

Understanding Lesbian Fandom: A Case Study of the Xena: Warrior Princess (XSTT) Lesbian Internet Fans

by

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Abstract

This thesis is written to promote and pursue an understanding of lesbian fandom and its function on the Internet. It will demonstrate how a particular television text *Xena: Warrior Princess* (*X: WP*) and a dedicated online fandom ‘xenasubtexttalk’ (*XSTT*) of diverse lesbian fan membership gained empowerment and agency through their fan practices. Since the screening of the television fantasy series *X: WP* (1995-2001), there has been a marked increase in academic enquiry into lesbian fan culture on the Internet. This thesis contributes to the lesbian spectatorship of fandom with a specific interest in online fandom. This research suggests there are many readings of *X: WP* and the dedicated websites set up to discuss the series have increased during and post the series broadcast period. This study explores the contradictions, the gaps, and the differences between fan responses to the series, especially the lesbian discourse and fan fiction that developed during and after the television series ended. This investigation suggests that fan scholarship can obtain a new insight into lesbian Internet fan practices as a virtual space producing new lesbian fan online identities and discourses that challenge traditional forms of lesbian fandom. It does this by presenting three distinct, significant and interrelated layers of lesbian online textual engagement. While interrelated, these layers are separate and important as they each reveal new lesbian online fan performances of identity that challenge traditional performances of reading and writing habits of lesbian fans.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful Buddhist son Ethan, aged five, who was born in the midst of all my anxiety around this research and whose strong life force and beautiful smile kept me going throughout my journey.

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Introduction

This thesis offers a lesbian and feminist cultural reading of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (*X: WP* 1995-2001) and its lesbian Internet fandom from an online community ‘xenasubtextalk’ (*XSTT* 1998-present). In this online arena, three levels of textual engagement and discourse develop. The first layer of discourse is based on the subtext embedded in the text of the television series. For fans, the subtext is an ‘open secret’ of a lesbian relationship between the two main characters of the television series. The second layer is about discussions of this and is revealed and developed through the fans’ interviews, emails and bulletin board postings. This discourse relates to the open secret of the subtext and results in some of the fans’ “coming out” narratives, rites of passage, and confessional narratives in this discourse. Finally, the third layer of lesbian discourse is created through the lesbian fans’ Internet production of fan fiction slash writings about the two main characters of the series and their intimate sexual relationship. These three narratives reflect the fans’ lived experiences which are demonstrated throughout the thesis. Lesbian Internet fans re-read the television text of *X: WP*; appropriate the subtext, and discuss it in the online forums, and, finally, some of the lesbian fans from the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom write, publish, and distribute Internet fan fiction through the Xenaverse¹. The Xenaverse is an extension of the diegetic world of the show and this is the term I shall use to refer this wider community of fans. The three layers of lesbian discourses develop together and separately. They overlap and intersect as they are performed online thus becoming part of the lesbian Internet fans’ new online fan identities.

¹ ‘Internet fan culture is so intrinsic to the series...that aficionados have coined the term ‘Xenaverse’ to describe the virtual territory that has evolved around and includes the programme. The Xenaverse is a virtual universe encompassing everything relating to *X: WP*’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.10).

The online club *XSTT* was set up to discuss the show's subtext and was run by lesbian fans. In July 2001, *The Advocate*, a well-known American lesbian and gay magazine named the club *XSTT* as one of the top five in X: *WP* subtext sites. Crucial to the understanding of the development of lesbian Internet fandom is the subtext or 'Xena's subtext "talk" in the title of the club 'xenasubtexttalk' or *XSTT*.

When Renaissance Pictures premiered *X: WP* as a spin-off from *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* in September 1995, never could the commercial, cultural, and global triumph of this fantasy narrative have been imagined. MCA/Universal TV and MCA International went on to syndicate the show. The lesbian fans' objects of fandom are the two female protagonists of the *X: WP* series, Xena and Gabrielle. The role of Xena, the main protagonist, is played by Lucy Lawless, while the role of Gabrielle, her companion, is played by Renée O'Connor. The storyline follows the action adventures of this warrior princess, Xena, whose violent past does not allow her any peace of mind. Xena's mission is to try to make amends for all the violent acts she has committed in the past as a warlord. Accompanied by Gabrielle, she travels across many lands confronting obstacles on the way to absolve her past and finally gain salvation. The television series did not have an explicit subtextual message during the broadcast of the first few episodes. However, it did attract a small online lesbian audience at this stage; but later on in the first season, a bridge between the producers of the series and a developing lesbian Internet fandom began to emerge. At this stage, a self-identified "out" lesbian producer Liz Friedman was hired. Friedman who had worked as an associate producer on the *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* (1995-1998) helped enhance the magnetism of the *X: WP* show to the online lesbian

fans by encouraging the creators and writers to build upon the subtext of the show. Once the television company was aware of that its online audience consisted largely of a lesbian Internet community, the direction of the series changed forever.

X: WP became the first television series of its kind to actively encourage lesbian online fandom. After every show was aired, the audience's attention was drawn to the show's official online site which was now advertised in the final credits of the series, 'Xena was one of the first television shows to promote website use, advertising its website via Universal Pictures at the end of every episode' (Ross, 2008, p.38). After season two, the lesbian online fan audience was courted and targeted by the producers of the series. This culminated in the Studio requesting a lesbian Internet fan to write for an episode of the show, and I shall discuss this more in chapter five.

Initially, the show appealed to a diverse section of fans many of whom were traditional fans of fantasy and adventure. However, this changed when the Internet enabled lesbian fans who traditionally went unnoticed in fandom to come together in large numbers as a virtual community to develop their discourses around this show. Alongside the Studio's official website, *XSTT* developed as a meeting place or space to discuss what many lesbian fans perceived as the subtext of the television series. In this context, the subtext is the sexual intimate relationship between Xena and her companion, Gabrielle.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand lesbian fandom of *X: WP* and its migration from traditional forms of fandom to lesbian Internet fandom and its development of new lesbian fan identities. I will analyse the discourses of *XSTT* fandom by using a

small case study of fourteen fans belonging to this particular lesbian online fan club. This study was carried out over a period of twelve months and sequential interviews took place online.

I have used a qualitative hybrid methodology that combined participant observation, ethnography, and online interviews. This combination of research methods constantly demanded review due to the diversity of the fans, as well as the fast-changing online technologies. The result, however, was a reflective and unique synthesis of research methods, which was innovative for its time (2001). In order to understand the fans' appropriation and consumption of the text and their communication through what I suggest is a new discourse, it is imperative that the process of developing their off and online social and cultural identities be recognised as part of the anxieties and tensions that their confessional narratives sometimes demonstrate when discussing their object of fandom. So, while agreeing with the broader frameworks of critical analyses within audience research, this study's first commitment is to the fans as social subjects and their performances and experiences, remembering as Miller & Glassner point out:

Those of us who aim to understand and document others' understandings choose qualitative interviewing because it provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects, while granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality (1997, p. 100).

As this thesis captures the beginnings of online research, I suggest that this aspect has its role to play in the study of lesbian Internet fandom. It should be noted that the discussions, conversations and "chats" online were recorded in real-time and because of this, they retain their potency and freshness (yet are inevitably dated within the historical context). The journeys and life experiences of the fans also explore many timeless issues but remain particular. These interviews and studies offer original and

determining insights into the development of lesbian online fandom in the relative infancy of the Internet, and, as such, offer a unique, significant contribution to lesbian online fandom research. This was an exciting time to research the new and expanding online worldwide web. I hope that my observations and challenges to create a hybrid methodology will encourage future researchers to explore new ways of creating online practices of qualitative research.

I chose the fans for the study at random or rather they chose to come forward; these were the fans who responded to the bulletin board postings about my research. Yet, after many visits to the online fan site, I noted that of the three hundred and more members, this fandom was a heterogeneous group. The sample group I interviewed consisted of old, young, married, single, bi-sexual, heterosexual, previously heterosexual, lesbian, potentially lesbian, gay, disabled, able-bodied, and single parents. All these fans belonged to the *XSTT* online fandom. (More detail about these fans is given in the methodology chapter of the thesis.) I believe this information helps bear out my explanation of the heterogeneity of the sample.

I have included in my sample of discussions taken from my online investigations a fan who was involved in domestic violence: a young fan who had very basic education and little employment prospects; a fan who was in denial about her same-sex attraction as well as being oppressed by her religious upbringing; a fan who was badly burned in a fire and was confined to a wheelchair and living in a rehabilitation unit at the time of the interviews; a fan with four children who left her marriage of twenty-five years taking her children to travel a thousand miles and live with another female fan, and a young fan whose writing of fan fiction developed along the same lines as

her sexual identity and its transformation. I will show how these different readings from these varied fans and their fan practices contribute to larger questions of personal transformation, building interactive identities, empowerment and agency for the lesbian Internet fan. I will also demonstrate how this leads to the development of the third level of lesbian discourse that demonstrates a challenge to the traditional notion of a lesbian fan identity and lesbian fan practice such as fan fiction writing.

What is crucial in this study is that the television series of *X: WP* cuts across a number of genres such as action, buddy, romantic, comedy, fantasy, feminist, women's series, soap operas (serialised) and therefore it cannot be critiqued simply in terms of television. I will suggest first that the lesbian subtext is appropriated by the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans. I will then look at how it is read and how this reflects and recognises real life situations for the lesbian fans. I will go on to explain how a section of lesbian online fandom developed through the *XSTT* fan club, and how, through the fans' Internet responses, the lesbian fans of *XSTT* were drawn to particular *X: WP* episodes in their discussions. Finally, I will discuss the production and distribution of the lesbian Internet fans' erotic and s/lash fiction writings online. I will investigate how these all grew from fandom such as that found in *XSTT* and the Xenaverse.

The fans mentioned in this thesis, I suggest, have their own personal individual and collective journeys within their chosen path of the fan club. According to Noelle Collier, Christine Lumadue and H. Ray Wooten 'Lesbians in the process of sexual identity formation look to social contacts for information about and the validation of their developing lesbian identities' (2009, p.582).

In this study, the subtext definition adheres specifically and strictly to Xena's and Gabrielle's sexual relationship. The context in which a lesbian subtext is used within *X: WP* was first defined as having been given a special "Xena twist" on the Alternative TV news group's website², sometime during the show's first season. Alternative TV was set up to support the subtext being developed by Internet fan groups such as *XSTT*. With regard to the term, Xena twist, this was used to describe *X: WP* production team's unusual practice of intentionally placing subtle indications of a lesbian relationship between Xena and Gabrielle into the show. *X: WP* is 'groundbreaking in that it provides an example to creators of television programmes of a way to make use of the space inherent in television texts, to present issues of sexual and gender diversity, and it provides audiences with the possibility of thinking about sexual orientation in a more fluid way that transcends rigid identity categories' (Bennett, 1999, p.1)³.

In addition to textual analysis, a number of theoretical perspectives such as audience research, ethnography, qualitative research, and discourse analysis will be used to understand the concept of constructing a new lesbian online fan identity. It should be acknowledged that this case study of European and North American fans is comparatively small: I will not be presenting my data as empirical evidence of how 'all' lesbian fandom operates online. Rather, I solicit a consistent series of detailed responses from my participants, enabling the validation of this small case study to further inform our understanding of lesbian Internet fandom in general. It is important to emphasise that for this investigation, the fans' online pseudonyms are used and I

² See more information on the 'Xena twist' by reading 'Xena: The Subtext FAQ' for alt.tv.xena Xenite.Org 2008-05-27 [online]. <http://www.xenite.org/faqs/subtext.html> [Accessed 12 September 2008].

³ See Bennett, K.E. (1999) 'Xena: Warrior Princess: Desire Between Women and Interpretive Response' [online] 'Xena' <http://www.drizzle.com/Kathleen/xena/html> [Accessed June 2001].

am stating that the practices of online fandom are now in the public domain, and can thus be viewed at any time. Authenticity is discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter, but it is important to state that available guidelines at the time of my research were basic and a rarity⁴.

All the fans' conversations remain unaltered except that the font has been changed to 'Times Roman' for easier reading. Most of the conversations took place in real time through the instant messenger service of the fan club *XSTT*. The spelling and grammatical errors will remain as part of the lived experiences of the fans and to contribute to the illustration of the immediacy of their online personas. My own spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are included in the data gathered. I would now like to set out a brief summary of what chapter one contains, and how the discussions and literature reviews of traditional and contemporary fandom are integral to an understanding of the broader historical perspective of lesbian Internet fandom.

Chapter One

The literature review of chapter one will examine the key debates within the contemporary history of fandom as fandom moved online and traditional notions of consumption and production were challenged. Thus, the classic cultural studies' expression of fan practice based on the Marxist model no longer holds credence given the age of media convergence. (Marx's theory of historical development suggests that the mass media follow the gratification of the dominant class and therefore reflect

⁴ While there is now an increased offering of guidelines for the online researcher, during my study many issues were experienced trying to get written consent. Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart (2000) point out, '[w]ritten consent is associated with issues of authenticity. Can a researcher be sure that emailed consent forms come from the appropriate person? (p.49). The virtuality of online research is a challenging area, which will come up again and again.' They suggest, 'until online methods are more mainstream, it is the individual researcher who must take responsibility for convincing others of the authenticity and credibility of the medium when for instance, seeking informed consent'. Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*, CA: Sage. pp.49-51.

their immediate interests. Given the advancement of information technology and the availability of the tools of new technology, the mode of production and its ownership is no longer the domain of a/the dominant class in society.) In the case of *XSTT*, it is the transmediation⁵ of textual, visual and audio narratives from television to the written textual, video, and audio narratives on the Internet, which disputes the Marxist model. What the lesbian online fans of *XSTT* do is to judge every expression of consumerism by blurring the boundaries between production and consumerism⁶. This suggestion applies to the lesbian fans interviewed as they create new online lesbian fan identities through their textual connections with other fans. They also pursue this through their re-writing of a sexual relationship between Xena and Gabrielle in their fan fiction practices and in some cases they are given to rewriting their own sexual relationship narratives simultaneously with the characters onscreen.

Chapter Two

Chapter two will give an insight into the methods used and why I suggest they are important in terms of contributing towards lesbian Internet fandom and fandom in general. From a social and cultural point of view, when “surfing” the Internet, the myriad virtual communities of fandom outweigh in sheer numbers and complexities any notion of what was once perceived as traditional fandom.

Researchers over the last decade have had to review the different approaches of methodology when using the Internet and this has seen the development of software

⁵ This concept is discussed by Henry Jenkins (2006) who argues that the individual media text is outdated and that every form of text is infused with many other texts, this results in the researcher having to achieve a more intricate understanding of the fluid nature of media.

⁶ Again new modes of production and ownership show how the classic model of Marxism and its concept of the ruling class is no longer adequate for answering the questions of mass media and cultural production, especially in the development of the World Wide Web and the Internet and the convergence of media.

packages for both qualitative and quantitative research. New software is rapidly being developed to support Internet ethnographic research as we constantly search for rigorous ways of pursuing social and cultural behaviour within the use and practice of new technologies. Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) research is still very much in its infancy and the problems and experiences in this field are highlighted in this methodology chapter. This chapter explores a mutual learning and developing experience for the fans and for the researcher. Using a more flexible method of computer-mediated research in terms of open-ended questions and tailoring conversations to individuals which occurred in real-time, I was able to eventually pool together interviews and texts gathered from collective postings and emails of lesbian online fans to produce a rich discourse of lesbian online fandom.

Chapter Three

Foregrounding the empirical data of the lesbian fans and my analyses of conversations and interviews, I will explore and interpret the fans' responses to what Jeanne Hamming (2001) refers to as the 'open secret'. The open secret in the context of this thesis can be defined as the limitation of the expression of same-sex desire, its denial and repudiation. However, I will also define the open secret as the subtext of the television series that the fans use as part of the pleasures of re-reading. I will demonstrate how the lesbian Internet fans are aware of how the subtext becomes part of a tactic used by the Television Studio to target them as an audience, and how, as a result, fans are able to harness their own productive talents to create further discourses online to promote *X: WP* in terms of the lesbian relationship between its two main female characters.

Chapter Four

This chapter seeks to enrich questions relating to the cultural struggle over meaning, and how lesbian fans are given a place in the world by their online lesbian fan practices. I will explore two extracts of episodes of *X: WP* and by introducing and connecting more empirical data from the lesbian fans online, I will highlight the cultural struggle that is taking place, and how the fans use their fandom to make purposeful meaning out of their everyday lives and activities. The investigation will deal critically with issues that affect the way lesbian fans move from being local viewers who read the subtext as lesbian consumers rooted in ‘traditional fandom’ to interactive global users who then create new online lesbian identities and discourse when conversing with other lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT*.

Chapter Five

This chapter explores the development of lesbian online fandom and its creativity in writing fan fiction online. It takes a feminist approach to the rewriting and repositioning of the lesbian subject one stage further. I will argue that the reading positions of lesbian fans are often established through the original canonical adaptations of the text and then, as part of an extra-textual fan practice, the fans add or transform the text into new lesbian dialogues and discourse within the production of fan fiction writing.

I have chosen a number of short extracts from my interviews with the fans from *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans which demonstrate the discussions of the fans’ around the introductions of Alternative Fan Fiction and S/lash fan fiction, and how they developed an interest in these fictions in their own reading and writing of fan fiction.

These extracts and interpretations illustrate the complexity of the dynamics of the new online identities and desires of the lesbian fans. I will also include two short extracts from fan fiction writing on the Internet: one from a *XSTT* fan and one from a Xenaverse fan. The fans also show a need to recreate therapeutic cultural images or representations of themselves through the characters they write, rewrite or create – however this is just one function of their agency and empowerment.

Chapter Six

This chapter considers the growth of lesbian online fan fiction, and how this is supported by professional and non-professional writers and authors who discuss and review and encourage the writing of lesbian fan fiction with the fans. This chapter explores ways in which lesbian Internet fans develop away from the traditional ways of reading and writing fan fiction to building aspects of their own creative playfulness as well as their liberating experiences into new fan practices. Finally, I will look at how beta reading and the editing of fan fiction and its distribution on the Internet is shaping the future of our understanding of lesbian Internet fandom and is leading to many exciting and progressive streams of production. *XSTT* as a lesbian Internet fandom has ensured not only a form of longevity for the relationship of Xena and Gabrielle through the online community but its fan practices also abandon traditional forms of fan practices with regard to fan fiction writing. The lesbian fans of *XSTT* have challenged and been effective in moving forward the social and cultural agenda in respect of lesbian Internet fan practices.

CHAPTER ONE: THE KEY DEBATES WITHIN THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY FANDOM

In *The Adoring Audience, Fan Culture and Popular Media* Lisa Lewis claims:

Fans get a bad press. The familiar images of fandom are loaded with negative stereotypes and labels of deviancy. Yet in many ways we are all “fans” and fans remain the most visible and dedicated of any audience. What defines and motivates this intense admiration? (1992, p.1).

As a fan myself, I suggest we respect, admire, and desire the object of our fandom. We distinguish our object of fandom and form our commitments. By endeavouring to understand the fan impulse, we may ultimately move towards a greater understanding of ourselves and this thesis aims to uncover the positive celebratory aspect of lesbian Internet fandom. As a topic of critical enquiry, contemporary fandom reveals complex contradictory cultural and social paradigms often because it is working with postmodern ambiguous texts such as that of *X: WP*. Thus, many of the key debates within contemporary fandom contain ideas that are interrelated, overlap, and cross over into many disciplines. In order to trace the history of contemporary fandom, I shall begin with the position taken by academics towards the study of fandom and its relationship with the fan. I will look at the emergence of online fandom from the world of traditional contemporary fandom. I shall look at the changing realm of the text and its advancement through new media tools and the synergy of television with online fandom.

Arising from the examination of the historical text of television I will look at key debates in resistant reading, ethnography as agency, and cultural capital. Pertinent to the rise of lesbian Internet fandom and linked to contemporary fandom are the debates of feminist intervention in audience research and the coining of ‘telefeminism’. Science fiction fandom online has attracted academic research with regard to social

and political challenges of the fan from within the LGBT⁷ fan community. Many observations in this area are relevant to lesbian Internet fan identity. As part of this review, I will draw on the historical findings of leading fan theorists (Bacon-Smith, 1992, 2000; Fiske, 1987, 1989, 1992; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992, 1998; Penley, 1997). With regard to online fandom, I will also look at its significant challenge to traditional fandom through recent debates of identity construction, to support my argument of three overlapping performances of the online fans which generate new lesbian online fan identities. These debates have been pursued by other cultural theorists (Berger, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Cooper, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; McHarry, 2010; Parrish, 2007; Spierings, 2007; Ward, 2008).

Academics with positive approaches to fandom are still at the forefront of research in this area. While fan narratives have greatly increased with the migration of fandom onto the Internet, academia still finds itself in an uneasy relationship with negative stereotyping of fans within the media. Harris and Alexander (1998) argue for an ‘understanding of why fandom has a fundamental and widespread social role in contemporary western society’ (p.5). In 1992, Henry Jenkins launched a seminal investigation into fans and fandom as ‘an alternative social community’ discussed in his book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. This book, by his own admission, has become a sort of beginners’ guide to a fan audience, ‘a sort of “how-to” book’ on fandom (Jenkins, 2006, p.15). Jenkins articulates his identification with fans through his fervent appeal to discourage the infantile attitude of both scholars and the media when discussing or representing fan identity. Jenkins’ book was written at a time when the stereotypical images of fans circulating amongst the

⁷ Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender community.

general public came from the media depicting fans as being obsessive and bordering on the insane⁸. Mark David Chapman, who was obsessed with the Beatles' singer, John Lennon, and who eventually killed him, was someone the media were inclined to relate to when discussing fans or fandom⁹.

In addition to Jenkins' key work, scholars have continued to raise consciousness of the pervasiveness of image of the "odd" fan. Other leading fan theorists have challenged a psychological notion of fans as being observed as being "lacking" or deficient in their pursuit of fandom and have continued to bring fan scholarship to the fore (Bennett, 1999; Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, 2003; Hamming, 2001; Hills, 2002, 2001; Jenkins, 1995, 2006; Jenson, 1992; Pullen, 2000). However, puerile attitudes towards fandom persist. The reading of *X: WP* and its fandom also reveal persistent unenlightened attitudes as Hamming (2001) observed in this description of a live Internet "chat" interview that took place between a Xena fan and the actress Hudson Leick who played Callisto (Xena's nemesis). Hudson Leick is asked a question by a fan, "At the end of 'Sacrifice Two' an episode of *X: WP* when Callisto is stabbed by Xena, she drags her hand down Xena's body. Your interpretation of that scene was very sensual. Was it improvised by you and [Lucy Lawless] or was it written this way in the script?" Hudson Leick responds, "I just wanted to feel her up" ("hudsonchat")¹⁰. While Leick's answer must be read as snide, as well as ironic, it demonstrates a type of "giving the fan what she wants to hear quality". On one hand, Leick's response indicates a deliberate antagonism, and on the other, suggests that she

⁸ To stereotype means to identify an individual on the basis of a limited set of characteristics that may be typical of the group that person belongs. Stereotyping is not inherently negative, but by attributing a few characteristics to all members of a given group it limits the way members of a group may be perceived, and generally serves to disadvantage people on that basis.

