the reality that many lesbians do indeed identify with aspects of those stereotypes and their related stylings. The women in the photographs are clearly stock photography models, rather than members of the community that have been photographed for the site (as sometimes happens on other posts). The use of young, thin women in the images of this series is likely financially driven. That is, in order to be able to produce a regular, accessible column on queer and lesbian sex, the site has to obtain the images as cheaply as possible. The consequences of stock photo usage are more fully explored in the previous chapter on queer humour and satire, however, the effects of using these images are twofold: first, that the articles are given a fun, pop-culture vibe - as though lesbian sex is something that all 'millennial' women do, or could do; and second, that viewers might begin to associate

stereotypically feminine imagery with queerness. That is, the coupling of *these* images with *these* articles might work to disrupt the assumed heteronormativity inherent in pictures of feminine women, in particular by jamming the assumption of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989).

The images, with all of their graphic accoutrements, evoke a sense of what Mikaella Clements (2018) calls 'dyke camp' - a style of lesbian sensibility that exaggerates and emphasises the body through aesthetics, gesture and movement. She draws on Sontag's definitions of camp (1964) as artifice and parody, and writes, 'dyke camp takes the real and magnifies it, so that it becomes absurd or funny or simply attractive in its own right' (2018). The styling of dyke camp is at once pared back and excessive, like the feeling of witnessing a tender moment, or catching a glimpse of nude flesh in a crowded space. The images that Clements writes about, and arguably the images in the *Lesbian Sex 101* series, are a kind of intimacy made public, an overt display of excessive desire. If heteronormativity has rendered lesbian desire invisible in favour of 'close female friendship', then the camp-ness of these images reclaims that desire and thrusts friendship firmly into the realm of the erotic.

Lesbianism is often constituted or represented as juvenile or as sexual immaturity. As Bradbury-Rance argues, lesbianism is figured (on screen and through the camera lens) 'in terms of the "immaturity" or "incompleteness" that have so frequently been used to reduce her to the discourse of the passing phase' (2019, 235; see also Roof 1991). This production of non-heterosexuality as immaturity attaches itself to queerness more broadly (McGlotten 2013, 14), but is especially sticky for women. That is, femininity/femaleness have also been narratively constituted as 'juvenile' moments of development in the human life course (Miller 2005, 6; see also Friedan's critiques of

Freud in *The Feminine Mystique* 1963, 79). The use of young women in these stock images is therefore significant.

According to a normative narrative of the life course, the women in these images could be ‘experimenting’ or ‘practicing’ sexuality in preparation for the ‘real’ thing as they mature (and move offline). If successful maturation is seen as orientation and movement toward a ‘serious’ adulthood, these images invite a wallowing in the *fun* ambivalence of adolescence (Halberstam 2011, 3). Queerness is affectively aligned with adolescence here, in that it is always oriented toward *potential* and the ‘not-yet-conscious’ (Muñoz 2009, 21). Rather than refuting claims of queer women’s sexuality as adolescent, the images and the content lean all the way in to ‘unfixed desires that refuse to endorse normative ideologies of development’ (Bradbury-Rance 2019, 235). In this instance, adolescent friendships are erotic, not because of any particular sex act or configuration of sexual partnerships, but because *ambivalence* is erotically charged and figured around desire as unfixed.

The images in this column abound with a joyful adolescent and feminine sensibility. They suggest a relationship between youthful feminist identities and sexual practice, such that fashioning a contemporary lesbian identity is tied up with eschewing the critical ‘weight’ of second wave, radical politics of sex. In this imagining, sexuality and sex practice are free from governing forces *because* they are free from men, rather than the symbolic oppressions of heterosexual or penetrative sexual practices. Penetrative sex and BDSM are permissible as feminist acts because of their association with femininity, youthfulness and *fun*. Moreover, if feminism is understood as primarily an identity category, then all that is required for ‘feminist sex’ is the fashioning of a feminist self. Such a self is produced through a sense of ‘belongingness’ with other

feminist selves as fostered through participation in the Autostraddle community. Though this belonging is not available evenly to everyone, its necessity reconfigures sexuality as inherently social and reorients erotic energies toward the community, rather than toward specific partners.

Desire at A-Camp

In 2016, my experience of A-Camp began with a burlesque show. After dinner, we gathered in the main hall, and three people performed provocative chair dances for the audience before the main speeches began and we were officially welcomed into the fold. Given this, and Autostraddle's liberal approach to sex online, I expected to be faced with lots of sexual activity and at least a little nudity at A-Camp. Surprisingly, this wasn't the case. Sex-related workshops were programmed throughout the camp, but they were scheduled during the day and sandwiched between other workshops on craft, food and pop-culture in such a way that they felt ordinary or mundane. The 2016 workshops relating to sex and desire, and their accompanying blurbs in the program were;

- "What do U mean?": Do you know how to talk about what you want, when you want it, and how you want it? Whether with your long-term partner or the new person you just cruised, we'll be discussing and practicing techniques for talking to others about sex - not only the kind you might want to be having but also what to do if you don't want to have sex.
- "I like that! Talking about our bodies and sex": Have you ever been at a loss for words when talking about sex? Or maybe you know what you

want but not how to ask for it? Many conversations about trans identities and sex often centre around the coming out process, but what about the conversation that comes after that? In this workshop we'll focus on navigating sex and communication about pleasure as a trans person.

- “Strip for your honeydip”: Campers will learn the basics of striptease and burlesque from professionals Gigler and Kai. Come wiggle around and feel sexy with us and learn some steamy moves.
- “Babes on Babes - How to hang out and hook-up”: Dearest and queerest loves, are you so giggly and excited to be around other foxy weirdos but maybe don't have a lot of practice chilling and flirting? We've all been there and some of us literally live in that space. We're here to help and offer tips, goofy stories, and real time practice on the art of hanging out and possibly hooking up with other warm-blooded babe magnets.
- “Queer safer sex”: Come learn about queer safer sex in a comfortable and open environment! Everything you've ever wanted to know but were too afraid to ask! Be on the lookout for sexy prizes!
- “Shibari: Introduction to Japanese rope bondage”: Introduction to basic Japanese rope bondage. Learn how to tie wrists, ankles and a chest harness.
- “Toys, toys, toys”: Come learn about all the sexy sex toys out there and the multitude ways to buy, clean and get them in and around your body!

- “Sex bar trivia”: Think you’re a sexpert or want to learn from someone else who is? Compete in teams to be crowned the ultimate sex knowledge champions and win fun sexy prizes!
- “Chair dance 101”: A fun and sexy dance class suitable for all levels of dancers. Learn how to work the chair in ways that will make anyone’s jaw drop. Come as you are, and let’s werk.
- “Raging flower, or so your genitals hate you, a feelings atrium”: Are you a person who has to avoid certain soaps? Certain lubes? Certain underwear? Would you like to talk about yeast infections or BV or dryness because it happens to you all the time? Come air your feelings about your angry genitals and get good tips from Doctor Lizz and advice-giver Ali.

At A-Camp X (in 2018), there was a workshop titled, *Sexing the Collage Cherry*, in which ‘many humans gathered in a shared space to undergo a sacred ritual: making collages about their sexual desires/feelings while listening to [...] an erotica story about Catherine Zeta-Jones’ (Autostraddle 2018). The story was written by Sarah Sarwar, the marketing director at Autostraddle, when she was 15. The images come from a variety of sources and were provided and curated by Autostraddle CEO, Riese. The collages that participants produced are strikingly sexual and explicit, given that they were sharing a room with friends and strangers and were listening to erotica penned by a teenager (see figures 38, 39 & 40). Twenty-five of the collages were uploaded to Autostraddle at the conclusion of A-Camp. These depictions of desire and erotic imagination are diverse and complex. Their construction was a collaborative process, in

which queer people gathered around a table to share space, stories and supplies that will enabled them to pronounce or temporarily capture queer sex.



Figure 38: Pile of babes/orgy (Bee Truchen)

Figure 39: Cosmic Tits (Dana K)

Figure 40: Femme Fantasies <3 (Maggie)

Sex at A-Camp was not something separate from the daily sociality of camp life, or something to be talked about only in the dark or in private. Instead, sex was considered part of the everyday culture at camp. Cabinmates signed up for workshops together and were offered opportunities for intimacy with friends as/well as potential lovers. If sex was out in the open and almost mundane at camp, it was the idea of the camp-crush that fluttered about on people's lips after dark and in hushed corners. The crush was the real stuff of excitement here. In the middle of my field journal there is a page with only the words, 'camp crushes' written on it, circled and underlined several times and throughout the journal there are several references to chatter about cabinmates' crushes.

The prominence of sex in the quotidian and daily life of Autostraddle and A-Camp have meant that desire functions as a technology of belonging in this community

imaginary. Although desire does not hinge on normative expectations of linear romance and heteronormativity in this context, desirability still acts as a form of cultural capital. Those that cannot, or do not want to, participate in desirous activities are left out and excluded. Further, desirability is often articulated in terms of aesthetics and adherence to bodily and style ideals - such as thinness, or whiteness. As I argue in Chapter 8, certain forms of androgyny (thin, masculine, white) are celebrated as desirable at A-Camp, meaning that belonging is extended to some and not others.

Crush culture

'Cruising' and looking for sexual partners was common at Michigan Womyn's Festival and other separatist cultural spaces (Cvetkovich & Wahng 2001, Browne 2011a). The erotic culture I experienced at A-Camp was also characteristic and pervasive but quite different from a search for sexual encounters. The emphasis lay on finding someone to 'crush' on, and then being able to discuss the crush with friends. The 'crush-culture' I observed at A-Camp was certainly not unique to 2016. Every year, at the conclusion of camp, threads pop up on various platforms (Facebook, Twitter, on Autostraddle itself) dedicated to discussing and naming campers' crushes. These threads are an opportunity to gush over one another, to revel in the collective affection of A-Camp or to recount the ways in which specific crushes turned into relationships, friendships or marriages. Indeed, having a crush at camp seems a requisite part of the experience.

After my time at A-Camp, Lucy and Clark - a monogamous couple - told me that they had been arguing about which one of them was more in 'squish' with me. I frantically google the word to discover that a 'squish' is someone that you have intense 'crush' like feelings for, without the romantic or sexual undertones. That is, when you 'squish' on

someone, you have a desire for a close and intimate, but not necessarily sexual relationship with them. The lines between squishing and crushing at A-Camp were often extremely blurry, in the same way that the lines between friendship and romance are often blurry in lesbian and gay communities (Weston 1997). This is because communities are forged from common experiences (some of which are sexual) and shared spaces (virtual or otherwise) rather than the heteronormative expectations of biological family.

The term 'crush' evokes adolescent femininity; an emotionally intense, yet temporary feeling that ultimately evaporates and becomes 'harmless'. The association of the crush with girls and young women is not coincidental - the term (and its predecessors and historical alternatives - smash, mash or rave) was used frequently from the mid-19th Century to the early 20th Century to refer to the intense emotional bonds that formed between women in (largely) American colleges and high schools (Horowitz 1985, Wilk 2004, Sahli 1979, Inness 1994). It was common in these settings, usually removed from the company of men (though not always), for women to buy each other gifts of flowers or chocolates and to write one another poetry.

