Is Slash an Alternative Medium?
“Queer” Heterotopias and the Role of Autonomous Media Spaces in Radical World Building*

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The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without ships, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.
(Michel Foucault, 1986, 27)

Slash is a wonderfully subversive voice whispering or shouting around the edges and into the cracks of mainstream culture. It abounds in unconventional thinking. It’s fraught with danger for the status quo, filled with temptingly perilous notions of self-determination and successful defiance of social norms.
(Joan Martin, 1992, 101).

Introduction: The Crisis in Alternative Media

This paper stems from two assertions. The first is that of John Downing who, on the occasion of a keynote address for the 2006 Media Democracy Day in Montréal, stated that what radical media truly needed to catch more of an audience than the already-converted was to start reporting more than just the cycle of protest and repression, to be more aware of what radical media forms do for the subjects that consume them, and to not be imbricated in the notion that the “counter-informational model” is the beginning and end of radical media production. What he meant by these statements is that rather than assume (and rail against) the dominance of mainstream media, radical media should self-consciously take part in building an alternative public sphere that could then grow to rival the mainstream. In mediating more than just reports on protests or oppressive, hegemonic forms of governance, and by including aspects that addressed humour and emotion (for example), a radical public sphere (as Downing considers it) could catch the attention of the general public, who would then be exposed to the more significant radical messages therein. In short, his suggestion is that perhaps the way to real change is through a radical alternative world-building that, in its breadth and subtlety, might have the force to shake an oppressive media system to its foundations more effectively than the blunt force of oppositional media incursions alone.

The second assertion is a more diffuse one made by various activists and academics who have held up the example of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (hereafter, TAZ) as a possible model for such a world-building. The assertion, which stems from the writing of the elusive Hakim Bey, is that through
autonomous media spaces—spaces that attempt to bracket various oppressive qualities of mainstream media—the progressive circulation of messages and ideas has at least a provisional degree of freedom to occur. ³

But if we accept these two assertions for the sake of argument—that to be more effective, radical media need to speak to broader concerns and audiences, and that one way to accomplish this is to take up the potential of autonomous space—must we not also ask if this is already happening? Perhaps the frame with which we view radical media (and alternative media more broadly) is so conditioned to only see certain things (things, for example, keyed as radical due to motive and content, like protest reporting) that we are missing the bigger picture: a slowly encroaching counterpublic (to use Michael Warner’s term⁴) that is becoming less “subaltern” by the year. Perhaps the variegated radical contents and methods in multiple media spheres are growing daily and are all but aggregated as such. Perhaps the current crisis in the media is no longer the hegemony of the mainstream; perhaps it is that the massive amount of radical media content already circulating is not viewed as part of a similar movement for changing the way we represent reality to ourselves, circulate meaning, and communicate ideas.

This paper will explore the above propositions in two interlocking sections. The first section will explore the notion of autonomous media space as related to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopic space (or space that functions as “other”), and assess how such spaces could be seen as progressive venues for those with a view toward the notion of radical world-building. The second section is an abbreviated case study that tries to tie some of these issues to a material example. The specific example I have chosen is that of slash fiction networks.

I’m going to make a fairly radical assumption that knowledge about slash and slash writing has seeped far enough into both academic and popular culture that I can move right into using it as a case study without much of the usual expository explanation of what slash is with respect to mainstream popular culture. A few aspects of it are worth highlighting however. The term “slash fiction” (male-male sexual fan fiction that appropriates characters from pre-existing fictional narratives) is derived from the “/” between K/S (or Kirk/Spock), the first recognized such fan community. Though the meaning of “slash” sometimes drifts to included female-female pairings or groupings and even heterosexual sex-related fan fiction, the more proper fan terms for such forms are “lesbian slash/fem(me)slash” and “het” (or “shipping”—short for “relationship fiction”) respectively. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using slash in the broader sense as denoting the range of various types of counterpublical fiction engaged in under the sign of “slash”. Though any insights from these arguments could be applied to “het” and other non-slash forms of fan fiction, such extensions would likely have diminishing returns the closer the sites discussed (and narratives therein-produced) stayed to the originary, and mainstream, media texts. If for anyone the general contours of slash fiction are less familiar, I suggest you take advantage of the rhizomatic nature of online texts to follow the link to...
the rough, but evolving and engaging, popular history and definition of slash on Wikipedia, or simply explore Whispered Words (fictionresource.com), a popular slash site. For additional context, you could also consult the useful glossary of fan-fiction-related terms compiled in The Fan Fiction Glossary at <subreality.com/glossary/terms.htm>.

