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Queer Cats Journal of LGBTQ Studies

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Queer Cats Journal of LGBTQ Studies, 1(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/Q511031151

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SECTION II

QUEERING THE
ACADEMY

TRANSFORMING SPACES:

Transgender Webcomics as a Model for Transgender Empowerment and Representation within Library and Archive Spaces

NAMI KITSUNE HATFIELD

Embodying the experience of the LGBTQ community remains a serious challenge within the Library and Information Science (LIS) field, even in the context of politically progressive organizations and projects. While some information spaces today, such as libraries and archives, claim to support LGBTQ culture—as do many media texts and artistic works—those claims mislead insofar as these spaces fail to take into account or equitably represent transgender issues and identities. In fact, the transgender population, which makes up less than one percent of the United States population,¹ is still poorly understood. Relatively few library and archival sources acknowledge that the LGBTQ coalition includes the trans community, and indeed consists of diverse sexualities and gender identity-based communities with equally diverse needs and attributes.² Even amongst progressive LGBTQ communities, inequities of access to power in media and information spaces have often led to misrepresentations of transgender identities,³ which has made many transgender people feel unwelcomed even within declared LGBTQ community spaces,^{4,5} including libraries and archives. Disempowered groups, as archival scholar Michele Caswell points out, “. . .bring significant legacies of distrust to the conversation [where] power is always central.”⁶

NAMI HATFIELD is a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles in the school of Library and Information Sciences. © 2016 Nami Kitsune Hatfield. All Rights Reserved.

Equity for transgender communities and clients presents a challenge to LIS practice. Despite major gains in rights and visibility, transgender people still face a massive human rights crisis that has not been effectively addressed.^{7,8} Transgender people remain underrepresented both in the cultural discourse and in the libraries and archival spaces that seek to preserve transgender-based material. These issues have prompted transgender people to seek safe spaces where gender identity can be openly discussed and explored, and where others outside of the transgender community can be educated.⁹ It is important that libraries and archives do a better job at preserving community histories, providing access to material, and welcoming input from transgender users, so that our theory and practice can recognize trans community members' contributions and needs. In short, libraries and archives need to proactively include community voices and challenge normative practices that have disenfranchised transgender users.

This issue raises urgent questions: How does the transgender community use media, art, and design to promote transgender identities, attract and educate allies? How can the area of LIS draw on transgender community media, art, and design work in order to develop methodologies to better meet the needs of that community? Such questions don't have a single or easy answer, because the transgender community is of course a large, complex, and constantly shifting demographic. Yet, information professionals, institutions, and theory must address these questions and seek-out answers, so as to recognize and meet transgender needs. While the transgender community has yet to achieve the visibility that gay and lesbian communities have, and has been said to be twenty years behind gays and lesbians in terms of rights,¹⁰ the community is slowly making gains, thanks in part to the increased presence within information spaces. This essay seeks to build on those gains.

Records and materials related to transgender experience unfortunately remain scarce within library and archive spaces. Many public libraries continue to lack transgender material, and many archival spaces likewise contain little or no transgender-specific records.

Personally speaking, growing up as a transgender woman I found little support or information within library settings. This lack of representation or information regarding my identity led to major struggles in my life, because for a long time I felt like I was alone in my identity and in the world. Furthermore, despite recent improvements and

scholarship that has built interest in transgender material, such as that of KJ Rawson,¹¹ transgender collections remain woefully absent within many non-transgender-specific archival settings. These settings, while improving, are still behind.