In her study of crushing culture at Barnard College, Wilk shares an example of a poem written by Linda, for the object of her crushing affection; "My heart, within her hand, it lieth/Why won't you love me Florence Wyeth?" (2004, 21, poem written circa 1913). Similarly, in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman traces the history of social rhetoric around women's relationships from the 16th to 20th Century and notes that it was once practically pedestrian for women to share love letters and poetry, as per Emily Dickinson and Sue Gilbert (1981, 1). We cannot know for sure whether the relationships these women formed were sexual, given that sexuality must be thought of in

historically specific terms. Although the bonds these women shared are not explicitly described as sexual, they are what Inness would call 'homoaffectionate' (1994, 50) and involved significant 'emotional and erotic energies' (Rich 1980, 637) directed toward other women.

Regardless of sexual content, considering the acceptability of women's romantic friendships tells us something about their shifting social standing and access to power. Romantic friendships were socially acceptable because they were considered either inconsequential or simply a point along the line toward developing a 'healthy' heterosexual identity that would result in marriage and childbearing (Faderman 1981). That is, 'romance' between women could only be understood as an early part of heterosexuality, as 'practice' for the real thing. Notably, romantic relationships formed online are thought of in similar terms - as either pale comparisons to 'real' romance, or as 'practice' for the authentic relationships that ultimately take place *offline* (McGlotten 2013, 2). The inconceivability of women's erotic charge or sexual desire allowed these relationships to develop without threat of social retribution. However, the construction of the figure of the homosexual and the rise of the suffrage movement between the 19th and 20th Century, meant that close relationships between women began to 'fall out of vogue' (Faderman 1981). With women's increasing political and social power, the crush was no longer assumed harmless or impotent. Instead, it was considered a dangerous breeding ground for what would become feminist collectivism.

Although the acceptability of women's romantic friendships began to decline in the early 20th Century, it was not because they were suddenly being recognised as inherently sexual beings. Rather, Faderman argues, women's relationships were especially scrutinised if they appeared to be part of 'the attempted usurpation of male

prerogative' (1981, 17). That is, women's deep, abiding friendships were somewhat acceptable as long as they happened alongside, or secondarily to a heterosexual pairing. Women who attempted to circumvent the patriarchy by prioritising other women - emotionally, politically or sexually - were labelled deviant, and eventually, as lesbians. The emergence of the figure of the 'political lesbian' in the 1960s-1980s, was the consequence of increasing feminist rallying that meant women were better able to decentralise men in their own lives and relationships (Rich 1980). Given Autostraddle's commitment to centralising the experiences and relationships of women, it makes sense that the friendships and community bonds formed here model, reflect and extend the 'romantic friendships' and 'political lesbianism' of earlier eras.

During a 2017 episode of the LGBT podcast *Nancy*, host Kathy Tu went to A-Camp for the first time. Early in the episode, Kathy interviews Dina, a veteran A-Camper, and learns all about the romance of the camp fling, the ubiquity of the camp-crush. At first, Kathy laughs at the omnipresence of the camp romance. Soon though, she finds herself caught up in a crush of her own. This crush, this potential romance becomes the central thread of the podcast episode. However, romance never blossoms. The listeners are not left feeling disappointed though - the pleasure of the podcast, of A-Camp itself, is not in the romance as a destination, but in the communal (and queer) meandering along the way. After giggling over a session of love-note writing (campers are each assigned 'pigeon holes' and it's common for people to use these to send love-notes), Kathy asks the audience, "We're adults, acting like teenagers - what are we doing?".

McGlotten argues that queer temporalities are 'attached to lengthy (sometimes lifelong) adolescences [...] that often side-step the promises and linearity of straight time, like the punctums of marriage and kids' (2013, 14) and is certainly true of the crush-culture at

A-Camp. Though Kathy Tu is 31, a grown woman with a career, in this story, she fails to 'mature' toward the desirable 'punctums of marriage and kids'. This failure is not without its pleasures, though. The association of the crush with adolescence works to minimise and dampen women's erotic and intimate desires, particularly if they do not flow in the direction dictated by the hetero-patriarchy. If heterosexuality is about living 'according to points that are continuous' (Ahmed 2006, 74), then the trivialisation of women's desire as immaturity is part of a project of reasserting heterosexuality as a dominant force in women's lives (Rich 1980, 654). Adolescence is therefore understood as a stop along the path to heteronormativity, which comes to stand for maturity, adulthood and importantly, social power. In this instance, queerness is figured as the mud in which women may become stuck along the path. Yet, at A-Camp, it is clear that there is pleasure to be had in this sticking, in this adolescent revelling, in the refusal to orientate toward adulthood. At A-Camp, the crush is not a precursor to an 'adult' romantic relationship, it is an important social ritual of belonging and collectivity (Inness 1994, 50).

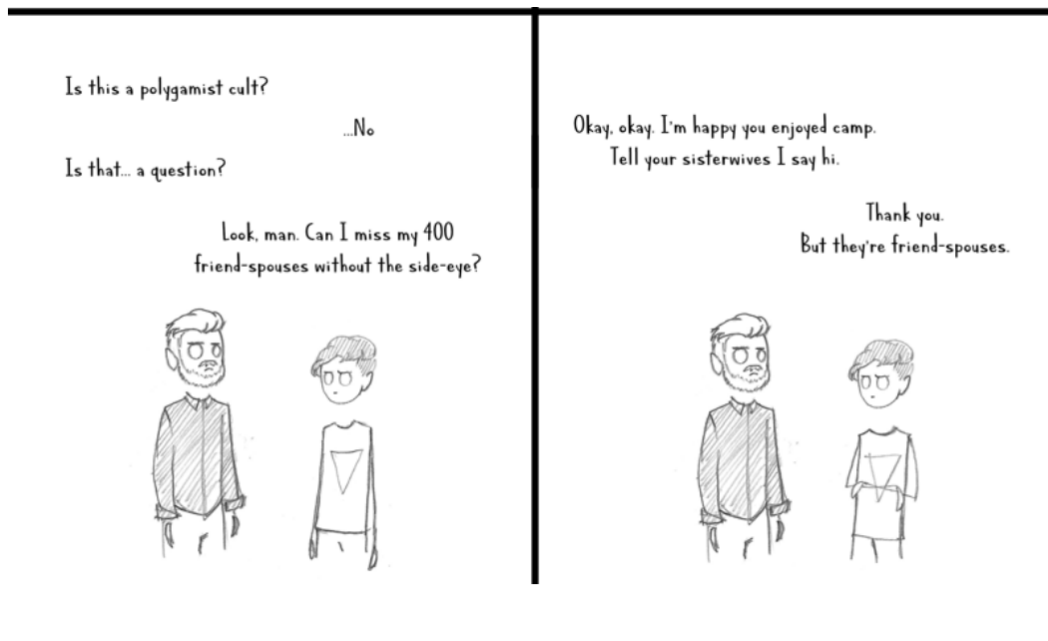


Figure 41: 'Take Me Back' - cartoon by Cameron Glavin (2018)

In a short cartoon titled 'Take Me Back' (figure 41, May 2018) on Autostraddle, Cameron Glavin describes their fellow campers as 'friend-spouses' (see excerpt of comic below) and celebrates their empathy, political leanings and attractiveness. When the other character in the cartoon mistakenly calls them 'sisterwives', Cameron corrects him - sisterwives has very specific gendered, religious and heterosexual historical connotations that are not applicable to these relationships. It is significant that camp friendships are so often described in such terms, in ways that exceed or go beyond, the expectations of female friendship. The use of a term like 'friend-spouses', as well as the culture of the camp crush, has several effects. In emphasising the importance and power of these queer relationships, the prevalence of romantic, monogamous (and heterosexual) relationships as the organising principle of social life is diminished. In this queer 'utopia', compulsory heterosexuality is not given the power with which to

‘wrench women’s emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women’ (Rich 1980, 637-8).

Conclusion

The ways in which queer people relate to one another at A-Camp is historically and politically significant. The framing of those relationships as *more-than friendship*, or as erotic or romantic friendships emerges from historical understandings and depictions of women’s friendships as inherently intimate. Socially, we often discuss friendship between women in ways that trivialise or dismiss those relationships as secondary to romantic (and usually heterosexual) relationships (Kitzinger 1996, 296). For lesbians however, the research shows that the lines between friend and lover are often blurred, sometimes out of necessity, but also because we have access to spaces (like A-Camp) in which heteronormativity is a less powerful organising principle (Rothblum & Weinstock 2014, 298). In the world of A-Camp and perhaps Autostraddle more broadly, desire is reconfigured as communal, rather than individual, as diffuse rather than directional. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that communities and groups are ‘formed through their shared orientation toward an object’, and we might assume that the shared orientation at A-Camp is towards other women, but instead, campers orientate toward the crush itself (2006:73). Here, crushes are about sex and/or friendship, they are about queer relationality and getting caught up or stuck in the *inbetween-ness*; the liminal space that crops up when one refuses to orient in the *right* direction.

I began this chapter interested in thinking about how sex and desire operate as organisers of queer community spaces. What I ended up with was an analysis of queer

friendship, rather than sex. At first I wondered if I had fallen victim to the narrative of the 'sexless lesbian', somehow erasing the materiality and the messiness of queer women's embodied relationships. I also wondered how the liberal and explicit sexual culture at Autostraddle the website could translate to something that seemed as innocuous and adolescent as the A-Camp crush. However, rather than friendship being a marker of the absence of sex, the camp-crush suggests a blurring of the lines between the platonic and the erotic. This particular boundary also functions as the border line between adolescence and adulthood and heteronormativity and queerness. That is, the dichotomous positioning of friendship and sex, and the linear positioning of adolescence as 'along-the-way' to adulthood, reifies heterosexuality as a natural and *more correct* orientation that comes to be indicative of social power.

Queer friendships are infused with desire because they are often built on a shared experience of operating outside or on the fringes of the mandates of heteronormativity. Theorising queer spaces, McGlotten writes, 'sex was a kind of background hum, that every space might become a queer space, if only I paid attention to sometimes faint but almost always present erotic frequencies' (2013, 4). If queer spaces always have the potential for 'erotic frequencies' than perhaps so too do queer friendships. The narratives of queer life at Autostraddle recognise this potential, and here, the technologies of sex produce specific sexual cultures that emphasise the significance of friendship . Such an emphasis positions desire as a socially and politically informed process, rather than an individual quality.

The recognition of desire as social is important because it allows us to more critically interrogate the ways in which particular manifestations of desire act as technologies of belonging and result in social exclusion and violence. The axes of desire within the

matrix of belonging certainly shift in the context of the Autostraddle imaginary of community, but they do not dissipate altogether. Belonging still hinges on the ability to navigate the cultural vectors of desirability. One must know, for example, which kinds of bodies are the most desirable in the given context and be able to adapt their own body accordingly. Though the regulating gaze of the postfeminist 'girlfriend' is eased through the queer reconfigurations of friendship at Autostraddle, a new regulatory 'desirous' gaze is enacted.

The social imperative of heterosexuality produces queerness as 'incomplete' and innocuous, which inhibits our abilities to affect meaningful and sustained social change in relation to the organisation of sex and gender (Rich 1980:657). However, Autostraddle's approach to intimacy and desire as a complicated process of social relations and a communal experience allows us some scope to resist the heteronormative discourses of friendship and sex. Instead, we are better able to revel in our collective liminality and orientation toward non-(re)productive pleasure. Our erotic perversions might push us to the fringes of social acceptability, but there we find some room to rethink how we might relate to one another.

Chapter Eight

Flung Out Of Space: Space, bodies and queer relationality

“High atop Mount Feelings,
Perched among the clouds,
There’s a place for you and me
In fact, we’re in that place right now.