I chose this example for two reasons. The first is that it strikes me that the networks that circulate slash might have affinities (if not overt alliances) with the alternative world-building project that Downing endorses. The second is because some of the theorizing around slash fiction communities arcs into considerations of alternative media—especially in relation to its roles and functions for subjects. Though a full consideration of these connections is beyond the scope of this paper, as a preliminary work it might act as a rapprochement from which both streams of thinking might gain some insight.

This is more an inquiry to see if in considering these two phenomena (one theoretico-ideological, one empirico-practical) together we might see something new, than a position paper proffering slash as the ultimate in alternative or radical media. Through considering the autonomous media spaces that accrue to what I will term the “queer” heterotopias of slash writing, I am attempting to mount an argument for broadening our perspective, in line with Downing’s proposition, of what it is radical media can or should be (or are) doing. Call it a journey through a varied landscape, call it an experiment in paradigmatic affinity, call it an essay (in the French or formal sense of the word: an attempt) at isolating the meanings that might be held in common between these two somewhat broad and disparate (though as I will come to argue, somewhat continuous) fields of endeavor.

From Autonomous Media to Heterotopias

To begin, I think it is worth considering how the project of radical or alternative world-building might already be happening (and might, in fact, be a mode of societal participation that has been existent for as long as humanity). To speak of alternative media as if they are the results of a new process that arose whole out of a reaction to mainstream media (i.e., to treat them as co-extensive with the growing movement and discourse that shares their name), is to treat the world as if it came already formed in one big hegemonic lump that contains no process, no history, no alterity. Similarly, to treat the concept of “radical media” as if it originated with John Downing’s 1984 collection of the same name is to ignore that what these ways of conceptualizing media (or mediation) signify, more than anything, are modes of interaction with the social.

In this light, we can then define the desire to engage with alternative media (and remember, ‘media’ is a plural term) as the seeking of modes and spaces of representation that speak to matter—and allow us to speak to matter—perhaps
not otherwise present in (or differently compiled—or represented—in) more conventional media forms. Similarly, we can define radical media, in line with Downing, as forms of media that seek to get to the root of various oppressions or distortions in society and re-build a more nuanced and democratic portrait of the world for itself. Such a way of acting can be seen as a mode of inhabiting space, of creating spaces where certain types of activity can occur. Two ways of elucidating this spatial angle of the issue are to mobilize the concepts of the TAZ and the heterotopia.

Though Hakim Bey resists defining the TAZ, intending it more as inspiration than “political dogma”, as “a suggestion, almost a political fancy” that would be understood through its workings rather than as a strict philosophy, those who take up its derivative concepts are often happy to make concrete propositions about them. For example, in the introduction to their book Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance and Dissent, Andrea Langlois and Frédéric Dubois define autonomous media as follows:

Autonomous media are the vehicles of social movements. They are attempts to subvert the social order by reclaiming the means of communication. What defines these media [...] is that they, first and foremost, undertake to amplify the voices of people and groups normally without access to the media. They seek to work autonomously from dominant institutions (e.g., the state, corporations, the church, the military, corporatist unions), and they encourage the participation of audiences within their projects. Autonomous media therefore produce communication that is not one-way, from media-makers to media consumers, but instead involves the bilateral participation of people as producers and recipients of information.

In this conception, autonomous media are forms of alternative media that perform a sort of “active resistance”, which is to say, they resist mainstream media forms by being “other” to them. In as much as mainstream media forms are hierarchical, autonomous media strive to be horizontal; in as much as mainstream media forms are controlled by money, autonomous media attempt to be non-profit; in as much as mainstream media forms exclude voices, autonomous media aim at inclusivity. As such, there could be seen to be as many forms or sub-forms of autonomous media as elements of “mainstream” media one found oppressive. The one thread that seems to hold these various notions together though, is that of inhabiting a phenomenological zone of separation or otherness from those spaces where what they contest is produced. This sense of operating in a different space (even if it is provisionally or temporarily) has marked similarities to Michel Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia.