Often trans community members feel disenfranchised even within the very spaces that should be designed for their empowerment. Transgender community members express concern about the lack of representation and marginalization within archival spaces. In an interview, Sky Widow shared how she felt marginalized in the ONE National LGBT Archives.¹² Other community members, for example transgender male activist, Dr. Jacob Hale have complained about the lack of clarity of transgender material within archives.¹³ This often leads community members to feel like outsiders within library and archive space, and within information theory as well. To redress this inequity, it is vital that transgender community members have voices within information settings, and that these voices are heard and addressed. It is not enough to create environments where transgender people are the subject. The LIS community must open the doors to the needs and perspectives of the transgender community on an ongoing basis. Only by inviting community members into such settings can information professionals create an environment that encourages social justice for transgender users. In this context, information professionals can and should be looking at popular works of transgender expression, and should explore how such texts use the tools of participatory and convergence culture to meet the needs of transgender users. Trans webcomics are one such type of work.

Webcomics provide one way among many (information flow, zine culture, alternative media, etc.) to address the question of transgender representation. In fact they serve to facilitate representation and social justice within the transgender community. This is particularly true for transgender women and gender queer readers, who have been to date the primary writers of transgender webcomics and the members of the transgender community most often represented within webcomics.¹⁴ Specifically, two current webcomic series, *Rain* and *Mahou Shonen FIGHT!*, present an interesting case study in how online media may use participatory and convergence culture methods to meet the needs of transgender users. I argue that such methods can in turn be applied within library, archive, and information settings to make them more inclusive of transgender needs and to build collaboration with the

transgender community members. In other words, the lessons gleaned from this popular form can help bring transgender community experiences and community politics into information settings, thus to empower community members.

The webcomic series *Rain*, started in 2010 by transgender woman artist and writer Jocelyn Samara, began as a fantasy action series, but its characters and stories gradually evolved into its current form, that of a more realistic story exploring transgender and other queer identities.¹⁵ *Rain* follows transgender youth Rain Flaherty, and recounts her complex life living with her bisexual aunt Fara while attending a Catholic private school. She discovers that her town, though small, includes many others with LGBTQ identities, as well as community allies. Despite this, she still faces many trials and conflicts, especially with her brother and sister, due to her identity as a transgender woman. These experiences represent in a relatable way the everyday life issues faced by those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer, but the story focuses especially on transgender experiences of Rain, her gender fluid friend and neighbour Kylie, and her transmale therapist Vincent.

Mahou Shonen FIGHT!, a webcomic series started in 2010 by the gender queer artist-and-writer team of DustyJack and JadePrince (JD), focuses on a cast of mostly male characters of various nationalities and ethno-racial backgrounds who attend an international-based high school. This series draws heavily on the “magical girl” genre, a Japanese genre perhaps best known to American audiences through the *Sailor Moon* franchise. This genre is known for bright, flashy designs, flamboyant costuming, transformation scenes, energetic posing, and young girls using magic to battle against the forces of evil. *Mahou Shonen FIGHT!* follows these conventions by including heroes in brightly colored outfits and a plot to save the world from evil spirits of pollution, yet it puts a new spin on the genre by presenting the main characters as mostly cisgender male characters. One character of particular interest, however, is the gender queer, super-glitzy, self-proclaimed team leader Raji, who cross-dresses during their transformations and is accompanied by the grumpy masculine spirit Autumn.

These two comics capture diverse transgender experiences and different approaches to the education and humanizing of the transgender community. While they both seek to develop a fan base among both transgender and non-transgender readers, they use radically different

strategies: *Rain* focuses on realistic depictions of transgender and LGBTQ life, with the lead character identifying as a transgender woman in a school setting, whereas *Mahou Shonen FIGHT! (MSF)* is a more fantastic, action-based story focusing on various mostly male characters, with the exception of Raji. Yet, while taking radically different approaches, both works are effective due to their informed and sympathetic portrayal of transgender experiences, and both use the participatory methods of organized fandom to interact with their readers and fan base in a similar way. Also, despite differing in genre, themes, and content, both series communicate with fans, drawing on the creators' personal experience within the transgender community to develop stories based on that community.

Participatory culture, as defined in new media theory, is a particularly useful framework for observing fandom and explaining the development of webcomics like these. This model, as developed by scholar Henry Jenkins, contrasts with traditional models of consumer and corporate-based culture. It does away with the strict distinctions between creators and consumer, instead blurring the lines between these two positions.¹⁶ Within participatory culture, fans often act as contributors and feel as though their contributions make a difference to the products being produced.¹⁷ These interactions help make works such as *Rain* and *MSF* possible.