We’ve come from towns and cities,
Far away and near,
To hike, and dance, and make some crafts
But most of all, be queer. “

A-Camp theme song, 2016, Jenny Owen Youngs

A-Camp is promoted as the ‘real-life’ version of Autostraddle, a place where one can be authentically queer in a *queernormative* space. The event is described by organisers and participants in deeply affective terms, as safe, welcoming, or life-changing and this attribution of affect extends to the space itself, with the campsite dubbed ‘Mount Feelings’. The social space of Autostraddle, the website, is idealised at A-Camp in ways that cement an imaginary of a collective queer utopia in the everyday, offline world. That is, the idea of a queernormative space is conceptually pleasant and amicable - a group of people gathered under assumptions of common experiences of gender and sexuality.

The imaginary of utopianism that permeates A-Camp has historical roots in the kinds of intentional separatist communities I discuss in Chapter Two. In this context, the

nostalgia of American summer camps converges with histories of feminist utopia building, centred on connecting with nature away from urban manifestations of male power. At A-Camp, the presence of cis men on staff is oddly noticable, for example. If utopianism 'disrupts dominant assumptions about social and spatial organisation', the rural setting provides space in which to reorient toward a feminist ethics of care, equity and co-operation (Pinder 2002, 238). A-Camp offers just a temporary separatism though, and might more closely align with what Cooper calls an 'everyday utopia': 'a hotspot of innovative practice' that becomes enmeshed with everyday life and routine (2014, 9). For many repeat A-Camp attendees, this is what A-Camp offers - a temporary respite/pleasurable utopia that becomes built into their daily lives. For Browne, in an everyday context 'utopias can be traced through moments of hope', that reveal movement toward an idyll, rather than the destination itself (2011b, 14).

The lacuna between the idealised and utopian social space and the materiality of the physical space is revealed by an examination of the different ways the campsite and the A-Camp experience are described and depicted by those who move through the space. The utopian idealism of the online community at Autostraddle relies on a sense of commonality that is disrupted by the diverse and disparate experiences of material bodies in the physical and commercial world. The queernormative rhetoric of A-Camp produces queer bodies as potentially unremarkable, or, as that which can go unmarked. Belonging in this instance hinges on commonality as expressed through normative bodies, which remains a significant problem for those who cannot go unmarked, even in this imaginary utopia. Indeed, the inevitable failure of the promise to belong is felt all the more sharply against the expectation that social structures and hierarchies of power will dissipate in this space.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which space and place figure for queer belonging and relationality. I begin with a thick description of A-Camp in order to illuminate the pleasurable attachments that campers have to the site as a deeply significant and fantastical social space in which they can ‘discover unicorns, slay dragons, swing dance and find all the horcruxes’ (Autostraddle 2016). I then turn to the ways in which the materiality of A-Camp is represented through stories and maps to highlight the tensions between physical and social spaces and to argue that belonging and accessibility are intricately linked but not equivalent experiences. Drawing on literature from the queer intersections of disability (Garland-Thompson 2004, Meleo-Erwin 2016, Kafer 2013) and fat studies (Huff 2009, Wykes 2016, LeBosco 2001), I consider how queer utopian ideals reify the normative body, even in spaces such as A-Camp that claim to subvert hierarchies of power and value.

The imperative for commonality means that those that don’t ‘fit’ become the loss of the good atmosphere (Ahmed 2010). The chapter explores these spatial tensions through a piece of narrative fiction that follows a composite character through her preparations for and experiences of A-Camp as a queer/fat woman who is both invested in the radically connective potential of the site and deeply disappointed by the ways in which the campsite remains inaccessible for non-normative bodies. To conclude, I argue that the ‘taste community’ (Bourdieu 1986) of Autostraddle produces a distinct ‘lesbian habitus’ (Rooke 2007) that reinscribes rather than removes the necessity for the ‘cultural resources’ (Skeggs 2004b) of white, able-bodied, middle-class normalcy.

Mount Feelings

A-Camp is described and promoted as a 'safe space'. Skeggs, however, argues that the 'production of "safe gay spaces" is an impossibility, although a temporary respite' (1999, 228). Her claim is that imagined queer utopias do little to challenge the power structures and material realities that create the need for safety in the first place. That is, physical *access* to space does not automatically translate to comfort or entry into *social* space. Indeed, queer people learn that 'most space is heterosexual'; heteronormativity provides the capital needed to access and utilise social and leisure spaces (Skeggs 1999, 214). The gender/sexuality matrix regulates the ways in which space might be experienced and, as Skeggs notes, politics of representation and visibility are key to how we internalise and normalise the governance of space.

Registering for A-Camp is not a trivial affair. The dates for the camp are announced a few months before registration opens, but the exact date that one can sign up is not revealed until a few days in advance. Every year, all 300 spots fill up within a few hours of registration opening, and a long waitlist begins. Autostraddle does not actively promote the registration date, but a flurry of group chats, text messages, Instagram posts and usually only a single article on the website alert potential campers that the time has come to leave a deposit and fill in their details. The deposit, \$75(US), is relatively small but non-refundable. When the time comes to pay the rest of the fee for camp (which fluctuates year to year, but was \$715USD in 2016), the camper must also answer a detailed questionnaire about their likes, interests, hobbies, identity, how often they've been to A-Camp before, whether they enjoy sleeping in or partying and so on. The information from this questionnaire is used to assign campers to cabins. My cabin was made up of 16 queer women aged 21-30 who each loved cats, except for one

woman who had a fish, and another who was a late addition and loved dogs. Around half of the campers who attend are new-comers and most people who attend do so alone, or with other camp veterans, rather than as couples or as large groups of friends.

On our first night at camp, we sat in a circle on the floor of our cabin with our two ‘counsellors’ and we each introduced ourselves, shared our pronouns (at the time, everyone in the cabin used she/her pronouns) and talked at length about our cats. I was the only person in the cabin not from North America. About four of the cabin members had been to A-Camp before, with one having been four times. Everyone else was new and visibly nervous but very kind, sharing snacks, food, drinks, phone chargers and makeup. We walked together to dinner in the dining hall. A-Camp is held at a Jewish summer camp, so the food is kosher, and we ate steamed vegetables and some stew. The noise in the room was thick, people were yelling, reuniting, laughing. Later, in our interview, Ess told me that being in the cafeteria on that first night was ‘unbearable’ and made her feel she’d made a mistake in coming and that she should go home. She wrote;

“The exhaustion from travelling all day and after a long bus ride, being plopped down in the middle of a packed cafeteria filled with hundreds of people, most of whom (it seemed) had done this before and they were all SHOUTING, banging their fists on the table (in solidarity, but for me, I wanted to run as fast and far as I could).”

For Ess, the crowd in the dining hall appeared as one body, collectively shouting and banging and somehow displaying their cultural competency in the space. She felt sharply and viscerally as ‘matter out of place’ (Skeggs 1999), unable to orient her exhausted body toward the ‘right’ movements and gestures in order to achieve a sense of belonging.

After dinner, we were ushered into 'Eagle Lodge', the other end of the dining hall, where a small stage had been set up. We sat in rows of plastic chairs as the official schedule began. First, a burlesque performance¹¹. Then, Autostraddle's founder Riese welcomed us all to A-Camp and played a 'safety' video made by the directors of A-Camp, Kristin and Marni. The video humorously reminded us to hydrate, to practise precaution in terms of bear safety and to respect nature and camp rules such as smoking areas and quiet times in cabins. Significantly, Riese implored us not to discuss politics while at A-Camp despite (perhaps because of) the upcoming US presidential election. We were also divided into colour teams for the 'rainbow wars', a team building exercise which took place throughout camp. After the introduction and welcome, the entire camp trekked, cabin by cabin, down to 'Fire Circle 1', where we gathered around a campfire to watch guest musician Jenny Owen Youngs sing A-Camp's new call and response theme song. When she called out, 'Where you gonna meet your new best friends?' and 'Where you gonna smash the patriarchy?', we hollered back, 'At A-Camp, at A-Camp!'

On the final morning of camp, I sat in the sunshine drinking tea with my cabin-mate Samantha and wondered out loud whether this might be what straight people feel like all the time. We had spent the last few days drifting lazily between workshops on book binding and tarot cards, talking about our biological and chosen families, swimming in the pool - sometimes topless, talking about crushes and crying. On the last night, we danced along as a queer band played covers of all the songs we grew up listening to straight people sing. On this final morning, Samantha told me it felt as though we've

¹¹ Michigan Womyn's Festival was also punctuated with low-budget burlesque shows performed on make-shift stages, as a way of publicising sex and sexuality (Browne 2011b).

had a week off from being prey and that she was angry that straight men were allowed to feel this way all the time and yet do nothing worthwhile with the feeling.

For some, A-Camp is the only place they can be out, or comfortable without fear of homophobic violence. Ess described herself pre-camp as *'carrying an incredible weight and never realising it'*, and told me it was as though she was never comfortable in any room she walked into. After camp, she wrote; *'Things feel easier. Life feels easier. I have a greater self-worth now'*.

Nobody is at A-Camp by accident, or on a whim, even though not everybody is fervently involved with Autostraddle. Unlike events such as Michigan Womyn's Fest, it is very difficult to attend A-Camp for less than the full five days, and impossible without private transport. This, coupled with the cost and preparation required for attendance, means that most, if not all, attendees are deeply invested in the space and the queer potentialities it affords. For this reason, the circulating affect at A-Camp is significantly different from other social spaces, such as lesbian club nights, or party spaces such as the Dinah Shore weekend. Though this is a space for meeting people and potential sexual encounters, it is also positioned as somewhere to find community and 'get away' from 'the burning hellfire of the rest of the world' (Autostraddle 2017). Ess tells me that though she was nervous signing up (because Autostraddle had been her ex-girlfriend's 'thing'), the 'hype' around A-Camp made it seem as though a sense of community and belonging were guaranteed.

A-Camp is modelled on American children's experiences of summer camp and as such is designed to invoke nostalgia as much as queer celebration. Summer camp is wrapped up in discourses of nature and associations with wholesomeness that are complex for people who grew up queer and/or now feel a significant disconnect from the

heteronormative structuring of childhood (Smith 2006, 71). Historically, summer camps were designed to help children ‘overcome’ the physical and moral pollutants of urban life and to be sites of Americanisation, in which a cohesive national identity could be emphasised and strengthened (Ferris 2012, 58). Homosexuality is certainly framed as a corrupting force in the urban landscape and in this way, summer camp has strong discursive ties to the ‘normative expectations’ of heterosexuality (Smith 2006, 72). As with the Lesbian Ken in *Queer IRL*, A-Camp affords a queer re-reading of or return to childhood norms and produces heterosexism as the central pollution of the ‘outside world’, rather than same-sex attraction. The nostalgic pleasure of A-Camp reveals the tensions between a personal and a national memory of summer camp as a happy and nationalist site. These nostalgic pleasures also produce queer affect as collective rather than personal or individuated (Boym 2008).