In “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Foucault defines the heterotopia as follows. In contrast to utopias, Foucault writes:
There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.9

The fact that Foucault underscores the difference between the concepts of “utopia” and “heterotopia” is significant here (and will be later when we will examine a critique of the TAZ as an overly utopian [and therefore, useless] concept or political strategy). As heterotopias are actual spaces10, rather than romantic ideals, they have a substantive place in politics as spaces where actual things can happen.

Both Foucault and Bey mention piracy and pirate utopianism/heterotopianism as metaphors and models for their respective frameworks. Of the two, Foucault is more directly critical of the idea of the utopia as a by-definition non-realizable space, drawing on one of the formal meanings of utopias as “[s]ites with no real place.”11 But the heterotopia is something different, and this difference is embodied in the metaphor of the ship. The idea of a (pirate) ship that has the ability to float beyond the reach of authority and restriction is one that has often found its way into romantic fantasies and anti-authoritarian visions. But the significant thing about pirates and their ships is not the romantic ideal they represent, but rather that they did exist. Their ships and enclaves were spaces where certain rules, conventions and assumptions did not apply. This was both progressive in some ways even as it was devastating in others, as pirates—real pirates—created space where, for example, race and class and gender might be redefined, but also where theft, violence, and murder might be de rigueur. It is thus vitally important, as both Bey and Foucault neglect, not to romanticize pirates or piracy, but it is equally important to realize that the spaces of piracy were not utopic ones, but rather heterotopic ones: spaces that actually existed, at least partially autonomous or other to the spaces of mainstream society.

But if autonomous media spaces are heterotopic, other, then are they in fact progressive? If it is the case that they receive their autonomy by being apart, removed from society and normative frames, does this form of living actually contribute to a progressive project of changing mainstream culture? There are two, conflicting, conventional answers to this question, and perhaps a third answer that mediates the two.

A first response could be one rooted in an approach to thinking about autonomous media space that takes its cues from Michel de Certeau’s engagement with the difference between strategies and tactics in The Practice of Everyday Life.12 According to de Certeau, one cannot simply look at what
powerful actors in society are producing and shaping without also exploring what those with less (or different kinds) of power are doing with those products.\textsuperscript{13} From what subversive uses people make of salaried time spent at work, to how they move idiosyncratically through cities, to how they find ways around some oppressive rules in their lives, de Certeau gleans that top-down power is not always successfully hegemonic and that the power of “making do” \textsuperscript{14} is a tactical power that, though it might not always be directly engaging the macro structures of society by way of strategies, is doing something.

As Igor Markovic elaborates, the use of tactical media forms allows for the circulation of messages and meanings in ways that might not be possible if one were to wait for ideal conditions of production.\textsuperscript{15} Markovic sees such media as praxis-oriented rather than ideologically perfect or perfectible,\textsuperscript{16} as spaces that can allow certain types of behaviour and organizing, and that as such can be “powerful all[ies] of social movements”.\textsuperscript{17} Though de Certeau figures tactical intervention as the sort of intervention that steals moments, privileging the temporal dimension rather than the spatial one,\textsuperscript{18} he does see in tactical intervention a spatial aspect. It is in the taking of spaces created and specified by others and diverting them to more tactical goals that he sees this spatial power occurring.\textsuperscript{19} It is in their “contexts of use”\textsuperscript{20} that the placeness of these places becomes significant, even if that use is only a temporary or constrained form of placeness.\textsuperscript{21} But not everyone agrees with this assessment of the usefulness of autonomous space.