⁹ Mark Chapman shot and killed John Lennon outside Lennon's apartment in New York in 1980.

¹⁰ See Articles on Xena: Warrior Princess (no date) [online] <http://www.xenafan.com/hudsonchat.txt> [Accessed Oct 2001].

is willing to participate in the ongoing discourse about the show's lesbian narrative' (Hamming, 2001, p.5). The response by Leick towards the fans works to continue the exchange of meaning with regard to Xena and Gabrielle's sexual relationship and the *Xenite*¹¹ fan community remains largely immune to this form of displacement.

Supporting Jenkins' ethnographic approach to fandom to try to rid the notion of pathology in terms of fans in general, I argue that two decades after his findings not much has changed in terms of fans being seen as "strange". With this in mind, one of my aims with this thesis is to allow fans to "speak for themselves". By foregrounding the primary data of the communications of the *XSTT* fans, I hope to make a contribution to the body of fan literature. While some notions about fandom have remained entrenched, fan theory has enjoyed some committed dynamic explorations. I will now look at the work of some earlier academic fans and some more recent scholars who have explored the migration of fandom to the online arena.

From Traditional Fandom To Online Usenet Fandom

Within the contemporary history of fandom it is important to define 'traditional fandom.' I will refer to a definition by Henry Jenkins (1992) who envisaged it as a movement that challenged predictable modes of consumer culture. Traditional fandom's roots lay in the notion that fans had no direct access to the field of cultural production. Fans did not own the means of production but through re-reading and re-writing they could challenge the reading of a text whether written, visual or audio. One of fandom's main streams of communication was the fanzine and this was primarily hand-printed, and later electronically printed. However, the Internet saw the migration of the basic amateur publication from a small amount of electronically or

¹¹ *Xenite* is the name given to a fan of *X:WP*.

hand-printed fanzines to a copious production of professional fan fiction narratives appearing on the Internet every day. Textual communication online is often interactive and empowering for the user. It is a far cry from early forms of traditional contemporary fandom which did not involve so many interactive discussions between fans. Earlier research on audiences, as discussed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), challenged the notion of fans or audiences as being passive. They looked at surveys that were carried out on the effects of the media on an audience, and how a viewer's behaviour might be altered through the use of the media. In addition, research was pursued into what contemporary audiences understood about how the message was given, and how it was received, and how the text was used by audiences.

The more recent scholarship of Collier et al., explores the two television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (dir. Josh Whedon, 1997) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (dir. Robert Tappert, 1998) and their interactive fandom online. Collier and others' work documents human behaviour in terms of the lesbian fans' emotional investment in fandom and in particular in their 'objects of desire' or the characters within these two contemporary television series. New debates about identity construction incorporating online fandom and in particular lesbian online fandom deal with identity development. Scholars have centred their work on identity and sexuality, and how it has been presented as a learning process for lesbians and transgender online fan communities (Collier et al., 2009; Cooper, 2010; Edwards, 2010).

Collier and others, as well as Cooper and Edwards, explore how individuals define themselves and the values they give to these definitions as they view messages from television and other media products. They look at how they include some of the symbolic content or coding of the media products into their own everyday lives.

Minority identities are discussed in the new debates arising from television, the Internet and fandom, especially those of homosexuality and lesbianism. These debates confirm that television and on-screen images play an extremely important role in how lesbians, homosexuals and transgender people envisage themselves functioning in a wider social and cultural environment.

Postmodernism and intertextuality have also been explored by academics such as Berger (2010), McHarry (2010), and Parrish (2007)¹². Richard Berger illustrates and explores the pleasures of s/lash fan fiction writing for homosexuals on the Internet through the notion of its postmodern content that supports deferred online endings and intertextuality. Fan readers and writers online continue to overturn the canonical structures of a recognisable television series or popular movie by repeatedly adding or subtracting couplings from the original television narratives such as *Star Trek* (1966-). The fans create sexually explicit situations within the fan fiction storylines. While this has been done by fans since the sixties, this process changed dramatically in the nineties with the arrival of online fan fiction. Online fan fiction does not follow the structure of traditional story telling. In traditional story telling, there are ‘endings’, or a ‘conclusion’ to a sequel. Within online fan fiction because of the process of the characters continually being re-written, online fan fiction does not contain peak moments or a climax because the stories become never-ending.

In his research, Berger (2010) refers to a website called Fanfiction.net (2009) and states that on this site, there are over ‘1,624 Xena: Warrior Princess (1995-2001) stories’ in which the main characters are depicted as sexually practising lesbians (p.179). This figure, in its thousands, supports the continued growth of the Xena

¹² See [online] Parrish, Julie, J. (2007) (in press) ‘Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction’ PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh. [Accessed March 2010].

online lesbian fan fiction. Berger's study, 'Out and About: Slash and Re-imagined Texts', bears relevance to this thesis with the argument that it is within the process of both reading and writing online fan fiction that the fans derive their most pleasurable experiences of fandom. The practice of reading and writing online is what reveals the three layers of lesbian discourse that helps sustain the fans' developing lesbian identities and suggests the 'normalising' of the lesbian experience in a positive and encouraging way.

The phenomenon of the Internet touches many fields of debate from cultural capital to audience research as well as constructed identities and sexual developments within online discussions and fan fiction reading and writing. In order to give a context to the emergence of lesbian Internet fandom, I shall now review how the text in traditional fandom is central to my developing argument of the appearance and growth of the three layers of lesbian online discourse and new lesbian fan identities. The next section will look at how the text *per se* transgressed in terms of its significance to fandom and the *XSTT* lesbian fandom.

The Productive Text in Fandom

Productive text was explored through its connection to the medium of television. Extra-textual fan activities around television opened up the debate for scholars. Camille Bacon-Smith's account of women fans and their extra-textual fan activities such as fan fiction writing in her book, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992) reveals a community of women who engaged in productions of literature, art, and criticism by utilising their favourite television programmes and stars. Through their productions of writings, the fans were able to create different narratives that changed the characters' identity and personalities.

Bacon-Smith's research showed that it was not the text that was the priority but what the fans did with the text afterwards that gave it cultural meaning for the fans and helped the fans to gain empowerment. A popular fan activity for the fans was the production of fanzines which were discussed and distributed by other fan members.

Often texts in contemporary fandom are discussed and read in the very many diverse and lively forums which appear online and off line: these forums might be in the form of book clubs, radio book clubs, mass reads or blogs on the Internet or even in television productions themselves. In the case of the highly popular UK terrestrial television chat show *Richard & Judy* (2001-2008) texts were read or viewed by individuals or a collective audience and later discussed during the television series and further in online forums before and after the shows, thus adding to the cultural structure of meaning. Danielle Fuller's (2002)¹³ work on reading and writing communities as a collective experience is opening up new avenues in the understanding and contemporary use of texts. My understanding of her work is that the 'text' is not just about the texts that are of a canonical or literary academic value, but about how readers and writers, especially women, form communities that give them agency and encourage them to explore their reading habits against the backdrop of the workings of power structures. At times, some communities' reading and writing habits are formed within social, geographical, racial and gender structures of inequalities. Fuller's investigations¹⁴ are continuing (at the time of writing) into what is embedded in women's reading and writing practices, and how cultural productions

¹³ Fuller, D. (2002) 'Critical friendships: Reading women's writing communities in Newfoundland,' in 'Women's Studies International Forum', *Science Direct*. 25:2.

¹⁴ See Fuller, D. (2007) 'Beyond the Book: Researching Reading in an Event-Based Culture.' [podcast] 20 November. See also [online] http://ah.brookes.ac.uk/podcasts/item/danielle_fuller_beyond_the_book. [Accessed 5 May 2009].

add to narratives of the women's self-reflected lived experiences as part of how women account for the world around them.

By the late nineties, research had shifted towards looking at fans who 'not only play radically with texts, they actively control them' (Abercombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.31). So what caused such a shift in fandom to take it from the passive to the active fan subject? Inquiry began into the meaning fans were giving to texts as they actively read them. Sociologist Stuart Hall's (1990) influential cultural research analyses of media audiences, and how audiences used a form of resistant reading, or 'reading against the grain' as it is commonly referred to in cultural studies, was an important step forward in audience research.

Hall's work helps us understand how culture becomes a process through which people make their experiences and activities or performance of ordinary life meaningful. Hall's encoding/decoding model was first published in 1973 and was used for analysing audiences and texts. Hall rejected textual determinism, for him encoding and decoding were moments within the application of reception and communication of a text. Hall's model was adapted to apply to resistant reading in fandom. Resistant reading in fandom was becoming a growth area in research which was slowly being developed, and it will also form part of my focus in raising questions about the context and shape of audiences or fan activity with *XSTT*. I will now examine how resistant reading was theorised.

Resistant Reading

One of the first in the field of fan theory to explore resistant reading was Jenkins (1992) when he adapted and coined Michel de Certeau's (1984)¹⁵ term 'textual poaching' as a way of looking at how fans appropriated certain texts for their own use. Jenkins explored this concern of text appropriation and its use in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) in how and why fans deconstruct and dismantle the text of mainstream narratives. Jenkins continued to build on the fans' pleasure in the text and raised further questions as to whether fans and the audience are free and creative in the readings of texts or actually conditioned far more by the production process and the cultural and media industries¹⁶. Questions of power structures in mediated messages, and how the fans through their resistant readings was further explored in Hamming's (2001) article 'Whatever Turns You On: Becoming A Lesbian and the Production of Desire in the Xenaverse'. Hamming questioned Jenkins' earlier work which fails to explore the route taken by fans that involves a form of collaboration between the fans and the media industry to produce a text that has multiple readings, thus adding to the fans' recreation. For Hamming, Jenkins' problem lies in the earlier notion that fanzines and fan fiction writing are not just 'commercial commodities', and that the fans' emancipation for Jenkins constitutes the fanzine, and that for him, it is the art of "textual poaching," that gives the fans their creative subversive ability to resist the commercial narrative. However, in defence of Jenkins' earlier work on the resistant model, Hamming points out that his writing predates the use of the Internet and its 'burgeoning popularity' as a resource for fandom (2001, p.5).

¹⁵ Jenkins' use of the term "textual poaching" drawing on the earlier work of Michel de Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, London: University of California Press.

¹⁶ See 'The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Popular culture in the Digital Age', in *Red Rock Eater Digest*. [online] Talk presented at the University of Michigan, spring 1998.
<http://commons.somewhere.com/rre/1998/The.Poachers.and.the.Sto.html> [Accessed Oct 2002].

In Jenkins' (1995) work with John Tulloch entitled, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*, Jenkins partially readdresses and reassesses the notion of the text and its resistant reading by asserting that:

The fans feel a strong identification with the programmes, the characters, the producers and their ideological conceptions, even when they feel strong frustrations with the failure of the producers to create stories they would like to see told (1995, p.263).

Jenkins argues in his chapter 'Queers and Star Trek' that fans remain loyal to the cultural industries even though on occasion there is not much response to their pleas to have a collaboration of ideas with the creators/producers of the show. Most of the time the fans' desired plotlines were greeted with silence. Fans have always questioned the content and representations of certain characters within television narratives and storylines. Gene Roddenberry the creator and main writer of *Star Trek* (1966-) refused to take the fans' letter-writing campaigns to include more LGBT representation seriously, this only added to the latter's disgruntlement. The displeasure of this refusal became the driving force that evoked a creative resistant reading that, in turn, offered some fans a form of empowerment and agency. What Tulloch and Jenkins are saying is that fans and fandom facilitate ways of dealing with social and cultural issues such as isolation, alienation, disagreement and despondency through their fan practices, which constitute a form of resistant reading. Within the community of lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* and other lesbian online fandom, the historical notion of a traditional resistant reading is exchanged for more of an alliance with the media and cultural industries, for fans are able to gain empowerment and agency through this form of collaboration. I shall now turn my attention to researchers and ethnographers who were also looking at new means of data collection because they were keen to uncover more insights into the audience. Ethnography was being

developed and began to change in innovative ways giving the audience agency in terms of the reading habits.

Ethnography as Agency

At the end of the seventies and early eighties, cultural studies' investigations were based on the postmodern thinking that referred to what was academically known as a 'crisis of representation'. These ideas were explored by cultural sociologists who investigated the notion of mass production and its technological innovation exploring audience reactions which produced some progressive findings (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984). The postmodern expression 'crisis of representation' shifted the focus of mass production and mass culture with its theories of universality to one of uncertainty in which the representation or message from the media and its reception by the individual was seen as having various points of view during any interaction. Ien Ang, David Morley, and Janice Radway wanted to challenge the notions of a mass audience. Their pioneering studies of audiences and media texts and especially that of Morley (1980) were considered groundbreaking in helping our understanding of both audiences and fandom. They looked at how a particular text was received, and how the messages were acted upon by the audience.

Cultural studies research took another turn when analysing the media or media audiences as the new ethnographic approach of sociologists and cultural theorists drew attention to the manner in which audiences could be researched in a way that lead to 'unexpected' results. These results were developed from an anthropological concept of observing human behaviour to the development of an ethnography that welcomed the oral narrative of the community or individual under investigation.

Audience Research and Ethnography

In ethnography, the audience itself was beginning to be recognised as active interpreters of various texts. The audiences were allowed to “speak for themselves” – changing the concept of the researcher being the expert within the study. This thesis traces the development of this active practice with regard to the lesbian fans of *XSTT* and their dialogue as categorised within the themes of a confessional, coming out and rites of passage online lesbian discourse.

Key researchers in this field, such as Ang and Radway, highlighted ethnographic qualitative study, however, their individual incentives for their research projects each came from different departures in terms of political, social and economic structures and interests. Meanwhile Morley’s study came out of a concern for a cultural studies research notion that was inadequate and was built around the passivity of the audience. Morley moved towards a more engaged view of audiences that encompassed Marxism and feminist theories when dealing with media that gave significant power to how audiences transmitted and received texts. His innovative ethnographic research published in his book *The ‘Nationwide’ Audience* (1980) was one of the first studies of the media in the cultural studies tradition. *Nationwide* was a BBC news magazine programme televised in the sixties and seventies. What was clear from this investigation was that Morley challenged the image of a “mass” audience. His work used focus groups whose findings demonstrated and opened up the path towards ethnographic investigations in audience research in the broadest sense. These groups demonstrated how an audience’s response to Morley’s questionnaires brought about many different experiences, both culturally and socially, and this became a substantial part of how the groups perceived certain texts. The difference in Morley’s approach to the text was that he saw its limitations when trying to view it purely as a

Polysemic text. His research provided new findings demonstrating how the text of the television series, *Nationwide*, skewed and restricted its audience's possibilities for interpreting the text presented to them.

Morley realised that programmes like *Nationwide* held little meaning for groups with the least social and cultural capital in how it reflected their everyday lives. Many of the social and culturally excluded minority groups and individuals turned to the more market-oriented programmes of TV companies and networks searching for more "human" stories that would have relevant meaning to their lives.

The media and audience research of the scholars Ang and Radway, in parallel to that of Morley, moved away from an American concept of the behavioural aspect of social science that dealt with surveys and quantitative research. It still held the audience at the centre of its study but continued into more of a critical theorisation of ethnography using interview questions that dealt with ideology and the notion of a crisis of representation. Ethnographic research presented many insights into audience response and helped paved the way for new theories of consumption.

The importance and function of new online electronic ethnography was its recognition that the audience and fans of different media texts were dynamic and participatory as in the case of my ethnographic qualitative research which sought to work within the new online arena and the discussions with the *XSTT* lesbian fans. This research demanded a flexible approach and response, as this new form of methodology was in its infancy at the time. That said, even though this approach was flexible, it was based upon feminist theory in the same way as the audience work of Morley (1980) and that of Ang (1985) and Radway (1984) was. This approach became integral and invaluable to the study of television through qualitative research and laid the foundations for

media studies theorists such as Bacon-Smith to conduct investigations into the science fiction community and its fandom.

Bacon-Smith's later work *Science Fiction Culture* (2000) in which she discussed her continued respect towards the subjects she chose as part of her ethnographic research into fandom, illustrated the agency of the fan/audience she studied. She argues that science fiction fans are not the cultural dupes or resistant rebels as previously stated by earlier scholars in the field, and that their involvement in fandom is complex and intricate, and deserves further research. Bacon-Smith states:

So, when the ethnographer asks the question, "What does postmodern culture look like?" The obvious place to find the answer is the science fiction community. The very name proclaims the postmodern fact of that community's existence: it is inextricable in both name and identity from the publishing industry that produces the science fiction and the audience that refuses to be passive but shapes a way of life around the celebration of a mass market commodity of the culture industry (2000, p.1).

Bacon-Smith's theories were in agreement with the later work of audience researchers who saw ethnography as the only way forward to tackle the contradicting paradigms of research in fans and fandom in the science fiction and fantasy genres. More recent arguments as well as further investigations and explanations into cohesion and alliances between the media industries and Internet fandom have offered a different position for the understanding of audiences and their dedicated fandom (see Berger, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Edwards, 2010; Gwenllian-Jones; 2004; Jenkins, 2006; McHarry, 2010; Ross, 2008). There is now a matrix of factors including audience education, race, sex, religion, and access to the discourses of family and peer groups, in addition to the diversity of media itself with all its social networking sites, which adds to our understanding of the complexity of audiences and fans. While each theorist presents different arguments, the commonality of their research is based on

the tensions and dynamics of the productive and cultural aspects of the Internet, as it intersects with the media industries, fandom and new online lesbian identities.

Online qualitative research which foregrounds the primary data, as in this case study, has provided new ways forward for ethnography online research. As with the *XSTT* fandom we see a diversity of fans as part of a lesbian community. Within my small case study I will argue that hybrid methodologies of qualitative ethnographic research are not only useful for the interpretation of the lesbian fans' discourse but they also enable the researcher to present a more rounded biographical sense of self in addition to highlighting the political, emotional or social aspects of the fans' responses. I worked energetically and enthusiastically with the fans to build a hybrid overt methodology that eventually created a workable model for retrieving raw data. This helped to provide an academic understanding into the trajectory and the migration from traditional fandom for some lesbian fans to lesbian online fandom. It demonstrates how the lesbian Internet fans gain cultural capital and agency that empowers them as social subjects in transition. Fandom, in terms of agency, prompts questions of where the power of meaning is situated and scholars such as John Fiske (1992) began to look at information as cultural capital that empowered fans and fandom.

The Fans' Cultural Capital as Agency

Debates in cultural capital pertinent to fandom began to make connections between the fan as a social subject and the text. A form of agency for fans, according to John Fiske's understandings of Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1984) and the provenance of valued knowledge or cultural capital, is the practice of "reading against the grain" for fans and fandom through which they gain their cultural capital. This

practice helped audiences to become active in creating meanings from the text and thus enabled them to accumulate what Fiske refers to as cultural capital¹⁷. For Fiske, ‘Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power’ (1992, p.43). Nearly two decades after Fiske’s analysis and theory of cultural capital, information and knowledge have now become, through the Internet, perhaps the most expensive, powerful and sought-after commodities in the world. Fiske suggests that cultural capital is symbolic within fandom as a reflection of the capitalist economic system and its exchange value. Fiske, writing further in relation to television, puts forward the concept that there are two separate economies: financial production and cultural consumption (*ibid.*). Therefore, for Fiske, the fans with the extra knowledge are somehow privileged or acquire more respect or kudos than fans categorised as ‘ordinary’ fans who have no real stake in their fandom.

The lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* have a vested interest in gaining recognition through their fandom because of their minority status, for this fandom can help to inform their developing identities. The fans’ pleasure is part of their cultural performances which occur while they are exchanging information about their objects of fandom. This form of privilege of recognition can come from other fans within their own fandom and community or from other communities who are interested in obtaining their knowledge. Just as economic gain can dictate privilege and power¹⁸ so can social and cultural environments. Fiske did not retreat from critical thinking but was aware of the market and consumer capital plus its growing impact on fans and fandom. Martin Barker, a cultural theorist, adds to this debate suggesting:

¹⁷ Fiske draws on the earlier work of Bourdieu (1984) in relation to the economic system. Fiske sees the knowledge that some fans gain within their fan activities as enriching them with self-esteem and recognition in the same way capitalism drives the economy by its rewards.

¹⁸ See Fiske, J. (1992) ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’ in Lewis, L. (ed.) *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 31-33.

Crucially, while the financial economy ‘needs to be taken into account’ in any investigation of the cultural, it does not determine it nor invalidate the considerable power that audiences have as producers of meaning at the level of consumption (2000, p.112).

While financial status can be one of the determining factors in fandom and audience research and consumerism, many other factors need to be considered when defining status for a fan and what influences are brought to bear on particular forms of power and agency. Relating to how the fans from *XSTT* produce and make their own meaning from the consumption of a television series and an online virtual community, this study demonstrates how the lesbian Internet fans use inspirational and transformational language as part of their learning process. They converse online and in my interviews they share their lesbian discourse about how they make friends, and connections with other lesbian fans online, and how through this, they are able to interact and explicitly manage their own social networks within their virtual community. This activity has led to new identities online that are no longer constrained by social or cultural norms.

The weakness in Fiske’s argument is that it is heavily dependent on a reductive explanation of the Marxist analyses of the media and cultural industries; thus suggesting two distinct social groups, the dominant and subordinate. The development of post-structuralist theories in media and cultural studies avoids the over-reliance on “neat” Marxist categories which include social class, age and gender. Investigations must consider how fandom is still ‘connected to the dominant value system’ bearing in mind the changing complexity of fan status and fandom especially since the introduction of the Internet (Fiske, 1992, p.30). A question worth asking is: does this mean that the fan cannot attain cultural capital because she/he does not have the latest technology and could therefore be referred to by other fans as a “week-end only

fan”?¹⁹ For *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans, the latest technology or the notion of a weekend only fan does not define the complexity of fandom and fan practices.

