

Texas State University-San Marcos

Thesis Proposal

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Student's Name: Bettina Ramon Student ID: 520872

Student's Signature: Bettina Ramon Date: 9/1/09

Major: English- Rhetoric and Composition

Style of manual to be used: MLA

Tentative Title: Composing, Gender, and Composing Gender: The Construction of Female Gender Variance in Online Spaces

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Please attach on a separate page(s): the problem; research questions; proposed strategies for data collection and analysis; and source(s) of data. Information should be given in sufficient detail to enable the committee to give your proposed thesis intelligent consideration.

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Names and Department

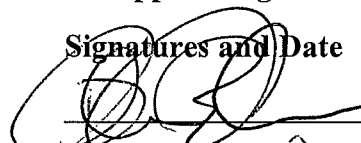
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Dr. Audrey McKinney

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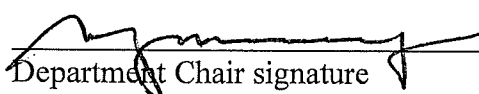
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Date

Thesis Proposal for M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition

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Statement of the Issue

Since the emergence of queer theory two decades ago, academics from many fields have begun to incorporate analyses of gender and sexuality into their “other” fields of study. In its employment in English studies, and rhetoric and composition particularly, gender studies in rhetoric and composition has largely been limited to examining the differences between men and women. This narrow definition of gender as little more than the differences between men and women reflects a simplistic and reductive understanding of gender as a natural, stable, and of binary. Contrastively queer theory challenges this popular narrative, and posits that gender is a social construct, and that the gender binary is a false one.

These studies in rhetoric and composition have coincided with another scholarly conversation: the role between computers and writing. This subfield analyzes the uses of technology and digital spaces as new avenues for composing. Many scholars in computers and writing have chosen to examine blogs as sites of knowledge production outside the sanctioned walls of the classroom. In his article “Promiscuous Fictions,” Tyler Curtain acknowledges these parameters, and writes that blogs can induce anxiety in many scholars due to their deviation from the proper sites of knowledge production, as well as the blurring of public and private spaces, and believes this view to be misguided. He writes, “It is the contention of this essay that blogs are a vibrant space of knowledge production, certainly outside of those protocols, such as peer review, that universities have come to use to ensure the standards of knowledge, but not outside of standards as such, as is often claimed. Blogging shares with peer review an insistence that knowledge production is a communal effort.” Curtain points to queer blogs as one example of the ways in which knowledge production can occur outside the ivory spires of the university, leading toward a queer body of knowledge that includes “intellection and theory-making”. Curtain’s article, however, is limited to male bloggers only—he makes no mention whatsoever of any female bloggers, nor does any other scholarship regarding blogs in the queer community.

Queer female bloggers also utilize the electronic medium in multiple ways to explore their gendered identities in relation to their sexual identities, meet like-minded people, and build community. Blogs in particular are a popular avenue for these activities. Even within the parameters of “queer,” “women,” and “bloggers,” however, degrees of gender variance in this community’s online sphere are vast; variances of female masculinity in particular proliferate. Sugarbutch Chronicles is one example of a female-authored queer blog that actively includes theory-making on issues of female genders and sexualities. In her seminal text *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam argues that “female masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history rather than simply a derivative of male masculinity” (77). Drawing from Halberstam’s call to recognize gender variances such as female masculinities, I will expound on the role of the electronic medium in the construction and complication of gender identity, and argue that the recognition of these gender variances will lead us to a new body of knowledge about gender that is lacking at present.