A second response might be the direct opposite, that autonomous media forms carry little or no progressive potential. John Armitage mounts a direct critique on Bey’s early writings and by extension the progressive potential of autonomous spaces. He argues that as Bey speaks to the establishment of a utopian ideal of autonomy, his framework ignores (or simply sidesteps) oppressive realities, and especially the reality of class divisions.\textsuperscript{22} He argues that Bey’s writings, and especially the concept of the TAZ, work only to retrench oppressive divisions, since those who can already “act autonomously” can do so because they are holding some form of privilege that others do not (122). In this he is not wrong, and there is an undercurrent of too-easy libertarian thinking in Bey’s work. But what this critique also does is assume that the only form of autonomy framed in Bey’s writing (and the possibilities of his writing) is a utopian elitist separatism, rather than recognizing that the TAZ as a more modest, and productive, tactical intervention is possible as well. As such, Armitage mistakenly figures the TAZ as a bid towards an impossible utopianism, one that has no bearing on substantive matters of oppression. He concludes his paper by positing that “the utopian movement of the TAZ has passed [...] and that the new radical politics of cyberculture\textsuperscript{23} will, of necessity, have to recognise that the overwhelming force of presence or solidarity really does arise from the reality of class.”\textsuperscript{24}

Taking both of these arguments back to a media context, the question could be asked as to what the goals of an alternative or radical media should be. Working from the notion of autonomous media-making outlined earlier, their...
main goal could be seen as the “amplification of voices of people and groups normally without access to the media”, with a view to furthering social movements. This broad notion of the importance and goals of such media-making shows that Armitage’s worthy critique might be limited by a point of view that privileges certain social movements over others, seeing only those with an immediate, direct and revolutionary impact on class inequality as productive. Though these sorts of intervention are crucial, it cannot be argued that other forms of intervention (and we can add for our specific concerns, media intervention) are by extension without importance. As such, the frame for radical media I am trying to articulate here is perhaps closer to Clemencia Rodriguez’s paradigm of a “citizens’ media”. Citizens’ media’s more modest claims as to where the threshold of progressive social goals begins (including such things as individual and community expression, representation and transformation—as well as the goals Armitage speaks of), are perhaps more in line with what autonomous media space seeks to create: a heterotopic space of possibility where new realities and understandings may emerge and be practiced. It is armed with this provisional understanding of what might make up the extended space of radical (progressive) media that we can now move to consider whether it is productive to consider slash an alternative medium.

Slash Networks as Queer Heterotopias

In Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online, Rhiannon Bury explores fan fiction communities run by (and catering predominantly to) women. In this project she draws on a tradition of feminist thought that can be traced back to Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, which sees separate space as an essential pre-requisite for certain types of autonomous action, especially for women in a patriachically structured society. In looking at online fan networks in this way, she forwards an “understanding of such cyberspaces as potentially heterotopic in their reworking and transgressing of normative spatial practices and relations”. In her study, she explores two such spaces as “virtual heterotopia[s]:” alternative spatial orderings where gender, power relations, sexuality and even nationality could be differently organized. Though such spaces were not “utopias”, and certainly not isolated from oppressive societal elements such as beauty myths, classist stereotypes and traditional gendering in some cases, they did offer a different form of mediation to that which was available as part of mainstream culture. This is perhaps especially true for the slash network she explores as part of her study. Marginal to the already-marginal fan fiction world, slash fiction writing can be seen as a practice that produces an even more rarified space: that of a “queer” heterotopia.

The slash world is a space that actually exists within the frameworks made possible by mainstream culture, but is also a space in which many assumptions and patterns of conventional culture are reversed or parodied. In that many of these inversions are in relation to traditional sex and gender pairings and
orderings, such a space can be seen as a queer space.\textsuperscript{34} It is also, like many radical media spaces, a space of controversy and risk.

According to Kelly Simca Boyd, being a slash writer has a lot to do with negotiating the risks involved with producing and sharing such forms of writing: those of censorship or legal action by copyright holders, censure and misunderstanding by friends and family members, even potential loss of employment or social status.\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps then these practices might be best understood as forms of tactical media-making, in that the dangers of copyright infringement and discovery don’t allow these (mainly) women to own their spaces outright, forcing them to use tactical strategies such as disclaimers and pseudonyms to protect themselves from the potential negative connotations of their work. Edi Bjorklund seems to concur with this perspective when she writes: "Slash is not just a new kind of women’s literature. It is a means whereby we may defy a wide variety of social conventions and taboos. [...] Slash fandom is, to sum up, a tactic of subversion for women."\textsuperscript{36} From this perspective, slash could be seen as meeting the requirements for an autonomous media form: it is giving women more of a voice in an arena in which they have previously been relatively marginalized (the creation and manipulation of the meaning-laden mediated characters and images that surround them), with a view towards the propagation of a social movement (the redefinition of societal conventions around sexuality and gender).