For many campers, attachments to A-Camp are deep and significant forces in their everyday lives. More than half of my cabin continues to attend A-Camp each year and we each send each other letters, cards and gifts semi-regularly. We remain connected through social media (Facebook and Instagram) and group chats that are particularly active in the months surrounding A-Camp. Despite these deep attachments, many campers remain ambivalent about the extent to which A-Camp (and Autostraddle more broadly) can be considered utopian as long as it operates within the limits and restrictions of capitalism. For example, Em told me her most consistent advice for newcomers was; *‘It’s a family reunion, not queer utopia. You gotta be prepared for there to be only one cool cousin to hang out with eating chips and dip.’*

Em’s family at A-Camp unfortunately didn’t include her girlfriend. As a trans woman, Em told me that she didn’t feel comfortable coming to a space that labelled itself *lesbian*,

and which was modelled on the sometimes-exclusionary sensibility of ‘womyn’s’ festivals, despite the fact that she identified as a woman and a lesbian. Camp leaders and counsellors made an effort to combat any anti-trans sentiments they encountered during the event. For example, in one session I attended (*Babes on Babes*), a woman made a throw-away comment about ‘not wanting dicks anywhere near her’, and another woman expressed her disappointment in the comment. The leader of the session facilitated a discussion about why the comment was transphobic and asked the commenter to sit with her own discomfort at having upset a fellow camper. Despite best attempts by counsellors and the bravery of the few trans women that did regularly attend A-Camp, a focus on ‘feelings’, an ambiguous attachment to ‘belonging’ at camp, and a desire to draw a distinct line between the ‘real’ world and the world of Autostraddle meant that the material *stuff* of bodies and how their arrangement organises social relations was sidelined and concealed.

The celebration of queer women’s aesthetics was often equated with a celebration of masculinity. For example, the drop-in barber at A-Camp (you could sign up for lunch time spots for haircuts), specialised in ‘queer cuts’, which were usually understood as more masculine haircuts. Trans women, however, could be viewed as *suspect*, as outsiders, if they strayed too far into a masculine aesthetic. While some found A-Camp to be a liberating space in which to explore masculinity for the first time (as was Ess’s experience), or a space in which their regular masculine aesthetic was accepted as routine, trans women often complained online that they felt they needed to pass before they could belong. Though trans *men* were routinely included (and celebrated) at A-Camp in high numbers, trans women took to Facebook groups to express their *unbelongingness*. Trans misogyny at A-Camp was a product of broader cultural norms

around AMAB bodies, but also a product of queer aesthetic norms that were expected to be written onto and immediately recognisable on bodies themselves. Again, the focus on ‘feelings’ at A-Camp, meant that assumptions about and experiences of bodies themselves were routinely ignored.

Representations of space



Figure 42: Official map of the A-Camp site (2016)

The site, affectionately dubbed ‘Mount Feelings’, was in the mountains of Angelus Oaks, to the west of Los Angeles. Figure 42 is the official map of the A-Camp site from 2016 (note that the event has since moved location). I refer to this map primarily as the ‘social space map’, as it depicts desired relationships and an imaginary of community as much as it does physical space. The map also resembles an illustration from a children’s

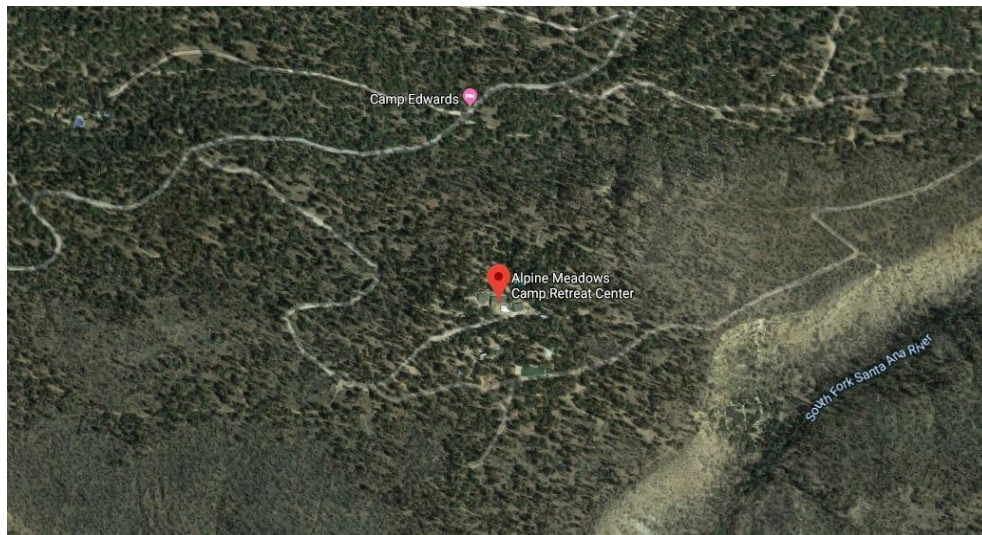
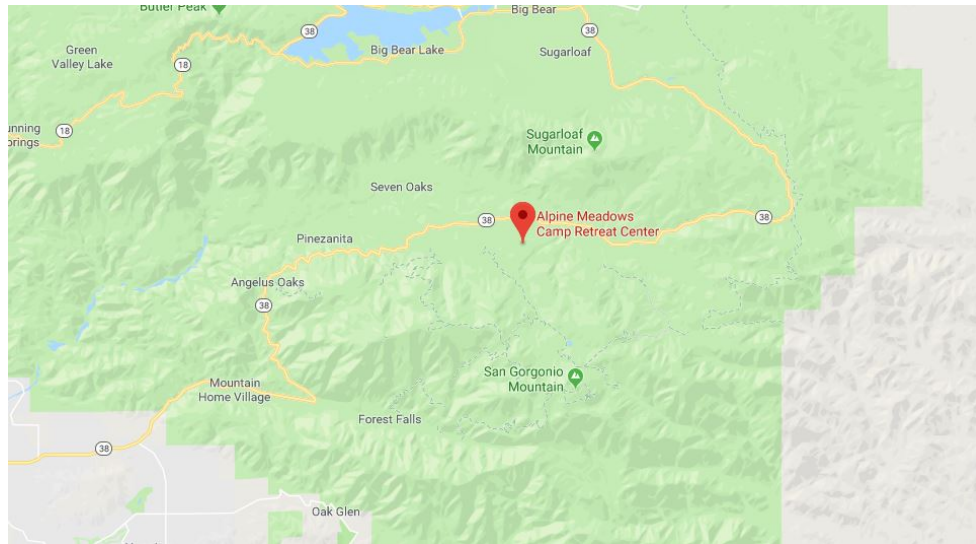
book and evokes nostalgia for the promised pleasures of American summer camps. The campground is depicted here as a hand drawn illustration featuring trees and tiny hikers in amongst the cabins themselves. The paths are shown as clear, white spaces between the cabins. The designated 'social spaces' are highlighted as fire circles, the pool and as lodges (larger cabins where most of the workshops and activities took place) (Skeggs 1999). The accommodation cabins (or 'bunks'), are listed here with numbers which then correspond with a separate list with names of the different cabins.

Occupying space is always political, and more specifically also relational, dependent on the materiality of the human and non-human actors that make up and constitute the space. As Werlan argues, 'space does not exist as a material object, or as a consistent theoretical object' (1998, 2). Instead, space is a tangle of relationships and orientations, between and to each other and to the material world. *Representations* of space, too, are political, telling stories about social relationships and power. Maps, according to Harley (2009) are a kind of language or literature that can be made to 'speak' about a place, people and history of social relations. Maps such as the one above of the A-Camp site, rather than depicting a fixed 'truth' about space, are the result of social agreements about how we should understand, measure and participate in space (Ahmed 2006, 13).

These agreements are, of course, informed and shaped by power. As Harley argues, 'maps are a way of conceiving, articulating and structuring the human world which is biased towards, promoted by, and exerts influence upon particular sets of social relations' (2009, 129). That is not to say that the map of the social space (figure 42) represents an explicit or intentional obfuscation of reality in furtherance of domination. It is not, for example, a show of power, designed to intimidate or reify neocolonial borders. However, 'community maps' such as this one, that aim to highlight radical

connection or social change, are still marked by significant, material and restrictive boundaries (Parker 2006, 476).

In this instance, the map obscures the relationality that constitutes the space and instead offers a flat surface that conceals the constructions of bodily norms and values inherent in its design. The paths appear level and unobstructed, rather than unpaved, rocky and mountainous. In contrast, Google Maps shows a mountainous landscape, dense with trees and fairly impenetrable (figures 43 & 44). Both maps from Google connect the site to the 'outside world', by showing the ways in which travel to and from the site is possible. Pointing out these differences is not an attempt to locate falsity in the first map, or to suggest these representations are more 'accurate' or 'real' than the A-Camp map. But the first map does highlight the boundaries of the *social* space in ways that Google Maps clearly cannot. Here, the A-Camp map tells the viewer something about the kinds of bodies that are expected to be moving through the space - those that can walk easily and without too much consideration or pre-planning.



Figures 43 & 44: Google Maps captures of the A-Camp site

In the official ‘social space map’ (figure 42), some cabins (but not paths) are depicted with wheelchair symbols, though it is not clear what the symbol means in this context, or indeed, in any context (Ben-Moshe & Powell 2007). That the internationally recognised (yet contested) symbol for ‘accessibility’ appears on two cabins and one lodge, all located within one section of the map, suggests a tighter border around the

‘social space’ designated for those with access ‘trouble’. Extrapolating from Skegg’s argument that ‘social space is the metaphorical means by which the different forms of capital to which one has access come to have value and legitimacy’, it becomes clear that some people, by virtue of bodily capacity, possess less ‘capital’ and are therefore relegated to private and non-social spaces (1999:214, see also Bourdieu 1986).

The use of the wheelchair symbol and the contrast to the depictions of the paths as ‘open’ and ‘blank’, rather than inscribed with social norms that value specific bodily configurations, constitutes access as a binary phenomenon. One can either access the space, or not, depending on the ‘state’ of their own body. Access is then experienced as a personal ‘body problem’, rather than a central part of the process by which ‘social spaces’ define and shape the kinds of embodied capital that are legitimised and valued. In much the same way that health has become a moral obligation, regulating the body so that it might access space in the ‘right’ ways has also become an obligation (Campbell 2012). In such a framing, the relationship to norms that shapes space and facilitates specific kinds of movement through space is obscured, as is the continual ‘becoming’ of bodies in relation to one another (Coleman 2009).

The ‘social space’ map, (figure 42), is coloured with green and shows mountains in the background as well as trees dotted about the site. This constitutes the space as ‘natural’, solidifying links to historical views of summer-camp as natural remedies to the ills of urbanity, as though nature might ‘cure’ the problems that certain bodies face as they move through the architecturally built landscape. This constitution of natural-ness in turn marks the bodies that are able to move through the space as also ‘natural’. The ‘natural’ body stands as the ideal against which all bodies are measured, even though the definition of ‘natural’ remains vague and undefined. The alignment of valuable

bodies with nature is not simply an expression of the positive value of the “natural” world, which in itself is a fallacy. Instead, colonial patriarchal discourses produce both bodies *and* nature as in need of regulation, mastering and possession and offer citizenship primarily to those that can demonstrate this mastery (Manderson 2005). This is especially true of marginalised bodies, which is evident in Iris Marion Young’s claim that women’s bodies are regarded as ‘natural territory, belonging to others’ (2005, 80). If belonging is understood as possessive, then the bodies that do not ‘belong’ in the space can be experienced as unruly or abject and in need of ‘management’ (Grabham 2009).

In this instance, the inclusive ideals of Autostraddle are interrupted by the painful sticking points of the material world. This does not mean that we can assume that given the right campsite, Autostraddle’s ideals and visions of an inclusive queer utopia would be able to flourish. The physical world is not merely an empty landscape upon which queer ideals might be mapped. Embodying gender and sexuality differently from the norm often necessitates a different relation or orientation to the material world because queer bodies are designated as abnormal not just because of sexual desires or practices, but also because of (lack of) proximity to bodily norms.