The purpose of this proposed thesis is to synthesize strands of research on female masculinity, blogs, and visual rhetoric from rhetoric and composition, computers and writing, and gender and sexuality studies. In rhetoric and composition, the subfields of computers and writing and sexuality and literacy inform my research; gender studies and queer theory provide an interdisciplinary perspective of gender and sexuality. In synthesizing the arguments in these conversations, I propose to remedy the gap in literature regarding the study of gender and gender identity. This discrepancy suggests an understanding of gender that is complicit with an essentialist agenda that promotes gender as natural, stable, and fixed throughout one's lifetime. Nearly all of the scholarship that exists addresses queer blogs from an androcentric perspective, such as Alexander's and Curtain's; Halberstam's work makes a case for female masculinity as a valid avenue of study, but does not integrate the role of computers and writing in that identity construction.

Jonathan Alexander's scholarship has primarily focused on the integration of sexuality as a focus of study in rhetoric and composition. Much of his earlier work considers how technology can facilitate an understanding of sexuality as a socially constructed aspect of identity that is relevant in the field. In "Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Overview," he and co-author William Banks draw parallels between sexuality and technology, arguing that both "are concerned with the intertwined issues of space and identity" (274). Both technology studies and sexuality, they write, work to disrupt easy categories of representation and identity. The authors identify four issues that scholars grapple with in discussions of sexuality, technology, and composition studies: "introducing LGBT/queer texts and issues; investigating safe(r) spaces in our classrooms and on the networks; creating and problematizing identity as a stable trope for narration, discussion, and argumentation; and using the notion of sexual literacy as a lens for teaching and research" (276). In this thesis, I will focus on the third and fourth issues posed by Alexander and Banks: how is gender identity constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed online?

Alexander's most recent text, *Sexuality, Literacy, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, begins to extrapolate the connections between gender, sexuality, and literacy. Early in his introduction, he defines sexual literacy as "'the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self-and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms" (5). However, in his discussion of gender and literacy, he reduces gender to the heteronormative, heteropatriarchal male/female binary. This omission is glaring, as Alexander is himself a gendered minority as a queer individual, and must understand the ways in which gendered identities are bound with sexual identities. Other research provides a strong foundation for the multiple reasons why it is necessary to expand our discussion of gender to include gendered and sexual variances.

Research Questions

I am interested in examining gender identity and presentation as it occurs on one popular blog in the queer female community, Sugarbutch Chronicles.

- What role does the electronic medium, particularly blogs, play in constructing and complicating gender identity?

To address this question, I will consider the following questions:

- How do other mediated online spaces support (or complicate) notions of online female masculinity?
- How does the queer female blogging community facilitate an awareness of a gendered literacy?

Methodology

To measure certain characteristics of gender identity, I will utilize the tags (provided by the blogger) to identify themes in her entries. “Butch,” “identity,” and “semantics” are all tags that are used frequently to create categories that enable readers to access related information quickly.

Because I have been a frequent visitor of this blog for over a year, I have observed the activity on this site for a significant period of time to the extent that I have become a part of the community. Therefore, I plan to employ a rhetorical analysis of content, images (excluding advertisements), design, comments, comment threads, tags, and pre-identified categories within the blog with the benefit of an ethnographic perspective. Though Sugarbutch Chronicles (SBC) is the primary site of my research, I will also analyze web content from two other websites, Twitter and Queer Eye Candy (QEC), that are linked from and supplement the blog. Twitter, a text-based microblogging service, is used in this particular blogging community as another avenue for identity exploration and community-building, while Queer Eye Candy provides a site for exploration of visual rhetoric and images as argument. In all three sites, I will look for content that supports, counters, and complicates the blogger's definition of gender, and analyze the role that each medium plays in these gender presentations. This analysis will utilize previous research on online gender presentation, identity construction, and computers and composition.

I will use a queer theoretical lens to conduct this analysis. Gender studies and postmodernism also lend a significant contribution to this project. Much of queer theory focuses explicitly on language in the construction of reality and identity. As such, I will call upon Derrida's theory of language as transparent to illustrate the role of language in keeping out non-normative genders and behaviors. Secondly, the scholarship of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler also inform my work in looking at the online representation of female masculinity and other non-normative genders.

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