In his \textit{Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture}, Henry Jenkins, drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s work in \textit{Between Men}, argues that beyond trying to represent desires they would like to see, the writers of male-male slash may be actively working out the taboos they see on the expression of male homosocial desire in popular culture.\textsuperscript{37} “[S]uch an account,” he continues, “may also explain the relative scarcity of lesbian slash since [...] women have historically enjoyed a more fluid movement through the homosocial continuum.”\textsuperscript{38} As such, as a non-heteronormative\textsuperscript{39} space of reflection, creation and comment, there might be a relatively smaller need to reproduce narratives of women together romantically.\textsuperscript{40} Finally, in the essay “Pornography By Women, for Women, With Love,” Joanna Russ argues that “[t]he writers and readers of these fantasies can do what most of us can’t do in reality (certainly not heterosexual reality), that is, they can act sexually at their own pace and under conditions they themselves have chosen.”\textsuperscript{41} As such, the participants within this space of media creation are circulating fluid perspectives upon gender and sexuality that are seen as lacking, or are at the very least under-represented, in mainstream media culture.

Others, such as Constance Penley, while still arguing for the highly political nature of slash writing, argue that the majority of the women involved are just getting off on the process. She positions the majority of slash writers as simply having fun with male characters and male bodies by creating pornographic situations involving them.\textsuperscript{42} Though she does see the fans’ writing practices as exploratory and as “creating pleasures found lacking in original products,”\textsuperscript{43} she rejects the view of previous writers that slash writing is searching for a redefined or androgynous masculinity.\textsuperscript{44}
Perhaps, though, the comments on the potential androgyny of male characters in slash fiction are more valid than some commentators (such as Penley and Boyd) might allow. The concept of “androgyne” here might often be read by individual slashers as still within a heteronormative frame. Within this frame if a man were coded as “androgyne” he could no longer be “masculine”, “active”, or a “man”. But if we look within these stories, as do, for example, Russ and Jenkins, one can see male characters that articulate active and passive, traditionally male and traditionally female roles, but in ways that are de-linked from their normative codings. As sexual “subjects” they are simply that: sexual, rather than playing pre-determined roles. To this some earlier authors attached terms like “bisexual” (Jenkins) and “androgyne” (Russ), but we might re-articulate those observations by calling them fluid practices within a queered figurative space, where the play of non-heteronormative intimacies, using material poached from the mainstream public sphere, becomes possible.

But if this case can be made, and the spaces of slash production are partially autonomous zones—“queer” heterotopias of specific scope and interest—doesn’t that just make them limited realms of social action, rather than alternative or radical media spaces? Put another way, why might we want to consider these spaces as part of an alternative media movement? What is so compelling about slash that might deem it part of a radical world-building effort?

Bury argues that sometimes these spaces (which usually double as women-only spaces) are less about the slash per se than about women having a space free of certain heteronormative conditionings in which to converse and share meaning, reflect on life, politics, the world. As such, a shared appreciation of stories where the (gay) male body is being, one might even argue, objectified, acts as a shield that keeps other aspects of normative culture at bay. Because these spaces are queered, they are non-heteronormative and therefore are (for certain subjects) safer spaces of connection and reflection.

Another perspective that might see these spaces as significant is that of figures such as Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, who argue for the importance and maintenance of spaces in the public sphere where alternative identities can be reflected. It is necessary to the maintenance of subcultural formations to have spaces and zones—physical or otherwise—that one can inhabit with certain identities, or that allow for the circulation of messages and meanings with a view to the cultural propagation, enjoyment, political presence, or circulation of subcultural capital with reference to that specific culture.

Warner, for example, analyzes how zoning laws in New York that would limit the number, size and proximity of sex-related businesses in any area that also contained residences were threatening the gay neighborhood around Christopher Street. But his argument goes beyond simply valuing easy access to porn and bathhouses. He argues that such zoning laws—ones highly steeped in heteronormative figurations of sexuality, publicness, and what is appropriate for residential neighborhoods or citizenship—limit and constrain those with non-
heteronormative identities to the margins where no-one lives: to outskirts, the quayside, out of sight and out of mind. For Warner, “[a] public sexual culture changes the nature of sex, much as a public intellectual culture changes the nature of thought.” In line with this argument, I have argued elsewhere for the importance of the Internet in the circulation of subcultural capital with relation to modern BDSM identity. The Internet-mediated sadomasochistic public sphere, itself a queer (or at the very least, non-heteronormative) heterotopia, allows the freer circulation of sex-radical discourse, and changes the dynamic relation between sexual subcultures and the mainstream public sphere.