While participatory media culture existed before the Internet, in the form of fandom-based publications such as zines, independent journals, and letters to the editor, often these forms of circulation and feedback were highly restricted. Small-scale print publications prior to the Web were limited in their capacity to bring together readers and creators and help them form or maintain lasting long-distance communication. Small, community-based fan groups had to struggle to form around such media, and groups based upon alternate identities, such as transgender identities, were marginalized and hard to find.¹⁸ With the mass circulation of Web 2.0¹⁹, however, fans and community members now have a platform that poses only a low barrier for entry.²⁰ This allows smaller-scale works, such as *Rain* and *MSF*, to be shared, and communities of interest to form readily. In addition, it enables individual readers to communicate not only with the creator of works, but also amongst themselves and with potential new fans. This in turn allows information and conversation about transgender identity and experience to be spread, both to those who can relate directly to the characters'

experiences and to those who are seeking more information about transgender identity. This participatory model has implications for archive and information practice.

Jocelyn Samara, creator of *Rain*, has clearly inserted her own experiences into the comic, as well as reached out to fans and asked them to share their experiences in order to shape the direction of the series. She states, "I've been calling *Rain* 'pseudo-autobiographical.' Having not openly accepted myself as transgendered until age 20, obviously that means I never attempted to try to pass undetected in high school like *Rain*. That said, beyond the basic setup of the story, it's pretty largely based off of my personal experiences, people I've met, things I've heard, etc. for better or worse."²¹

Frequently, however, Jocelyn will ask fans for information on how they feel about the comic, and will make an effort to learn more about the experiences of those who identify as LGBTIQ. For example, *Rain's* Facebook page enables Samara to communicate with fans, release new material, and pose questions to her readers. On this page users are often in contact with Jocelyn and engage in conversations with her. In a post dated 19 May 2015, for instance, Samara asks fans questions about her story, such as how they are enjoying it, what chapter titles she should use, or how romantic pairings in the comic will or will not work out.²² This eliciting of reader participation allows *Rain* to tackle difficult issues for a variety of queer and non-queer readers, such as teenage pregnancy, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, disclosure, and coming-out, further blurring the lines between creator and consumer. This encourages fans to invest emotionally in *Rain's* development and to form fandom groups freely, and also allows Samara to share her personal experiences and educate readers about transgender and LGBTIQ experiences from a personal perspective.

Rain demonstrates the importance of users' voices in defining a space that is created by and for communities. Presenting questions as Samara does helps shape the comic and develop a participatory bond between the creator and the user, a method that could be mimicked between archivists or librarians and users within LIS spaces such as archives and libraries. The model developed by comics such as *Rain* shows how interaction can help encourage users to contribute voices and resources, such as time and money, toward shared projects. Communities, given the opportunity, can and will get involved in such projects.

A successful example of this methodology at work is the South Asian American Digital Archives, whose mission statement declares that, “We believe communities can use history as a tool for empowerment,” and “We believe that history is not a spectator sport.”²³ This community archive values user input in many of its programs, including its First Days Project, an archival project documenting the story of immigrants’ first days in the United States. This project clearly reflects SAADA’s mission to create “a more inclusive society by giving voice to South Asian Americans through documenting, preserving, and sharing stories that represent their unique and diverse experiences.”²⁴ SAADA’s methods enable community members to share material and become very much involved with an information space.

