

GLASGOW KISSES AND ACEHNESE REBELS: CONTEXTUALISING LOCAL IDENTITIES AND MASCULINITIES IN CYBERSPACE

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Introduction: Virtual Communities

John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* is a science fiction story of a futuristic world paralysed by genetic mutation. In a fundamentalist religious community where deviations are rooted out as abominations, the ability of a group of youngsters to communicate by "thought shapes" is a dangerous secret. When their telepathic ability is discovered, the group is hunted down. The epigraph to this paper reveals the thoughts of David Storm, the narrator of the tale, who can read the "thought shapes" of Rosalind, and thus can perceive "the real Rosalind", and love her in a much deeper way than the way in which most love is experienced in the world we live in today. As Dreyfus observes in *On the Internet*, "Artists see far ahead of their time" (Dreyfus 2001: 50). In many ways Wyndham's vision is already upon us, most noticeably if we compare the ability to share "thought-shapes" with the Internet-driven ability to communicate with people at opposite ends of the earth almost instantaneously, either through text or audiovisual images, or a combination of both.

However, there are some important limitations with the contemporary version of sharing 'thought-shapes'. For instance, to what extent can we - like David and Rosalind of *The Chrysalids* - perceive the 'real' identity of the person we are communicating with, say, in an Internet chat forum, where we have never met the person face-to-face and we don't know what they look like? Surely it is impossible to know the full story. On the Internet, where one's gender is theoretically fluid, real life reality has been transformed into virtual reality. Hence, the online environment is one where speech floats free of physically manifest persons. Unlike the world of face-to-face interaction, those we may engage with online might well be those "whose existence as concrete individuals one has no specific knowledge" (Calhoun 1991: 101). They appear to us online in a faceless, disembodied form (Waskul and Douglass 1997), and in an anonymous world of avatars and pseudonyms we are unable to reliably know what they might be like in real life.

Nevertheless, many online communicants would argue that they share a much greater understanding with their disembodied online friends and acquaintances than with their neighbours or work-colleagues. This is despite - or precisely because of - the fact that they may never meet face-to-face, or even share their 'real' names. According to Dreyfus,

some enthusiasts rejoice that, thanks to progress in achieving such telepresence, we are on the way to sloughing off our situated bodies and becoming ubiquitous and, ultimately, immortal. Others worry that if we stay in our rooms and only relate to the world and other people through the Net we will become isolated and depressed (Dreyfus 2001: 50-51).

Now that we can shop, do research, play games, meet new people, keep in contact with old friends and family and indeed anyone in the world electronically from the comfort of our own home and workplace, there are more and more questions being asked about the impact of the Web not only on our personal identity, but also on our social identity. Indeed, there has been much discussion of the ways in which the Internet and chat forums in particular are being used in a variety of ways to reconfigure conceptions of social community. According to Wellman and Gulia, much of this has been written in black-and-white terms: observers are either passionate enthusiasts or staunch critics (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). In other words, there has been a tendency to either write off virtual communities as escapist and destructive or to assert that the Internet is creating wonderful new emancipatory forms of community in a world where there is an underlying sense of loss of community. However, neither approach has been characterised by detailed ethnographic or participant observer studies of virtual communities. This is despite the growing evidence that self-reflexive ethnography and/or participant observation - where the researcher actively participates in the activities of the group itself - can provide a much more nuanced and insightful account of the community under observation, thus ensuring a more successful implementation of the Internet research (Kendall 1999). Our approach is based on participant observation, where the content and context of online posts - or texts - under discussion will be analysed in terms of what is commonly known as discourse analysis.

Masculinities and the Internet

Despite the boom in 'men's studies' over the last fifteen years, comparatively few questions have been asked of the ways in which men in particular represent themselves on the Internet, either in the West or in developing nations such as Indonesia. This is ironic, because up until quite recently, the Internet has been consistently considered as a male-dominated domain, where "the Internet is marked by its military origins and the white male

hacker world that spawned it" (Wajcman 2004: 4). Meanwhile, feminist analysis of cyberspace has focused on women, who have been consistently regarded as "a collective *other* defined against the male norm" (Parsonen 2002: 92). As a result, the dominance of men has been treated as the 'norm', and self-representations of men in virtual communities have been seen as unproblematic.