Taking such arguments into consideration, it is perhaps easier to see how slash could be considered part of a radical world-building effort: as a space in which non-heteronormative figurations of desire have more freedom to circulate. But is this enough to consider it as a useful ally in the struggle for alternative media?

One could argue that no, it’s not, because it is a set of individualistic projects that does nothing but mobilize the power of certain elites to move “outside the system”, or else because it is a conglomeration of the powerless—the weak—who continue to be nothing but powerless. This is certainly in line with Armitage’s critique of Bey and those who use his thinking as political strategy.

But slash writers are producing something significant: a proliferation of non-heteronormative spaces. As Penley puts it, they are not just “making do” but making, engaging in original and impactful cultural production that in fact influences the mainstream and the types of images and messages dominant cultural producers are circulating. This space is protean, and within protean space a new kind of thought emerges.

Anti-normative thought is a powerful tool that can be mobilized in other quarters. So, in addition to autonomous or heterotopic spaces being not-necessarily-closed with respect to their potential use for practical and engaged politics, even such spaces that have no specifically-progressive political ends—and slash communities might be seen as a case in point—might be part of an anti-normative world-building effort that makes them part of something progressive nonetheless. Similarly, one could argue that this is just another libertarian thread of alternative culture—and it might be that too—but who is to say that energy for change cannot come from multiple quarters, or that certain quarters might not be the source of multiple types of action? As with anything, it is what is made with the consciousnesses formed and nourished—allowed to grow—in such spaces that counts; and isn’t this one of the major reasons why alternative media are important in the first place?

Thinking of such models as alternative media allows for acknowledging what can occur in imperfect systems—in enemy territory, as it were. Using such a tactical perspective it is important that major social issues such as class not fade from the horizon of analysis and engagement, but they should also not obscure the fact that there are multiple struggles being fought that are variously using and refusing “the master’s tools” to forward their projects. It is also important to
recognize that not all of these things are, in fact, even struggles, or are struggles only in as much as they come up against resistance. A case-in-point is the relationship of slash-producing to feminist identification and practice.

Penley writes about the original K/S slashers diligently making do and circulating their cultural productions by using office equipment from their workplaces to produce their zines. Many of these women did not identify as “feminists”, even though their writings and practices were often very feminist ones. They encountered oppression, and fought against it, yet they did not identify with their oppression nor were they (for the most part) self-consciously political.\textsuperscript{55}

They were however bucking the heteronormative system of desire, introducing a fog of particles, movements, ideas and stories-in-motion that have been reinserted into the “mainstream” social in numerous ways. This set of collective tactical movements—what de Certeau calls “Brownian motion”—is exactly the form of chaos that Bey speaks about. A creative chaos, a chaos of non-pre-determined action and reaction that is not the antithesis of order but rather the raw stuff that order is built out of.\textsuperscript{56} As touched on earlier, Penley picks up on the idea of Brownian motion to posit that such making do (in the hands of slash writers) is not making do in a soft sense of “making the best out of a bad situation” but a \textit{making} in its own right.\textsuperscript{57} As cultural producers, slash writers don’t so much transcend feminist (and one could add by extension, queer) politics as complement them, through “finding alternative and unexpected ways of thinking and speaking about women’s [and one could add, men’s] relation to the new technologies of science, the body, and the mind”,\textsuperscript{58} not as a “pre- or protopolitical language that could then be evaluated from the perspective of “authentic” feminist thought”,\textsuperscript{59} but as part of this very same radical world-making that some are groping for through alternative mediation projects. Boyd writes that:

> It is important that feminists participate in slash fiction. Writers of slash are women on the frontlines of the pornography debates. Every day they look at what popular culture gives them and twist it around until they create something that they like better. While [many] slash writers do not set out with a “feminist agenda,” their writing works to resist, and reconceptualize popular notions of sex, sexuality, pornography and romance.\textsuperscript{60}