Similarly to SAADA, *Rain* draws experiences from a variety of sources, including Samara’s experience and anime fandom through the use of convergence culture, which, as defined by Jenkins, is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted.”²⁵

Samara’s *Rain* employs this feature through its use of made-up series such as “Black Wings Kaminari” and its spoof of popular anime and manga series, thinly veiled behind parodic titles such as “Kill Book” [*Death Note*], “Dragoncube A” [*Dragonball Z*], and “Hardsteel Physicist” [*Full Metal Alchemist*]. This is also true of the webcomic *Mahou Shonen Fight* where the comic’s two gender queer creators and fans of the magical girl genre of Japanese media come together. *MSF* clearly draws influence from works like *Sailor Moon*, at times mimicking exact images. It is clear that JadePrince and DustyJack have borrowed from Japanese media in both style and thematic content to meet the needs of fans. Both *Rain* and *MSF* demonstrate the concept of convergence culture, as they borrow from various other media and design stories that aim at and are influenced by anime and manga fans. These are multimedia fandom-based texts.

Mahou Shonen FIGHT! effectively emphasizes diversity and queer identity. In the Kickstarter campaign for *MSF*’s first print-based novel, JadePrince stated that, “We the creators [sic] wanted to create a story and world of endless diversity, in terms of gender expression, sexuality, cultural experience and ethnicity.”²⁶ Moreover, the character Raji demonstrates a

commitment not only to diversity of gender expression but also to the fluidity or questioning of gender identity. In a panel at Comic-Con International 2014, the two creators confirmed that Raji and Raji's fiancé both identify as gender queer and non-conforming, and within the comic Raji is a character that cannot be easily defined in terms of gender identity.²⁷ In many ways Raji's fluid perspective towards gender is represented by the character's alter ego, Miss Autumn Ingenue, who represents a liberating character for many transgender fans, especially those who are uncomfortable with gender binaries and who would enjoy an escape from normative standards and representations of gender. Raji's character helps to highlight one of the other goals of the creators, which was "To create a story we would have liked to have seen when we were teens, but just didn't exist. A genre story that we could see ourselves in, [sic] even into adulthood we as Queer peoples still long for representation in media, for the opportunity to see someone like us among all those other faces and to feel in that moment a little less like an outsider."²⁸

Raji as a character embodies this during their transformation scenes through a style of a female presentation that contrasts with the comic's mostly cisgender male cast of heroes.²⁹ Such scenes, and Raji's personality generally, establish the character as a gender queer role model who incorporates elements of both male presentation (while at school) and female presentation (when transforming into a "magical boy" hero). Raji presents a character to which both creators and fans of this work can relate, one they will want to read about and share. Even for non-transgender readers this sort of character can be liberating, humanizing, and amusing; the character may also recall other flamboyant and charismatic characters from Japanese media such as Tamaki from *Ouran High School Host Club*. While Raji is portrayed differently from the characters and experiences represented in *Rain*, such as the gender queer character Kye, the character effectively brings the two creators' experiences and identities to life and represents gender queer identity. These examples demonstrate the diversity of identities and experiences found within the community settings, and thus suggest the diversity of approaches needed within libraries and archive spaces. Both of these works demonstrate the importance and need for a variety of non-binary forms of representation that are often lacking within library and archive spaces.

These webcomics may seem far removed from the concerns of the LIS profession, but in fact can provide models for interactivity and

inclusivity within archive spaces. Understanding transgender-based participatory culture through such popular online texts can help develop strategies for encouraging user participation within information spaces such as libraries and archives and within LIS theory. As archival theorist and scholar Verne Harris reminds us, the “opening to the knocking of the stranger is the beginning, and the end, of justice”; we must bring in communities that have been treated like strangers, such as the transgender community. This will be not an easy task, given the variety of intersectional identities and perspectives within the transgender community; therefore, it is essential to, both, work with diverse community members and also confront the inevitably political nature of information settings, rather attempting to avoid that nature. Only thus can we create a much-needed sense of social justice and trust. The interactions modeled by popular fan-based media such as these webcomics can provide a way forward.