Commenting on Western cinema, Neale famously observed over twenty years ago that 'the images and functions of heterosexual masculinity within mainstream cinema have been left undiscussed' (Neale 1983). Over the last decade or so, this situation has been somewhat reversed (Craig 1992; Lehman 2001). However, in terms of the 'images and functions' of heterosexual masculinity within cyberspace, very little has been discussed, apart from clichéd references to the aggressive, authoritative or adversarial brand of masculinity all men supposedly take on in the virtual domain (Spender 1995; Kendall 2000). Similarly, Herring claims that cyberspace is characterised by male-dominant patterns of communication, including "androcentric" biases such as self-control, lack of emotion, assertiveness and rationality. As a result, Herring argues that cyberspace is likely to be a site that perpetuates "oppressive power arrangements that disadvantage women and non-adversarial men" (Herring 1996).

Addressing the lack of a masculine perspective on virtual communication is important, particularly because in the early years of research on the Internet it was routine to praise the gender-neutral possibilities of cyberspace. In the euphoria surrounding the early years of the Internet, much was made of the fact that cyberspace was theoretically gender-, race-, and class-blind. However, quite a few studies have since proven that online communication is very much a gendered affair (see, for instance, Turkle 1997; Wise 1997; Danet 1998; Bouderidis and Drakou 2000; King 2001; Thomson and Murachver 2001; Wajcman 2004). General communication habits have ensured that even in the most mundane interchanges on the Internet gender is an important element. Even though cyberspace is theoretically, in the words of O'Brien, "an otherwise gender-amorphous space", users of the Internet still overwhelmingly attempt to portray themselves as one of the two genders (O'Brien 1999; Marshall 2003). Cyberspace, as much as anywhere else, is gendered, and the study of online masculine behaviour, tempered by a contextualised focus on ethnographic detail (Pease and Pringle 2001), deserves much more scholarly attention.

Here we are interested in the man question: how do men interact online? In what ways does masculinity find expression in online forums? Is a sense of community weakened or enhanced by supposedly 'masculine' styles of communication, such as flaming? We examine these questions in an analysis of online behaviour that happens to touch on the issue of national or local identity. Furthermore, we also ask: are masculine styles of communication connected with the advocacy of particular versions of national identity? Analysis of the discussion suggests that masculine styles of communication may well be couched in references to hegemonic conceptions of national or local identity. Of course, to some this may sound a little socially deterministic. But nevertheless, it is our contention that men online often represent themselves through the utilisation of cultural stereotypes.

Furthermore, although Internet researchers such as Stone and Turkle would emphasise the fluidity and multiplicity of the online self (Stone, 1996; Turkle 1997), we would in turn like to emphasise that sex as biological gender remains the unquestioned basis for these multiple performative identities. In other words, following Butler (1993), we would argue that in the online context gender identity - or in this case an embodied masculine identity - is a function of performative production. Gendered performances - to be revealed shortly - enacting hegemonic masculinities are therefore carried out wilfully and consciously. Call it "performativity" or self-imposed "social determinism", our aim is modest: to merely ask "the man question" of men online.

Men, Avatars and National Identity

The first Internet chat forum to be discussed in this paper will be Cold as Stone, a forum ostensibly focussing on the music of a-ha, a trio of Norwegian musicians best known for their mid-1980s world-wide hit, 'Take On Me'. Like many Internet chat forums, Cold as Stone consists of members from all around the world. Countries represented include Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Holland, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, and the United States of America. Although there are officially over 200 members listed, only 20-30 people post messages regularly. There are a number of status identifiers attached to each user's posts, and the number of posts delivered also has an impact on one's level of status in the forum. For example, 'newbies' are newcomers with 0-25 posts, 'forumed' are members with 50-100 posts, 'truly forumed' are members with 100-500 posts, 'forum experts' have over 500 posts, 'forum gods' have over 1000 posts and 'forum freaks' have over 2000 posts. Members can also be awarded points for interesting or funny observations, or for whatever other reason, depending on the vote-giver. These keenly observed status identifiers are automatically placed below the username (or pseudonym) of each member's post.

Cold as Stoners are also visually represented by avatars, or 'user representations', which are defined by Webb as "flat two-dimensional boxed photographic or animated cartoon figures" (Webb, 2001). Technically, avatars are small jpg (joint expert photographic group) or gif (graphic interface format) images of 100x100 pixels or less, but depending on the online architecture of each site, these images can be slightly smaller or larger. Although not all Cold as Stone members have avatars, the vast majority of the members with some level of computer literacy do. These images appear alongside each post of that member, or in the signature box at the bottom of their post, and they often convey quite a great deal about the personality or mood of the poster. This is especially the case if a certain member changes their avatar to suit their latest mood or whim. However, some would argue that avatars

tell us very little at all about the participants they are meant to signify, as they are little more than crude stereotypes. For instance, according to Webb,

Avatars are normally, though not exclusively, humanoid in appearance, although some participants use animal representations (such as wolves, cats and lions). Humanoid avatars are heavily stereotyped along lines of gender and ethnicity. They usually appear as ethnically white with mundane aspects of masculinity and femininity being vividly marked out. Avatars are often significantly sexualized and glamorised (Webb 2001: 563).