One of the most significant movements in Boyd’s thesis is when she notes that regardless of the way they identified,\textsuperscript{61} the women surveyed in her study believed in the equity of women in social, cultural and economic spheres.\textsuperscript{62} This is worth dwelling upon. It seems that regardless of ideology, slash seemed to promote a space for progressive affinities. As such, though we might, in the final analysis, be wary of calling the space of slash production a queer space (as that could have identitarian implications), it is certainly not heteronormative space. Though we might not be able to call it a feminist space, or a space devoid of all sexism, it is a space that has strong affinities with feminist principles.
Conclusion: Alternative Media and Radical World Building

As Donna Haraway reminds us, the politics of affinity have strong potentials to move us beyond some of the limitations of identity politics.63 As spaces such as those of slash media production are “other”, or heterotopic, they do offer a potential as zones where other practices, discourses, and consciousnesses can form or circulate with partial autonomy from the constraints upon those practices, discourses and consciousnesses in other societal spheres.

It is in this way that such practices might be seen as having affinities with an alternative media movement—perhaps not in “pure” ways that are completely autonomous or other, that seek a utopic solution to all major problematic aspects of society at once—but partially, tactically, and modestly, gaining some ground on the monopoly of life images and messages shown and circulated in mainstream media.

Perhaps there is not one “alternative”, just as there is not one world-societal problem that needs to be addressed. If this is the case then maybe there are specific modes of struggle for specific battles which are variously radical, reformist, tactical, citizen-oriented, democratic, or identity-political as the specific case requires. And just as a unitary “alternative media” is not the answer to all social issues, perhaps the variegated types of alternative media (understood in its proper sense as a plural term, as the collective term for multiple, different, media alternatives) do not all point in the same direction. And perhaps, just perhaps, this is their strength.

References


Notes

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1 Downing & Rodriguez, 2005.

2 A writer who may or may not be just one person, or several people, or a name of convenience for certain radical writers, but certainly is at the very least the pseudonym of writer Peter Lamborn Wilson.

3 Though this “assertion” is gleaned from several places, the most sustained version of it can be seen throughout the 2005 collection Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance & Dissent, Andrea Langlois and Frédéric Dubois, eds.

4 Warner bases his term “counterpublic” on Nancy Fraser’s mobilization of the term “subaltern counterpublic” as a conceptual way to account for public spheres that exist outside, adjacent or tangentially to the unitary mainstream (bourgeois) public sphere of Habermas’s writing. For more detail see Michael Warner’s (2002) Publics and
Counterpublics and Nancy Fraser’s (1992) essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.”

5 Thanks to Fabiana Pereira for this insight about the root of the word “radical” being, well, “of or related to roots.”


7 Dubois and Langlois, 2005, p. 9.

8 A fact which echoes Michael Albert’s prognostications in his article “What Makes Alternative Media Alternative?”


10 Just what counts as a heterotopic space could be up for debate, but by way of example: pirate ships, rooftop vegetable gardens in corporate neighborhoods, student-run soup kitchens on corporatized campuses, resistance cells of movements, warchalked WiFi space in urban areas, libraries, affinity groups at large protests, protests of all kinds, free stores, marxist feminist reading circles, bike paths, recycling boxes, the underground rave scene, downloading sites on the Internet, a culturejammed détourned billboard, the PIRG movement...

11 Foucault, 1986, 24. The slippage of the word utopia between its two possible meanings stems linguistically and symbolically from its etymology in the Greek. It could either be a transliteration of ou topos (or “no place”), or rather of eutopia (“happy” or “fortunate place”) (Logan and Adams 1). Thomas More’s punning points out the role of such ideal spaces: perfect but non-existent they are as guides without flaws, but could never be inhabitable precisely for that reason.

12 De Certeau, 1984.

13 Ibid, 32

14 Ibid, 35.


16 Ibid, 118.

17 Ibid, 123.

18 Ibid, 37.

19 Ibid, 29.

20 Ibid, 33.

21 Which definitely puts de Certeau in line with Bey, since, for Bey, the “Temporary” part of the Temporary Autonomous Zone was the key aspect, in fact the thing that enabled the zone’s autonomy. A temporary aspect allowed a zone the ability to operate “under the radar” like a covert resistance cell that moves around and surfaces only when it wants to perform a public action (Bey 99).