Also missing from the A-Camp ‘social space’ map (figure 42) is a sense of relationship to the ‘outside world’. Queer subjectivities do not exist in isolation from the mandates of a broader heteronormative world and of course campers did not arrive at Mount Feelings as bounded, pre-embodied queer citizens. Although Autostraddle promotes A-Camp as a space separate from the ‘outside world’ and its associated homophobic dangers, the campsite can never be fully divorced from the journeys and encounters that make attendance possible for some and impossible for others. Attendees and the place in which they meet are mutually constitutive, a process which involves ongoing

entanglements with the world. This map then perhaps represents a failure of maps in general to tell stories of interconnectedness, rather than of boundaries and borders.

In order to attend A-Camp and carry out my fieldwork, I had to traverse a number of digital and physical landscapes. I sat at my desk in an office in Canberra - in a building that is largely inaccessible to some due to a single often-broken lift - to write ethics and funding applications and to write and reply to emails to A-Camp organisers. I woke up in the middle of the night in the apartment I share with my partner (ground floor, no steps) to compensate for the time difference to North America and secure my registration at A-Camp. I applied for a visa waiver, acutely aware that others in my position would be unable to travel to the US for research because of visa restrictions.

I looked at Autostraddle, visa websites and ethics applications on phones, tablets and various computers. I took screenshots, transcribed text and printed out drafts of my interview questions. Then, one morning, I left the house very early to dodge kangaroos on the road to the airport and flew to Sydney. From Sydney, I flew to Los Angeles, made my way through customs and toward the meeting point for Campers. When everyone else arrived, we boarded a bus and drove three hours to the campsite, stopping briefly to buy alcohol and snacks from a supermarket along the way. Once at the site, an Autostraddle staff member showed me to my cabin.

The possible research avenues were shaped and limited by my ability to traverse this path with relative ease. I can climb stairs, sit at a desk for long periods of time, read a screen without issue (migraines permitting) and travel by plane, by bus and by foot with minimal consequence and with some financial freedom. I am also aided by an ability to navigate the world of academic process, treading along well-worn academic 'desire lines' - 'pathways formed when many people walk the same way over and over

again' - to secure funding and support for my research (Luckert 2012:318, see also Furman 2012) . A week after I finished my fieldwork, a mass shooting occurred at *Pulse*, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. A few months later, Donald Trump was elected as president of the United States. These too changed the shape of the research and the ways in which space could be queerly constituted and occupied.

Below, in contrast to the official A-Camp map, is a collage of the spaces I moved through and across in order to conduct my fieldwork and attend A-Camp (figure 45). As I travelled, I collected screenshots of the places I was navigating in order to situate each part of my fieldwork within a broader context, rather than isolating sites or experiences. I have arranged this collection such that a path can be traced in a loop through the fog of streets and landscapes. The path is happenstance, rather than a linear representation of my journey, but I use the collage here to demonstrate the relationality of ephemera and 'bring diversity into unity' (Seiden 2001, 103).

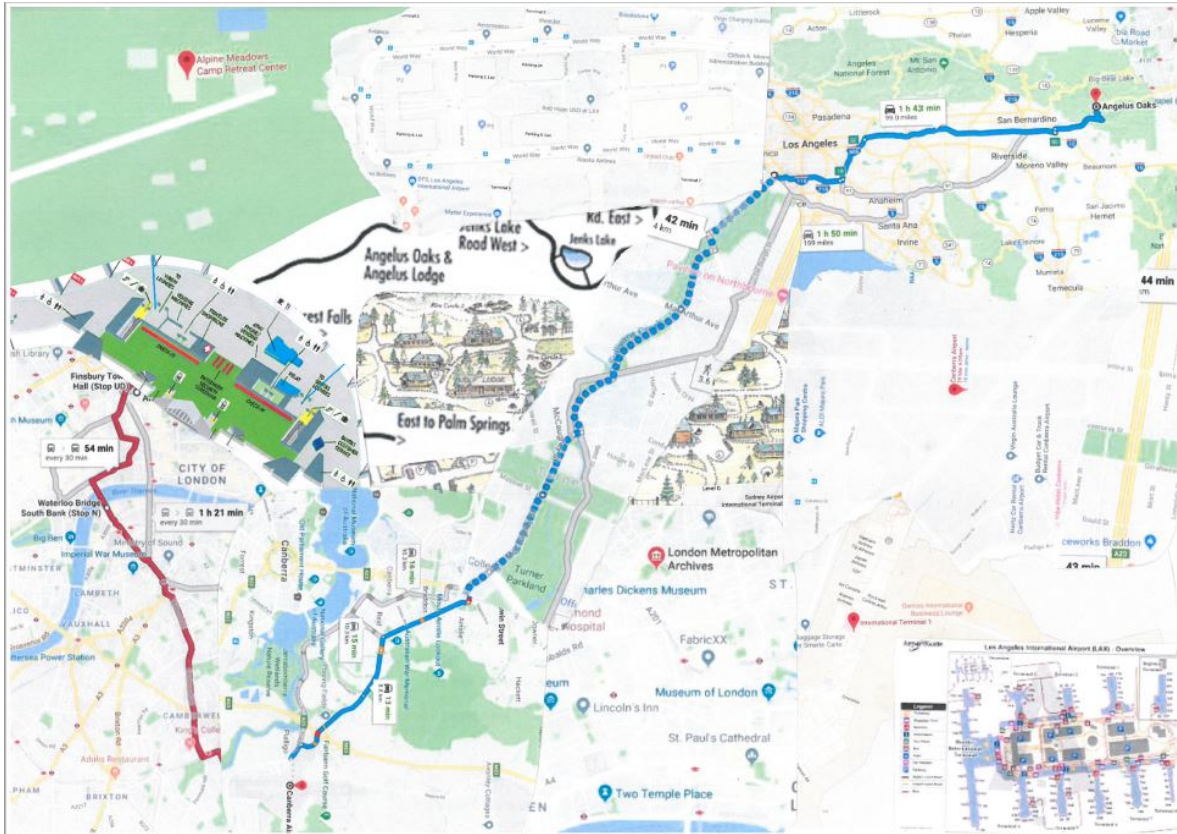


figure 45: A collage of my fieldwork sites

Collage making ‘allows for inconsistencies, ambiguities, ruptures and discontinuities’ (Chilton & Scotti 2014, 163). By reconfiguring the journey in this way, I want to make the viewer conscious of their sense-making with the map, in order to denaturalise an understanding of physical space as politically neutral (Aronson 1991). This map does not aim to be ‘user-friendly, rather it is impenetrable and hard to decipher. Different parts of the map will be recognisable or accessible to different viewers. Rather than casting access as an individual ‘problem’, the collage map (or scrap-map, as it is saved on my computer) highlights the ways in which ‘the geography of the city functions as a mechanism for distributed power’ (Loustou & Davis 2012, 123). That is, this map

doesn't make 'sense' because it is not configured in line with dominant expectations of how bodies should experience space. This map doesn't adhere to the aforementioned 'social agreement' about how we should move through the world.

As dense and confusing as the collage map (figure 45) is, I argue that the social space map (figure 42) might be equally as jarring and unhelpful for some, lacking in necessary details for movement and engagement. Some participants might look at the first map and not know how they will make it to meals each day. Others still will be entirely deterred from attending A-Camp. One might not know how to 'move through' the map in figure 45, but it is clear that this is due to the map's design, rather than a 'flaw' in the body's design.

Although I didn't explicitly ask El to map their journey for me, the photographs they chose to share with me about their experiences of A-Camp were organised temporally *and* geographically such that one could almost trace their path. Our conversation also followed this trajectory - travelling to the site and then away again, dwelling on the before/after more than the event itself. El asked that I not reproduce their photographs here, but there were eight photos in total: 3 of the natural landscape at the campsite, one selfie (also at camp), one image of the A-Camp notice board, one flyer for Klub Deer (A-Camp's makeshift nightclub), one picture of El's shoes standing on a colourful, 1980s inspired carpet, and one picture of a candle-lit vigil to end gun violence. While almost all of these images were from the campsite, the two images from before and after (the 1980s carpet and the candle-lit vigil) dominated our interview.

El described the first photo as 'the obligatory Carpet of the Portland Airport shot' and tells me;

"I flew to California from Portland, where I had been dog sitting for friends for the previous three months, which felt significant because I knew I would not be returning (to my eternal sadness, Portland is very expensive and has few jobs). So those are my shoes on the morning I left for camp, having slept for a grand total of maybe three hours, both excited to camp for the first time and very sad to be leaving Portland/missing my dog ward."

El also told me that one can search the location tag for Portland Airport on Instagram and find dozens of other similar shots of shoes on the carpet. El is constituted as part of several 'wholes' with this photograph. They are at once part of the community of camp-goers, the group of social media enthusiasts who religiously post photos of the Portland Airport carpet *and* the specific intersection of young people experiencing unemployment and LGBTIQ people experiencing high rates of workplace discrimination (Pizer et al 2012). The space of the airport is experienced in relation to class stability - El clearly has the mobility to attend camp, but is also sad about returning to their family home afterwards, where limits on expressions of sexuality and gender might be enforced.

Immediately after this photo, El shared an image of a vigil for the victims of the Orlando shootings. Although the vigil was held in Washington DC about a week after A-Camp ended, El told me it still felt significant and connected to their experience of camp. Indeed the Autostraddle Facebook pages are always particularly active directly after A-Camp finishes and the Orlando shootings dominated much of this conversation in 2016. El described the political groups and individuals that spoke and explained that the event had more of an anti gun-violence focus than an anti-homophobia focus. While it was a sombre and depressing event, El said;

'In going, my DC Facebook friend group ended up eating giant salads at Sweet Green and it had a sort of bittersweet camaraderie type of ending. We're Gonna Be Ok kinda thing. Also my sister who has anxiety and OCD texted me when I was on the metro on the way there: "I don't want you to go I'm afraid you'll die in a shooting" (anti LGBTQ things had been spray painted in Dupont - historically the gayborhood of DC - that week), which was Not Fun.'

This 'telling' of space is open-ended. As readers, we can easily see that El's experience of camp was not limited to the physical site in California. Instead, we watch El's journey from an interderminable past, tinged with financial and emotional affordances and toward a future in which El's occupation of space continues to be tied up with their experiences of queer relationality at Camp. *This* depiction of space is marked by relationships - the Portland airport is significant because of the relationship El has with their family and with the structure of the city that renders it no longer accessible?. The image is also significant because El is marking themselves as one of the many people who have 'location tagged' similar shoe selfies in the Portland Airport. El is occupying multiple spaces and multiple subjectivities at once here, as a leaver, a mourner, a reveller and as part of several larger groups.

In this instance, access is not a binary phenomenon. For example, El's attendance at the vigil is shaped by recent events and relationships that both limit and encourage their participation and subsequent negotiation of belonging in the space (Skeggs 1999). That is, El's attendance at a public event is potentially curbed by the very homophobic violence that necessitated the vigil in the first place, but also by the recent 'intrusion' of homophobic graffiti in the 'gayborhood' and by their sister's anxiety and concern. Conversely, they are enabled to participate through their association with the queer

Facebook group and perhaps emboldened by their recent trip to A-Camp. El is constituted as queer in their occupation of the vigil space in multiple, ambivalent ways that are not easily untangled. If belonging is a negotiation as Skeggs (1999) insists that it is, it is important to remember that negotiation is informed by power. El's safety at the event is at least partially ensured by their whiteness but threatened by their queerness. The safety that they do have access to enables a specific kind of belonging that allows them to feel like 'we gonna b ok', even whilst recognising the homophobic threat that necessitated the event.