Arguably avatar culture has developed exponentially in the years since Webb's article was written, as many avatars are now amazingly sophisticated, and they are as varied and heterogenous as the people who use them. We would also like to argue that on many occasions an avatar underscores the user's connectivity to their geographic location, thus performing an important role in local identity formation. Cold as Stone's Mortyman, for instance, uses an avatar of a Norwegian flag, obviously referring to his Norwegian citizenship. Another example is Northern soul, who for six months had an image of one of Norway's most famous natural attractions, the *Aurora Borealis*, or Northern Lights, as his avatar. Another avatar Northern soul briefly used - a moving cartoon image of Thor, a god of Norse mythology - also refers to Northern soul's Norwegian background, and may also be an oblique reference to his 'forum god' status. Sir Lancelot from Brazil uses a poignant image of a lonely and withered tree, as an expression of his feelings of geographic isolation, as well as an attempt to depict the feeling of 'saudades'. This Portuguese word can be translated as sadness, melancholy or pathos, and has been used on many occasions by Sir Lancelot and others to help describe the music of a-ha. Buffer DJ has an image of a swaying rap singer, Thompsoner has an image of a *Lord of the Rings* Nazgul, and Magician an image of - quite fittingly - a magician! In these latter examples we see masculine identity performed not so much in terms of locality, but rather in terms of one's desired online "persona". Both aspects of male online behaviour are, however, self-perpetuating, easily changeable, and are created, enacted and reconstructed on an ongoing basis. Even if one is not a rapper in real life, or not particularly nationalistic in real-life, or not particularly "evil" in real-life (ie: like a Nazgul), by utilising an avatar of a rapper or a fictional character or a flag of a certain nation, one creates a consistent and self-reiterating narrative of masculine identity. Thus we find that one's online identity is indeed "performed", or at the very least symbolically constructed.

The strong sense of local identity, not to mention a sense of community, is also engendered through various 'rituals' performed each week on the forum. These rituals include weekly threads such as 'Song of the Week', 'Video of the Week', 'Poll of the Week', 'Solo Song of the Month' and various games that can be played anytime, such as the 'Associations Game', the 'Lyrics Game' and most recently the 'National Associations Game'. Games such as these are played asynchronously and at any time of the day or night: one user responds to the previous user's comment, and so on. For instance, in the 'National Associations Game', if Brazilian Sir Lancelot is the author of the first post, then the following respondent must post a word, image or association related to Brazil, and so on. In a game such as this, clichés abound- for Sir Lancelot's Brazil, for instance, we see posts such as 'samba', 'World Cup Winners' and 'hot sex', and for Rolling Thunder of Holland we see 'tulips', 'windmills' and 'Amsterdam'.

It is in general forum repartee, however, that one's nation-state or local identity is often viewed as an important determining factor in understanding the context and culture of, in this case, men. For instance, in one thread Russ, an American, set up a poll to determine who is the 'real' Buffer DJ, a maverick firebrand from Scotland. Buffer's response is typically fiery, and also peppered with local references. Consider the following passage, which begins with an Irishman, Magician, warning the others of Buffer's possible response:

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?

Post by: Magician on May 11 at 19:44

But when he does [come back] he's going to be fighting mad (as only us Celts can). Remember, even the Roman Empire at it's peak couldn't conquer the Scots. They are tough Mother-F*****s. So some of you had better watch out.

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?

Post by: buffer dj on May 14 at 19:47

im still here but where is my friend russ hiding away in his little world of? if you lived in glasgow russ i would have gave you a big GLASGOW KISS....trust me ? come here mr puppy boy.....

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?

Post by: Russ on May 15 at 01:57

Woof!....heheheheh!

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?
Post by: buffer dj on May 15 at 03:16

i dont think you got that one?

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?
Post by: Magician on May 15 at 12:40

A Glasgow kiss isn't quite as romantic as it sounds!!!!!!1

Title: Re:Is Buffer really "Ivan admirer "in disguise?
Post by: Russ on May 16 at 20:03

Get over it!!!!

(sheesh!)

Besides, threats really don't work with me...But if it makes you happy, then go ahead.
And I know what a Glasgow kiss is too!