Transgender-based webcomics like *Rain* and *MSF* demonstrate how successful this sort of welcoming of the community can be. Despite being relatively small in circulation compared to other media, they have been made possible by fans, and they bring the community into a shared space. Libraries and archives can look to *Mahou Shonen FIGHT!*'s successful use of crowd-funding through Kickstarter as demonstration of the importance of community within webcomics. Information institutions have the potential to take such models of participatory and convergence method and move them from the digital to the physical; this will require that the relationship-building that goes on among fans online be mirrored with in-person users. Archivist and librarians need to commit time towards listening and working with transgender users and communities. This could include methods such as personal meetings, forums, and discussion groups that would help to recreate the online model of relationship building within a physical space. Creating such discussion spaces will allow communities to feel invested and represented within the inherently political nature of spaces such as libraries and archives.³⁰

Just as *Rain* and *Mahou Shone FIGHT!* allow their readership to interact with creators, so too are some libraries, archives, and other information spaces exploring and working with community-based methodologies—a process that has proven successful. For example, the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, in addition to serving as a community archive run by and for the lesbian community, also creates collaborative

programs in which archival volunteers and community members work together to create unique collection descriptions. Within this archive, volunteers share the responsibility of documenting and describing the collections.³¹ Volunteers with archival backgrounds often are assigned to assist with inventorying and describing the physical aspects of collections; however, in a process paralleling that of the webcomics reaching out to their readers, these records are then given to community-based volunteers who have a strong background within the lesbian community, and often can provide detailed and personal context and biographies to help interpret the material. In this way, the skills of both parts of the community are employed, so as to create a finding aid that meets community needs while being well documented. Just as the readers of *Rain* and *MSF* provide the creators important experiential and political feedback to allow *Rain* and *MSF* to be more relevant and inclusive in depictions of trans experience, so the Mazer's community of users complements the work of volunteers with professional archival backgrounds.

Another example of a project that has been developed through a collaboration between the community and an informational setting is MOTHA, the Museum of Transgender History & Art, which was exhibited at the ONE National LBGT Archives. MOTHA envisions "99 Objects" of importance to the transgender community, regardless of whether said objects actually physically exist or not.³² This project has enacted a process by which trans community members become directly involved in the development of a physical collection of materials. At the same time, the MOTHA exhibition distinctly states that it "does away with any tidy distinctions between the known and unknowable. It embraces partial facts, rumors, and maybes, recognizing that the archive is incomplete and not every truth has left a trace."³³ MOTHA, in other words, confronts the reality that many transgender stories have been lost, discredited, or buried, a loss that creates silences within archives. This project is remarkable, not least because it seeks to envision a collection documented and described by community voices and through the participation of the community. Each record in MOTHA is documented by a member from the transgender community contributing to the stories and history behind that record.³⁴ This sort of collaboration between members of the community and archives is another example of how participatory methodology has proven successful in practice.

It is important to develop spaces in which “the other” is welcomed and invited to be a part of this convergence.³⁵ Participatory theories of convergence culture model the development of a more open and inviting informational space that meets the needs of marginalized communities. It is not enough for archives to maintain a supposedly neutral space that is indifferent to political and social matters in the name of an alleged objectivity; positive, proactive steps must be taken. Again Caswell notes, “. . . power is always central.”³⁶ In fact libraries and archives continue to struggle with the inclusion of a variety of voices. A recent study from the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group of The Archival Education and Research Institute states that, “While one can identify various excellent organizationally sponsored initiatives, there is no evidence that the archival field as a whole has contemplated the implications of working in such partnerships with communities.” It is essential that we encourage a convergence of theory and community voices within libraries, archives, and other information spaces, and that we acknowledge the need for communities to have “power to represent.”³⁷

Trans-based webcomics such as *Rain* and *Mahou Shone FIGHT!* show how to foster communication by doing away with the strict distinction between mediators and users, an approach that can build community trust and inclusivity. These webcomics have been successful precisely because they reject or efface the traditional distinction between creator and consumers. Archives and libraries likewise could benefit from such a model, as espoused by archival scholar Joel Wurl, who emphasizes stewardship and working with communities, rather than custodial models where materials fall under the archive’s exclusive ownership.³⁸

