# *Butch Gardens*: Tumblr Plays and Online Personae

David J. Eshelman

*Butch Gardens: A Lesbian Soap Opera* is a blog serial of scripts and thumbnail sketches published twice a week on Tumblr from November 26, 2013, to December 25, 2014. I wrote the scripts under the nom de plume Mocha Tchokha Rose. The posts use a non-realistic comedic style to follow a number of women characters—all of whom identify as gay—whose airplanes crash land in an abandoned amusement park in the Amazon rain forest. *Butch Gardens* is an outcropping of my Blogger site, *Plays: Short and Strange*, a blog for short plays that I created in 2012 under the pseudonym Westward Ho. In this essay, I explore how writing is affected by the blogs' use of online personae distinctly separate from their author's offline life. Specifically, I look at the relationships between online personae and marginalized identities. Finally, I assess the future of plays on the internet.

Let me discuss why I began blogging. As a playwright, I am interested in alternate ways of getting scripts to audiences apart from stage production. Traditional print publication is another obvious way; however, print publishing conventions have historically limited opportunity: in the U.S., standard practice dictates that print editions only be issued after successful stage production. As a result, stage production—particularly, narrowly conceived professional production—stands Cerberus-like at the gates, presenting an obstacle to distribution that does not exist for other writing genres, such as poetry and fiction. To increase the visibility of plays, I have considered other means of production/publication: for example, I turned to audio productions and created the Arkansas Radio Theatre as a low-cost way to make digital performance available to wide audiences.[1] It made sense to me that, in addition to audio productions, I would explore a twist on traditional print publication—print publication on the internet. Like many contemporary artists, I feel that, if I am not engaging in online opportunities, I am ignoring the world in which we live.

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[1] Two of my Arkansas Radio Theatre productions have appeared in *Liminalities*: *Vim &*

**Online Personae / Noms De Plume**

The Internet can grant a sense of anonymity to writers. This anonymity comforted me in my blog experiment because it meant that no one would ever know my connection to the writing unless I made that connection known. In creating online scripts, I wanted a freedom of artistic creation dissociated from my day-to-day professional and academic life. In other words, I wanted to write experimentally without the ramifications of public failure.  Until this essay, I wrote truly anonymously, not letting even my closest friends know the name of my sites.

I did not foresee the ease with which a nom de plume takes on a life of its own. My use of an online persona led me to develop more online personae—friends and family of the first—weaving a whole metafictional world outside the original texts. In other words, the authorial personae became characters in a created world with other characters. A metafictional or metatheatrical understanding is suggested throughout *Butch Gardens* in that the story is self-consciously presented as a play. Pictorially, each "episode" is accompanied by a thumbnail sketch, many of which feature a proscenium arch. Since *Butch Gardens* suggests that it presents an onstage world, the obvious corollary is that there is a offstage world. This offstage world is only hinted at on the *Butch Gardens* Tumblr site, but has a fuller manifestation in the originating blog, *Plays: Short and Strange*, on Blogger. *Plays: Short and Strange* features short playlets interspersed with other pieces that suggest "behind-the-scenes" representation. Through these pieces, we meet Westward Ho, the aspiring playwright who has ostensibly created *Plays: Short and Strange*, along with his family—notably his sister Sunny, a newlywed physicist; and his mother, Mrs. Ho. We also meet Mocha Tchokha Rose, a student from Westward's playwriting class whom Mrs. Ho enlists to write for the blog. Mocha ostensibly creates *Butch Gardens*, which she writes on her own or as part of MTR Studios, a group of aspiring authors who meet together in the backroom of Panera Bread.