Drink some good beer and take a chill pill....Violence doesn't solve anything.
And..intimidation just doesn't work on some people.....

be good....

A "Glasgow Kiss" is usually defined as a head-butt, but sometimes is also used as a reference to a punch in the face. The fact that Buffer uses capital letters accentuates the aggressive tone, as the repeated use of capital letters is the virtual equivalent of shouting. Indeed, Buffer's threat reinforces Magician's statement – albeit a statement based on a particular cultural stereotype - that the Celts are indeed keen fighters, and as such they are men not to be trifled with.

Some commentators would consider Buffer's threats to be an example of the discourteous anti-relational phenomenon of "flaming". But flaming has also been regarded as a kind of play, or a kind of sporting relationship. As Baym observes, "flaming is a gendered form of relationship that can be enjoyed at an emotional distance" (1998). In contrast, we would argue that Buffer's display of 'manliness' is perhaps best understood in terms of the social and cultural specificities of his local context. In other words, Buffer's behaviour is as much an attempt to define his own online identity as it is a symbolic reflection *and* redefinition of his real-world identity. That is, as a proud - and somewhat aggressive – Glaswegian Celt. Of course, we need to be conscious of the "multiplicity" of masculine identities (Connell 1995), especially if we dare to make generalisations about Glaswegians, Celts or Scotsman. Nevertheless, we can argue that masculinities, and hegemonic masculinities for that matter, come into existence as people act in a certain way in a certain social setting.

The active production of cyber-masculinities in terms of hegemonic national identity suggests to us that Benedict Anderson's much-cited concept of "imagined" nationalism is extremely relevant in the context of cyberspace. Originally, Anderson coined the concept "imagined communities" to refer to constructions of nations and national identity - the dominant cultural identities of our time – in response to the rise of the printing press and the resulting compression of a sense of space and time from the nineteenth century onwards (Anderson 1983). More recently, with the advent of the increasing global flows characteristic of globalisation, coupled with the borderlessness of the Internet, the nation-state is said to be in decline (Burgess 2004). Nevertheless, we would argue that Anderson's thoughts on nationalism are equally applicable to cyberspace, and furthermore, in the online realm the concept of the nation-state, and a sense of nation and national cultural identity, is alive and kicking. This is especially the case when masculinities – often based on hegemonic masculine stereotypes - are constructed online.

In Internet forums such as Cold as Stone the relationship between off-line national cultural identity and online masculine behaviour is not only hinted at. In fact, in many cases it is made proudly and explicitly. The Norwegian Northern soul, for instance, who was briefly mentioned earlier, has no qualms in drawing upon stereotypical narratives of Norwegian hegemonic masculinity. On many occasions he represents himself in terms of the fearsome Vikings and their longboats, the heroic Norse mythology, and Norway's present-day role as an arbiter for peace and justice. For instance, in a thread discussing what one's greatest fear is, Northern soul's response is telling: "Vikings don't know about fear".¹ Besides his choice of avatar, Northern soul's user-name is also an oblique reference to his Scandinavian background, thus underscoring Wiley's observation that "From the first moments of

logging on, new users creatively craft ironically-intentioned or whimsically-concocted “handles” that replace everyday names” (Wiley 1995: 9).

In understanding Northern Soul’s consistently performed brand of cybermasculinity, and the dominant perception of Norwegian men, it is also important to consider that the three members of a-ha - who are of course Norwegian - are virtually worshipped as minor deities on the website², and understandably Norwegian men are held in very high regard. There are many threads praising the virtues and good looks of Scandinavian men in general, and Norwegian men in particular. Despite their bloodthirsty reputation, the Vikings are also enthusiastically defended, and the historical record corrected, when questioned. As observed by Jeff Hearn, “The nation state constructs men, and powerful men have historically constructed the nation-state” (Hearn 2001: 86). Yet, as Hearn also argues, “the specifics” of the relationship between men and their nation needs to be contextualised, especially when analysing “small and marginalised countries” (Hearn 2001, 86). The next section of this paper, briefly touching on the specificities of the relationship between an Acehnese man and the country he lives in, Indonesia, is perhaps a relevant case in point.

Contextualising ‘Rasters’ of Aceh

In an Internet chat forum such as Slank.com, which overwhelmingly consists of members of just one nationality, in what ways do representations of masculinity intersect with national and local identity? We would suggest that to answer such a question it might be best to collect a selection of ‘multiple’ masculine perspectives, thus reflecting Jones’ argument that “to have a holistic sense of our interactions (on-line and off-line) we must take good care to understand individuals and their relationships together” (Jones 1999: 5). However, due to space restrictions, our version of such a ‘personalised’ approach will be primarily focussed on the online behaviour of just one man, ‘Rasters’ of Aceh, a war-torn province of Indonesia.