23 Armitage conflates Bey’s use of the terms “Net” and “Web” (in combination with the popular appropriation of his work by cybertheorists), with an understanding of the TAZ and ontological anarchy as being only “virtual” phenomena not connected to real world—and especially, class—struggle (see Armitage 118 and 124). Beyond this literal reading of a metaphor (as Bey points out, he is referring more to societal structures than to any specific technology (Bey 110)), there is also in Armitage a less-than-nuanced reading of the politics of “the virtual” that misses that the virtual is a space of figuring and possibility that bleeds into—and, in part, comes to structure—actual reality.

24 Ibid, 124.

25 Langlois & Dubois, 9.


27 It goes without saying that not all radical, autonomous, or alternative media are progressive. This is one of the internal problematics of people who seek to provide these spaces as fora. For more detailed accounts of issues that arise when confronting the...

28 Bury, 2005.
29 Woolf, 1929.
30 Bury, 18.
31 Ibid, 167.
32 Ibid, 36.
33 And, in certain cases, more than in more male-oriented fan-culture spaces as well (Bury 34).
34 There is a politics to calling something a “queer” space, and one that I touch on below. Suffice it to say that there is a space between saying that we could “see something” as a queer space, and calling—naming—it as such. This paper inhabits that peculiar and slippage-ridden space. A heterotopia in a different register, perhaps.
35 Boyd, 2001, 86.
36 Cited in Ibid, 19.
37 Jenkins, 1992, 204.
38 Ibid, 205.
39 Heteronormative means the normative structures that accrue around a certain conception of what “normal” or “natural” intimate behaviour is or should be about. It includes things like compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory normative gendering and a compulsory “heterosexual” life-narrative (meet-get married-have kids-grow old together-die). It is a handy term because it is not heterosexuality, per se (or gendered relations, or monogamy, etc.), which is problematic. It is when those frames for living are imposed on everybody without choice or distinction, it is when social structures and institutions (and people) only recognize one way of being a person as right or proper, it is when those positions are seen as having no fluidity or possible overlap, or when they come with attendant social statuses, that they become cumbersome and often oppressive.
40 Ibid, 205. Such representation might even feed into preferred heteronormative representations of the desirable, as the controversial “lesbian” television show The L-Word (that contains a very heteronormatively slanted view of what “real lesbian culture” looks like, and that is marketed towards men) speaks to.
41 Russ, 1985, 90.
42 Penley, 1991, 137.
43 Ibid, 139.
44 Ibid, 155.
45 A terminology also mobilized by Jenkins (189).
46 Though this aspect might be changing, as more men begin to engage with the practice of slash reading and writing.
47 Bury, 71.
48 Warner, 1999, 139.
49 Ibid, 149.
50 Ibid, 178.
51 A shortened acronym for the culture surrounding Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism.
52 Penley, 1991, 140.
53 Ibid, 135. This is becoming more and more prevalent as media producers realize that there is a “market” for subversive voices and their inclusion. Such feature films such as the later adaptations of the very-sliced Harry Potter book series; and such television
programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and even *CSI* play off of the knowledge of their own slash universes, incorporating threads, plots and scenes that speak to multiple possibilities for their interpretation as texts. (Which is a fancy way of saying they play up the slash premise, often for campy effect, but in ways that promote, rather than hinder, the circulation of alternative messages and meanings.)

Even given some theorist-practitioners such as Penley attempting to key them as deeply political.

Penley, Ibid, 137-140.

Bey, Ibid, 18.

Penley, Ibid, 140. Thanks to my students in COMS 240 for showing me how, in a sense, the notion of "making do" contains that ambiguity, and can be read in both ways, depending on if you see de Certeau as a defeatist, or a tactician.

Penley, Ibid, 319.

Ibid, 139.

Boyd, 102

Approximately 58% as Feminist; 10% as “humanist/equalist; and 25% as anti or post-feminist, based on an online survey administered to 200 women and 10 men. It is unclear from the methodology how the men’s responses factored into the statistics, if at all.

Boyd, Ibid, 71.