Choices as simple as names led me to write in certain ways. I borrowed the name "Westward Ho" from the title of an obscure Charles Kingsley novel; but, because Ho is an Asian name, it affected how I wrote the "backstage" pieces. I did not set out to create Westward as an Asian-American figure, but found that, as I wrote in his name, I thought more and more about what his life might be like—the life of an internet writer named Ho. As a playwright like myself, he was a place where I could project my own authorial insecurities. Also, I began to develop in him loose connections to Asian-American culture. There are only a handful of details revealed about Westward's life: his mother may not be a native English speaker and is strict; his scientifically-inclined sister finds her husband in a foreign country; Mrs. Ho is disappointed in her son or, at least, more inter-

ested in the grandchild that she has from her daughter. We learn other circumstances about the Hos' lives—for instance, Mrs. Ho's near romance with a lawyer named Baldhawk and Westward's hobby of making dioramas. We are similarly introduced to Mocha Tchokha Rose in these "backstage" pieces. A figure identified as "Older Woman"—clearly Mrs. Ho—arrives at Westward's playwriting class. The following exchange occurs:

> OLDER WOMAN: I have a blog. It used to be my son's. Yes, the one you know. I need someone to take charge of it. I have no head for writing—though I might have written a play or two. I need a writer. I will not pay.
>
> (All the PUPILS, in eager foolishness, raise their hands. The OLDER WOMAN selects a young woman.)
>
> OLDER WOMAN (Continued): You, with hair like a man. Your lines are biting. I like you best.
>
> YOUNG WOMAN: My girlfriends said it was my lucky day.
>
> (The other PUPILS seethe in their envy.)

From this scene, we learn that Mocha Tchokha Rose has an admirable writing style. More importantly, we find suggestions that Mocha is queer. For instance, she is identified as having "hair like a man" and she refers to her "girlfriends."

By choosing to write as personae different from myself, I was able to explore identities apart from my day-to-day living. In my day-to-day life, my identities create for me a hammock of privilege: I am a white, late thirties, U.S. born, English-speaking, able-bodied, cisgendered, heterosexual, married, church-going Christian male academic. The only place where my privilege comes up short is that I live in rural Arkansas. Assuming online identities different from my day-to-day experience may smack of cultural appropriation. A similar situation occurred at the time of writing this essay, when an obscure white poet named Michael Derrick Hudson was discovered to have used a Chinese pen name to help get his poem into the prestigious anthology, *Best American Poetry* (Schuessler). Both Hudson and anthology guest editor, poet Sherman Alexie, were criticized for cultural appropriation and enabling this appropriation. Have I done the same thing? In response, I would say that objections come when such an action results in special access or profit at the expense of others. Blogger and Tumblr are sites available to anyone: altering my identity did not affect my access to these platforms. Furthermore, the sites have brought me neither fame nor glory. If not for this article, my sites would hardly be known. And this article makes clear the

disjuncture between my own perspective and those of Mocha Tchokha Rose—and Westward Ho and Mrs. Ho, etc.[2]

 As we academics proceed on our collective quest to promote diverse voices and diverse modes of expression, it behooves us to parse out the different ways to do this. Specifically, I would like to explore who writes and what they write about. As far as who writes, we can most likely agree that more persons from traditionally marginalized groups should be in *all* positions of power—including, for the purpose of my particular argument, arts and literature. Those of us committed to a progressive cultural project see the need to nurture artists and writers with perspectives at odds with the mainstream. But, apart from these artists and writers, it is also important to recognize the need for a greater number of positive—or, at least, complex—*representations* of individuals from traditionally marginalized groups. While it might be preferable if these representations are created by persons like those whom they purport to represent, we should not discourage increased representation in general. We should encourage both diverse writers *and* diverse subjects; but we should recognize that these goals do not always have to come at the same time.

 This unyoking of progressive goals is especially important from the perspective of the individual writer. Take me, for instance. I cannot honestly say that my writing is of equal importance to the work of a person of color or of someone from a traditionally marginalized group. Quite the contrary, I feel that my ideas are likely less urgently needed by our culture at this particular moment. But, as any writer can understand, that recognition won't stop me from writing. Nor will it stop me from thinking of myself primarily as a playwright and choosing to interact with the world in that capacity, through my writing. Some individuals further the progressive project by *who* they *are* <u>and</u> by *what* they *write*—a writer/advocate pairing almost (and problematically) obligatory for the minority artist. Other writers, however, can act only through their writing and not their being. Because the privileged writer cannot increase writer diversity through the act of writing, he may be tempted not to bother with other actions that he can accomplish through the tool of writing, such as improvements like increased character diversity. That is a pity and something to be striven against. In the final wash, I am going to write; so I had best be conscientious about how I do it. I believe that the world is better served by me writing about traditionally marginalized figures than it would be by me writing yet another white man's play about white men for white men.