With regard to the control of a television or film text, fans usage of the Studio’s property is explored by Gwenllian-Jones (2003). She discusses the legal battle of online fandom and censorship. Since fandom transferred its practices to the Internet there have been issues over copyright laws between fans and the Television Studio and about official and unofficial clubs, as well as artefacts that fans purchase and sell online or through official fan conventions²⁰. Jenkins continues to build on the fans’ pleasure in the text and raises further questions as to whether fans and the audience are free and creative in their reading of texts or actually conditioned far more by the production process and the cultural and media industries²¹.

Regulation of the text has been part of the debates about official and unofficial culture in fandom. At the beginning of the series, MCA/Universal TV and MCA International along with the creators of *X: WP*, Renaissance Pictures, created a rift between what they defined as official online Xena fandom and the unofficial virtual online fandom created and owned by the lesbian fans of the Xenaverse. The text of the show sent out conflicting messages to the mainstream audience because it began to acknowledge and enhance the sub-textual reading in season two but failed to recognise the lesbian online fans or their fan clubs. Meanwhile, the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans’ cultural capital and resistant reading were confined to an unofficial status, although the overall

¹⁹ This is an excerpt from a fan song describing fan practices, entitled: ‘My Weekend Only World’ by T. J. Burnside Clapp in Jenkins, H. (1992) *Television Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (Studies in Culture and Communications)* New York and London: Routledge, p.287.

²⁰ US company, Creation Entertainment owns the ‘Official Fan Club of *X: WP*’ and this is a business enterprise that continues to run fan conventions. Previously, fans ran such conventions and ensured that the proceeds from the conventions went to charity.

²¹ See ‘The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Popular culture in the Digital Age’, in *Red Rock Eater Digest*. [online] Talk presented at the University of Michigan, spring 1998.
<http://commons.somewhere.com/rre/1998/The.Poachers.and.the.Sto.html> [Accessed Oct 2002].

viewing figures for the show, thanks to fans such as the *XSTT* fans, were increasing season by season.

Later academic work challenges the notion of fans' opposition to official culture, and suggests that the media industries are now producing progressive texts that neutralise this opposition of a 'them and us' culture²². Similarly, there is now the perception that the producers and creators of television and film texts have begun to take the interpretative work of the fans' online communities critically. This implies that fans and producers are now collaborating with each other and engaging with fans to produce media texts²³. The historical, traditional notion of fandom fighting the capitalist forces of power through their resistance of a dominant reading is now not so clear or prominent within the key debates of fandom. Fandom, it appears, like all forms of community, consists of some form of hierarchy or élitism. Many fan theorists who have pursued these arguments dispute the notion of fandom being a democratic community that incorporates egalitarian processes (Hills, 2002; Pullen, 2000; Williams, 2002). Hills writes:

Following Fiske's coinage of 'fan cultural capital' (the knowledge that a fan has about their object of fandom), I would suggest that 'fan social capital' (the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, *as well* as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom) must also be closely investigated in future analyses (2002, p.57).

Hills stresses the complexity and states that 'it seems unlikely that such a calculative model will account for all fans' (2002, p.55). There are fans, however, whose intent is not on exploiting their return of their investment in forms of capital. Such fans are more likely to be people who just want to acquire fan knowledge, perhaps as a challenge or just to gain some pleasure. Moving away from the concept of

²² The industrialisation of fandom has also been commented on (Bennett 1999; Gwenllian-Jones, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Hamming 2001; Helford, 2000; Hills, 2002; Pullen 2001).

²³ See chapter five for the development of fans' production of texts relating to *X: WP*.

hierarchical positions within fandom we should take into consideration an understanding that fans are now becoming part of a postmodern global production “package” that enlists an audience for fandom as part of its creative text. Films such as *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001)²⁴ were advertised on the Internet and gained a large online following well before these productions saw theatrical release. The cultural and media industries are increasingly utilising and locating their different interests within the synergy of television, film, and the Internet and engaging the fan more and more. As Kirsten Pullen comments:

In fact many American reviewers have noted that the pre-movie Internet buzz and film website were more interesting than the movie itself. The pre-release activity guaranteed huge opening weekends in the US for both films, and the radical ways in which the Web has expanded definitions of fandom (2000, p.56).

Despite this situation, hierarchies and distinctions remain. The concept of official and unofficial fandom still pervades mainstream popular culture constructs, as does the difference between the official recognition of mainstream online fandom and the unofficial online fandom of the lesbian Internet fans of *X: WP*. Fiske’s position on fans and fandom is that:

Fandom is a peculiar mix of cultural determinations. On the one hand, it is an intensification of popular culture which is formed outside and often against official culture, on the other, it expropriates and reworks certain values and characteristics of that official culture to which it is opposed (1992, p.34).

In agreement with Jenkins’ (2006) later work that engages in more contemporary thinking, along the lines of Fiske, that nothing can function completely outside of culture, as culture itself is ingrained in everything and affects all our actions, I will show how *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans experience this dilemma in the interpretation of their data. Beyond considering themselves as part of a marginalised group, individual

²⁴ *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) (dir. Daniel Myrick) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001) (dir. Peter Jackson).

fans reflect on their understanding of how ‘real’ or ‘true’ their online experiences have become. Jenkins’ earlier work in traditional fandom envisaged the text in traditional fandom as being something that would remain a priority and possibly, something that would not change over time. It may still remain a priority to researchers in fandom who realise, like Jenkins, that ‘[f]ans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media’ (1992, p.23).

Fiske’s understanding of cultural capital as a celebratory accumulation in terms of knowledge has now become clear as the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans and the fans of the Xenaverse in their online communications can demonstrate. Fiske points out:

Cultural capital and cultural competence are both central to people’s ability to make socially pertinent and pleasurable meanings from the semiotic resources of the text (1987, p.19).

Having briefly covered the social, cultural, and economic aspect of cultural capital, I shall now refer to a feminist intervention and critique that brought new directions into the reading and interpretation of media texts by the industry and the audience.

Feminist Interventions into Audience Research

Many feminist scholars²⁵ have analysed women fans and spectators in television and cinema audiences prompting the removal of the discourse of women as victims of consumerism towards them being part of an empowered audience or consumers of popular culture. Feminist cultural studies view women as active consumers who interact with the text to make meaning and enhance their daily lives. Earlier studies of avid viewers of soap operas gave theorists such as Marie Gillespie (1995) and

²⁵ For further discussions of feminist interventions within audience research (see Aaron, 2006; Ang, 1985; D’Acci, 1987; Gammon & Marshment, 1988; Geraghty, 1995; Gillespie, 1995; Hobson, 1982; McKinley, 1997; Thomas, 2002, Williamson, 2002).

Elizabeth McKinley (1997) an opportunity to discuss fans' experiences and viewing habits whilst watching popular soaps. The work of Gillespie and McKinley constitutes that of just two of many cultural feminists whose investigations analyse the roles of race and gender within the viewing practices of soaps. Women fans are explored in the work of Ang (1989) and Radway (1987) suggesting that reading romantic novels or watching television soaps enabled some women to escape from the drudgery of patriarchal power. This becomes a form of denying all the domestic chores that needed to be carried out and accomplishing time to read a book or watch television soaps. Lesbian Internet fans such as magmor and reneeg_33 whom I interviewed for the *XSTT* case study also gained agency through their reading and writing online performances and experiences and these discussions of fans will be illustrated more thoroughly in the following chapters²⁶ for fans such as these demonstrated new reading and writing practices as part of empowerment. Although earlier individual fan and audience research explored specific angles and theoretical discussions, many cultural and media theorists also considered how the fans use the television text and identify with the storyline or characters of a particular soap opera by exploring the fans' interpretations as an aspect of feminist pleasure. As Abercrombie and Longhurst argue:

So, even if the preferred reading of most soap opera is fundamentally patriarchal, women can still subvert this reading by laughing together about the behaviour of men or by talking together about the way soap characters are acting like they do because of the powerlessness of women (1998, p.27).

Soap operas, as a particular television genre, enable discussions between women and men who view the characters, plotlines and stories of soaps as having some connection to everyday real life situations. Fans have opinions and discuss their

²⁶ magmor's involvement in fan fiction is discussed and viewed in chapter five.

individual concerns about family and relationships within the public and private sphere. Gillespie's *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (1995) a study of Punjabi youth in Southall, London, suggests that young Asian women use soaps operas such as *Neighbours* (1985-)²⁷, to look at their own relationships regarding their cultural freedom in Britain as British born Asians, and how they are represented within soaps. Her research documents Punjabi Londoners who watch and became dedicated consumers of a television text that offers them a form of "gossip" or "talk" that relates to their own sense of "otherness". Through this television soap opera, the fans explored the rules of female and male relationships; even though they might not have identified strongly with the characters represented in this particular soap opera, this opened up the debate about race for young British Asians and the cultural expressions of belonging. Gillespie's study demonstrates how:

In Southall, soap viewing has become a domestic agonistic ritual which involves defining and redefining relationships with 'others' both absent and present: from the characters on the screen, who constitute a televisual presence, to the wider audience, an absent but implied cultural referent; from parents and the local community to siblings and peers (1995, p.98).

Gillespie's work illustrates the show's magnetism for the younger British Asian audience and how soaps are used as a 'cultural resource in their everyday interactions, both in the peer culture and with parents and other adults, as they endeavour to construct new modes of identity for themselves' (1995, p.143). Indeed, the act of consumption, and how female audiences utilise these products to discuss their domestic subjectivity, and how through their consumption they have derived pleasure and empowerment, is the foundation of much of the early research on fandom and audiences. The young, Southall Asian female fans who watched the soap opera

²⁷ *Neighbours* is an Australian soap that, as the time of Gillespie's study, featured budding pop stars, Jason Donovan and Kylie Minogue. This helped drive the soap's appeal amongst teen and younger audiences.

Neighbours revealed their pleasures in viewing representations of the characters who came across as self-assured females. The teenage romance storylines stimulated talk on inequalities of gender in these diverse cultures emerging from the Western and Eastern worlds. As the study revealed, the young characters in *Neighbours* held appeal to these young fans because they were depicted as having a far greater amount of freedom than British Asian young women might expect for themselves.

Because every text within a different medium can position both women and men in negative or positive situations it does not mean that agency cannot be gained from these positions. These positions are not necessarily fixed as feminist research has discovered and disclosed. Women viewers and fans perceive their own subject positions in society as being more fluid than some of the restricting and limiting representations depicted by television or the media in general.

Radway's (1987) research on the romantic novel and Ang's (1985) study of a soap opera furthered ethnographic audience research in suggesting that women place and interpret their own meaning onto the texts of their choice. This action can be a liberating experience for many women. Ang's work on the American television series *Dallas* (1978-1991) was also an intervention into the debate on cultural imperialism in terms of American television programming during the seventies. Ang took a stance against the denigrating views of popular culture and its consumers and the argument that Europe was being taken over by American television and American culture (1985, p.2). She wanted to prove that popular culture has its advantages for women in Europe and stressed the importance of being able to identify women's positions within the domestic sphere that could inform them in the public sphere. Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas, Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, involved reading

women's letters about their interaction with the then popular television soap, *Dallas*, and the pleasure that fans experienced in their discussions with other women on how the characters are represented socially and culturally, and how the fans themselves would deal with certain situations. Ang's study became one of the key turning points in female audience research using ethnography.

Radway's study, 'Reading the Romance' (1987) researched the women readers of romantic fiction, and how they derived enjoyment from these novels. Many readers indicated that they gained a space and time for themselves amongst their daily chores to read their books and this was seen as crucial for their wellbeing within their domestic environments. Radway's readers also discussed their favourite authors and the disparity between some of the romantic narratives with their friends, relatives and other readers. They also participated in a newsletter that enabled them to choose their preferred novels. There was a move among feminists away from the notion of a pleasurable resistance reading and toward the dominant text that was now offering extra-textual activities such as fan fiction writing and this began to draw more interest from researchers in terms of the viewing habits of fans.

The later works of Bennett (1999) and Hamming (2001) developed from earlier feminist research, further express the contentment and benefits obtained by fans through their television viewing habits. Bennett and Hamming were able to "tap into" the *Zeitgeist* created by popular interactive cultural texts such as *X: WP* and its lesbian Internet fandom. The cultural debate about fan consumption of popular culture evolved in the eighties and nineties into the areas of fan practices with the growth of new digital technology. This debate has been expanded upon by various contemporary scholars (see Bennett, 1999; Berger, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Cooper, 2010;

Edwards, 2010; Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, 2003; Hanmer, 2003, 2005, 2010; Morreale, 1998; Kennedy, 2007; Parrish, 2007; McHarry, 2010).

The playful celebratory online performance of fandom has sometimes been viewed as subversive by academics and especially within the growth area of fan fiction writing the online performances of minority groups. New digital media has enabled research into the emotional experiences of lesbian fandom and the social networking of online lesbians. Research, including this case study, has found that as lesbians develop online fan identities, they also explore many emotions ranging from confusion to senses of self-questioning to anxiety. However, some of these emotions are also positive in that in the case of some of the *XSTT* lesbian fans who showed a degree of significant relief when discovering affirming positive images of lesbian diverse identity within television and media representations.

Obtaining pleasure through this new form of mediation is illustrated by the ways in which the fans of *XSTT* engage with the fantasy genre of *X: WP* and produce a new lesbian online discourse²⁸. The feminist intervention into audience research continues with my own study of the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans, in the way it considers the continuing and evolving process of reading against the grain, and how this helps fans adapt certain texts and utilise their own reading habits. This process leads to fans transforming their social and cultural identities and gives meaning to their subjective experiences in a rapidly changing technological world.

Feminist academics broadened their scope of research to investigate the complexity of women as audiences who gained agency and pleasure through television and film

²⁸ See fan theorists who discuss the evolution of viewing habits of fans and their fan practices and how they enhance the notion of pleasure through their fan and audience activities on the Internet (Bacon-Smith 1992, 2000; Gwenllian-Jones, 2001, 2003; Hills, 2002; Pullen 2001).

viewing. Feminism is about the representations of power, language, identification, and its consequences. Some of the more recent issues being explored in audience and fan research are what Ang refers to as ‘the cultural contradiction, inconsistency and incoherence pervad[ing] contemporary, postmodern culture’ (1996, p.11).

Lyn Thomas (2002), a cultural feminist researcher, concerns herself with some of the problems of inconsistency within postmodern culture and audiences. She explores the problematic construction of fans and fandom and their reading of what has been described as “quality texts” on television²⁹. The texts Thomas explores are suggestive of quality media because they are broadcast on BBC television and BBC Radio 4. Cultural aspects of the British identity and its representation of nationhood are represented in this form of media. The complexities of the female audience and fan research are expressed in her study of how fans relate to *The Archers* (1950-) a radio series that is viewed by academia as a particular quality cultural audio text. Thomas writes in her concluding chapter of *Fans, Feminisms and ‘Quality’ Media*:

My original aim of looking for feminism where one might not expect to find it had been fulfilled; gender representations in these apparently ‘traditional’ British media texts are no longer easy to categorise, and modern masculinities, particularly, are represented in ways unimaginable even a few years ago (2002, p.173).

Thomas’s work, along with that of other feminist researchers, reveals that texts in popular culture are progressive and can be read from different subject-reading positions (Cooper, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Edwards, 2010; Hamming, 2001; Helford 2000; Innes, 1999). The complex affair of resistance in online fandom has moved towards a pleasure obtained through an alliance with the industries as well as the text. This pleasure is witnessed in the increasing number of women and lesbian

²⁹ Thomas is interested in ‘the textual features and critical discourses associated with a body of media or literary texts which have become ‘shorthand for quality’’ (2002, p.31).

fans wishing to discuss their favourite television series or film through the fan cultures developing on the Internet³⁰. One of the diversities of fandom and its progressive elements is the prominence of the lesbian Internet fan communities and their discussions of *X: WP* as a lesbian and feminist text.

Although both Bacon-Smith's (1992) and Jenkins' (1992) books emerged as key texts of fandom during a period in which fan scholarship and academic research began to change direction, they were not conceived as feminist texts. I suggest that within their writings there is a feminist element, especially in Bacon-Smith's (1992) book, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth (Contemporary Ethnography)*. This book delves into the fan activities of many women who contribute to popular culture through their extra-textual practices such as writing for traditional fan magazines. The development of qualitative study and ethnographic research enables the fans to be given an opportunity to speak for themselves, albeit through the subjective gaze of the academic fan researcher.

At times, the pleasurable pursuits of fandom can present problematic aspects: for instance, many women can feel that they have to be careful when expressing or exposing their fan membership, fan fiction or s/lash writing fantasies to their families or friends. There is concern about being criticised or judged as being "strange" and outside the commonsense notion of normalcy. This form of alienation is highlighted constantly in academia's concern for the media's interpretation of fans as being sadly deficient, and lacking in social or cultural skills³¹. Taking part in fan activities allows many women an outlet to write about or to discuss fantasies that they would usually

³⁰ See the work of fan scholars who discuss the increase of women fans utilising the Internet to discuss their favourite television or film productions (Jones, 2003; Hamming, 2001; Pullen, 2001).

³¹ For work that contradicts the psychological notion of fans as being observed as "lacking" or deficient in their pursuit of fandom (see Gwenllian-Jones 2000, 2003; Hamming, 2001; Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Pullen, 2000).

not express. Bacon-Smith, interviewing a self identified lesbian about her fan fiction writing asked her, “Why are you interested in writing about male-male sexual relationships?” The reply from the lesbian fan was:

...[O]n the most personal level, I've realized that slash writing, and indeed all the male-centred fannish writing by women, is a way of expressing the sexual feelings I do have for male images and types. I know from experience that the interest doesn't extend to actually enjoying sex with men for its own sake, but ...I do have some notions that men might be attractive. As objects, and purely at a distance, but the notion is there (1992, p.246).

As a lesbian the fan could distance herself from the material and experiment with a sexual attraction although she might not wish to experience this in the physical sense or even in her imagination. The pleasure for fans in writing fan fiction is how they can discuss issues or fantasies that may be frowned upon as morally deviant or “politically incorrect” inside or outside the community they belong to. Lesbian fans can then transfer whatever fantasies they wish onto the characters within their fan fiction writing without fear of hostility. Bacon-Smith stresses that the women fans she interviewed ‘don’t want to change real women – themselves – but they have no patience with the images of women created by men’ through television, film, or in the social world (1992, p.247).

The media and cultural industries are slowly being transformed through the changing viewing and reading habits of fans and audiences generally. The recent work of Collier et al., (2009) communicates a way forward in how support is becoming available to women who venture into communities on the Internet to discuss the latest television text and discuss their experiences as viewers and fans and through these discussions as they realise that these television shows have informed their sexual identity development. Collier and others’ work updates academic knowledge

regarding lesbian fans who view particular television shows while having discussions online that support their lesbian identities. Historically, society's general attitude towards such taboo subjects meant that many women fans did not find an opening to be able to discuss certain aspects of sexual or cultural identities yet that slowly, through their fan practices, they were being encouraged to share their experiences, knowledge and opinions through their fan language and fan practices without fear of ridicule.

Looking at an area in which fans had long endured prejudice, Bacon-Smith (2000) in her book *Science Fiction Culture*, gives a well-documented account of the cultural practices and struggles of women fans within the science fiction genre. Fandom does not produce a utopian world for women without any disagreements or anxieties. Traditionally, there have been internal problems within fandom around the issue of sexual identity and feminist audience research has tried to "flush out" these problems and expose how the changing science fiction genres form part of the key debates within contemporary fandom for they have enabled dialogue to take place.

Feminists as fans have been the focus of attention in the cultural and media industries since the late seventies and early eighties. The next section illustrates how feminists were targeted as potential new audiences in the eighties and nineties, and how the industries used a co-opting strategy to ensure the increase of women viewers. Leading this field were two feminist researchers, Eileen Meehan and Jackie Byars (2000), with their historical case study of the new co-opting strategy used by a particular television company. The notion of 'telefeminism', as defined by Meehan and Byars in their study of audience research and fandom, should be recognised as part of the historical journey of media representations within contemporary lesbian fandom.

Telefeminism

The targeting of feminists in the eighties was part of a strategy undertaken by the cultural industries to promote a loyal fan base for certain programmes that could be said to contain a feminist element. The policy adopted by the television companies was to try to appeal to feminists by using feminist politics and assimilating them into their programming schedule thus making it attractive to more women. Understandably, feminists were and still are cynical about the approach that North American and British television companies have taken over the last three decades to change the oppressive and unequal depictions of women in entertainment.

The shifts in television representations in terms of women in the nineties and into the twenty-first century is still being challenged by feminism, however, there was a positive break-through in this period and this is reflected in the early research of Meehan and Byars (2000). Their fourteen-year informative study, aptly named ‘Telefeminism’: ‘How Lifetime Got Its Groove 1984-1997’ is an imaginative investigation of America’s first cable channel, Lifetime Television. The in-depth study looked at how the producers of this company targeted the women’s movement as an audience to increase their revenue³².

Lifetime Television engaged in a venture to capture ‘a niche market’ of women viewers who had previously not been targeted as a significant audience (Meehan and Byars, 2000, p.234). They did this by developing a sophisticated strategy. The researchers’ findings indicate that the company proposed ‘two forms of co-optation’ that this was introduced through a policy of coercion (*ibid.*). The first was the ‘appropriation of liberal feminism’ through the construction of an association with

³²See Meehan, E. and Byars, J. (2000) ‘Telefeminism’: ‘How Lifetime Got Its Groove, 1984-1997’ in: Miller, T. (ed.) *Television and New Media*. 1 (1) 33-51.

feminist groups such as the National Organization of Women, and the second was to create a form of programming that has been described by media and cultural writers as ‘women’s television’ (*ibid.*). This tactic was a rethinking of feminists as media consumers and, within this rethinking, the television and advertising industries joined together in a relationship that bred a new form of feminist programming.

A ‘telefeminist programming formula was used to defuse any basic structural challenges to patriarchy and its institutions’ by trying to appeal to a female audience with representations of women that were diverse and quite distinctive from usual constructed depictions (*ibid.*). The shift in television representations of women and the new programming schedules presented a twofold problem for many feminists. First, it took away the radicalness of a feminist ‘subtext’ by appropriating it and this could also be witnessed through a form of advertising that commandeered feminism during this same period³³. Second, it provided a great deal of pleasure for female audiences by moving away from more traditional formulae in televisual representations of women, adding depth to the women characters within some exciting new narratives³⁴. Lifetime Television grasped the opportunity to strategically target this specific growth area, aiming primarily at an audience that could embellish their legitimacy and expand the lucrative side of their profits. The focus by the television companies on a niche market and the recognition that many women now

³³ In 1995, UK pharmacy brand ‘Boots 17’ created its own version of ‘feminism’ with an advertisement showing a young androgynous woman dressed in army fatigues with a baton under her arm standing in front of a video with images of different parts of men’s bodies appearing on the backdrop screen. The woman makes derogatory remarks as she points to each image: ‘Well boys in just 50 seconds the honeymoon is over’ – Pointing to the video: ‘This is what she wants and boys we’ve just given her the capabilities to get it.’ The music is set to male voices singing an army marching song with the words ‘I got your number’. At the end of the advert, we hear bullet shots and see eye shadow, nail varnish, mascara and lipstick. Underneath is written: ‘It’s not make-up. It’s ammunition.’ [Accessed on videotape 20 February 1995].