El's narrative 'map' clearly demonstrates the ways in which space is a negotiation of relationships and capital, rather than a fixed or natural 'reality'. The airport and the vigil, or even the camp itself, are meaningless without considering the contexts in which they are made meaningful. Such contexts are always embedded in capitalism and the consequent need to control and regulate bodies. Each space is constituted relationally, but those relationships are also constituted and shaped by the material forces of bodies in the world.

Access to space, therefore, is not simply a matter of consideration of the diversity of bodies that might move through an otherwise open space. Instead, as Huff notes, space is a commodity, 'a purchasable resource' and, 'the body marked as unable or unwilling to adapt bears the responsibility for societal failures and is thus stigmatised' (2009,180-1). That is, the regulation of bodies against an idealised norm is part of what is on offer in the commodification of space. The experience of not-belonging or inaccessibility is therefore articulated as a problem of will (Ahmed 2014) such that the 'problem' of access becomes a problem of stubborn bodies and wilful failures.

Queernormativity, accessibility and the fat body

“Just excluding cis-men doesn’t make it (the space) safe or more enlightened”

- Interview with Em

It is easy to take queernormativity as the positive outcome of a successful utopian project, in which queerness is taken for granted, depathologised and left unmarked. However, the etymology of the word normativity is rooted in eugenic agendas of the 19th century that attempted to standardise the human body and its experiential capacity (Davis 2013, 3). The movement mobilised normativity as a way to root social or moral transgressions in individual bodies, rather than addressing uneven social structures. Though Autostraddle and A-Camp are certainly not eugenics projects, the idealism of A-Camp’s social space is constituted through discourses of queer commonality that pitch particular material experiences of the world (white, middle-class, able-bodied) as common, dominant and valuable. This part of the chapter approaches accessibility through the lens of the fat body, as both cultural signifier and material experience, to critique the deployment of morality for the regulation and standardisation of bodies in aid of capitalism. Drawing on feminist and queer intersections of disability and fat studies, the chapter examines how queer accessibility is constituted and experienced socially *and* physically.

My aim here, following from Sedgwick (1990), is to take a universalising, rather than a minoritising approach to accessibility and the regulation of bodies in social space. While a minoritising approach would focus on the ‘problems’ of disability *for disabled people* (Huff 2009, 177), a universalising approach recognises the ways in which the production and denigration of categories such as ‘fat’ and ‘disabled’, constitute all bodies within a

hierarchical regulating structure that operates to 'legitimate an unequal distribution of resources, status and power' (Garland-Thompson 2004, 77).

The concept of 'norms' arose as part of Western industrialisation with its accompanying aims of efficiency and uniformity (Barnes 2012). Normativity (even *queernormativity*) is not simply about emphasising pleasurable commonalities, but also always about the value and order of bodies within capitalist structures. Such structures have produced bodily 'norms' as moral imperatives through the strong historical alignment of social deviation with physical disability (Davis 2013). Karl Pearson for example, active in the 19th century eugenics movement, describes undesirable citizens thus; 'the habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculous, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic, the diseased from birth or from excess' (quoted in Davis 2013, 6). Other similar descriptions of undesirable characteristics as manifest in physical embodiment certainly include lesbians and queer people broadly (Gibson 1997, for example). Here, bodies who deviate from standard expectations, or from the norm, are aligned with behaviour that transgresses *social* norms.

Non-normative bodies carry disreputable moral weight and are tarred with wilful deviance, relieving social structures of ethical caring responsibilities and providing reason for active exclusion. Non normative bodies have queer potential and fat women's bodies in particular abound with queer potential (see LeBosco 2001, 2004, 2009), through their positions 'at the centre of moral panics in which they are conceived of as perverse, excessive, unnatural and a threat to the social order' (Wykes 2016, 3).

Fatness and disability are not simply interchangeable terms, nor is the framing of fatness as an accessibility issue without contest, though there are significant ways in which the fields of study overlap. They are both, for example, rooted in the sociology of

health and involve (hopefully) extensive feminist critique of medical discourse that seeks to standardise bodies. Fat studies scholars now draw extensively on social models of disability that insist on distinctions between disability and impairment. In this model, impairments are physical or mental limitations and disabilities are the social meanings and subsequent barriers attached to those impairments (Gleeson 1997). For some scholars, fatness could be understood as a physical impairment that leads to specific social disadvantages. Looking at fatness and disability through the same lens is not without tension though, precisely because fat studies scholars can diverge so vastly on the politics of health and whether fatness constitutes a social rather than physical impairment. Importantly, fatness does not have the same history of institutionalisation as disability (Meleo-Erwin 2016, 101).

There are significant critiques of the social model that stem from both fat and disability scholars (Cooper 1997, Meleo-Erwin 2016). Kafer (2013), for example, argues for a political or a relational approach to disability (rather than a social approach) which aims to destabilise the distinction between impairment and disability. She notes that ‘what we understand as impairing conditions - socially, physically, mentally or otherwise - shifts across time and place, and presenting impairment as purely physical obscures the effects of such shifts’ (2013, 7). While the social model is certainly helpful in its emphasis of the world as social and therefore architecturally exclusionary, it is important to remember that the body itself is always already social as well. Meleo-Erwin extends Kafer’s critique of the social model by arguing that as an approach to social equality, it doesn’t do enough to ‘expose and resist the illusory nature of normative ideals of autonomy, control, self-determination and proper citizenship’ (2016, 109). That is, focusing on the removal of ‘disabling’ barriers fails to recognise the ways

in which *all* bodies are constituted relationally and are reliant on one another for survival.

Rather than being brought together by the social model then, or by an inherent similarity in politics, fat and disability scholars can make strong alliances along *queer* lines of inquiry. Such a queer approach would demonstrate that subjectivity is *never* autonomous, and would make room for interdependence and vulnerability. This queer intersection is where this chapter sits. Recognising, as Elizabeth Grosz does, that ‘any account of embodiment is also always an account of sexuality’, a queer approach takes the ‘norming’ of bodies as a tool of neoliberal capitalism that also upholds heteronormativity (1994, viii). Or, as Wykes puts it, ‘heteronormativity operates as a regulatory apparatus which underwrites and governs the discourse on - and management of - the fat body’ (2016, 4). Such governance of the body involves management of social and physical landscapes so that they reflect dominant norms as both natural *and* imperative social ideals.

I explore the intersections of fatness and queer belonging through a piece of composite narrative fiction that draws on interviews, autoethnography, and participant observation, both at A-Camp and on social media sites connected to the event (Leavy 2015, Wertz et al 2011, Willis 2019). As Frank articulates, ‘there is a possibility of portraying a complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in a theoretical explication’ (2000, 483). That is not to say that the chapter *lacks* theoretical explication, but rather the fictive story acts as a departure point for careful consideration of the tensions that arise between accessibility, relationality and belonging. The piece that follows, *Ollie Goes to Camp*, is a vignette, a collection of observations collated into the story of a single character preparing to attend A-Camp.

I chose to analyse and represent these issues in fiction as a way of addressing my ethical anxieties about participant observation and generalisability, particularly online. That is, ethnographers are not always immediately 'visible' as researcher/observers when conducting research online (Fay 2007). Rather than use direct quotes without explicit consent, or leave gaping holes in the research, the fictional narrative offers an opportunity for 'interpretive gaps' that make room for 'readers' interpretations and imagination' (Leavy 2015, 56, see also Abbott 2008 and de Freitas 2003). Writing these gaps also affords a reading of the gaps - the places where 'data' is missing or absent.

Ollie Goes to Camp

She's been fucking women for fifteen years, so she knows what it is to be queer, thank you very much. It's all about where you put your hands, how you move your lips - even when you are not in the bedroom, even when you are not pressed tightly against another warm body. This thing she has come to know as her queerness is everywhere, in every limb and every word. She walks around the world dripping in it, offering it up and receiving it in glances and gestures. Still, her queerness finds different forms in different places, smaller or bigger to fit between and through the buildings in the city, brighter or dimmer to navigate the low-lit bathrooms of sweaty clubs at 2am, and quieter, gentler, faster, angrier when she goes to work or school or visits Home. Sometimes it seems she is in control of this shape-shifting, but most of the time it is more like osmosis - her queerness ebbing and flowing with the world around her. She is ashamed that she cannot control it, just as she is ashamed she cannot control the contours of her body and its fleshy depths.

This month, Ollie is in training. She has booked her trip to the top of the queer mountain - to queer heaven! - and it is time to prepare. She walks everywhere and reasons that the more she sweats now, the less she will sweat on her cabin's annual sunrise hike. She trains her body to hide signs of strain, of breathlessness, of pain. It's not that anyone is mean, exactly, but Camp is a place to 'be yourself', and this is usually contingent on a sense of relational commonality. Every audible puff of her chest, every slow dawdle draws an attention she doesn't want. A kind of vulnerable visibility reminiscent of her time/s in the closet, fearing accusation, discovery, condemnation.

In between pool parties and crafternoons, this is what she has learnt from her time at camp: being desirable is key. Desirable is such a vague and seemingly subjective term but she has been back enough times to know that here, on the mountain, the attractive queer - the *thin* queer - is some careful mix of butch/femme, a gentle melding of the masculine and feminine that renders her invisible in this utopia amongst her peers. Ollie too is at once both masculine and feminine but she is also monstrously visible. Her fat body is always *too* feminine, with its soft flesh purses, filled with extra estrogen and emphasising her breasts and hips. She is also *too* masculine, taking up more space than she should with the heft and strength of her impenetrable body. She is both, but she is also nothing - a failure, out of control.

She sets her alarm for five minutes earlier each morning. This too is a kind of training - to ensure the sprint from bed to dining hall is fast enough to secure a seat at the end of a bench. Too much of a sleep-in and she loses her precious real estate and struggles to fit in amongst the loud gaggle of hungry queers. She always brings snacks to Camp though, and it is nice to laze outside, the ground warm beneath her while she eats. Her friends picnic with her sometimes and it is glorious, but other times she wonders what

chatter she misses over breakfast. For all the energy everyone expends being 'body positive' and telling her she looks damn fine, nobody really wants to hear how she doesn't fit at the fucking dinner table.

Ollie is excited for Camp, really. She revels in the presence of her friends, of people she considers family. She enjoys dancing and making out with strangers and drawing her own tarot cards and making zines about the impending climate apocalypse. She *loves* not being at work for a week. But she dreads the inevitable scrutiny of a fat body in a social space. And she hates herself for giving in, for the training itself, for giving in to the illusion of the adaptable body and the fiction of corporeal control. It seems she cannot escape the spectre of heterosexuality as easily as everyone else appears to be able to when the shape of chairs, doors, beds constantly remind her that this space was built for someone more valuable than she. The discomforts of moving through the world as a fat person were not disappeared at camp, but she felt she had to manage those discomforts if she wanted to *really* participate in the revellery of queer utopia. She isn't lying when she calls this place queer heaven. But even heaven is furnished with the inescapable stuff and things of capitalism.