 **Plot and persona.** The online personae affected subject matter—specifically in the case of the queer-identified Mocha Tchokha Rose. Her *Butch Gardens* is billed as a "lesbian soap opera" and follows the lives of a series of women—all

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[2] Perhaps it is wrong of me to write this article because it is a jack-in-the-box-like assertion of privilege. But, really, *Butch Gardens* is likely to be read only by a small audience.

gay—who land in an abandoned amusement park. The women arrive because their planes are attracted by a magnet operated by the villainous Elinor Radley. The plot has many machinations, usually ridiculous. However, the most common trope in the scenes is a desire to share origin stories—an act especially significant for marginalized identities. The origin of the park is revealed in Episode 20. Consider how Elinor's story creates a fictional world both queer and ridiculous:

ELINOR RADLEY: As I was telling you, my father was the hypocritical entrepreneur Boo Radley, who wanted a son but got me. And, somehow, in his business dealings, he bought half the Amazon. He intended to tear it down to grow hops—but died too soon. But not before he had lost all his possessions with the click of a roulette wheel in Monte Carlo.

(The COUNTESS wakes up.)

COUNTESS VAN DER CAVE: (Snorting) I remember! I was there!
(She falls back asleep.)

ELINOR RADLEY: But he didn't really lose everything, you see; because he retained a small plot of land. Not *small*, really—a million acres jammed with orchids and sloths. It started as a lesbian amusement park. Not really, though. At first, it was a home for blind lesbians founded by Susan B. Anthony's grand-niece: the Susan B. Anthony Home for Blind Lesbians, I believe. But everyone called it "Butch Gardens" because of the flowers that grew and because of a statue of Susan in a particularly mannish pose.

(The COUNTESS raises her head.)

COUNTESS VAN DER CAVE: Was she scratching her balls?

ELINOR RADLEY: (Incredulously) No. Her legs were just wide.

(COUNTESS VAN DER CAVE falls back asleep.)

ELINOR RADLEY (Continued): With a name like "Butch Gardens," it was only natural that—with the craze in the 1960s—the place became an amusement park. And a lesbian amusement park, because who but lesbians would vacation in the Amazon? Unfortunately, lesbians have no money, though; so no one came.

FOOFEE: What about indigenous lesbians?

(ELINOR RADLEY glares for a second, then shrugs.)

ELINOR RADLEY: A fair question. Some of them might have come; I don't care. But the high-stakes lesbians didn't, because they were too poor. Only the ultra-rich lesbians. And there aren't many. Just me.

(COUNTESS VAN DER CAVE snorts awake.)

COUNTESS VAN DER CAVE: I also came! I especially liked the pavilion where you could gut your own fish.

ELINOR RADLEY: You *were* there, I remember. But not often enough. So there was no revenue; and the place closed.

This segment serves to illustrate how the dialogue works: characters share origin stories and, in the process of sharing, gain a better understanding of who they are.

**Different lesbians.** There are several components in *Butch Gardens* of which I am particularly proud. I like the fact that the plays feature only women. The characters comment on the manlessness of their world: on their way to battle drug lords, the women discover that they can no longer hear or see men because they have been apart from them for so long. But the writing in which I take the most pride concerns the inclusion of Georgette and Grace.