³⁴ Arthurs discusses progressive texts that changed the representation of women - see Arthurs, J. (2004) *Television and Sexuality, Regulation and the Politics of Taste*. New York: McGraw-Hill Open University Press, pp.14-16.

had disposable incomes due to many remaining in the workplace longer, staying single or having children later in life, resulted in the industry drawing up new policies around media consumption and women's viewing habits. Feminists as part of 'the targeting of upscale women', were now being accorded greater cultural and symbolic power than other viewers or audiences (Meehan and Byars, 2000, p.35).

Meeham and Byars report that 'All of Lifetime's owners – Viacom, Hearst, and CapCities/ABC – produced or owned programming; CapCities/ABC also owned one of the three major broadcast television networks in the United States' (*ibid.* p.34). They drew on their established movie libraries to enhance its mutual interest in the feminist elements of its audiences by showing films made in-house by its parent companies. Additionally, the company made its own movies during the period 1990-1993 under the name World Premier Movies (2000, p.38). These movies, while differentiated in genre, used a habitual theme that integrates them under the category of 'romantic crusader'³⁵. The model of female protagonists as featured in many of these films and television shows began shape a new form of feminist genre. I suggest that *X: WP* as a television series copied this model to engage the lesbian Internet fans and co-opted the presence of the online lesbian fans by retaining them as a target audience through the continuing debate of the subtext. I argue that a similar criterion of co-optation and coercion was being executed in terms of the lesbian Internet fans of the Xenaverse and fan clubs similar to *XSTT*, once the industries were alerted to the growth of the lesbian online communities. I would now like to turn my attention to how the eventual recognition of the Xenaverse and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans by the media and cultural industries has benefited from these changes within the science

³⁵ Many of the themed 'romantic crusader' movies involved a woman representing the legal system and fighting for justice for the "underdog".

fiction and fantasy community. The science fiction fan community was the focus of some of the early sixties' debates of contemporary fandom that looked at how sexuality and identity was represented and this provided a space for dialogue between fans and writers of science fiction and fantasy fan fiction.

The Significance of the Science Fiction Fans in Contemporary Fandom

The writers and producers of the long-standing television science fiction series *Star Trek* (1966-2006) continued to show their homophobic tendencies when it came to lesbian and gay representation. Jenkins' (1995) chapter 'Out of the closet and into the universe, Queers and Star Trek' begins with a quotation of Frank Hummel taken from the *Gaylactic Gazette*, a gay and lesbian fanzine noting the advancement of the science fiction television series. Hummel begins:

Star Trek celebrates its 25th anniversary in 1991. In that quarter century, one of the most important aspects of the series...has been the vision that humanity will one day put aside its differences to work and live in peace together. Star Trek, in its various television and motion pictures forms, has presented us with Africans, Asians, American and Andorrans, Russians and Romulans, French and Ferengi, Hispanics and Hortas, human and non-human men and woman. In 25 years, it has also never shown an openly gay character (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995, p.237).

Jenkins' chapter supports the idea of the fans lobbying the producers and creators of the *Star Trek* series, arguing for the visibility of lesbian and gay characters within the series for the twenty-first century. Jenkins claims that the science fiction stories listed in Eric Garber's and Lyn Paleo's *Uranian Worlds* (1983) 'deal with gay and lesbian themes and characters, starting with Lucians's *True History* (AD200) and ending in the late 1980s' (*ibid.*)³⁶. Jenkins continues, 'Some of the stories they cite adopt homophobic stereotypes; yet they also see science fiction as a genre which was

³⁶ See Garber, E. & Paleo, L. (1983) *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.

historically open to gay, bisexual, and lesbian writers who could express their sexuality in a disguised but potent form' (1995, p.243). This disguised form implies that fans of the science fiction genre were still experiencing homophobia within the structure and inner workings of fandom towards the end of the twentieth century. However, in the sixties and early seventies, there were many writers who offered hope to the LGBT community, with the emergence of science fictions writers such as Joanna Russ, Melissa Scott and Marion Zimmer-Bradley. Many of these writers expanded and sought new developments within their writing to initiate fictional LBGT characters thus leading the way forward to challenge mainstream science fiction narratives.

The work of these writers is recognised as an important milestone for the lesbian and gay fan community, according to Bacon-Smith 'the appearance of gay characters in the literature did not necessarily signal an equal acceptance of an openly gay or lesbian presence in the literary community' (2000, p.137). Joanna Russ gives her experiences of writing science fiction and fantasy genres as an out lesbian and of the economic downsides:

I'm sure being an open lesbian has not been good for my career. Also doing all sorts of non-fiction feminist writing I mean, put it together: book reviewer...feminist, lesbian highbrow - I've never made more than \$3,500 advances for any novel. ANY...Sexual orientation, by the way, is something one often doesn't know the effect of (2000, p.137).

While we cannot idealise science fiction or fantasy fan culture, it does provide a platform for a positive outlet for viewing lesbian and gay creative writing talents although it may not be very lucrative, as Russ has pointed out. Discussions within the science fiction community have always challenged the intolerance towards lesbian and gay fans and this continues today through online debates. The work of the Xenaverse and XSTT lesbian Internet fans who write, distribute, and publish online

lesbian fiction and get support from other lesbian writers and authors have gained from the advancement of the science fiction and fantasy fan community.

Pullen's (2000) work on fandom explores the impact of the World Wide Web on traditional fans and fan membership, and analyses the similarities and differences between traditional fans, fandom and fan membership. Pullen's work is one of the first to explore the implications of the Internet on fandom. According to Pullen, online fan communities, like traditional fan communities, share an expression of pleasure and relief knowing that there are similar fan members who participate in rearticulating certain texts such as *X: WP* online, and self-identified lesbian fans like *XSTT* are no exception. In bringing the historical debate of contemporary fandom into the twenty-first century, it is through the synergy of television and the Internet that fandom is finding a larger audience. Fans, for instance the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans, are becoming recognised as integral to audience research through their online presence and to our overall understanding of lesbian fans in general.

The Synergy of Television the Internet and Online fandom

Crucial to the debate of online fandom is the work of Gwenllian-Jones (2003) and Hamming (2001), who both take Pullen's analyses of online fan communities a stage further. They have followed up with research that explores the synergy of television and the Internet, and how this is shaping the more industrialised face of fandom within the science fiction and fantasy arenas. Gwenllian-Jones and Hamming strengthen their arguments through their analyses of the Internet and its new marketing possibilities for developing fan practices. Marketing is one of the major arenas of development with regard to the influx of fan fiction writing and its growth since the emergence of the Internet. Hamming's work explores the changing face of

fan culture and its effect for the lesbian Internet fan. The emergence of intertextuality, self-referential, stylised television productions, and the reworking of feminism and gender in television texts such as *X: WP* (1995-2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) point towards the targeting of fan audiences.

Gwenllian-Jones' (2003) work examines cult television and fantasy cult genres and their high production values. She separates cult film fans from "Must See TV"³⁷ fans by suggesting that:

In common usage, the term 'cult television' has a variety of different meanings. It may refer to series that have nostalgic appeal (such as certain defunct children's programmes, or programmes associated with a particular decade); series considered to have an off-beat or risqué appeal (*Absolutely Fabulous*, *Beavis and Butt-head*, *South Park*); or series that fall into the 'so bad, it's good' category (*Sunset Beach*) (pp.164-165).

Furthermore, Gwenllian-Jones views cult television fans as people who 'engage in creative and interpretive practices such as fan fiction or producing fan art' (ibid.). The 'appointment viewing fans' as she refers to them, 'schedule the programme into their weekly routine and make every effort to ensure that they watch it'; this is opposed to other fans and to anybody who does not recognise themselves as fans, seeing themselves as just viewers (ibid.). Fans record the programme and store it, but continue to purchase official video releases. These fan practices may conceal the concept of what a 'general audience' is and what a 'fan audience' is, as consumerism in these products attracts a diverse range of people who may not fit into either bracket of enthusiastic audience or fan. Fans are diverse as audiences and many 'enjoy mainstream programmes with high production values series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the *X-Files* (1993-2002) 'that appeal to both a mass general

³⁷ 'Must See TV' is an advertising slogan used by NBC television network to brand its prime time blocks of sitcoms during the 1990s, recommending Thursday slot/block viewing.

audience and to a dedicated fan base'³⁸ (*ibid*, p.165). Online research that studies groups of lesbians, and how they function and inform their self perception online in terms of their lesbian identities is useful to the Xenaverse and its *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans because it supports their advancement and helps to decrease a sense of social isolation for lesbians.

Online identity construction has been explored since the arrival of the social networking site Facebook by sociologists such as Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin, (2008)³⁹ who claim that identity performances online in terms of social networking sites are implicit rather than explicit because they “show”, rather than “tell”. I argue that *XSTT* fandom, although not a social networking site, illuminates how the fan members use a fan identity and fan performance as a way of communicating with like-minded people. I suggest that online constructed identities for the lesbian fans of *XSTT* fandom are explicit rather than implicit because they “tell” through their online fandom and through their form of fan fiction writing a narrative and discourse they are giving of “who they are”. Online identity does not have corporal concepts as part of its representation, but, as evidenced in the work of Zhao et al., (2008) and Collier et al., (2009) different online environments and social groupings can create and present a diversity of notions of self-identity within the forums of the Internet.

Identity whether online or offline is constructed through an individual’s thoughts, emotional feelings and attributes which are arrived at and presented as an object of how the person believes they are perceived by others. In general, social face-to-face interactions are presented under circumstances and situations where the claiming of

³⁸ In season three and thereafter, *X: WP* began to use higher production values in the show employing Computer Generated Images (CGI) and other special effects.

³⁹ See Zhao, S. Grasmuck, S. Martin, J. (2008) [online] ‘Identity Construction Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships’ in *Science Direct*. 24 (5) 1816-1836 www.elsevier.com/locale/comphumbeh. [Accessed 5 Sep 2010].

physical attributes or characteristics such as sex, race and so on, would be significantly difficult to mask or conceal. It would make it awkward in such a situation to carry out a performance that is deceptive and denies any substance. However, the Internet and online identity does enable the corporeal body to be removed from any attributes of identification. Online constructed identity and its performance make it possible for social encounters to disguise or mask any physical characteristics or personality traits or even to be deceitful about them. The Internet as a technological environment adds to a new model of constructed identity and this is what I interpret as part of lesbian fandom and its new online performance of lesbian fan identities. To illustrate the process of these performances I will draw on the empirical examples of the fans interviews and conversations throughout the study.

Many contemporary researchers are supplementing the debate about the lesbian virtual community and its online identity (Burke, 2000; Collier et al., 2009; Cooper, 2010; Cooper and Dzara, 2010). These ideas were also pursued earlier in an innovative study of one of the first online dating sites for lesbians. The investigation by Sally Munt, Elizabeth Bassett and Kate O'Riordan (2002)⁴⁰ is important to the lesbian online fandom because it is concerned with a lesbian identity. It was one of the first investigations into a commercial dating site that they refer to as 'Gaygirls.com' (though this is not the actual name of the site). They explore how queers, dykes, lesbians, bi-sexual or potential lesbians deal with the performance and problems of their changing identities online. Munt et al., propose that:

The site also operates as a feedback loop where identity is reassessed. It is not preparatory in the sense of a one-stage process but is returned to by users to renegotiate their identity. It thus operates in a threefold way: as a preparation, a forum for reassessment and a discursive community... It is

⁴⁰ See Munt, S. et al., (2002) 'Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity and Coming Out On-line'. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*. 7: (2/3) 125-137.

thus, on one level, a facilitatory space: it allows the development of social identities that might otherwise be more constrained by geographical location and cultural capital (2002, p.36).

Bearing in mind the celebratory diagnosis of the Internet with reference to lesbian online identities by Munt and others (2002), and Collier and others (2009) it is crucial to stress the instability of Internet communities and the danger of them being viewed as spaces which encapsulate a notion of a fixed established identity. Munt and others' argument is that the virtual space or community that is formed on the Internet is about a cyclical journey. It is about the ongoing process of the concepts of identity and in this thesis, the aspect of the lesbian online identity as never-ending is also corroborated by the production of online fan fiction writing which is discussed in later chapters.

Although the television series and the official Studio website of *X: WP* came under the MCA/Universal homepage there was still a lot of activity by the lesbian fans who enjoyed and pursued their online fandom⁴¹. At first, the creators and producers of the show refused to recognise these lesbian fan sites. Following this, difficulties were reported occurring between fans around their fan status and it appeared that *Xenite* fans themselves who consisted of lesbians, straight women and straight men were arguing on the websites. Pullen writes:

When Xena first became a cult hit, these groups were often openly hostile towards one another, with lesbians and straight women in particular battling over the ‘meaning’ of the show and its depiction of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle (2000, p.57).

This provides confirmation of Jenkins' earlier analyses of how fans, by functioning outside the perimeters of the official fan cultures, are often treated undemocratically and not really respected for their fan activities. Jenkins, in his conclusion to *Textual*

⁴¹ See MCA/Universal Official site for Xena [online] <http://www.mca.com/tv/xena> [Accessed June 2002].

Poachers, fervently argues against the notion that ‘fans are little more than an extension of the market logic of commercial broadcasting, a commodity audience created and courted by the culture industries’ (1992, p.78). The approach of Gwenllian-Jones is that fandom is exactly this, and she argues that this is precisely what fans have become. However, if we examine more closely both Jenkins’ and Gwenllian-Jones’ analyses, we see that they both distinguish between official fan culture and unofficial fan culture. What is being argued is that the official fans, along with the creators and producers, are exponents of the integration of the industries within fandom⁴². There is a difference between fandom, described by Jenkins as unofficial and which ‘provides a base from which fans may speak about their cultural preferences and assert their desires for alternative developments’ and the official fans who ‘generate and maintain the interests of regular viewers and translate them into a broader range of consumer purchases’ (1992, p.79). According to Jenkins, the unofficial fans appropriate television texts to address questions of dissatisfaction with the market content and delivery of certain products, thus developing an oppositional reading to what the creators intended. We need to consider whether this shift in the notion of resistance for fandom means that all fans have become part of the media and cultural industries’ consumer machinery even though it is accepted that there has been a trajectory in the relationship of fans and the culture industries.

It is not, however, just the networks and producers that often show disdain for unofficial fandom; this can happen within fan culture itself. Fan clubs can often differentiate along sex and gender lines this difference requires dialogue that can be

⁴² Fans are recognised by the industries when they use the official websites or the official fanzines. These are supported by companies distributing merchandise and which are commercially involved with the television networks that get direct profits from fan membership. Independent websites, podcasts and fans using PDFs to distribute their information reduce costs considerably. Production costs were a “stumbling-block” for fans before online fandom, while online fandom is today’s main producer of official and unofficial fanzines.

used to support similarities rather than difference. There are examples online of positive alliances which have been forged online and these demonstrate how a number of fan sites decry divisions on sex and gender lines. The website called The Ultimate Xena Fan Fiction Directory (1999-) includes heterosexual male and female writers and lesbian writers, ‘all of whom seem to encourage and enjoy each other’s output’ (Pullen, 2000, p57)⁴³. The appearance of sites such as this represent a major shift in how new technological practice have affected traditional fandom and fan practices.

Jenkins claims:

A decade ago, when I published my first work on fans as textual poachers I was describing a subculture that was oddly alien to a good percentage of the audience I was addressing... Today thanks to the Internet, fans sites are much more visible... Fan traditions are discussed on the front pages of the *New York Times*. Aspects of fan practice are influencing commercial media in a much more direct fashion and as we see, popular culture is becoming more responsive to fans’ aesthetic and thematic preferences (1998, pp.2-3)⁴⁴.

In 1992, Jenkins talked of “textual poaching,” now nearly two decades later he talks about “digital poaching”⁴⁵ and yet these discussions are about the impact of television and the Internet on audiences and fandom. Cultural and media researchers⁴⁶ agree that new technology and the synergy of the two mediums of television and the Internet challenge the fans’ viewing practices. Fans can now explore more interactive pleasures with the stars of their chosen shows as they experience the immediacy of contact with their objects of fandom, sometimes within hours of the series going out live. ‘When the show began airing in repeats on WE in 2001, viewers were

⁴³ See ‘Xena Fan Fiction’ [online] <http://www.xenafanfiction.com> [Accessed August 2002].

⁴⁴ See again ‘The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Popular culture in the Digital Age’, in *Red Rock Eater Digest*. [online] Talk presented at the University of Michigan, spring 1998.

<http://commons.somewhere.com/rre/1998/The.Poachers.and.the.Sto.html> [Accessed 14 May 2000].

⁴⁵ See *ibid*.

⁴⁶ See researchers that further the argument of fandom using technology to support fan practices (Allen, 1997; Collier et al., 2009; Gwenllian-Jones, 2000; Hills, 1999; Krzywinska, 2002, 2006; Mendelsohn, 2002; Morreale, 1998; Pullen, 2000).

encouraged to chat online while episodes aired – and a live chat ticker scrolled across the TV screen to reveal what viewers were saying while they were watching' (Ross, 2008, p.38). Fans are able to deconstruct and reassemble images and meanings quickly with Internet editing software packages that give their work professional status. The Internet has provided fandom with extensive information ranging from the scheduling of programmes, to star interviews, newsletters, fanzines, and promotions that enhance fan participation and pleasure.

During the period of my research, more television companies were setting up official websites such as the networks of CBS, NBC, and ABC in the US. 'In the UK, BBC and Channel 4 have provided similar websites for their top soaps' (Pullen, 2000, p.55). The information produced through the Internet would previously only have been available for committed fans who could attend conventions⁴⁷. Fans would have to spend a great deal of their time, energy, and money on fanzines and newsletters while researching their favourite topic. This new situation 'has blurred the boundaries between original fan activity and marketing ploys' especially in how the cultural and media industries are now targeting specific fan audiences through the Internet⁴⁸ (Pullen, 2000, p.55). In the age of new online fan audiences and media convergence, fans are viewed as active and migratory, as part of a participatory culture of changing and developing identities that has to stay close to the objects of fandom. As Hills argues:

[t]hat practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time or

⁴⁷ Conventions would have been an expensive activity, however, now computers are available in public libraries and made accessible in many environments within towns, cities and even rural areas, computer facilities are now accessible on certain mobile phones.

⁴⁸ Pullen in her article (2000) states although only approximate data '... in June 2000 the Yahoo Web directory listed more than 33,000 websites about individual actors and actresses, television programmes, and films' (p.55).

even during ad-breaks perhaps in order to demonstrate the ‘timeliness’ and responsiveness of their devotion (2002, p.178).

These changes affected traditional fandom because fans could now respond faster to television series and also it influenced their relationship to the production and distribution of fanzines, and how conventions could be attended. Many fan fiction magazines in traditional fandom although painstakingly written and illustrated, were incomprehensible at times and not available to many fans. Conventions too were difficult to organise and only a minority of the fans ever attended. This has now changed because more information and communication is readily available to the fans, in addition to the fact that there are many easier and sometimes cheaper means of travel. Moreover, in the not too distant future conventions may be held online which will ultimately reduce cost and time, and add a further dimension to online fandom. Pullen suggests that:

Most important for Web-based fan communities⁴⁹ are the distribution and production of fan created texts and the sense of community talking about a favoured television programme can impart, even to viewers separated by thousands of miles (2000, p.54).

The format of fan conventions will now have to take into account the increasing diversity of fan membership due to the phenomenon of Internet. ‘The evolution of fandom, the mass audience and the marketing strategies of cult television producers’ plus the significant source of extra revenue for the production Studio which online fans generate needs to be periodically reviewed’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p.165).

The late nineties is a landmark time when television companies looked towards minority groups to enhance television ratings and to integrate fans into regular viewing audiences. ‘Xena led the way in this regard... with several episodes offering

⁴⁹ This is especially important to the XSTT lesbians and to the performance of lesbian identities through this new form of communication and social networking.

storylines that focused on the existence of Xena fans' for example, in the episodes "A Day in the Life" and "Send in the Clones" (Ross, 2008, p.39)⁵⁰. With the emergence of new popular texts and the advent of new tactics and strategies being used by the cultural and media industries to inveigle a fan audience, these joint ventures have enhanced the fans' enjoyment and immersion in the text, while simultaneously increasing the television company's audience viewing figures and increasing advertising revenue.

The Internet has brought about a conflation of 'reader' and 'writer' in relation to fan fiction writing online and the media tools used to enhance this fan practice. Sociologists and cultural theorists have all illuminated how Internet fandom, fan practices and the contentious position of the subject within Internet fandom has changed during the last decade (Cooper, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Parrish, 2007). Traditional fandom is no longer a fan discourse for the lesbian Internet fans or for future fans for it has now been replaced by a celebratory lesbian fan resistance reading and writing online. An important point in terms of the convergence of television, the Internet and fandom is that we have witnessed a new "technologically savvy" audience such as *XSTT* and its lesbian Internet fans that contributes in the seeking out of texts that might provide diverse avenues of social and cultural meaning. At the same time, the highest audience ratings in the US for the fans watching *X: WP* in 1996-1997⁵¹ reached 7.8 million suggesting that the synergy of the television, the Internet and online lesbian fandom played a large part in increasing revenue for the media industries.

⁵⁰X: WP (1997) Season 2, Episode 15, "A Day in the Life", (dir. Michael Hurst). TV, US. 19 Feb. (1998) 19 Dec and X: WP (2001) Season 6, Episode 16, "Send in the Clones", (dir. Charlie Haskell). TV, US. 23 Feb.

⁵¹ See Whoosh! (1997) the fanzine and e-journal Issue No. 53 for the highest US Ratings on Syndication [online] <http://www.whoosh.org/issue53/dooland1.html> [Accessed June 2001].

