Digital Media, Sex, and Performance: An Introduction

Amber Johnson

When Adrienne Rich wrote, "This is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you," she articulated a paradox that continues to stifle our desire for change. For some of us doing work in the spirit of emancipation, we are held captive by dominant cultural symbols that fail to emulate the liberatory goals of our scholarship. In the *Text and Performance Quarterly* special forum on the Performative Possibilities of New Media, Desiree Rowe and Benjamin Myers speak to the imaginative possibilities of new media and our ability to write, create, perform, and challenge scholarship as well as sex, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, civility, race, language and many other ideological politics. As Rowe & Myers note, "scholarship is radically altered by the very possibility of new media" (2012, p. 73). The radical changes occurring do not fit standard acculturation modes (assimilate, integrate, separate, marginalize), but are something different entirely. Radical shifts alter the way we perform, understand, and map out our intersectional identities as cultural verbs through scholarship, activism, and everyday life. Inherent within those changes is great potential to deconstruct and re-purpose dominant cultural symbols through new media, especially as it relates to social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Performances of sexual identity shift drastically as access to digital media and technology increase and change. New technologies bring new, innovative ways to perform sexual identity online. People avow sexual scripts of the past, but perform them in new ways in addition to creating new scripts. Intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual preference chaperon those performances and, in turn, dictate the ways in which we perceive, mark, and perform sexual identities. The essays and performances in this special issue examine various digital

Amber Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Intercultural Communication at Saint Louis University in the Department of Communication. Her research trajectory merges qualitative and rhetorical research design with a focus on digital narratives of sexuality at the intersections of race, class, geography, education, religion, and beauty. Dr. Johnson is an award winning author and has published articles in *Critical Studies in Media and Communication, Text and Performance Quarterly Communication Quarterly, Howard Journal of Communication, Qualitative Inquiry, Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* and *Health Communication Journal.*

media platforms, including blogs, facebook, and online dating sites in an effort to unpack the specific ways people use digital media to challenge, redefine, and perpetuate dominant constructions of sexuality and desire, as well as insert bodies, sex, and sexual performances into virtual spaces. Our goals are to present the dynamic intersections and performances of race, class, gender, and sexuality within digital media contexts.

The contributors speak from a range of methodologies and epistemologies to offer a broad discussion of sexuality in terms of physical, biological, performative, orientation, desire and pleasure.

In her essay on intimacy and online self-portraits, Kaarina Nikunen explores public performances of sexuality by examining tease-sites and youth online communities. She argues that shifting boundaries of intimacy, public and private, global and national, offer understanding of the emerging digitalized sexuality and its implications to gender, race and ethnicity.

Ragan Fox turns to viral criticism to analyze how audience members use digital media to respond to the Westboro Baptists church's anti-gay discourse as a form LGBTQ activism and advocacy.

In his essay on political framing around the legalization of gay marriage, Robert Gutierrez-Perez utilizes autobiographical performance and performative writing to interrogate the use of <marriage> as an ideograph during the final week leading up to the Question 1 vote in Maine on November 3rd, 2009.

Shaka McGlotten borrows philosopher Henri Bergson's conception élan vital to describe the generative potential evident in new pornographic artifacts and to resist the trend to view porn as dead or deadening.

Drawing examples from World of Warcraft, Second Life, and GameCrush, Lyndsay Michalik argues that multi-player online gaming allows for and even encourages players to engage non-normative sexual performances in various types of sex work, and illustrate how each type of sex work fits a different online economy.

Using quare theory and black feminism to reveal the complexities of intersectional, queer hyper/in/visibility, Amber Johnson and Robin Boylorn argue that *Between Women,* a YouTube websieries, promotes discourse around nonnormative identities often rendered invisible in mainstream media. However, the show's perpetuation of harmful stereotypes creates a form hyperinvisibility that silences the same bodies it attempts to emancipate.

In the performance space, Keith Dorwick offers a look into six T-diaries of female-to-male men and boys in gender transition. Dorwick argues that T-Diaries as a genre allow trans men and boys to demonstrate the effects of the hormone on their bodies and also document (in some cases) the social problems that arise from being trans in digital culture. This video-essay reads testosterone as a tool that helps facilitate social constructivism (though a construct in which the body actually changes) as one option of many for FTM trans men.

In "Queer Renderings," Patrick Santoro offers three videos that represent an arc of gendered and sexual consciousness across a split screen of spatiotemporality: that of the crafted self on screen (video artifact as product) and that of the crafting self behind the scenes (video editing as process). He argues that performing the self in video allows him to reimagine queer identity, relationality, and desire.

The essays and performances in this special issue reveal the complexities of sexuality in post-human, intersectional realities. They demonstrate the liberatory and oppressive potential of digital identity development, formation, and engagement. It is my hope that you will enjoy reading each essay as much as I enjoyed working with each of the contributors of this special section.

References

Meyers, B. & Rowe, D. (2012). The Critical Lede: New media and ecological balance. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 32*(1), 73-77.

Rich, A. (1975). The Burning of Paper Instead of Children. In Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (Eds.), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton, 50.