*Butch Gardens* centers around four couples. There are two leader/servant pairs: the irritable Elinor Radley and her feline bondswoman, the Panther Lady; and the kindly but doddering Countess Van Der Cave and her trusty woman-servant Foofee. And there are two romantic partnerships: the younger women, Lonnie and Annie; and the senior citizens, Georgette and Grace. These latter two, often referred to as the "gray-heads," are drawn in the accompanying sketches as almost identical figures, in white sweat-suits, clutching purses like Sophia in *The Golden Girls*. They live in Florida and talk about Boniva. Grace is more aggressive—Georgette sometimes apologizes for her—but they love each other. I believe that the presence of these two individuals—older women in a longstanding romantic relationship being relatively unusual in literature—is among the most progressive elements in *Butch Gardens*. Their love is best captured in a sequence in which they stumble upon the Fountain of Youth. Momentarily lost in the Amazon, they find a pool full of nymphs. They slip on the muddy edge and fall into the water, discovering that whatever touches the liquid becomes young again. In Episode 54, the women are forced to make a choice about whether to remain or not. They decide to leave, Grace declaring, "The best part of life has been getting old with you, Georgette." This scene provides a portrayal of older women who embrace their age and sexuality and who express their love

in tender fashion. While such couples obviously exist, their representation in the arts is rare.

**The Future Of Plays On The Internet**

I believe that *Butch Gardens* is successful writing: it attempts to define what scripts written for the internet might look like; and it creates more representations of the frequently underrepresented. However, as an experiment in using the internet as a means of publication, it is less successful. Though I had hoped that people would notice these plays, I believe that very few have.

My cause would have been helped had I used my online personae differently. I did not create full-fledged personae who interacted with others on the internet. Because of my unwillingness to make my personae interact within online communities, I was not able *as* one of my fictional personae to bring attention to my site and, instead, had to turn to this article, a more traditional academic means. While I used many of the tools available online—for example, making sure that my sites were searchable and employed searchable keywords—I did not engage meaningfully in any online communities. I also did not promote my site in my own academic, professional name. For these reasons, I was at a disadvantage.

Interaction is important in online worlds. Two articles suggest how I might have used a concept of community to leverage my online personae differently. In "Rereading Fandom: MySpace Character Personas and Narrative Identification," scholar Paul Booth explores how fans of television shows interact on the social media site MySpace not only as fans, but as *characters* from the shows. However, unlike my endeavor, the fans seem more concerned with communal interaction than with literary art: in other words, the subjects seem to be using popular TV—*Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars*—as ways to connect with like-minded individuals rather than, for instance, creating fan lit. In "Gender-Swapping and Socializing in Cyberspace: An Exploratory Study," a study which would seem more related to my gender-swapping performance as Mocha Tchokha Rose, investigators Zaheer Hussain and Mark D. Griffiths explore interactions within an online community—specifically what they call, "massively multiplayer online role-playing games." Hussain and Griffiths study how choosing a different online gender from offline life can be used for specific purposes during a game—for example, for offline women to gain more respect or for offline men to use femininity to get perks (50). Again, my own experience did not include this kind of online interaction: instead, I merely tracked my views on Google and counted the notes (like Facebook "likes") and followers on Tumblr.

The platforms that I chose for my work did not facilitate community. Instead, I was casting bread upon the waters—putting out work and waiting. Perhaps the problem was that I was not entering a readymade world like an online

game. While users of Tumblr can create quasi-communities based around pages that interest them, communities around scripts cannot coalesce because sites for online script publication do not yet exist or are not yet being used in a significant way.[3] I tried to create a community around scripts by starting a separate Tumblr devoted to the reposting of others' scripts along with my own, but there was not much to post and I did not see a lot of interest.

Ultimately, at least for me, the predominant way in which I am comfortable directing readers to my online writing is to speak as I most often see myself, as my offline persona. Surely in the future, other writers will know how to draw attention to their work while retaining their noms de plume.

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[3] In my view, the best script-related Tumblr site belongs to the New York Neo-Futurists. They regularly publish scripts and produce ventures that make good use of the internet. For example, they solicit Twitter Plays—short plays that they then produce as part of their show. While the Neo-Futurists are leagues beyond other script-related endeavors on Tumblr, they are nonetheless primarily a promotional site, drawing attention to their stage show.

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