This chapter has traced some of the major academic trajectories in terms of fandom and audience research generally, and the resistant reading of popular cultural texts. It has explored some of the historical key turning points of fandom and the ramifications that the Internet has had on fandom. The notion of resistance reading within traditional and Internet fandom has been explored in this chapter. Fandom has become an organic textual mega-narrative of inexhaustible information, which continues to grow. As Collier et al., point out:

The Internet provides a rich environment for fan communities to come together and share in the creation of meaning and in the construction and expression of both textual meaning and personal identity. This is evidenced by the participants use of Internet fan communities, not only to further their fan involvement, but to support their developing lesbian identities (2009, p.597).

The *XSTT* fans use a virtual setting to build friendships and to discuss their burgeoning online lesbian fan identities as this study suggests through its primary data. In this chapter, I have explored and explained some of the key historical debates within contemporary fandom and have advanced some of the significant and important claims relating to the shift from traditional fandom for the *XSTT* fans. I will continue to connect to these debates throughout the thesis raising the consequences of the migration for the lesbian and exploring the layers of lesbian fan discourse that this migration has developed. I will illustrate this through the fans' interviews and online discussions the importance of fandom and its debates while analysing and interpreting the lesbian Internet fans' personal narratives and contributions towards audience research. The next chapter will explain and explore the methodological approaches used towards engaging a particular lesbian online fandom to support my investigation and to progress the notion of lesbian online fandom and its discourses.

CHAPTER TWO: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TOWARD A NEW DISCOURSE IN LESBIAN FANDOM

‘Society is not a harmonious organism, the social world is characterised by a power struggle between different groups’ (Ruddock, 2001, p.172).

A cultural and social power struggle has been taking place in traditional science fiction and fantasy fandom as a result of the emergence of the Internet and this has been reflected in the establishment of lesbian online fandom as a contemporary phenomenon. In order to understand this struggle, this chapter will explain and illustrate why qualitative research as a methodological process is important. Qualitative research can help us to identify with some of the lesbian fans of *XSTT* who use online fandom to discuss *X: WP* and produce a lesbian discourse. I maintain the principles of qualitative research but will also disclose the ‘messy reality’ of my ethnographic study during the process (Holliday, 2002, p.7). The approach adopted here illustrates how traditional fandom has changed since the advent of *X: WP* online fandom. The approach will be applied to a case study that evolves and develops online with the interviewing of a small number of Internet fans. My aim is to demonstrate how the methodology of qualitative research that places the lesbian fan, and spectator at the centre of the investigation is advantageous when exploring a new discourse. Allowing fans to speak about the process of their viewing habits, whether of film or television, is an important part of feminist ethnography. This study will narrate and interpret what John Van Maanen refers to as ‘tales of the field’ these organically develop over a period of time, revealing that ‘fieldwork is an interpretive act not an observational one’ and is an integral part of qualitative research (1988, p.93).

This case study uses feminist ethnography, electronic computer interviewing, and participant observation. I will discuss how the research was conducted through

analyses of the research process; the development of the conceptual framework, research tools, ethics, and protection of data and sampling in the devising of non face-to-face interviews⁵². The application and implementation of the chosen methods are considered throughout this chapter. Further adhering to ethical guidelines⁵³ a full explanation of the purpose of the research was posted on the *XSTT* fan bulletin board and explained to the participants both in individual discussions and through emails⁵⁴. The fans participating were able to “speak” to me regarding anything they were not sure of both during and after the interview process. With regard to confidentiality, participants’ real names and locations are known only to me, and will not be revealed throughout this study⁵⁵. Ethical issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and the principle of protecting the participant were adhered to at all times throughout the research.

A framework of qualitative research is constructed to generate specific research objectives through the emerging data, which can be categorised into four areas. These objectives are to explore the general impact of the television programme on a specific lesbian audience and to understand the experiences of fans belonging to the *XSTT* fan club as social and sexual subjects. Further, it is to examine and interpret the online conversations, bulletin board messages, interview data, and emails including fan

⁵² I use the term ‘non-face-to-face’ interviews here because in computer-mediated communication (CMC) the user is able to use webcams. At the time of my interviews this tool was still in its infancy. I state later on in this chapter that I first met one fan at an academic conference. My interview with this fan was carried out through email but we did meet face-to-face before the exchange of questions and answers on email began.

⁵³ In taking this approach to my research, I state that I have not violated any ethical guidelines. At the beginning of my research, I attended a standard ethical review board at (London Metropolitan University) and it was agreed that my approach was satisfactory. The main concern was for my safety and that I should be aware of the complexity of online research because this was historically uncharted territory. I was aware of the risk assessment with regard to myself and my participants and the sensitive nature of the study. This was discussed and highlighted at every stage of my research. My policy was to ‘do no harm’ and this was conveyed during my initial and consequent contact with the fans

⁵⁴ Copies of these bulletin board postings are in Appendix ‘A’.

⁵⁵ Some fans’ general locations are given as part of their profiles but this information is not specific.

fiction writing that have been gathered through the fans' activities. Finally, this chapter considers methodological issues in qualitative research in terms of how it connects to this investigation. As a feminist, lesbian reader, I position myself as a *bricoleur*⁵⁶ using an interdisciplinary hybrid methodology that develops throughout the research process.

'Queer bricolage' will be used as part of an interdisciplinary orientation of queer, feminist, cultural and media disciplines that is eclectic in its approach and methodology and helps towards the understanding of fans and fandom within this particular fan club. It is important to highlight at this stage that, as a researcher I draw on the notion that there is 'no clear window into the inner life of an individual' and that every gaze is processed through the lenses of 'language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.24). My research is based on a queer bricolage methodology because it crosses disciplines and draws on a variety of theoretical concepts from the social sciences and humanities. It also engages in recent methodologies using electronic ethnography such as that engaged with in the studies of other fan scholars (Cooper, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Currier-Sweet, 2007; Edwards, 2010, Kennedy, 2007). As Denzin and Lincoln state 'Cultural studies scholars embrace a combination of methods and paradigms when focussing on their objects of study' and this examination continues to draw on various procedures to form its 'end' product (1998, p.24).

This process has implications for the choice of research-settings and for the women involved in the conceptual framework of my methodology. 'The researcher-as-

⁵⁶ A bricoleur is described and clarified as a "Jack-of-all-trades" or a kind of professional "do-it-yourself" person. The bricoleur produces a 'bricolage that is a pieced together, a close-knit set of practices that provides solutions to problems in a concrete situation' (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991, p.161).

bricoleur-theorist works between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms' (Denzin, and Lincoln, 1998, p.2). Many theorists acknowledge *bricolage* as an undertaking involving practices that facilitate new tools or emerging concepts and techniques produced through the combining of different methodologies (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Nelson et al., 1992, Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991). In the adding of another dimension to this study by using a queer methodology, it is necessary to point out that:

[a] queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence (Halberstam, 1998, p.13).

Recent work on the destabilisation of sexuality and identity by queer theory can also operate to suggest that acts of 'life-writing', such as the interviews that take place on the Internet by the *XSTT* lesbian fandom, form texts that qualify identity through the author and the personal narrative. Queer theory is a form of coalition identity politics, where no identities are authentic or lacking; therefore it contests the heteronormative dominant representation that suggests everything else is deficient or incomplete. The various methodologies used in this study, together with their theoretical understandings, suggest that ethnographic writings have many voices that are infused with text and language that integrate all the life experiences of the writer. Consequently, we can never produce an objective, absolute narrative that depicts absolute knowledge. As one definition of cultural studies and its use of qualitative research,

Nelson asserts:

On the one hand, it is drawn to a broad interpretative, postmodern feminist and critical sensibility. On the other hand, it is drawn to more narrowly defined ... humanistic, and naturalistic conceptions of human experience and its analyses (1992, p.4)

The cultural and social study of fandom requires a methodology that is fluid and pliable, and one that can be applied from a non-normative experience. I suggest qualitative methods have a tolerance for uncertainty that can reflect the cultural and social reality being studied. Moreover, qualitative research can permit a longer more in-depth identification of behaviour through the use of participant observation. Qualitative methods have also enabled me to acknowledge the subjective biases in research and address them. I argue that quantitative research cannot always do this in terms of its statistical information. The characteristics of any cultural or media investigations such as lesbian Internet fandom will have many tensions and ambiguities. The data produced from the fan interviews, emails, bulletin boards, and Internet postings are a primary source that will be analysed throughout my investigation and its findings will be interpreted.

Qualitative data has in the past been contested by the quantitative ‘positivist’ type of research that requires and places more emphasise on statistical evidence, a sort of “number-crunching exercise”, to produce what has been alleged historically as truth claims (Gilbert, 1993, p.7)⁵⁷. This form of research also uses content analyses, surveys, experiments, and descriptive statistics to discuss its findings. This approach has the preconception that the social world with all its complex behaviours and codes

⁵⁷ Nigel Gilbert (1993) expresses this as a ‘positive tradition’. ‘[I]t is used to connote a view of sociology as a progressive, cumulative, explanatory ‘scientific project... in some cases to ultimately control the social world’, see Gilbert, N. *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage, p.7.

can be interpreted as uncomplicated and sometimes idealistically undemanding (Brewer, 2000). My investigation recognises that qualitative methods can also be problematic, and therefore have their own limitations, as Arthur Berger points out when he states: '[w]e observe behaviour; we cannot observe what people think, and it is dangerous to assume that we can know what they are thinking on the basis of their actions' (2000, p.168).

The cultural and social changes that have taken place in our society through new technologies such as the Internet, satellite and cable television, digital and new media have helped to shift the focus of audience research in the last two decades. Fan practices have moved away from just the viewing of a television, cinema or literary narrative into a more interactive mode through the use of the Internet. The interest is on the transference of conversations through the fan practices, and how this helps in the understanding of the fans' everyday lives. The active audience paradigm that is well established through previous research in fandom is what becomes apparent during this investigation, and becomes the path that is pursued in order to answer the central questions of the thesis regarding the three layers of new lesbian identities and discourse revealed through *XSTT*.

Traditional ethnography within the social sciences has produced a change in the interpretation of ethnography. The main decisive factor in this change was the notion of field research and its usage as a core element. The route my investigation takes is "getting close to the inside", inspired by the well-used phrase of offering 'thick description' or 'deeply rich' data that is borrowed from Gilbert Ryles (1949), and

cited by Clifford Geertz (1973)⁵⁸. These elements are embedded in the practices of ethnography and can provide a rich tapestry to help researchers delve into human behaviour, but all of this is dependant on the subjective interpretation of the observations and the gathered data. What both Ryles as a philosopher and Geertz as a sociologist maintain is that the data gathered by the researcher is a construction of human behaviour. David Silverman (1997) points to the use of integrative ethnography which gives a layered account when studying ‘microcultures or subcultures’, integrative ethnography and its importance is emphasised in the use of this methodology when exploring the ‘existence of communities of people sharing the same rules and same understanding of the world’ in this instance in fan communities (1997, p.11). James Clifford describes ‘integrative ethnography’ as a process whereby ‘understanding the other through an empathetic relationship, the fieldworker would be able to reconstruct the other’s point of view’ (1986, p.100). Being a member of this particular lesbian fan club, *XSTT*, has enabled me to have an empathetic relationship towards its online fandom, although there was urgency and a deep awareness on my part to ensure that the fans’ fragmented and, at times anxious voices were given a space to be heard.

One advantage of qualitative research is its interactive flexibility and use of research tools. ‘Interpretative techniques such as semiotics or ideological analyses’ incorporating psychoanalytical, feminism and queer theory interpretations can assist when studying the primary data (Berger, 1997, p.15). Anne Gray (1997) illustrates these concepts by endorsing the use of qualitative enquiry in her research on the

⁵⁸See Geertz’s (1973) essay, ‘Thick Description’: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture’ in which he explains that he adopted the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) whose discussion on “thick description” appears in two essays now reprinted in Ryle’s (1997) ‘Collected Papers – Collected Essays’ (1929–1968), Vol. 2. London: Routledge, pp.3-30.

gendering of new technology. Gray expounds the notion of “telling it like it is” and explains the broader aspect of documenting “hidden lives”, suggesting that feminist ethnography is a response to biases and problems of exclusion within traditional disciplines, those of perceived androcentric and masculinist research method⁵⁹. Drawing on a non-normative gaze to support my findings enhances the social and cultural aspects of using qualitative research methods in this particular investigation.

Previous audience research has drawn on feminist methods using small-scale qualitative investigations successfully highlighting case studies as a way of enquiring into the behaviour of fans or television audiences. Elizabeth McKinley's (1997) monograph called *Beverly Hills, 90210: Television, Gender and Identity*, the study of young women fans of the soap opera⁶⁰, saw the use of ethnography as part of her research objectives to enhance her understanding of the viewing behaviour of a number of young women fans. McKinley, a feminist, admits that she was not a fan of this soap but was interested in the talk young women produced when watching this series. McKinley engages in a methodology that enabled her to contest and investigate the tensions of her own identity. This she accomplishes by discussing her privileged position as a feminist academic who was not a fan of this soap, but whose interest was sparked by conversations that she heard based on this programme. McKinley claims that, she continually questioned her own identity through her interpretations of the fans she investigated. Her honesty in divulging her problems and shortcomings while using particular research methods is reassuring. She discloses that she chose an array of fans from different social and economic backgrounds as her respondents. This presented her with many complicated issues and McKinley refrained from adding the

⁵⁹ For further information about feminist empirical research read Sandra Harding (1987) who identifies a qualitative approach as ‘feminist empirical research’ in *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY. Cornell University, p.92.

⁶⁰ *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) television soap opera drama aired on Fox Television Network.

extra challenge of the notion of race and ethnicity to her already intricate equation⁶¹. McKinley uses qualitative methods and diverse questions as part of her interview technique; she also adopts an adventurous method of recording all the conversations during the viewing of the particular series, which has been acknowledged as innovative in terms of audience research. McKinley's questionnaire became part of my model when constructing a template at the beginning of the pilot study. However, her use of double-headed questions presented too much of a problem and I withdrew them early in the study. The interviews furnished me with information that became more absorbing and intriguing as the investigation developed. The fans' responses to my questions were analysed and understood more deeply as aspects of their own lives were revealed.

Viewing my own fluid identity as a hybrid of meanings as a fan academic lesbian my fan interpretations will come from what ethnographic theorists suggest is an insider's perspective⁶². This is not to suggest that this position is viewed as advantageous but that it may produce 'less partial and distorted descriptions, explanations and understandings' (Harding, 1987, p.12). As this notion of hybridity encompasses and is embedded in all social, cultural, religious, class, and racial aspects of human life my knowledge and experience is important in terms of exchanging and divulging certain information with my participants. These exchanges helped me to reflect upon and explore my own identity as well as analysing the fans. As a consequence, my experiences were constantly being mirrored during my conversations online with the diverse members of the XSTT fan club. I became aware during the many discussions

⁶¹McKinley (1997) moved from a broad general notion to a more 'focused characteristic of ethnography' as cited in Adrian Holliday (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, p.64.

⁶²For a detailed explanation of the concept of insiders in relation to fans and fandom - see Matt Hills (2002) *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.

with the fans that one could only ‘construct a discursive representation’ of the fan members of this online fan site (Skeggs, 1994, p.75). A tension arose within my role as a researcher because of the displacement of lesbianism as a unifying political identity. While supporting this notion, I also claim that qualitative research methods employ a framework that allows the verification of responses within the online interviews to use direct quotations from fans that sustain the reality of their situations. These may present the tensions of a lesbian online identity when it has become displaced. My insider knowledge as a lesbian fan was useful but at the beginning was also challenging with regard to finding my way around the fan club and online discussions and conversations. I sought guidance from the fans in this area and this built up trust.

To illustrate this I am including one of my first connections with a fan called emeraldruid. This fan was supportive of my research and helped me to understand how difficult it would be at times to construct interviews through the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) system. This was when the hardware and software was in its infancy. It was very difficult to get the spellings and grammar correct when communicating with a person online because the excitement of being able to converse with each other from across the world was an amazing experience for both of us during this historical period. This is an extract of our first contact with each other, ‘resubmit2001’ was the online pseudonym I chose for the study.

resubmit2001: Hello hope I am not disturbing you?

emeraldruid: no, not at all. i'm just having some pc probs that i can't seem 2 fix.

emeraldruid: how r u

resubmit2001: Can you answer a couple of questions while I'm on line

emeraldrudd: sure

resubmit2001: What attracted you to the show, How did you get started watching it, ?

emeraldrudd: u mean xena?

resubmit2001: Yes, sorry I should have explained I have three other people that I'm trying to chat to at the same time, bear with me please.

emeraldrudd: k. i was in a rehab center when i was just changing channels n came across this gorgeous woman in leather

emeraldrudd: i had been in a fire

resubmit2001: I am sorry to hear that , I hope you were not too badly hurt,

emeraldrudd: well, i was very badly burned. lost everything. but i do believe that i got back more than i lost

emeraldrudd: ended up in a wheelchair

resubmit2001: When you talk about the show with others do you have a favorite character, who and why, what kinds of things do you talk about? Thats a wonderful insight into life that you have!

emeraldrudd: my fav is.....xena but i like the relationship between xena n gabrielle

resubmit2001: What was your favorite episode? What was the most memorable thing that happened on the show? And What did it mean to you as a lesbian?

emeraldrudd: my fav is the debt 1 & 2. the last question will take a little thought. lol

resubmit2001: Do you think the show has changed since you've been watching it, also do you think you have changed, in what ways? Please take your time, I hope you are not offended by any of my questions and that I hope that you do not get upset, please tell me if it is painful for you and I will try and rephrase the questions.

emeraldrudd: i think it's changed in that b4 it just used 2 b a story a week, then it became sort of a following type of thing. not quite soap opera but it became about xena and gabrielle. even tho, usually, each episode didn't go right into the next, it kept up a story. does that make sense?

resubmit2001: Yes, did you discuss the episodes with people on line alot, what you it make you feel the whole fan club that sprawned from this programme.

emeraldrudd: most of the disussions have been with message boards n lists. then there's the xena clubs that i belong 2. i'm not sure what it is about the show that started the whole fan club thing, tho

resubmit2001: What did you favorite show the one you mentioned early mean to you as a lesbian, did you feel some sort of empowerment after watching it?

emeraldruid: o, absolutely. i see that i can do what i want 2. i realized that after i came out of the coma after the fire. they didn't think i was goig 2 live. then they said i'd never walk again....oooo nver tell me that, dr. now i can walk, with a cane but i'm out of the chair.

resubmit2001: That is good news! I will finish now, but hope to chat again soon, thankyou for all your help these are not the official questions I just wanted to break the ice with you so now we have made contact, we can talk some more before the official questions end of Aug after a chat with my supervisor, have a good day, by the way what time is it where you are?

resubmit2001: Sorry I dont know all the jargon it will take me a while to get use to it, please be patience.

emeraldruid: o, patience....the fire taught me that. lol. i'm in newburgh, indiana. don't worry about the jargon, u'll catch on u r so welcome

Working on the chat line was demanding because at the beginning of this research I had lots of people to deal with in succession and it had to be done rapidly in order to capture the data onto floppy disk. This fan answered many questions and I hardly gave her time to think before I went on to the next query. I was anxious that there were other people waiting to chat. In this extract, emeraldruid talked about the protagonists, Xena and Gabrielle's friendship, and how she [emeraldruid] relates to Xena and her survival skills. The fan identifies with these qualities. The fan also reflects on her accident. This is a confessional discourse and the register the fan uses to discuss this personal information is embedded in the answers to my questions about the television series: "I got more back than I lost". This short sentence became an important link in my exchanges the fan. It cemented ties and enabled me to pursue my questions to this insightful investigation in an open way. When I asked the fan, "what does it mean to her as a lesbian?", her reply ended with the abbreviation "lol" or 'laugh out loud'. This interested me. The fan, needed to get her own perspective on this question and was able to answer this later on in our conversation when she talks

about her empowerment when discussing the medical diagnosis and her condition after her accident.

Although never being able to rid oneself entirely of the label “academic”, unless under a covert nature, the less important status-seeking category of fan/academic can reduce the élitist pressure when conducting research without the anthropological issue of “going native”. It may also provide a context in which the fans are more inclined to tell the truth, although authenticity of online electronic investigations with regard to online identity performance can never be emphatically proven. As Hills conveys:

Fandom, I would suggest, deserves to be represented more on its own terms (in which the limits of this ‘limited factual basis’ are explored and made explicit) rather than being used to form part of a moral dualism (2002, p.9).

As Hills makes clear and I became aware, especially when speaking to the fan emeraldruide, that the moral dualism of fan/academic could present itself with me being a novice in terms of my computer skills online as a fan. However, it should be acknowledged too that this helped with my study.

The Case Study

On January 16th 2001, I sent an email to the webmaster of Yahoo to enquire if the ‘Xenasubtextalk’ (XSTT) site had been updated and if the chat rooms and Usenet groups were still functioning. An email was returned from a person called Scot who informed me that the last update was on the 3rd December 2000 when the last new episodes were aired. At the end of the email was the symbol for the “smiley” face and

the text presented as ‘(: Lesbians are cool :)’⁶³. After receiving this information, I had the “go-ahead” to begin my research.

Qualitative methods of enquiry were adopted and I concentrated on the accounts of the fans themselves using participant observation, used over a twelve-month period. This culminated in approximately another ten months contact time being made with the participants during the semi-structured interviews. Participant observation was not done in the traditional way (i.e. living among the participants in a natural setting and collecting or amassing field notes) therefore the framework of this study contests this rationale. Participant observation can involve what John Brewer describes as ‘ethnomethodological approaches’, which suggests new forms of ‘interactionism ...the organisation of conversation’ (2000, p.60). In this case study, fans used online conversations, often organised into discussion threads on bulletin boards as part of their everyday fan activities. I also used the discussion threads on these bulletin boards for interviews.

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel introduced the phrase ‘ethnomethodological approach’ as a means of qualitative research. He used it to describe the study of everyday life: ‘[w]alking and sleeping activities that we take for granted without any real thought was something that sociologists delved into’(1967, pp.31-32). In my online interviews as part of an ethnomethodological approach, I adopted probing questions that related to ‘the ways people make sense of things, and find meaning in things especially conversations people have and things people do’ (Berger, 2000, p.146). This approach was developed in the sixties by sociologists who were exploring the organisation of conversation in everyday activities, or the common-sense knowledge that is embedded

⁶³ A copy of the original can be viewed in Appendix ‘A’.

in social structures. This informed what we now know as ‘conversation analysis’ (Brewer, 2000, p.60). Garfinkel was already expounding this type of research in the sixties, claiming that we take these experiences for granted and as Berger suggests, ‘important segments of everyday life escape our attention and are really fertile ground for understanding how people live and make sense of things’ (2000, p.149). Computer technology has enabled a different method of participant observation. The researcher enters this environment through the gaze of a monitor and using an interface that connects the researcher and participant. Applied to the fans, this would become part of their everyday activities, for instance, logging on to the Xenaverse and surfing the net for information about the series, visiting the fan club and making connections with other fans. I argue for the validity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in terms of my interviews, the data generated should be treated as interpretations of active agents in a concrete cultural context. I also argue for the validity of the semi-structured online interview and discuss how the material generated would be interpreted as part of the fans’ own narratives.

