Fandom, fan fiction, and “slash.” Some see these as harmless pastimes, others as the democratization of mass-mediated messages, and still others as frivolous—if not dangerously obsessive—behaviour. But regardless of one’s opinion, it is impossible to ignore that the intersection of fan culture, fan writing, and Internet technology has produced a new communication phenomenon: the near-instantaneous reception of media texts, organized through virtual interactions that create a set of additional texts, clustered around the main texts and contributing to their impact.

These new forums of interaction form rich and textured objects in which many communicative processes can be isolated and observed. Treating such online environments as spaces—as places where things happen—in *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online*, Rhiannon Bury explores the politics of space, community, and identity in “female fandoms,” with a special focus on the community-forming and -maintaining strategies of two groups of women.

This book, a development and extension of Bury’s 2000 dissertation “Performing Gender On (the) Line: A Case Study of the Process of Community Making Among Members of a Women-Only Electronic Mailing List,” explores these ideas using a participant-observer positioning that allows her access to the dynamics of the communities involved and the subtleties that one could only observe by being that close to the media texts and practices involved. I mention the title of her dissertation because the keywords of “performing gender” and “community making” are significant clues to the content and focus of her work. For this book is, more than anything, about the process of making and maintaining the communities of women’s online fan spaces and how issues such as gender, class, and sexuality are articulated within those spaces.

Bury draws on a sprawling theoretical literature that spans authors treating cyberculture generally: feminist and poststructuralist engagements with identity, community, space, and texts (including a Foucauldian engagement with the heterotopic); queer engagements with pornography and romance; sociological work on politeness and face-maintenance; and finally scholarship on textual modifica-
tion and fan fiction. The work also gains an analogical impetus from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and its impact on the discourses and experiences of women in society.

Bury introduces and treats each of her two case studies individually, then together, moving from the theoretical to the specific, while introducing additional theoretical grounding at the heads of later chapters. The two case studies, one of an *X-Files* listserv called “The David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade” and the second of a *Due South* listserv of slash-fiction creators and appreciators called the MRKS (“Militant RayK Separatists”), form a comprehensive platform to observe and catalogue exactly what kinds of interaction are taking place in these online spaces.

Her main thrust is, in her own words, “to extend an understanding of such cyberspaces as potentially heterotopic in their reworking of normative spatial practices and relations” (p. 18). In this she succeeds admirably, the theoretical frame of the “virtual heterotopia” informing the phenomena she explores, while the engagements with those phenomena expand the range of considerations of the heterotopic, adding nuance to its possible usefulness and applicability.

One particularly interesting instance of this is her insight that nationalist myths—to use her example, Canadian nationalist myths as portrayed and articulated in *Due South*—are circulating in such cyberspaces, creating an “other space” (or virtual heterotopia)—in this case, of “Canadianness”—that is not specifically delimited by national borders. In the context of thinking about globalization (and especially cultural globalization from above) this insight has a lot of mileage for further work in cyberculture studies.

While the book is generally very strong and has a lot to offer, some minor elements distracted from the quality of the work. For example, some chapters ended without conclusion, leaving one wanting a bit more, some form of summation. Further, her framing of element after element as being at once “online” and “on (the) line” speaks interestingly to the element of risk: such things as theory, gender, community, and ethnography can all be said to be at risk in their online articulations. However, one does get the impression that this diacritical enthusiasm is taken a bit too far when the same “on (the) line” construction is used to mark out humour, desire, and politeness strategies, or at least one wishes for a little more contextualization and discussion of how these are all connected and at risk. Finally, some might find that an overreliance on the sociological theory of face maintenance makes chapter 4, “Nice Girls Don’t Flame: Politeness Strategies On (the) Line,” unnecessarily clunky and difficult to follow. However, these are minor issues compared with what the work as a whole has to offer. Information about fan practices up to 2002 makes this collection topical, when other publications about Internet social phenomena are sometimes (due to the speed of new technology and software) almost completely out of date by the time they come to press.

By concluding that “fan practices cannot be analyzed separately from gender, class, sexuality and nationality” (p. 206), Bury delivers on her promise to explore relations of space, the body, and community in a nuanced way, not limiting each insight to its “corresponding” matter (nationality to space; sexuality to the body, et cetera), but rather showing how these influences are inter- and co-determinating, wrapped up in an multilayered network of influence and affect. As Bury
points out, as the source of some of the first large-scale communities to “extend” their presence into the nascent spaces of online interaction, fan culture is a rich and valuable site for continued investigation both in research on computer-mediated communications and media studies more broadly. And as such, due to its honesty, humour, entertaining approach, and theoretical rigour, this book makes a strong complement to such studies, and it contains a set of rich case studies of a significant phenomenon in communication practice.

Notes
1. “Slash” is fan fiction that includes same-sex romantic or sexual relationships among male characters in a given fictional text.
2. Although both groups Bury studies were considered “female fandoms,” they were organized as such only implicitly, through choice of topics, framing, and focus, and indeed one group contained at least one gay man. Though Bury’s sample populations were confirmed as being populations of women only, it is perhaps true that the larger groups from which the samples were culled contained others who were assuming the roles of women for their online personas. This alone points out the potential complexity of exploring issues of gender and sexuality in online spaces.
3. She does do this to a certain extent, though, in discussing how she opened her methodology up to her participants, putting her practices “on the line” to “develop relationships with [her] participants based on trust and respect” (p. 30) and to seek their feedback, a technique which has affinities with feminist emancipatory praxis. See also Lather, 1991.

References

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