Rasters is an intriguing character, not least because his online web of influence is quite vast. He runs his own blog or web diary, and he is an extremely active member of quite a few Indonesian-language chat forums. As a result, we can gauge a great deal about perceptions of local and national identity through the analysis of Rasters’ style of presentation and discursive activities. For the most part, this involves the examination of the creation and exchange of posts on several Indonesian-language Internet chat forums, including Slank.com and malesbanget.com. Like forums such as Cold as Stone, these communities primarily exist as interest groups - where each person has a similar unifying interest, such as being a fan of a certain rock-band - but they also ‘imagine’ themselves in unique and unpredictable ways, developing an identity all of their own.

Each of Rasters’ posts on Slank.com - a forum devoted to the discussion of Slank, an Indonesian hard-rock band - are distinguished by a hyperlink to his blog diary, an increasingly popular accoutrement amongst urban Indonesians. By clicking on Rasters’ profile, we soon learn that he has a lively sense of humour, and a very strong sense of identification with his local identity – his “Acehneseness”, as it were - in opposition to the dominant national identity. For instance, in Slank.com his location is listed as “not !d!OTnesia !!!”, and Rasters often comments on the ongoing separatist war in Aceh³, criticising the Indonesian military aggression in particular⁴. In early 2004 his avatar appearing to the left of each of his posts was an image of the rebel Acehnese flag, and most recently each of his posts has a signature drawing attention to the ongoing conflict in Aceh: “Save Aceh right now”.

It is when tempers flare and harsh words are uttered that we can see Rasters’ true colours, and indeed we can attempt to contextualise the ‘masculine’ nature of flaming. For instance, when a disaffected member of Slank.com complained about the way in which the forum had lost its fire and become more conservative over the passage of time, Rasters soon jumped in with his own version of affairs: “So you’ve just noticed this Mr.? From the very moment I joined this Slank forum, I’ve felt that (to be honest here) you’re not allowed to insult, belittle or criticise Slank! If you do, you’ll be gagged or censured, or even dragged off by the military and then silenced, or even worse, abused and banned! And don’t ever make a thread that Slank or the moderators don’t like, and don’t expect them to join in on that thread. Here you’re not allowed to speak too openly (like what you said), because here everyone has sold out – they’re all old men wearing ties you know – although there are one or two who are cool. As for me caring about being banned: before I used to, now I don’t give a damn!”⁵ Raster’s comments are deliberately provocative, and unashamedly inflammatory, in the sense that he is launching an unguarded attack on his fellow Slank fans.

Yet Raster’s personal politics, and his devil-may-care style of online behaviour, is very much tied in with his offline context. As observed by Webb, “cultural, as well as ethnic and gender-based prejudices abound in virtual world” (Webb 2001: 587). With his references to the euphemistic discourse characteristic of the Indonesian military, Rasters’ makes very subtle comparisons between his own marginal identity within the community of Slank.com users and the wider fate of the pro-Independence separatists of Aceh.

Conclusion

It can be argued that Rasters’ inflammatory display of ‘manliness’ - not unlike Buffer DJ’s aggressive ‘Glaswegian’ style of online behaviour - is best understood in terms of the social and cultural specificities of his local context. In other words, Rasters’ behaviour is as much an attempt to define or “perform” his own online masculine identity as it is a reflection of his real-world identity. That is, as a proud - and somewhat aggressive – Acehnese Indonesian.

Ultimately, however, we would argue that the popular belief that cyberspace is an independent reality, separate from off-line environments, must be discounted.

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¹ [<http://www.cdd.ee/forum/index.php?board=15;action=display;threadid=2538;start=0>], site accessed 18th September, 2004.

² There are many threads on Cold as Stone commenting on the good looks of the members of a-ha (Magne Furuholmen, Morten Harket, and Paul Waaktaar-Savoy). See, for example:

[<http://www.cdd.ee/forum/index.php?board=12;action=display;threadid=2039;start>], accessed May 18, 2004].

³ See, for instance, [<http://www.slank.com/album11/sladiskus2/viewtopic.php?t=644&start=0>], site accessed 26 July, 2004.

⁴ See, for instance, [<http://www.slank.com/album11/sladiskus2/viewtopic.php?t=1014&start=0>], site accessed 26 July, 2004.

⁵ [<http://www.slank.com/album11/sladiskus2/viewtopic.php?t=1097&start=0>], site accessed 20 July, 2004.