In this case study, I am drawing on Kenneth Plummer, who argues that ‘story telling may come very close to life as experienced’, this research presents snapshots of fourteen women’s stories as they chose to tell them (1995, p.168). As real life accounts as they lived them, their form of story telling is in computer-generated conversations. I remain aware that my sample is very small and as Geertz points out, small occurrences are ‘not the world in a tea cup’ (1973, p.23). In stating this, Geertz also argues that small facts speak to large issues and considers it equally problematic to avoid generalisations and while the sample in this study does not constitute an empirical account of XSST online fandom, generalisations can reasonably be made. I am suggesting that on a macro level the fans whom I interviewed during my

exploration were interested in the love and sexual relationship of Xena and Gabrielle, on a micro level, and as a diverse social and cultural group that form a virtual community of individuals they share different opinions and came from different 'speaker positions'. While some research may negate the advanced nature of computer-generated discussions, it is important to be aware of their positive elements. The need for certain, oppressed sections of society such as lesbians to form safe cultural spaces is important and the Internet has provided the tools to enable these forums of conversation and discussion to take place. Wendy Seymour an academic Professor in Social Work informs us that:

The participants suggested that technology is an important avenue of personal and social communications. Successful use of technology can be closely related to issues such as independence, quality of life, empowerment contact with the wider community, a "path to freedom", a sense of control over life, and the facilitation of social value (2001, p.150).

In Seymour's study, the Internet has become another avenue to investigate different forms of communication within different groups of people. Television and video viewing, Internet use, club membership, computer-mediated messaging, lesbian identity, and fan fiction writing as well as 'people in the field' were all accessible without the fans feeling threatened in any way (Brewer, 2000, p.62). Katie Ward⁶⁴, writing about the Internet and feminist online cyber communities, acknowledges that 'there is no established precedent as to how to collect data', or what time structure is recognised or judged as appropriate (1999, p.8). In addition, Ward discusses online electronic ethnography which supports the notion of feminist ethnography and agency. Scholars have previously adopted methods of sociology and anthropology and applied them to the 'virtual real'. Interviews are imperative because they enable the

⁶⁴See Ward, K. (1999) 'The cyber ethnographic (re)construction of two feminist online communities', 4: (1) [online], 'Sociological Research Online'. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk./4/1/ward/html> [Accessed May 2001].

researcher to gather information about what people think, as well as what they do within fandom.

I constructed and adapted my interviews using the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) service hosted by a Yahoo server. The immediacy of this group activity is worth mentioning because it enhances a form of individual and collective intimacy, and this can help to build on a community. It engages people more and supports them in their conversations and discussions. It can also help not to overwhelm participants with large blocks of text and produces natural breaks for response to questions. There is also the added advantage of being able to leave a message for a person making it possible to arrange a time to go online together. A symbol appears when you go online to inform other members and your membership name appears, so all members know who is online at the same moment. The synchronous communication route enables engagement with fan members in a highly interactional style of conversation.

Due to the lack of visual cues, except for the use of emoticons 😊⁶⁵ many of the fans asked me questions on a one-to-one basis (in what was developing into a relaxing social setting) about my age, ethnicity, class, and employment, at the same time as I was questioning them. As Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln suggest:

This personalisation of the interview method makes it a potential agent of social change, where new identities and new definitions of problematic situations are created, discussed and experimented with (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.36).

Because communication codes between lesbians consist of eye contact, glances, and gestures, a sort of emotional investment or coded behaviour using the Internet did not

⁶⁵This is a ‘smiley face’ or a face that can show the person you are communicating with some sort of response, either to a question or just to express how you are feeling about a particular question or comment.

facilitate this act, so both parties relied on the emoticons and mostly written language. In the past, historical markers and images as well as representations in the lesbian community could be terms such as butch and femme, but these do not function in exactly the same way in a cyber environment. However, they did function in a different way as codes or markers within the more personal conversations and confessional narratives of fans discussed in preceding chapters.

To help the flow of conversation, I continued to use emoticons 😊 such as the smiley face or the embarrassed face showing all its teeth 😬 ! These icons allow facial gestures to be represented in text-based data. This online language allows for the “levelling out” of social and cultural differences. They were used in this study at certain informal stages within the interview, for example, when a participant’s topic thread was a personal comment about a recent or past relationship. As Munt et al., note, ‘These strategies construct a sense of reciprocity, engendering the impression of an interaction rather than a series of monologues’ (2002, p.129). This activity permitted me to adopt a light-hearted approach to the questions, and the icon that represented a blushing face was used quite frequently by me until I became familiar with the abbreviated text and codes used in CMC. Acronyms and other forms of shorthand are used in CMC and deciphered without too much difficulty as much of the shorthand is easy to understand such as ‘u’ representing ‘you’ and ‘lol’ (as stated earlier) meaning to ‘laugh out loud’. The use of these icons added to the relaxed atmosphere when I was conducting an electronic semi-structured interview. Some limitations of this electronic technique were experienced when interviewing online. The delay mechanism in the IRC line made conversation ‘move’ at different stages. This interferes with the rhythm between the researcher and the participant and, at

times can become frustrating. Before the question is answered, you begin to type in another question. Patterns were forming as the interviews progressed and the confessional mode of conversation became part of the social interaction of my interviews. After a screening of an episode of *X: WP*, electronic conversations were in abundance and the systems of communication were full with descriptive language and lesbian codes and signifiers. Conversations appeared in standard ASCII⁶⁶ text and were provided through the normal Web-based protocols.

The data generated through my qualitative methodology expressed a different form of fan dialogue, a layer of lesbian fandom that was cultivated through this electronic tool and these online tools are intrinsic to lesbian Internet fan practices⁶⁷. The fans I interviewed are ‘active agents’ in their own stories. Some aspects of the ‘directness’ of the topic threads invited the participants to reply using a fan language that was familiar to them through the conversations in the forum on the website. This method of online interviewing, I suggest, contests and challenges traditional methods of face-to-face interviewing or focus group interviewing by being able to produce electronic conversational data. The processes and retrieval of electronic data and storage is made more manageable by quick access to the data through both floppy disks and hard copy and then by its links to other software that enables the analytical process to take shape⁶⁸. I would agree that ‘research is grounded because no researcher can separate

⁶⁶ ASCII or ‘American Standard Code for Information Interchange.’

⁶⁷ Lesbian fandom in this context means a discussion coming from a position of fluidity something that is constantly changing like the performance of a lesbian Internet fan identity. This concept is explained and discussed more thoroughly in chapter three and four using the fans’ conversational and interview extracts as illustrations that have been interpreted.

⁶⁸ Floppy disks are no longer used in computer technology and have been replaced by universal series bus or USB storage drives. However, at the time of this research, they were still user-friendly.

herself from personhood and thus from deriving second order constructs from experience' (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p.57).

There were a few problems within this qualitative case study, one being the geographical location of fans. Some of the fans lived in different parts of North America and time zone differences varied between six and eight hours. Time was spent waiting for fans to log on to the server to enable contact to be made or sending them offline messages to request a response or to schedule a time slot. Sometimes this proved difficult to co-ordinate especially during the school holidays, as some fans had childcare responsibilities. Trying to sort a timetable out was awkward as fans also worked or had caring duties such as looking after ageing parents; one woman was disabled and sometimes wheelchair-bound. These restrictions meant that in order to get a connection I had to log on at around 03.00 UK time and arrangements were made to ease these problems. The problem of time delay was partially resolved by requesting some email conversations for the second phase of the study. The second part of the interviews that related to the final episodes of the programme and Xena's barbaric death drew a lot of activity from the fans.

One of the most interesting aspects of this qualitative study was what I discovered in both the diversity and commonality amongst the fans I interviewed. The fans who became my key participants ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-five. One fan DCB was seventy-two years of age. I also drew on other fans who posted on the bulletin boards of *XSTT* as well as the fans I interviewed. These fans were Indigo, Adara, Regent to the Queen, Shari and Stonexena. Also known as Stone, Stonexena was a founder member of *XSTT*. Class status, as described by the fans I interviewed, ranged from working-class, blue-collar worker to middle- and upper-middle class. Their

employment status was as follows: nursery nurse, maths teacher, prison warden, school secretary, press technician, health worker, graphic writer, scientist, social worker and teaching assistant. Two fans were unemployed, and one fan had been burned in a fire, which had left her disabled and she lived in a rehabilitation unit at the time of the interviews. Three of the fans interviewed were biological mothers and four were mothers who co-parented children. Twelve of these fans lived in the US although one fan at the time of the research was in the process of moving to Britain. One fan lived in Ireland and another in Britain. One fan described her ethnicity as German, one as Hispanic, while another as having "Cajun on my dad's side and American-Indian Cherokee on my mom's side", while another categorised herself as Scottish-Irish. They were all geographically positioned between North America and Europe and belonged to a variety of cultures. At the end of the research I had accumulated twenty-three women on my 'friends' list' of the club but made regular contact with fourteen who became the foundation for the investigation.

I suggest that my small sample is representative of women and fans of a larger population, and therefore, some theoretical generalisations can be made regarding their progressive identities. During the interpretations of the fans' disclosures, it cannot be denied that related experiences can influence findings and inform interpretations or analyses. In order to minimise this problem, I will try to make my biases explicit and therefore make the process of data collection and analysis as transparent as possible. In my research I did not purposefully exclude other marginalised groups, nor am I suggesting that theorising lesbian fandom and its constructs implies that the issues of race, class and gender are translated as reasonably stable and are therefore not counted in the equation. This research contests these social, cultural and political constructs as fixed categories and, while agreeing with a

poststructuralist notion that disputes absolute truths, I do not share the same pessimistic outlook that agency is not possible for the fans in this research⁶⁹. I argue that a form of agency is located in fans wanting to tell their stories in whatever way possible. Attention is given to the notion of empowerment, and how this can induce changes in women's lives, thus informing the meanings placed on situations within their own negotiated social and power relations.

Insider's Biases

First-hand experiences can only enhance appreciation of the topic being researched and discussed and my insider knowledge as a lesbian fan allowed this. Prior to the interviews, I continued to "lurk" in the chosen fan club, observing the discourses taking place from a distance⁷⁰. The next stage after lurking was to find my way around other connected sites and to gather as much information about the television programme, the two main women protagonists and the online fans as I could. I obtained photographs, fan fiction 'Über' stories⁷¹ and copies of the official fan e-journal as well as various other articles that had been placed on the Internet with reference to the show. This enabled me to gain more knowledge and understanding of the *XSTT* online fan club.

⁶⁹I suggest agency in terms of potential lesbian performance or identity, lesbian identity or a queer fluid identity or performance that enables *XSTT* fans and their fan practices on the Internet to support their empowerment.

⁷⁰A "lurker" is someone who views and observes from the sidelines, it is a term used on the Internet chat lines. A lurker is someone who does not participate fully. A lurker is viewed in the computer world as someone with voyeuristic tendencies. See 'Glossary' in 'Bleeping Computer' [online] www.bleepingcomputer.com/glossary/definition92.html [Accessed May 2001].

⁷¹The German 'Über' or 'over' can also be translated as 'cross' or 'above'. In this context it translates as 'crossover'. These stories depict the characters in different time and space zones. It is a formula that incorporates intertextuality of genres and parts of previous stories being inserted or made explicit reference to. This word and its relevant stories are explored in chapter five in regard to fan fiction writing.

I began to be familiar with the terminology of the *Xenite* and the developing Xenaverse online fan community and was slowly acquiring the discourse to enable me to apply for membership of one of the dedicated fan clubs. This gave me some credence and a vocabulary to take part in the bulletin board discussions and postings as well as the instant message service. During the CMC, another lesbian discourse was beginning to take shape and this became entrenched in the fans' online practices and performances. This was part of the fans' biographical narratives of the self that 'capture a tension between self and others...generating a reflection on the fluctuating place of the subject within its community' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998, p.162).

Adhering to Denis Walsh's suggestion that 'ethnographic research depends on building up relations of rapport and trust with people in the field', I proceeded with the initial introductions (1998, p.232). Control would inevitably lie in the hands of the owners of the club I was observing, but being a fan member obviously gave me more influence when it came to discussing the latest episode aired.

This activity proved to be time consuming but was necessary for the gathering and analysing process. Many thousands of websites have been dedicated to fans of something, but in the earlier stages of fandom, it was deemed problematic by some academics to be a fan and an academic and to want to investigate fandom as a topic⁷². Tanya Modleski, a cultural academic, did not greet this academic fan position during research with a congenial stance. She writes:

If the problem with some of the work of the Frankfurt School was that its members were too far outside the culture they examined, critics today seem to have the opposite problem: half in love with their subject,

⁷² See more information on the duality of fan/academic in Hills, M. (2002) *Fan Cultures*, London Routledge.

immersed in their culture, they sometimes seem unable to achieve the proper critical distance from it (1986, p.11).

The Frankfurt School, as a neo-Marxist group in the thirties, examined the effects of mass culture and the growth of consumer culture on the working classes. They critiqued new technology, and argued that it was becoming a force of social and organisational control. Modleski implies that there is a danger within the academic's position of academic/fan that can be too celebratory in its approach to fans, and how they interact with the culture industries. My understanding of Modleski's position is that contemporary researchers may assume an over-positive approach in the theorisation of consumerism through and within fandom.

While Modleski's response may seem harsh, it is intended to place more of an onus on the researcher to be reflexive about their subjectivity when entering into a familiar cultural world and to be aware of having some objective distance⁷³. Hills a self-confessed 'academic-fan' is sometimes critical of the insider academic approach, although he appears to come from an insider perspective himself. Hills claims that Jenkins' work is a form of 'academic–fan hybridity' and suggests that fandom is sometimes appropriated by academics and elevated to a state of profundity (2002, p.10). Hills elaborates on this by illustrating John Michael's (2000) interpretation of the fan-academic⁷⁴. According to Michael, fans and fandom are revered by Jenkins as almost 'saintly' intellectuals above reproach. He goes on to criticise Jenkins' defence of fandom as belonging to an academic value system that projects its persona in order to control and sanction its customs. Both Hills (2002) and Michael (2000) share the

⁷³This is a process in which academics transform their guise to that of a fan member and can become immersed in their fandom forgetting their objectivity as an academic.

⁷⁴ Michael, J. (2000) *Anxious Intellectuals; Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals and Enlightenment Values*. Durham: Duke University Press.

viewpoint that Jenkins, in his analyses, fails to acknowledge the fabricated illusions of this position. Michael furthers his argument by pointing out that:

Jenkins is intent on proving that Trekkies [sic] are not a collection of alienated and maladjusted cultural dupes but a sort of peaceable kingdom operating without the impositions of intellectuals ...it begins to resemble a sort of idealized research seminar engaged in a fairly traditional form of literary study (2000, p 120).

Moore (1993) and Geertz (1973) further dispute the fan/academic position. Moore suggests that the ‘life histories of academics are insufficiently interesting to merit such close scrutiny’ (1993, p.68). In support of previous statements, Geertz argues that researchers who take on this role believe themselves to be ‘romantics or spies’ by trying to become the people they interview (1973, p.13). Even though I may share a familiarity and some common ground with the lesbian fans I interviewed, I do not envisage myself in either of these ‘romantic or spy categories’, exciting as the latter may sound. As a fan and member of the *XSTT* club, I had the privilege of already understanding some of the reader response positions and discourses of the fan members.

Recruitment, Methods and Framework

The initial method used in the process of the research was conducted by gathering data from the postings on a message or bulletin board within the fan club. *XSTT* is not set up in a typical magazine format as such, although it does display some characteristics of this particular style. However, it does have a home page with internal links to contact the founder member’s personal home page; a link to enter the chat room; and a link to photographs and all the member’s details such as online pseudonyms, age and also the geographic location of fans. It is also listed in the

entertainments' section of the Yahoo server⁷⁵ for clubs on X: WP with its title 'xenasubtexttalk'. This is a clear signifier for lesbians as it is also advertised as 'XSTT - An adult lesbian club to discuss Xena subtext'.

I investigated some fan's details that were listed on the membership list, choosing a fan called cabinngirl. Like Stonexena, cabinngirl was one of the founder members and a gatekeeper of the club. She posted regularly and, after reading her profile, I decided she was the fan to make contact with first. She lived in California and was thirty years of age. To get in touch with the founders of the fan site you look for a yellow star symbol to enable you to send an offline message. The instant message symbol is a yellow smiley face⁷⁶. cabinngirl gave her approval of my research and posted a message to that effect⁷⁷. A copy of my request along with the gatekeeper's comments was then placed on the bulletin board. My second response from cabinngirl after asking permission to post my request for participants for my research and then to appeal for further information came from her in an email:

Sorry it has taken me so long to respond to your email. I have been extremely busy with work and school and now with the tragic events of the 11th. As far as the club goes... real has reared its ugly head and I do not get there often. However,, if you have any questions you need to ask me please go ahead... the term TPTB means...The Powers That Be... meaning the people that run stuff.

Membership of the club was an important step in becoming familiar with the discourse used by the *Xenites* on the bulletin boards and on the IRC Chats⁷⁸. In order to take part in the individual conversations using computer-mediated language and to

⁷⁵ A sample of the Yahoo server site and its listing of XSTT as an adult lesbian club can be viewed in Appendix 'I'.

⁷⁶ See earlier 'emoticons'.

⁷⁷ Copies of these emails can be viewed in the Appendix 'A'.

⁷⁸ IRC refers not only to the software but also to the means to create a live chat area on the Internet in which real-time conversations among two or more people take place via the IRC software. IRC is divided into channels. When you join a channel everything you type is visible to you. Most channels have a topic or thread.

facilitate the IRC as required, it was necessary to send an email message to a chosen fan from the membership list. This was carried out via the instant messenger service I had to request permission to be put on this fan's friends' list. I chose a couple of fans whom I had noticed posted regularly on the bulletin boards, and introduced myself as a researcher who was also a fan. This was the start of my communication with some of the fans. After my membership of the club and the initial posting to one of the gatekeepers, I posted again requesting fans to help with the pilot study. By this time, I had five women who stated that they were interested. Three women had replied to the first postings, that one of the gatekeepers had endorsed on the bulletin board. The fans used the names of reneeg_33, ladykat44 and jerricat44: two of these fans were active posters on the bulletin board. I made one-to-one contact and discussed a summary of the investigation with two of these women in March 2001. I explained that I was devising some questions for a pilot study and would be in touch again when they had been completed⁷⁹. At the time, my work was being discussed at an ethics board meeting⁸⁰. I was concerned about this interlude. I did not want to lose my participants and was pleased it proved to be only a two-month break from chatting online. I did lose three of my five respondents because of the break but this was something beyond my control. (Two fans, ladykat44 and reneeg_33, continued to support the pilot study.)

⁷⁹ See message No: 6360 in Appendix 'A'. This is from cabinngirl one of the founder members of the fan site.

⁸⁰ I was informed not to go back online until my supervisor had been informed of the outcome of the meeting. Concern was that the research involved the Internet and was being conducted online. It is important to bear in mind that this was early days and not many ground rules had been laid down which was problematic for academic study, although now there are many guidelines in place for online research for students.

I was concerned about the interruption of my research as it was a crucial time to form a relationship with the *XSTT* lesbian fans. My anxiety was that the offline messages and bulletin board requests did not clarify any urgency in my requests for respondents. Seymour suggests ‘gaps in communication may assume heightened importance in online research’ (2001, p.153). This proved to be difficult to deal with at first. My initial contact was a posting on the bulletin board that received a very positive response. I decided to carry out a small calculation while waiting to progress with my research: I worked out that by the time my research continued after the delay at the beginning of May 2001, the bulletin board had already produced 6,400 postings since the club was opened in October 1998. This suggested that some members enjoyed the activity of posting and that the talk generated through this action was a vital part of club membership. Connections were re-established on the 9th May 2001, and I sent a number of requests off line to my friends’ list and waited for the replies. I felt excited at the prospect of interviewing these and other women in more depth. I also decided to discontinue the pilot study, go straight into the research, and try to get as many participants as possible to help with my semi-structured interviews. I approached another gatekeeper of the *XSTT* Stonexena. This was a message I received from my first contact with this fan:

Stonexena: If you would like to try and set up some sort of chat to talk about the thigns you are working on...that would be fine with me. Send me an email to StoneXena@yahoo.com or send another IM message. I am inteterssted in helping yo uout wiht your research if I can. See ya....STONE

Stonexena or Stone was helpful at the beginning of my research and when questioning her about the last two episodes of the series in chapter five. After leaving a couple of online messages for new participants I decided to choose from the members’ list and

received a friendly response from a fan called critter69_78. This is her answer to my request for news.

resubmit2001:

Its very quiet at the moment what do you think the reason is?

Let me know when we can chat, you are in England so that should not be too difficult to arrange. I am here from 9.00 till 5.00pm mon-Friday, I would appreciate a one 2 one to help with my research everything will be treated with the upmost confidentiality Thanks for this. My research is about the lesbian subtext in Xena and if the show was empowering to women. I would like to ask you questions about your story,

critter69_78:

I am presently in the USA but am returning on Aug 22nd if all goes ok with immigrations.....go to the XSTT club and read novice7_uk posted message there and you will see what i mean

resubmit2001:

Thanks so much for your reply, I do remember this posting and I thought you might be the woman, how interesting, it would be great to have a chat with you both about all whats happened, I look forward to having a one2one with you both, that is if your gf wants to help me with my research. Take care and the best wishes to your both.

This fan did respond and I was able to talk to her girlfriend another fan called novice_7 and their story is explored later in this thesis. In conversations such as this, I drew on the cultural investigations carried out by a feminist researcher, Ellen Seiter, who had used a similar approach to the one I was contemplating for the interviews. Seiter (1995) carried out audience research with a group of participants who were already known to her. The fans I interviewed were not part of a focus group, although later on in my research I did meet with one fan, magmor, at an academic conference. There were no visual cues as to who the rest of the fans were except for the profiles on the fan club. However, in some cases you could obtain photographs from the fans if you asked through an email. Through my observations, I soon became familiar with

their habits of posting and some of their discussions concerning Xena's and Gabrielle's representations as being in a lesbian relationship within the television series.