As Wurl points out, “In a stewardship approach, archival material is viewed less as property and more as a cultural asset, jointly held and invested in by the archive and the community of origin.”³⁹ Rather than asserting the archive’s ownership over material, a stewardship model creates a system of co-ownership and cooperation between archive or library, and community. This approach gives communities a say and power over material, and requires archivists to be continually aware of the community’s role in working with materials. As Caswell points out, building on Wurl, stewardship, in contrast to custodianship, “deems the physical and legal transfer of records as the first step in an ongoing relationship between archival repositories and stakeholders.”⁴⁰ This accountability model is one of the first and greatest steps toward repairing the broken

trust that has played such a major part in the transgender community's relationship with archives and libraries. It can create a space where the community and archives can establish a better relationship with each other, and allows communities to hold archives more accountable for materials and representation.

This model has proven effective in transgender webcomics, where owners have regularly participated in dialogues with fans to develop stories and a fan base. Such methods have also been employed with digital and cultural projects such as the Tribal PEACE project, which facilitated collaborations among American Indian reservations in California.⁴¹ In this archive community members worked together with archivists to digitally represent American Indian communities. By bringing information experts such as Ramesh Shrivisan together with community members, the Project created a model and a digital platform that truly represented community interests.

The methods of convergence culture and participatory appraisal provide vital tools for the advancement of social justice within information settings. Though webcomics provide only one way of looking at participatory and convergence culture, information professionals can learn a lot from the inclusive methods of transgender users found within such online texts. Webcomics like *Rain* and *Mahou Shonen FIGHT!* have fostered spaces where the transgender community can represent the diversity of its identities and perspectives, spread education, and develop connections among community members and to those outside the community. It is important that information settings and theory likewise draw upon such practices in order to invite in and empower communities and community perspectives through collaboration and stewardship. Like the interactive virtual space created by the reading communities of these webcomics, libraries, archive, and information institutions have the power to deeply affect the lives and politics of those around them, including the lives of those within the transgender community.

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12. Sky Widow, interviewed by Nami Kitsune Hatfield, Los Angeles LGBT center, November 20, 2014.

13. Jacob Hale, interviewed by Nami Kitsune Hatfield, California State University Northridge, November 18, 2013.

14. Transgender male writers of webcomics have been conspicuously difficult for me to locate, and trans-male representation in webcomics appears rare. This perhaps reflects the prominence of women in webcomics generally, and the perception of webcomics as a female-friendly alternative space to male-dominated comics fandom. Similarly, imported Japanese manga and anime, or English-language imitations of same, have been viewed as crucial entryways into comics fandom for girls and women—and the influence of Japanese cartooning on LGBTIQ webcomics is pronounced. *Shojo* (girls’) manga has a long tradition of appealing to female readers through homoerotic depictions of idealized males, whom critics have often described

as a focus of identification for female readers; less common are overt treatments of trans identity, as in Shimura Takako's trans-themed manga *Wandering Son* (*Hōrō Musuko*), which extends *shojo* conventions into new territory. To a great extent, the rapid growth of manga reading in the US has been linked with a fandom that has been gendered "female," in contrast to the prevailing monolithic view of US comics fandom as masculinist. Webcomics too are often seen as providing a more welcoming entryway to female creators and readers specifically. These alternative fandoms, and the gendered conventions of Japanese-inspired genres, may help account for the prominence of transgender women and the relative absence of trans-men in webcomics. This point, however, is speculative; this concern requires further study.

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28. "Mahou Shonen Fight!: Volume 1 Wake up,"

29. Jade Prince and Dusty Jack "Mahou Shonen Fight!: Chapter 3: Ambiguous," last modified April 16th, 2011, accessed May 13, 2015: 10-11. <http://www.mahou-shounenfight.com/?p=188>. Compare this scene to an Anime (Japanese animation) magical girl transformation scene such as those found within *Sailor Moon*.

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