Her capacity to fuck, to desire, to love, to caress and manage relationships are all marked by the shape of her body. She is not queer *and* fat so much as she is *queerfat*, a tangle of possibilities and limitations. Her Camp bestie likes to remind her that Camp is *a family reunion*, not a paradise, and that *just excluding cis men doesn't make it safe or more enlightened*. It takes more work than that and for the most part, safety - the kind brought about by social change- is uncomfortable. She keeps showing up here in this heaven (and online), because she wants to do this work for her queer family. She wants to fuck and laugh and dance and make crafts, but she also wants to play her part in reminding

others that they need not be comfortable to be valuable because value is an exclusionary system that always leaves some, if not most, feeling like trash.

Queer/Fat

At A-Camp, several discourses tangle together to produce an acute discomfort for fat campers. That is not to say there aren't pleasures as well, but material *and* social pains mingle here to constitute non-belonging and inaccessibility in significant and specific moments. Fat lesbian, bisexual and queer women are often targeted by public health regimes that attribute obesity to lesbian cultural norms in ways that continue to pathologise queerness as bodily 'sickness' (Yancey et al 2003, Struble et al 2010). Lesbian communities, such as A-Camp, are often imagined however, in Gayle Pitman's terms, as 'lesbian havens' - feminist utopias that allow women to 'forget' their fatness away from the disciplinary scopic regime of the male gaze (2000, see also Walker 2012). As I established in the previous chapter however, the male gaze is increasingly being dwarfed by the regulatory powers of the 'girlfriendly' gaze and the imperative for desirability.

At A-Camp, the lesbian haven usually manifests as 'body positivity', which shifts focus from material restrictions and limitations toward emotional and self-regulation in line with strict 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2012). Though non-fat campers are not necessarily overtly antagonistic (though some can be), the convergence of queerness as sickness and body positive discourses perpetuates a myth of corporeal control and adaptability which individualises the problems of access that arise for queerfat women at A-Camp.

As a movement, 'body positivity' aims to challenge the idolization of thinness and emphasise exclusivity and at A-Camp this was apparent in frequent compliments on

outfit choices and bodily stylings (Limatius 2017). This reflects the movement's focus on bodily performances in images and representation in the mainstream media, with the hope that providing alternative images will foster social acceptance (Sastre 2014).

However, body positivity's association with contemporary feminist politics means that it can actually stifle the ability to express dissatisfaction with the body, because doing so might be rendered 'unfeminist' (Nemeroff & Russo 2004). Expressions of body dissatisfaction and discomfort are also discouraged in lesbian communities that are constituted as 'havens' of body positivity and 'immunity' from the imperatives of mainstream media imagery (Walker 2012). Given the current prevalence of thin, mostly white, able-bodied lesbians, it's hard to imagine that queer women can entirely avoid the tyranny of slenderness. For some fat A-Campers, the insistence on body positivity, though pleasurable at times, also inscribes *shame* onto bodies that experience discomfort attributed to fatness. This shame prevents criticism of the ways that spaces at A-Camp disallow fat bodies, for fear of causing the loss of the 'good atmosphere' (Ahmed 2010).

Ollie's experiences of body positivity at A-Camp were ambivalent, both affirming the aesthetic value of fat queer bodies, but also concealing the ways in which fat bodies experience real material harms in the world. Body positivity manifested at A-Camp as a cultural norm that centred primarily on fashion and style. In 2018, A-Camp's long running workshop 'Destigmatise Your Size' was replaced with a ModCloth¹² fashion parade, in which participants were invited to try on outfits. The replacement of a critical fat space at A-Camp, with an event that centred on fashion, clothing and appearance

¹² An online fashion retailer that caters to a broad size range.

was indicative of cultural norms that privilege body-positivity over significant engagements with material harms.

Discussions about how fatness impedes full participation and a sense of belonging at A-Camp were frequent, both at camp and in Facebook groups and chats afterwards. Campers lamented the size, design and placement of chairs in the dining hall and having to choose between avoiding mealtimes or experiencing significant discomfort. Other campers despaired at the emphasis on physical activities in their particular cabins, especially given the thin mountain air. Each of these instances of physical discomfort or pain were also instances of social disconnection - eating outside was possible, but meant missing important social moments and the daily lunchtime announcements. Similarly, some campers could still participate in hikes, but felt that their breathlessness would mark them out as different. Accessibility issues (chairs, hills, bunk sizes) were discussed alongside issues of belonging in ways that made it clear that the social space of A-Camp and the physical campsite were inextricably linked. The body positive atmosphere was celebrated, but also criticised for an inability to effect material changes and address physical harms. There was also a sense amongst campers that the overt imperative for body positivity had a silencing effect. Complaints about the space as 'fatphobic', were sometimes taken as body-negativity and so were avoided where possible.

For fat queer women, the stigma of both queerness and fatness are compounded. It is for this reason that I describe the character of Ollie not as queer *and* fat, but as *queerfat*. The pathologization of homosexuality often manifests for lesbians as public health anxiety that positions them as 'risky' and 'sick' populations. Both queerness and fat are seen as corrupting forces that threaten to undermine and destroy the social values and

norms of Western civilisation (McPhail & Bombak 2014). In terms of public health projects, marginalised people (poor, black, queer) make up a significant proportion of this threat, and thus are the bodies that require the disciplinary scrutiny of the medical gaze (Saguy 2012, Wilson 2009, Ernsberger 2009). For lesbians, fat is constituted through psycho-medical lenses as the inevitable consequence of feminist politics and orientation away from the male gaze. The ‘problems’ of fatness (for A-Campers - the inaccessibility of the built environment) are reframed as individual moral deviances.

The queerness of body fat is also apparent in its social coding as simultaneously feminine and as masculine (Murray 2008, Hartley 2010). At the same time, fat women are seen as both asexual *and* hypersexual, unable to control or correctly orient excessive desires (LeBesco 2004). Androgyny was certainly celebrated at A-Camp as it is in many queer spaces, however androgynous *thinness* signifies a blending of masculinity and femininity as deliberate, rather than as an abhorrent failure to control the body. Fat women have always already failed to perform heterosexuality appropriately, and the stigma of this failure is heightened for lesbian and bisexual women. Indeed, queer fat women are often understood as failing to exert control over sexuality or the body in ways that contrarily constitute a willful lack of agency (Millman 1980). For the women I spoke to at A-Camp, this manifested as feelings of undesirability and non-belonging that regularly interfered with the pleasures of camp.

Fat bodies are expected to adapt to the environment at A-Camp. This association of accessibility with adaptability is evident on the A-Camp website where campers are encouraged to ‘let organisers know’ if they need assistance to move around the campsite. Though this section of the website has now been removed, this advice suggests that accessibility is primarily the responsibility of the person experiencing the

barrier, but also that the inaccessibility of the environment is inevitable and fixed - which it is, to some extent. Huff argues that 'the body visibly marked as unable or unwilling to adapt bears the responsibility for societal failures and is thus stigmatised' (2009, 181). Fat bodies at A-Camp are marked, quite visibly, as unwilling to adapt to the space, which as I have established is constituted as 'natural' and normal. Moreover, they also risk being marked as unable to adapt to the collective celebratory aesthetics of A-Camp if they raise issues about accessibility and discomfort.

Conclusion

A-Camp is pitched as a queernormative and safe utopia for queer women. For fat, queer women, the need for safety arises primarily in relation to the built environment and corporate logics that dictate the distribution of public space (Huff 2009, 184). A-Camp exists in the context of assumptions that homophobia and sexism are the primary obstacles to belonging for queer women and that the *choice* to inhabit a queernormative space will always be progressive and pleasurable. Access, for many types of bodies, relies on positive relationships with those in power. For A-Campers and straddlers broadly, this means adherence to calls for respectability and collective feeling rules that privilege body positivity over criticisms of the campsite and its inaccessibility.

Accessibility is thus often framed in terms of bodies that deviate from the norm, which obscures the ways in which bodies are constituted *through* access and participation in space. Fat bodies are produced as unhealthy, undesirable and not valuable precisely because they cannot access the built landscape easily. Morality is inscribed on the body such that those grappling with the barrier come to be seen as the barrier themselves. The utopian ideals of A-Camp reinscribe the normative ideal for bodies as either

adaptable and able to fit into the material landscape, or as escapable. Autostraddle, as with other online spaces, is pitched as somewhere to escape the ills of the body through digital disembodiment (Pham 2011). This imagining of utopian communities fails to account for the ways in which power informs embodied relationality. That is, only *some* bodies are able to adapt to the landscape because the landscape was built to reaffirm their bodies as normative. Further, the bodies that are both willing and able to strive toward the ideal, or achieve proximity to the perfect are celebrated in ways that are uncritical of the ideal itself or the accompanied imperative for self-regulation.

Rooke argues that the 'utopian, validating promise of lesbian and gay space' relies on the expectation that difference will 'somehow melt away on entry', rather than reconfigure to produce specific and sharp moments of discomfort (2007, 249). The expectation of utopia produces very real harm for some campers, who cannot shed the bodily 'marks' that produce them as 'others'. A-Camp is not without pleasures for queer fat women though, and temporary respites are an important part of political work. For El, the week at A-Camp had strengthened their ability to attend the anti-gun violence vigil. For the queer women that are represented in the composite character of Ollie, carving out deliberate space in which to consider and craft criticisms of A-Camp and Autostraddle was an important consequence of attending camp. These women *keep* attending camp, also, in hopes of further strengthening their bonds without capitulating to discourses of individualised accessibility, desirability and bodily norms.

Conclusion: Disappointing Utopia?

As I prepared this thesis for submission, Autostraddle published a statement cancelling A-Camp for 2020. The statement followed a year in which former A-Camp performers and staff launched complaints about the event's inability to make space for and properly compensate women of colour and trans women. In response Autostraddle committed to hiring new directors for the camp and a 'primarily Black and other POC transition team to determine next steps for A-Camp or a different kind of Autostraddle-adjacent event', such that 'any future events will be designed to center POC leadership, voices and experiences' (A-Camp.org 2019). The three areas the Autostraddle team identified as key to the problems at A-Camp were structural racism, class and disability. The critics of A-Camp wrote that the transphobia and racism experienced at camp meant that the space 'became an exact emulation of the world people were supposed to come there to escape' (Owens & Wysinger 2019). For some, the promise of belonging made by the website fails to actualise in the non-digital space and the social matrix of value fails to melt away in any real way. The pain of these failures is more significant for the promise of utopia that was offered and then snatched away.

In the same year, Autostraddle ran a fundraising campaign to facilitate a redesign of their business processes in order to be able to pay writers in more secure and sustainable ways. The editors cited the closing of websites such as *Rookie*, *The Toast*, *Design Sponge*, and *Everyone is Gay*, as well as the skeletonising of sites such as *Everyday Feminism* and *Feministing*. Larger sites such as *Buzzfeed* and *Vice* went through major restructures in which permanent staff were let go on scale and replaced with freelancers and casuals. As always, *AfterEllen*'s parasitic takeover by transphobic lesbians stands as

a spectre, warning of what might happen to queer media if it cannot make ends meet. The only way Autostraddle has been able to survive, the editors argue, is by paying staff very little - a feat made possible by the fact that the Autostraddle staff, historically, has been made up of a small group of tight-knit (and middle-class, white) friends.

Yet, in 2018, 92% of Autostraddle's revenue came from readers and members of the A+ program. The July 2019 fundraiser raised \$90,000(USD) in under a week, and \$146,671(USD) altogether (Autostraddle.biz - Campaign tracker 2019). If tracked in terms of money, it is clear the community imaginary being fostered here is important for queer women. Autostraddle has successfully aligned a promise of belonging with financial and cultural capital. In this utopia, a queer feminist subjectivity is available to anyone who makes the 'right' choices, and can afford to buy the 'right' products. Membership is literally for sale here. But more than money, belonging in the Autostraddle assemblage relies on a common imaginary of the lesbian as explicitly feminist, capacious, sexy and dynamic and connected to a shared history and literacy of gender, sexuality and popular culture.