Before Seiter commenced her study, she joined a parent-support network group and then decided to request their help with her research project. One of the advantages that she expresses through this approach was 'the availability of the group' and this was another reason for approaching the fan club of which I was now a member. Like Seiter, I understood that the Internet was a useful resource tool in terms of lesbian fans and fandom. The study was exciting and the research could be carried out with reasonable access and in the same 'thrifty manner' as suggested by (Seiter, 1995, p.138). In agreement with Seiter, the accessibility of these women was a distinct advantage in terms of location and access.

Getting personal recommendations from a contact can help in forming a group that is comfortable with each other, so I also wanted individuals as well as the group to realise that 'they have something to contribute' (Seymour, 2001, p.156). Naturally, the club was a good starting-point as the fan members were all involved in the subtext of the show, but not all would be willing to take part in the investigation for various reasons. I chose a name from the list without knowing this fan in terms of her posting or chatting habits the fan's name was xeniteus, and our first conversations were fruitful. xeniteus was confident with regards to chatting and being computer literate, she was able to support my many questions relating to the bulletin board postings and chats as the following snapshot reveals. resubmit2001:

Hi thanks for your messages, sorry you dont feel too good, I will need more help with the Xena questions but I putting some more stuff together

over the weekend. There is a posting today at xenasubtextalk which is from GBD and it has the abbreviations TPTB what does that mean, also when someone arranges a chat, it would seem that is what they are trying to organise at the club will it be held on the posting boards on IM service or in the chat room, if it is in the chat rooms and I ask the womens permission first is there a way I could save the conversations or is this not poss in a chat room?

xeniteus:

TBTB = The Powers That Be...usually refers to Tapert and Co. Well, I believe there is an option on most Chat Room for participants to choose to log the exchange they have with the group...and I believe it is that way in Private Chat...check and see by entering into a general chat and scope out your options. Here in IM, under the Menu Bar item FRIEND, you can invite people to a conference. With and without webcam and/or voice options. That is another possibility. Hope your day is going well. I can field questions whenever you wish. >G<

xeniteus was very informative and although she gave me instructions, I was not able to enter a chat room and save the chats as it became too complicated so had to return to one-to-one communications. The fan was interviewed using the same questionnaire that I used with all the fans but once I gained more rapport with the individual fans, I tailored my questions. This fan's contribution to this research was important and appears throughout the next three chapters. The idea of using bulletin boards and chat rooms from fan clubs as part of a qualitative methodology for exploring online lesbian identity and lesbian fandom has been recognised by other cultural, media and sociology theorists such as Cooper, 2010, Collier et al., 2009, and Edwards, 2010. They advocate that unlike Internet dating sites that are crafted to manipulate self-identification and build up a person's attributes, fan chat rooms, and bulletin boards are mainly anonymous contributions of self-presentations. There is no need to want to deceive or exaggerate personal characteristics in fandom.

The two fans ladykat44 and reneeg_33 who had remained from the test pilot study were sent an electronic message through the one-to-one chat line, asking if they knew

other women who may be interested in helping me with my research. The participants who replied to me this time were then approached with the same semi-structured open-ended questions and given a choice of how to answer and respond, through the messenger service or email. After the initial contacts, I would try to chat to them at least once, sometimes twice a week, both formally and informally. I make this distinction because, in the formal times, I kept strictly to the questionnaire while in the informal times, some of the fans just wanted to talk to me about problems that they were encountering or just to have a general chat. The questions I pursued in the formal interviews became culturally meaningful and salient to the fans. These are the usernames of the fans from *XSTT* who participated in the interview section of my research, replying through the chat rooms or through the emails and postings: ‘billenomates_18’, ‘malki_35’, ‘darxe’, ‘emeraldruid,’ ‘critter69_78,’ ‘texard’, ‘xeniteus’, ‘reneeg_33’ ‘magmor’, ‘sil verravyn’, ‘novice_7,’ ‘ladykat44’, ‘cabinngirl,’ and ‘stone’ (‘stonexena’).

One participant was recruited from Dublin University at the beginning of my research. The fan joined me on a discussion panel when I was giving a paper about my research. She agreed to be a participant. Her questions were sent through email rather than one-to-one messenger service from the club. Because my research was of a sensitive nature, dealing with identity and sexuality, it was necessary to be attentive to questions asked by these participants, and to reassure them about the confidentiality of the study and what would happen to the data when the research finished. After the first anxious introductions that came from both me and the participants, more informal discussions took place that enabled me to tailor the questions more towards individual women. I had established a trust with these fans and we began to share a friendly understanding. While performing this stage of my research and, remembering to

reflect on Seiter's discussion, I became aware that the very 'nurturing' she professed to was apparent in some of my conversations with the fans (1995, p.138). Some of these 'nurturing conversations' appear in the snapshot interviews in the thesis.

Types of Data Gathered

This investigation focussed on the cultural engagement with a specific audience who used a popular media text and the Internet to provide a tool for generating lesbian "talk" as a form of entertainment, social networking, and discussing new fan identities. The data has three forms of what can be categorised as talk or lesbian discourse. One is produced and generated in the fan forums through the bulletin boards and messenger services or emails where they discuss the subtext or 'open secret' of the series. The second is produced through the semi-structured interviews over the Internet and, finally, the third is the fan fiction writing manufactured online by the lesbian fans. There were two types of discussions manufactured during the non face-to-face interviews held on the Internet: one was an asynchronous discussion that allowed each fan to post and read messages at their own convenience through the bulletin boards and email service. The other is real time conversation that is synchronous and held through the IRC function. The latter process, at the time of my interviewing, was harder to gather because it has no archive to capture the talk. This was sometimes problematic and conversations were lost in the process of trying to save them. As O'Connor and Madge state:

Real time chat is a fast and furious environment. Multiple answers come in very quickly and in a fragmented and disjointed way. As comments from interviewers and participants can only be made as fast as someone can type, interviewers may prepare questions in advance and cut and paste them into the interview (2000, p.153).

Demonstrations of the different forms of talk are explored and interpreted throughout chapters three, four and five when positioning the fans within the subtextual narrative of the television series. Thomas (2002) argues that a number of audience research investigations as expressed by cultural and media feminists have all used different objectives and adopted a different focus and approach when gathering and collating information from their participants (Bobo, 1995; Collier et al., 2009; Cooper, 2010; Jowett, 2005; McKinley, 1997; Seiter, 1999; Stacey, 1994). Thomas suggests that feminist work incorporates different research concerns and various forms of data. Her own analysis suggests that written data in feminist audience research has been a dominant feature; however, 'interviews and focus groups are increasingly favoured' by academics (2002, p.59).

Sample Limitations

Whatever sample a researcher chooses for a case study or for a piece of research that requires entering into a cultural setting, subjective meaning is imposed onto that environment changing it immediately. The *XSTT* fan club can be deemed a natural environment in terms of an anthropological and social science point of view. However, there are limitations within this sample, because it is a club that is set up for lesbians to discuss the subtext of the *X: WP* series. The sample deals with a variety of individuals, some of whom self-identified as lesbians or bisexual but many of whom did not self-identify as lesbian but belonged to the fan club. The main observations and discussions between the researcher and the participants took place within the confines of membership. The membership and profiles could only be obtained and made available through the rules of membership of the club.

Another limitation was the ethical implications about confidentiality and the use of the data gathered. The emails that were requested as part of the interview procedure for the fans never materialised, and even though further conversations took place a written consent form was never received from any fans. The bulletin board postings explaining the purpose of the research contributed to the informed consent of the participants. The interview data was only accessible to me, and all the participants used their pseudonyms. This was not just an online problem. Getting permission was something for me to continue to pursue throughout individual conversations and during the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) postings. After my initial posting to the gatekeepers and on the BBS, it became the dual responsibility of both the participant and the researcher to ensure that they read the messages and thoroughly understood what their involvement meant. The individual interviews and conversations that were conducted online enabled a constant reiteration of the confidentiality and ethical requirements. This ensured an increase in trust with the informants through adhering to the rules of membership that are applicable to most fan clubs.

Charting Themes and Theories

As soon as an initial number of interviews had been put on disc and then transferred to printed hard copy, I began the process of indexing and charting. This was done before all the interviews were completed because the interactive nature of qualitative research allows for this. The different stages of my research overlapped and informed each other, and certain data emerged that was not anticipated at the beginning of my investigation such as the fan fiction writing. It was important because of how it empowered the lesbian online fan identities and challenged their traditional reading and writing habits. It added to the importance within the phenomenon of X: WP and

understanding new lesbian Internet fan identities through *XSTT*. With the use of ‘NVivo’,⁸¹ a research software package, I was able to search for emerging patterns within the data in the same way as the traditional methods of coding, except that the tools available are different⁸². This software makes coding and retrieval of information much simpler, as it is possible to select portions of text and apply codes to them without losing any of the original data. What is essential to my research and important to me as a sociologist is that the computer tools ‘assist the researcher to develop theoretical ideas’ (Gibbs, 2002, p.11). This is structured through ‘diagrams, concept mapping, and charts’ (*ibid*, p.12). A salient point made by Graham Gibbs is that a ‘qualitative analyses usually seek to enhance the data, to increase bulk, density and complexity’ differentiating from quantitative analyses that ‘reduce or condense the data’ to give statistical information (*ibid*, p.3).

What attracted me to the software package was the implied notion that NVivo was designed to inspire more probing and productive analyses of the research data. Gibbs calls attention to NVivo as a software package in that the ‘images or observing social practices that are commonly transformed into linguistic form, through description and field notes’ become the *raison d'être* for its usefulness (2002, p.1). The themes or common topics that emerged and encapsulated my understanding at a preliminary level were discourses of sexuality, romance, friendship, communication, confession and television practices. Occasionally, these topics partially coincided and overlapped

⁸¹ ‘NVivo’ is the name of a qualitative software package that I used at the beginning of my research

⁸² Please see in Appendix ‘F’ a ‘worked copy’ of NVivo data using the data for the fan darxe, one of the first participants to be coded at the beginning of my research. This data processing helped me to produce certain patterns and themes that later became important to my study but had to be abandoned due to theft of a zip drive and its contents. The working copy sampled in the appendix was one that I had printed out as a hard copy but unfortunately the rest where stolen on the zip drive before being printed out.

during the online discussions but this was the framework for the initial analyses that was developed and extended using the fans' narratives.

Before transferring the original data into NVivo for coding, a conversion process has to take place. The original data is transferred to 'rich text format' (RTF) to allow the data to be recognised and coded accordingly. This is a long process were there is a great deal of separate text and interviews but, when the project eventually takes shape, it enhances the accumulation and scheming of texts, documents and codes that are called nodes in NVivo. This is undoubtedly a useful implement for any qualitative research but I still had the laborious and time-consuming tasks of 're-reading the texts to check interpretations' (Gibbs, 2002, p.14).

I embarked on a paper method of drawing up three columns with subject headings before entering the data into the software package. The subject headings were Discourse, Objective Referent and Subjectivity. This model was suggested by Thomas Wengraf and is called 'evidence to support inferences to models' (2001, p.10). I approached my data using this method first because it gave me a pattern from which to observe how knowledge is extracted from data and second to gauge how my inferences and general assumptions could be misguided⁸³. Therefore, a reflexive approach is necessary to pose further questions. The inferences that I made regarding my data have not come from the actual interview material, but from conceptualising a progression of events, that in turn, have enabled me to interpret the data and discourse produced during the interview. Wengraf suggests that this model can divulge how the participant 'talks about things, about the changing social and cultural contexts', [the

⁸³ I have placed four samples in Appendix 'F' to show how Wengraf's 'paper method' was used to observe the patterns and themes that emerged from my data. This had its limitations as it was time-consuming and, given the immediacy of the Internet and NVivo software, it was difficult to continue with this methodology as part of electronic ethnography.

participants have] ‘lived through’, and ‘[have] knowledge about the participants themselves’ (2001, p.10). This analytic style of narrative can be applied to all my interviews and the data gathered from the bulletin boards. It enabled me to draw out and illustrate the important issues or events from the narrator. Although this process continued to help me in interpreting my data, I needed to discuss and document what is referred to by Holliday as the ‘messy reality’ of research, and how this reality is part of process and, more importantly, what I, as a researcher had learnt from it (2002, p. 50).

This chapter has discussed the use of qualitative research methods outlining a micro case study and participant observation of a lesbian online fan club called *XSTT*. It has explained the application and implementation of the chosen qualitative methodology, and discussed the research objectives with regard to the changes in traditional and online fandom. My research has been assisted by qualitative research using a queer bricolage of semi-structured interviews and a case study that enabled me to interpret the different forms of data gathered from the *XSTT* fans. The tools of electronic ethnography that allowed me to gather data as part of ‘tales of the field’ helped in building the framework for this study. In unravelling the phenomenon of *X: WP* and its *XSTT* fandom, qualitative research has proved to be the most successful methodology for my investigation.

In conclusion, ‘the social world is characterised by a power struggle between different groups’ (Ruddock, 2001, p. 72). Qualitative research recognises this struggle while focussing on the tensions of the lived experiences of the lesbian online fans. This struggle for meaning will be explored and discussed in the following chapter. Qualitative research and the Internet and a hybrid methodology of queer bricolage has

enabled me to interpret the fans' short extracts from discussions and conversations that were placed on the bulletin boards of the fan club or through my interviews with certain fans. This has allowed me to understand how, as social and sexual subjects, the lesbian fans of *XSTT* through their confessional lesbian performances on the Internet have empowered their everyday lives. The next four chapters will be given over the exploration of the social, political and cultural agency of the new lesbian online fans identities as they are revealed through the three layers of textual lesbian discourse which intersect and overlap throughout the thesis.

CHAPTER THREE: THE INVALUABLE ‘OPEN SECRET’ OF *XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS*

Having described the system of qualitative analysis in chapter two, I will now begin my exploration of the three layers of textual discourse within *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom. This chapter is concerned with the first layer of discourse. This is the subtext or ‘open secret’ of the television series *X: WP*. I will explore how this first layer of discourse prompts the second layer of discourse and informs the fans’ online discussions of the subtext. The subtext or open secret in this thesis refers to a lesbian reading of the narrative of the show in which lesbian fans from *XSTT* read the two main female protagonists, Xena and Gabrielle, as having a lesbian relationship. For many of the *XSTT* lesbian fans, the catalyst for the move from traditional fandom toward Internet fandom is this ‘open secret’. The open secret proves invaluable to them, for within their fandom, its particular influence is immensely significant and no single value can be placed on it. It prompts development in the fandom in many diverse ways and on many different levels from the social, emotional to the political and cultural. With this, the ‘invaluable’ in mind, I want to show in this chapter how the open secret emerges as a celebratory aspect of the television series within the *XSTT* lesbian fandom. I shall examine how it enhances the visibility of *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans online, and how it attributes agency and empowerment to them.

The work of Burke (2000), cited by Collier et al. (2009), explores how lesbians use the Internet, and how its networking tools can ‘serve to validate lesbian issues and normalise the lesbian experience for those who participate, thus creating a stronger sense of community’ (Collier et al., 2009, p.603).

If a secret is defined as knowledge hidden from others, then an open secret is no secret at all. The trope used here refers to that which is widely known but is given no public acknowledgement. It is the underlying current in the text of *X: WP* the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ which provokes the founding of the *XSTT* fandom and the Xenaverse discussions of the lesbian subtext of the show (Hamming, 2001, p.1).

The television series *X: WP* and the fan club of *XSTT* grew and developed alongside each other. The positioning of the fans towards the open secret is crucial in terms of how it reflects the fans’ diversity as well as their collective online story of fandom. The fans are complicit with the open secret yet benefit socially, emotionally, politically, and culturally from the Studio’s use of it. The open secret is what collapses the restrictions between the production and consumption of the series for the lesbian fans; it directs the fans to an evolution of their new online lesbian identities. In this investigation, we shall also observe that some of the fans’ readings may never be more than personal acts of consumption, but I argue that even in this act, it is the fans’ agency and empowerment through their online lesbian discourse that supports their individual and collective transformation.

As part of exploring how the use of the open secret mobilises the lesbian Internet fans towards new areas of online lesbian conversations and production, I shall dedicate a section of this chapter to discussing the final two episodes of the television series. The ending of the show is a piece of grand television cinematic drama that finally collapses with the controversial and brutal demise of its heroine Xena. This is such a powerful ending that it evokes a combustive production of online debates in the *XSTT* fandom and new levels of engagement with the open secret begin to take place. Through the ensuing engagement, many attitudes of the fans are exposed. I shall look

at how the subtext and this open secret of the series heralded the creation of new forms of lesbian online identities as the fans were prompted to produce continual Xena fan fiction when the series was no longer on-air.

The open secret is intrinsic to the series and kept the fans locked into it and immersed in their fandom during and after its six-year broadcast. I shall begin my exploration of the open secret in terms of the fans' personal investment in the subtext, and how it gave them agency and empowerment.

The Fans' Stake in the Open Secret

The open secret progressed with the series and in turn became a cause for the growth and development of the *XSTT* and Xenaverse fandom. The lesbian discourse around the subtext illuminates a broad spectrum of transformational attitudes within the fans experience. Often their chats became inspirational talk, representing a triumphant aspect of the fans' personal lives and the celebratory effects of their fandom.

At the start of the series, fans of the show were drawn to a layer of text embedded in the show because examples of double-entendres were peppered throughout the script. It was then that fans began to talk of the Xena twist. At the outset, the Xena twist described what was seen as the creator-writers of *X: WP*'s unusual practice of intentionally placing subtle indications of a lesbian relationship between Xena and Gabrielle into the show. To support this notion of subtext, the creators produced a space in the text on which the lesbian fans of *XSTT* focussed. I asked cabinngirl an *XSTT* fan, when she talked about the show with others, what did she talk about? She replied:

It makes me laugh to think about it, but we would talk like we were gossiping teenage girls. We would talk about symbolism, and what did we think this meant.... And did you see that clever little symbol they put on

the set ...or the innuendos that were thrown around...or the look that Xena gave Gabrielle, and didn't it send chills up your spine.

cabinngirl expresses her everyday speech and discourse about the open secret and this is important in terms of the social and cultural aspects of fan practices and lesbian fandom. The fan is looking for meaning in the text and its use of symbolism. The fan is immersed in the fantasy of the subtext, and how it holds substance for her sense of self and identity. The innuendos and symbolism are codes of lesbian identity that this fan acknowledges. The lesbian fans of *XSTT* enjoy online and offline chats as part of their pleasurable fan activities and, for some, it enhances their new lesbian identities.

Other fans such as magmor, not only recognised subtext as coding in the text of the series, but emphasised the pull of the subtext, and how it was seducing her to keep on watching. She clarifies the importance of the subtext and declares what she is witnessing as her motivation for watching the series in her searching journey.

... it kept lesbianism on my TV screen, even if in a coded way, at a time when I desperately needed it.

The fan is complicit with the open secret and suggests self-awareness as a liberating factor in her plea of desperation. The more lesbian Internet fans tuned in, the more the lesbian subtext was developed to the point that fans declared a new definition of the subtext, as magmor explains:

The subtext – which I consider to have been the maintext for quite some time actually One of my straight girlfriends cackled glee at the final episode of the Norse Trilogy of season six and asked “Is there anyone left out there who can still think they’re straight after that “?

In her commentary on the standing of the text, magmor revealed how discussions on the subtext reached diverse parts of the *X: WP* viewing audience. This fan explained that she exchanged viewpoints on the subtext with one of her “straight girlfriends” suggesting that discussions about the subtext as the main text not only crossed over

different audiences, but that both participants in the exchange understood the subtext as dominant.

As with the case of many of the fans understanding the subtext as the main text, what impact it is important to ask what impact this was having on the *XSTT* fandom? The most important aspect of the open secret was how it prompted in-depth revelations from the fans about their transformations. We have traced several of magmor's comments on the subtext in how it kept her hooked into the series, and how the fan was following her understanding of a development of the subtext as a relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. I asked magmor what was the most memorable thing that happened on the show? She replied:

It was that Xena and Gabrielle evolved as human beings, and the way their relationship responded to those changes -

And when asked whether magmor changed during the period of the series? The fan replies in depth:

In denial and in some turnmoil when I started watching in 1997, the show was a great comfort to me and focus for my struggle to come to terms with my sexuality. In 1999 I came out, and weeks before the final episode screen on Sky 2001, I was sitting in an evening class on Lesbian Literature at UCD in which slash fiction and Xena fanfiction being discussed by ten fascinated lesbians(one of the most fascinated being the course director who was given the class, yes, I'll say I changed!

The fan magmor's interpretation of the series' open secret is that Xena and Gabrielle are having a lesbian sexual relationship. Her lesbian fan discourse is participative and she gives confessional accounts of how it has been a transformational and inspirational experience for her during the period of 1997 to 1999. For magmor, watching and participating in the series online chats and discussions offline in a university classroom setting with other like-minded people, and for her, one person in particular was what drew her attention and enabled her coming out narrative, and her

self-reflected thoughts about her lesbian fan identity and journey. The open secret for magmor was about her own secret her secret of her closeted sexuality that she struggled and suffered with especially through the three years she mentioned in her online responses.

In exploring these fan narratives, the fan readings and interpretations express their relationship with the characters at the beginning of their viewing experience. The message the fans receive from the show as individuals enables them to bring their own social and cultural frameworks to bear on what was being conveyed by the symbolic images and the show's narrative and plotlines. They are making meaning from the appropriation of the text while constructing a social and personal identity for themselves. For fans such as magmor it was an adjusting period, a process mirroring the changing narrative of the show, in which the fans' identities developed, occasionally in parallel with the female characters of the show. As an individual, magmor identifies with the notion of female objectification through the media message she is interpreting and also dealing with her own 'denial' around her own sexuality. This can be viewed as being complicit with the show's message of the open secret but it is also liberating and salutary. As stated in the introduction, the fans' discourses are embedded with biographical senses of the self and, as such, the meaning of the open secret is individual to each of the fans from *XSTT*.

As we have examined, the first layer of discourse offered spaces for meanings, for interpretation and discussion by fans through the development of the subtext. The subtext is used in a celebratory manner and opens up topics of discussion from coming out, gender, sex, love, and identity (to name but a few) and these will be explored further shortly in this chapter, and again in chapter four. I would now like to

turn my attention to the commodification of the open secret, and how the paradox of the show was to promote this subtext while denying it, and how this played to the economic gain of both Studio and fans.