Is it a 'cruel optimism', a strange attachment to an imaginary of life, that keeps us all here, labouring under the belief that consumption choices, aesthetic stylings and an investment in queer business might bind us together in belonging-ness (Berlant 2007)? Why do we expect that belonging and a sense of place in the world will somehow flow from some pre-determined likeness that queer women are destined to share? And what is the use of belonging anyway, if it only functions as a prison, a border, a boundary? Resisting the lure of belonging is not easy though, and participating in the fantasy of generability or the utopia of sameness is not without its productive pleasures. This thesis has examined what it means to relate to and with one another as queer women in

the present and investigated how we might utilise digital spaces to foster queer feminist collectivisim without succumbing to notions of the collective as *common*.

The shifting figure of the contemporary lesbian, as she is imagined through 'commercialised and celebrity postfeminist forms' and feminist lifestyle and culture literature, is entangled with rhetorics of relatability, capacity and luminosity (Garden & Toffoletti 2017, 1). For her, sexuality is articulated in terms of 'taste' and she is bound to others through her consumptive habits and practices. The desire and imperative for a sense of belonging produces attachments to socio-spatial borders that reify commonality as a natural origin of community and conceals social structures of power and value that constitute sexuality as meaningful. The remediation of intimacy online affords an interrogation of belonging as a regulatory force and a reimagining of how we might 'do' sexuality in the face of collapsing borders between public and private arenas. This thesis has explored the relationships, allegiances and tensions between contemporary queer culture and post/feminist digital cultures to argue that the new figure of the likeable lesbian, articulated as she is in terms of taste and consumption, affords a particular critique of social norms without disrupting expectations of feminine commonality and relatability.

Investigating the luminous lesbian and her culture and relationships online has been an intimate and ambivalent adventure. I use the term ambivalent here not in relation to apathy but rather in the queer sense of feeling strongly in more than one direction - my attachments to the Autostraddle community imaginary are mobile and shifting. There are certainly pleasures to be had here and a critical engagement need not foreclose or limit those pleasures. It is for this reason that I have turned to Sedgwick's work on reparative reading and Cvetkovich's writing on compelling descriptions for guidance in

enacting this thesis and its methodologies. The messy entanglement of methods used to produce such a reparative reading has made room for loving critique and for critical surprises. As much as anything, I have spent the last few years learning to occupy the difficult and tenuous position of the critical feminist insider, whose intimacy with the research project and fieldsite *enables* rather than limits critical engagement. The ethnography produced here has been structured by a feminist framework of ethical approaches to in-depth participant research and to digital research. In both senses I am guided by Bev Skeggs' commitment to transformative, immersive and responsible research that attends to materiality, structure and power (1994, 2011). The critique enacted by the creative methods (narrative fiction, collage, visual methods) employed herein is therefore always 'future oriented', charged with imagining a new way of being in the world together (Coleman 2016).

The place of the queer woman in popular culture is changing rapidly as she appears almost ubiquitously across television, movie and social media screens. In our scopic economy, the visibility of the luminous 'celesbian' is paramount and signals a cultural investment in representation as a legitimising social force. In this milieu, visibility is a technology of belonging such that social value comes to be dependent on a capacity to be *seen* and be seen *as relatable*. As Kanai notes, 'the sentiments of inclusion and belonging are predicated on the continual measurement and calculation of value' (2019, 181). In the digital landscape, it is in the realm of the visible and the representable that calculations of value are undertaken. For women, this means an intensification of a sense of identity-as-work that characterises labour in neoliberal times. Although a politics of visibility can reframe pathologising or essentialising social narratives for queer women, the border between visibility and surveillance is thin and porous.

Technologies of visibility, such as selfies, can be vibratory, connective and pleasurable but they also heighten the constitution of the self as ‘contentifiable’ and conceal the ways in which the social value of that content is structured by gender, race and class norms.

Though a reliance on visibility as legitimacy is troublesome and harmful, the *practices* associated with ‘becoming visible’ can produce meaningful moments of social connectivity and collectivity. The ephemera generated through quests for queer visibility act as an intervention in a particular archive of sexual life that privileges heterosexuality as natural and normal and positions queer sexuality as pathological and deviant. Queer women’s experiences in particular are lost or diminished in historical accounts of social life, precisely because their lives and relationships have necessitated secrecy and invisibility. The desire for archival representation expressed by my participants’ selfie practices is referential of a ‘longing for community across time’ rather than an effect of narcissism *or* a simplistic investment in an economy of visibility (Love 2009, 31). Digital community archives, as exemplified by the Autostraddle community galleries, are critical projects that trace mobile attachments to the ‘stuff’ of everyday queer life. These galleries enable critique of dominant historical narratives but they also afford pleasure and playfulness in the production of an intelligible community imaginary that is otherwise geographically disparate.

The humour with which some of these archives (such as the Lesbian Ken gallery) are infused is reflective of both critical feminist humour and contemporary digital norms that privilege playful, weird and humorous content. Humour functions online as a vehicle for ambivalent critique and at Autostraddle specifically as a way to mark anti-heteronormative politics as a politics of joy and collectivity. On the site, laughter and

playfulness (as per the tradition of wearing onesies to A-Camp) are mobilised to constitute the community imaginary and to establish a sense of queer relatability. The humorous aesthetic at Autostraddle negates narratives of queer vulnerability, even whilst recognising and responding to the material harms of homophobia and heteronormativity in the world and online. In the examples I examine in 'Laughing Gayly', heterosexuality is reframed as pathological; traditionally heteronormative images are 're-written' as queer, and identity is articulated as playful, social and non-essentialist. In each of these examples, the humour is incongruous and queer - effacing clarity for multiplicity. However, the ability to affix the meaning of the joke relies on cultural capital and specific social literacies that are embedded in powerful ideological contexts that regulate bodies. There is creativity in humour though, and laughter can function as an embodied capacity to resist regulating forces and to enact a new imaginary of lesbian and queer life.

The community imaginary at Autostraddle takes root in the body, not just through laughter, but through desire as well. Like much of the content on the site, Autostraddle approaches sex playfully and their 'not safe for work' content is littered with 'fun', colourful images of young women experimenting with masturbation, kink, relationships and sex more broadly. The emphasis on intimacy as social rather than private produces the deeply communal affect of the 'crush' that proliferates at A-Camp. In this space, the liminality between friendship and romance and between adolescence and adulthood is charged and eroticised in ways that jam the linear narrative of heteronormative maturity. Instead of growing up, and growing out of the crush, Straddlers are invited to stay, to wallow in a refusal to orient in the *right* direction. In 'Crushing, Smashing, Squishing', I revisit Adrienne Rich's theorising of the lesbian

continuum to argue that the queer landscape of Autostraddle relieves post/feminist 'girlfriendships' of their heterosexual mandates and surveillance imperatives (1980). At A-Camp, the surveilling gaze is transformed into an *erotic* gaze as Straddlers learn to orient toward the community, rather than toward narratives of romantic coupling as legitimating articulations of maturity and citizenship.

Desirability is contingent on proximity to bodily ideals though, and the governing ideals of Autostraddle and A-Camp value and constitute queer bodies as potentially unremarkable. The production of a 'queernormative' space, such as A-Camp, assumes bodily commonality and reinscribes the body as a 'neutral' canvas upon which sexuality and identity can be inscribed. Participation in the communal space relies upon the capacity to uncouple the body from historical and social contexts, such as race, class and disability. In this queernormative 'utopia', homophobia is taken as the most significant barrier to belonging and inclusion. For the fat women attending A-Camp, fatness remained a bodily obstacle - jarring physical access to the space and interrupting the social pleasures of camp life. Despite the 'body positive' culture at camp, these obstacles were continuously reframed as individual moral deviances, and drawing attention to them was taken as causing a 'loss of the good atmosphere' (Ahmed 2010). The lesbian habitus produced within the Autostraddle community imaginary is subject to the attainment of middle-class, white, and able bodied cultural capital and literacies. The material reality of A-Camp diverges significantly from the utopian promise of Autostraddle, and as Rooke argues, 'the contradiction between the promise and the actuality, the imagined and the real, makes negotiating the cultural matrix of the lesbian commercial scene particularly impenetrable for those who cannot or do not wish to heed the doxic calls to order that are present in these spaces' (2007, 249). Though

belonging never actualises for some campers, the experience is still significant, meaningful, sometimes pleasurable, and central to the collectivity necessary for critiquing normative ideals and resisting fantasies of commonality and sameness.

This thesis has investigated and examined the imaginary and discursive borders of the queer women's community at Autostraddle.com and what it means to relate to and with one another as queer women in the present. Contemporary expectations of girlhood/womanhood as capacious, common and driven to perfection intersect with queer politics of divergence, collectivity and resistance in complex, ambivalent and generative ways. The expectation that we gather around common aesthetics and consumption has rewritten discourses of pathology (for some) and opened new modes of access to a community imaginary that is deeply meaningful (again, for some). However, the rhetoric of belonging as sameness persists and produces sharply felt moments of disconnection. The tensions *and* pleasures of the digital intimate public of Autostraddle propel us productively onward though, and ask us to imagine new ways of being together in the world. I end as I began, with questions: How might digital infrastructures 'mobilise' our attachments to identity, to borders and boundaries, to *sameness*? How might we remake these attachments and investments as temporary, porous and shifting.

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Lesbian Ken Community Gallery: <https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-lesbian-ken-community-photo-gallery-384500/>

Lesbian Prom Gallery: <https://www.autostraddle.com/lesbian-prom-37132/>

Lesbian Prom Gallery (updated): <https://www.autostraddle.com/lesbian-prom-gallery-heartwarming-photos-of-girls-taking-girls-to-prom-1985-2014/>

Lesbian sex 101 tag: <https://www.autostraddle.com/tag/lesbian-sex-101/>

Meet the Team: <https://www.autostraddle.com/meet-the-team/>

Merchandise: <https://www.hellomerch.com/collections/autostraddle>

NSFW Sunday tag: <https://www.autostraddle.com/category/society-and-culture/nsfw-sunday-dailyfix/>

Press: <https://www.autostraddle.com/press/>

Queer in the Bedroom: <https://www.autostraddle.com/photo-gallery-queer-in-the-bedroom-370546/>

Queer in the Bedroom Submissions: <https://www.autostraddle.com/be-part-of-autostraddles-queer-in-the-bedroom-gallery-368165/>

Queer in the Kitchen: <https://www.autostraddle.com/photo-gallery-queer-in-the-kitchen-367133/>

Queer in the Kitchen Submissions: <https://www.autostraddle.com/submit-to-autostraddles-queer-kitchen-gallery-364878/>

Reader Survey 2016: <https://www.autostraddle.com/welp-here-you-are-some-things-the-2016-autostraddle-survey-told-us-about-you-383173/>

Straight People Watch: <https://www.autostraddle.com/tag/straight-people-watch/>

Ultimate Lesbian Sex Survey:
<https://www.autostraddle.com/announcing-the-ultimate-lesbian-sex-survey-for-lady-types-who-sleep-with-lady-types-271069/>

We are all Lesbian Ken: <https://www.autostraddle.com/we-are-all-lesbian-ken-send-us-your-photos-for-a-community-gallery-383682/>

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