The Commodification of the Open Secret

With regard to the consumption of fandom, the show's development of the subtext illuminates the dynamics between the fans and the creator-producers of the show. The open secret of the television show becomes the unique selling point for the show, leveraging lesbian support in terms of a viewing audience (see Bennett, 1999; Collier, et al., 2009; Gwenllian-Jones, 1999; Hamming, 2001; Kennedy, 2007). The open secret develops into a compelling hook in response to what the show's Internet lesbian audience is reading into the television series. Lesbian fans would tune in every episode hoping for the desired outing of Xena and Gabrielle as a lesbian couple. Once the studio acknowledges the power of the lesbian fan base, the open secret becomes a structured motif. The dramatic tease is embedded in each episode, and the suspense and the waiting in the shared secret of this forever-promised-and-always-unrequited desire is set for the whole of the series and becomes this highly marketable commodity.

With regard to commodification of the open secret one must ask what value it had to fans and the Studio? What made *X: WP* so popular that it was shown on '200 stations across the United States' and in more than hundred countries, and what made it such a prized product that it was to be translated into more than twenty different languages? (Morreale, 1998, p.79). As the lesbian fans increased on the Internet and in *XSTT*, and the Xenaverse, the show promoted its own website too; this in turn improved the show's exponential growth and revenue. The show was influenced by the market and

was quick to respond. Having originally been targeted in the marketplace as a mainstream adventure fantasy, the television show now changed its direction after a single season's run, and the show's writers began to write for the lesbian Internet fans as its tacitly understood target audience. With its rising ratings, *X: WP* attracted the budgets, the marketing and the craftspeople. It became renowned as a stylish, spectacular, pioneering, and innovative cult and mainstream form of television. Technical and special effects were introduced as part of the investment as the show knew it would continue for many more seasons, for instance, no less than three separate camera units were required on the last two episodes so they could be shot on a cinematic scale. The industry, in turn, acknowledged the creativity and craft of the series. *X: WP* became an Emmy award-winning television series. It was nominated fifteen times, and won six times in the outstanding Music composition section⁸⁴. It was also nominated by ASCAP Films and Television Music Awards, and received a Top TV Cult Series award, as well as being nominated in 2001 by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films for the Best Genre cable/syndicated television series. In 1998, it also won an award from the New Zealand Films and TV Awards for Best Contribution to Design.

The "captivation" of the lesbian Internet fans was noticeable and continued to be at the forefront of the Studio's planning. The draw of the subtext was making money for the show and the growth of the lesbian online fans from fan clubs similar to *XSTT* reflected this situation. As the show's executives got used to securing a regular slot for the show in the schedules season after season, the open secret also appeared to great effect elsewhere. It was the lesbian Internet fans' reaction to the open secret that

⁸⁴ Composer Joseph LoDuca won this award for his music score for *X: WP* (1999) Season 5, Episode 1, "Fallen Angel" (Dir. John Fawcett). TV. US, 27 Sep [online] www.sfsite.com/depts/xepromo05.htm [Accessed May 2002].

created a highly publicised form of fandom. Their speculation over the possibility of a relationship between Xena and Gabrielle became a topic for many primetime chat shows⁸⁵. The lesbian Internet fandom was now a powerful force, as the online fan journal *Whoosh!*⁸⁶ recorded:

the first season of *X: WP* drew in a mainstream and cult fan audience however, by the second season with the emphasis on the open secret and the lesbian fans, the show was averaging 6.1 million as a viewing audience.

The popularity of the show began to rely on the specific relationship of the fans seeking the subtexts and the Studio began to tacitly develop the open secret for this audience. However, the relationship that grew over the open secret as a product was not always a favourable one between Studio and fans. This was revealed particularly in way the Studio failed to acknowledge the *X: WP* lesbian online space although it, itself, was promoting online fan communication. Commenting on the unofficial websites and the official MCA/Universal homepage inaugurated in 1995, Pullen notes:

[t]he official site encourages only particular kinds of fan activity. Despite their overwhelming presence on the Web, lesbian fans are virtually invisible on the official site and MCA/Universal never mentions Xena's subtext (2000, p.59).

The act of setting up an official fan club online to run alongside the show and with this club having the word 'official' in its name, led fans in independent lesbian clubs

⁸⁵ 'Xena received a flurry of attention, including tributes from shows like *Ellen* and *Roseanne*, *The Tonight Show* and *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*; ...cover stories [ran] in magazines ranging from *TV Guide* to *Ms* [*Ms Magazine*]'. See Weisbrod, R. (1998) *The Official Guide to the Xenaverse – Xena: Warrior Princess*. New York: Doubleday Dell, (Introduction).

⁸⁶  *Whoosh!* is an online fanzine and e-journal for *X: WP* and its fans. It is the birthplace of the International Association of Xena Studies. <http://www.whoosh.org>. The first season of *X: WP* drew in a mainstream and cult fan audience however, by the second season with the emphasis on the open secret and the lesbian fans it was averaging 6.1million as a viewing audience. With particular subtext-favoured episodes this peaked to between 7-8 million [online] <http://www.whoosh.org/issue53/dooland1.html> [Accessed May 2001].

such as *XSTT* further to feeling ‘unofficial’. Moreover fans in general within the official NetForum⁸⁷ showed concern that if fans such as themselves consistently disapproved of the production company that eventually MCA/Universal would terminate the forum.

Lesbian Internet fans, however, on unofficial sites such as *XSTT* continued to discuss the subtext and the pleasure they got from discussing the open secret within the forums of the Internet, so much so this became a regular fan activity that continuously challenged the official sites, in terms of online interaction for fan lesbian identity and its performances. According to Pullen (2000) the official fan site wanted to detach itself from what is perceived as a ‘fanatical’ aspect of fandom such as collecting memorabilia. Yet many fans were beginning to produce, create, and market their own *Xena* products. In their interactions and interviews with me the *XSTT* fans made differentiations in they made a difference in what was ‘official’ and ‘unofficial,’ as we can observe in these responses from the fans with regard to their collection of memorabilia of the show.

malki_35:

I have 2 books, Season 1,2,3 most of 4 and what was aired of 6 on video and some of the Official Xena Magazines from Titan. I look at them quite often.

Fan collection of artefacts may vary in consumption quantity or quality, however, collecting memorabilia is more a complex representation of fandom than just an act of pure consumerism. The fan darxe notes she many forms of memorabilia which are part of her performance and play, in terms of her cultural practices of fandom.

darxe:

⁸⁷ The official chat room forums online.

I have all the books, a few comic books, some collecting cards, and all but 3 of the magazines. I also have 4 shirts, oh and 4 12 inch dolls and 3 6 inch dolls. several fposters, a kite, and a book postcards. I also have the calendars. I have them all over my roomso I see them all the time. LOL when I see Gab pic I sent you I drool I'll send you a link so you can see the pic. I LOVE Girls Wanna Have Fun. I have the Tshirt from that one.

Fandom involves representations of identity which are essential to fandom, these representation are different than just consumerism and collecting items. The concept of lesbian identification and desire are interwoven with darxe's performances as she chooses to specify a particular episode *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*⁸⁸and emphasises this identification and desire between her objects of fandom Xena and Gabrielle and the fact that she too is just having 'fun'. All the fans are having fun collecting things and all differentiate in their consumer items and what their specific interests are as the fans illustrate in their lists.

cabinngirl:

I do, I have action figures, a kit from the club and a couple of calendars

magmor:

Masses! I'm a sucker for the stuff. Books, T-shirts, comics (I am not a comic fan but I made an exception for Xena), videos, soundtracks (I love Joe LoDuca,s music) DVD,s, calendears, a Xena action figure, the Official magazines, a lot of the official stills from the series, and I've had all the fan club kits so far.

reneeg _33

well i've taped most of the shows, i have the membership kits 1 and 2. don't know why I didn't get 3. have the calendars oh and a book of the xena show the behind the look of the show. It's very good it only covers the first 3 seasons. The membership kits you get pictures and a newsletter and a tape of the bloopers...it's kinda cool

⁸⁸ X: WP (1996) Season 2, Episode 4, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" (dir. T.J. Scott). TV. US, 28 Oct.

xeniteus:

Bookish, Xena, Collect swords, pocket watches, write some poetry when themuse moves me...like to mess with photos...love my P.C.

Throughout these lists of artifacts, the fans not only make a difference between unofficial and ‘official’ with a capital “O” but the fan xeniteus also talks of re-imagining online properties as her “mess [ing]” with photos. The lesbian Internet fans not only collect, buy, and sell merchandise, but they were some of the first online fans to launch fan-run conventions⁸⁹. Memorabilia is crucial to many fans as it signals the development of online fandom and their lesbian fan Internet community. Since the lesbian fan activities migrated to the Internet, memorabilia has a special historical significance. For *XSTT* fans they could now take different pieces of media from different mediums such as video files, audio clips, still photographs, radio interviews, and alter them or link them together to become a customised individual part of their own historical narrative with reference to the open secret. In the case of *X: WP*, many online lesbian fans were drawn to particular important scenes that form part of the open secret and through customising their ‘objects of fandom,’ they could exhibit their own representations of them online. (This is illustrated in the final section of this chapter with two still images appropriated and re-imaged by lesbian Internet fans⁹⁰.)

The consumer market for the media and cultural industries saw an irrevocable change with online fandom. The Studio supported in general the consumerism of the Internet fandom, while the Internet through its immediacy actually functioned to support the lesbian Internet fans in their online business dealings in terms of the reproduction of items. This production of artefacts was integral to the growth of their fandom, while

⁸⁹Missy Good, a fan and fan fiction writer, cited later in this thesis, also organises ‘Xena conventions’ for fans.

⁹⁰ The ‘Kiss Image’ of Xena and Gabrielle featured in the final episode is appropriated by the fans and changed see page 135.

the open secret, as part of this consumerism and marketing was successful in its message to the loyal lesbian Internet fans, for the producers realised that these fans could be reached through the unofficial and official fan sites. In sharing the open secret in a symbiotic relationship, the Studio and the fans became part of the Internet's continuing circuit of the Xena narrative 'that maintains the show's playful ambiguity [and marketability] that encourages fans to relocate their desires to the safety and anonymity of cyberspace' (Hamming, 2002, p.4). While Hamming notes the safety and anonymity of cyberspace, anonymity should not be equated with invisibility. The commodification of the open secret also drew out political voice(s) from the *XSTT* fans.

The Politicisation of the *XSTT* Fans within the Open Secret

As Hamming suggests, the Studio relied on 'confessions and restraint' as part of the show's regulation (2001, p.1). Just as *XSTT* fans faced regulation of their experience within the dialogues of Xena and Gabrielle, they also experienced regulation online, and when it came to the general issue of legal control of the Internet, this was something about which the *XSST* fans and the Xenaverse voiced their opinion, and loudly. The online protest registered the level of manipulation by the Studio as well as the level of injustice felt by fans:

It would appear to be sanctioned in law for the television company to "poach" the fan writers' ideas or storylines for their series but it was different if the fans used pictures or other sources that broke copyright laws and made a small profit from them. The copyright laws protecting television, film or music companies resulted in what editor-in-chief 'Kym Masera Taborn' of *Whoosh!* the e-journal called 'cultural fascism' (*Whoosh!*, 2000).

'In 1996, lawyers for Viacom were among the first to act, sending out stern 'cease and desist' letters to *Star Trek* fans whose websites made unauthorised use of copyrighted

materials' (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p.168). This led to concern in the online fan community. On May 13th 2000, there was a fan blackout by Internet users worldwide in support of the protest made by fans regarding some websites being closed down over copyright issues and sharing of information. The blackout became another protest and part of the growing political awareness among members of the Xenaverse and XSTT fans. Again, this protest was taken up online by the fanzine *Whoosh!* Bret Rudnick, a graphics editor for *Whoosh!* equates:

Internet fan sites as being the equivalent of placing posters in your room, stickers on your locker or notebook, or pictures on your refrigerator. The Internet is the means by which you can invite others into your room, or school or kitchen. For the vast majority of fans who create or visit fan sites, it's simply a venue to share your interests with others worldwide rather than just in your immediate neighbourhood (*Whoosh!* 2000).

The issue of control of the global online arena is still (at the time of writing) an area of political and legal dispute and at the time of this dispute, the Studio realised that they needed the fans. It began to court the lesbian Internet fans more publicly while maintaining the open secret. One of the many ways to appeal to the lesbian fans, without excluding the wider audience of *X: WP*, was to execute a discussion between the most sought-after and marketable product, the star of the show, Lucy Lawless. This was set up with a number of fans in a chat room used by lesbian Internet fans. Reflecting on her chat room experience, Lawless, giving a radio interview, revealed how vociferous the fans could be about their object of fandom:

I joined a conversation about 'Xena', which was a mistake...I felt the pressure to say something, and I made some jokey comment about Xena not being real. The people in the room were appalled. 'I can't believe what she said' 'It was the worst possible thing you could ever say about Xena, apparently. I got flamed and they all left me there'⁹¹.

⁹¹'Xena Interview' (no date)[online] <http://www3.zdnet.com/yil/content/mag/9705/xenainterview.html> [Accessed May 2002].

As Hamming highlights in Lawless' account, 'It is precisely this characterization of the neurotic fan that surfaces in Lawless' (2001, p.2). The anxiety implicit in Lawless's "mistake" of getting too close to her fans speaks more of her misunderstanding of Xena's fans having a voice rather than their supposed pathology, and, although it could be said this interview was not a success, the creators of the series continued to make contact with lesbian Internet fans. The executive producer, Robert Tapert and his producers began to give regular radio, newspaper and magazine interviews during the *X: WP* broadcasts, stating that they were having conversations with the *X: WP* fans online⁹². Even though the open secret was now a two-way message coming directly from the producers/creators, caution was still required on the part of the Studio which did not understand the power of consensus in the online fandom.

In 1999, the *XSTT* and other Xenaverse fans challenged the possible censorship of an episode "The Way"⁹³ which was scheduled for distribution after its initial airing in August by the Studio in the US. The *XSTT* fans were informed of the likelihood that the episode might be removed from syndication following its broadcast, because of a boycott by a Hindu organisation called the World Vaisnava Organisation: The American Hindus Against Defamation, and, indeed, the show was banned from airing on UK television. The Hindu organisation and its members objected to what they perceived as an alleged disrespect of one of their Hindu deities Krishna within the plotline of this episode and contacted Renaissance Pictures. The organisation alleged that Lord Krishna was depicted by the show in a blasphemous way and was portrayed

⁹² Tapert and Friedman gave online interviews to *Whoosh!* Issue No. 52 Jan 2001.[online] <http://www.whoosh.org/issue> [Accessed May 2002].

⁹³ *X: WP* (1999) Season 4, Episode 16, "The Way". (dir. John Fawcett) TV, US. 22 Feb. (The syndicated show was banned from airing on UK television.)

as helping the two characters of Xena and Gabrielle who the organisation claimed were lesbians.

The Studio and the production team decided to withdraw the episode and informed the fans through the official *X: WP* website. The lesbian fans took action and an online petition was circulated amongst the fans collecting over 10,000 signatures in protest at its withdrawal. The Internet was used as an empowering tool for the fans. Dissemination of the petition was fast and easy. The petition's address was posted on various sites including *XSTT* and the Xenaverse. Fans could sign and return their signatures to the organisers all online and almost immediately. The sudden arrival of 10,000 signatures on the Internet led to pressure being placed on the network to place this episode back into the series⁹⁴. The episode was aired at a later date with the alleged offensive scenes unedited and essentially remaining the same. The fans also sent an 'Open Letter'⁹⁵ to Bob Fleming, Universal's Studio Head, Jim Benson, Head of Public Relations and Robert Tapert, Executive Producer thanking them for taking the fans' concerns seriously. As a result of this controversy, a political lesbian identity promoted by virtual communities such as the *XSTT* began to become visible on the Internet. This issue also helped to cement an emotional alliance with other fans beyond the Xenaverse who were sharing news on the censorship on a global basis.

It is important to emphasise that when the fans took their action, it was not an issue of lesbianism versus Hinduism. It was about censorship and about the lesbian Internet fans defending the subtext of the show against the censorship by the Studio and what

⁹⁴ See 'Star Poet' for address of online petition. [online] <http://starpoet.com/names.html>. [Last accessed May 2002].

⁹⁵ See 'Protest Censorship' [online] www.tsof.com/~cmwilson/ProtestCensorhip.html to read the full letter to the Group Presidents at Studios USA [Accessed 21 Oct 2001].

the Xenaverse termed The Powers That Be (TPTB)⁹⁶ who used it. Censorship is a political concern that fandom is constantly challenging.

In the latter part of the first season, Liz Friedman, one of the show's producers and a self-declared out lesbian, gave several interviews where she alluded to how the show's makers were making use of the open secret to indulge the fans. In one such interview held in October 1996 on one of Boston's radio stations in the programme *One in Ten*, a lesbian and gay radio programme, the ongoing debate about Xena and Gabrielle's sexual relationship was discussed by Liz Friedman in which she endorsed the show's stance:

I don't have any interest in saying they are heterosexual that's just bullshit, and no fun either. The subtext is one of the best parts of the job, getting to throw in references that I know the fans are interested in and will pick up on, but do not necessarily flash any irrevocable red lights (October, 1996)

Friedman is ambivalent and light-hearted in her approach to the subtext. However, within an active fandom such as *XSTT*, a fan member, magmor reveals that she thinks the reason for the open secret in *X: WP* and the concern of the Studio is part of a homophobic backlash that other television series suffered during this period. magmor states:

Speculation as to why they [X: WP and its producers] had to be so coy about their sexuality. My take on that is that publicly the production team sang dumb so as not to court cancellation like a certain blond American comedienne "Ellen De'Generes" her show was cancelled she out herself and her character on American television.

The fan magmor is referring to the time when, in 1997, Ellen DeGeneres and her sitcom alter ego, also called Ellen, came out as lesbian in the ABC comedy *These Friends of Mine* (1994-1998) about a bookstore owner. The homophobic backlash

⁹⁶ 'The Powers That Be' (TPTB) was first coined by the Xenaverse fans denoting the all-powerful status of the Studio and its employers.

from the media about Ellen DeGeneres openly public sexual relationship with actress, Anne Heche, and the religious bigotry of the evangelist, Jerry Falwell, who called her “Ellen Degenerate” heralded the failure of her new venture *The Ellen Show* and it went off-air after only a year (AfterEllen.com, February, 2004)⁹⁷.

Three years later an article in *The Advocate* (1999) on March 2nd Friedman was reported talking again about the lesbian Internet fan sites, and how fans post photographs, discuss articles, and play *Xena* games that support the subtext. Friedman explains:

Every fan of a show helps advance it, and the Internet provides a natural opportunity for there to be a community of fans...in fact, Internet discussion spurred the creation of a conscious subtext in which X and G deliver double entendres and have even come very close to lip smacking (under subtle pretences)

Within *XSTT*, fans would appear to be following more closely the lines of another Friedman statement from the same *One in Ten* (1996) Boston interview:

[a]s a representationally starved queer, as I think we all are, when you see somebody who you feel is paying some attention to you and is even willing to leave something open to that kind of interpretation, you have a more positive response to it (*One in Ten*)

As the Internet became a new platform for lesbian fandom, so it also became a place where fans could express the political as an individual and as part of a collective. The lesbian Internet fans from *XSTT* were advancing their social, political and cultural lives, as well as the show’s ratings and its economic value. They were gaining ground by redefining not only their active needs as fans but also individual and collective online identities as lesbians.

⁹⁷‘After Ellen’ ‘The Incredible Story of Ellen DeGeneres: the Rise and Fall and Rise Again of a Reluctant Lesbian Icon’, by Malinda Lo. [online]
<http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/People/ellen.html> [Accessed Dec 2004].

The Postmodern Text of *XSTT* Fandom

As I have just discussed, *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans were beginning to use their fandom as a platform for exporting and developing communications and expression. This is because their online platform made possible through the medium of the Internet is generative, as Pullen claims, ‘the immediacy of the Internet enables fans to get an immediate response to their interpretations of a particular text or fan production’ (2000, p.4). Yet, it is also the postmodern text of *X: WP* which allows the subtext and the ensuing online discourse. The scripts of *X: WP* are sophisticated in their use of language, dramatic device and portrayal (and I shall explore this further in chapter four). This postmodernity of the text gave a sense of opportunity and possibility to the fans. Fans could seize their own meanings in the ‘space’ left by the main text for the subtext. Double-entendres, artifice, symbolism and the crossing of all lines in terms of language, drama and style made the text open and allowed it to be read in so many ways. The scripts also allowed new character portrayals to come to the fore which also advanced the subtext, so that it became highly accessible to *XSTT* fans. In this way, the subtext provided the *XSTT* fandom with its own heroines.

The defining of the series’ lesbian heroine is central to the open secret and to how the fans from *XSTT* read the text. Many of the *XSTT* fans “bond with” the characters of Xena and Gabrielle as their objects of fandom and the characters (and, in some cases the stars) rapidly become lesbian icons. For many lesbian Internet fans, this is a unique first-time experience of encountering female heroes and they can discuss their characters’ adventures through the Internet chat room and forums.

While it may not be deemed original in terms of the historical timeline of television and feminism, *X: WP* is exceptional as a mainstream piece of television with its subtextual readings of scenes, expressions and gestures as well as the pairing of two central female figures. The representations of women on television in the nineties were influenced by the women's movement of the late seventies and early eighties when feminism as an ideology began to challenge the portrayal of women in advertising. This challenge was transferred to television and film in relation to how women used popular culture to elevate their status as women in what was considered by feminists to be 'progressive texts' (Arthurs, 2004, p.14). Although XSST fandom developed through a legacy of traditional fandom, largely based on the representations of women in melodrama, soap operas or science fiction, the shift of the fandom online, with its postmodern text for the fans to discuss, has been progressive and transformative. The representation of the feminist lesbian heroine and *X: WP*'s re-working of the role of women within its historical and mythical narratives, and its use of 'feminism and progressive sexual politics,' albeit within the 'political limits of television in the late 1990s,' suggests the arrival of a long-awaited female heroine (Helford, 2000, p.35). This is supported by a productive lesbian Internet fan discourse which shows many lesbian fans eager to discuss their icons.

There was plenty to discuss. *X: WP* included in its storylines diverse topics of concerns to women, such as relationships, friendships, sexuality, romance, violence and war, and the complexity of the subjugation of women. From an audience perspective, *X: WP* was able to capture such a large fandom as a syndicated television show, because it featured and focussed unarguably on depictions of postmodern feminism as well as containing a lesbian subtext within its narrative. Television

programming was beginning to deliver lesbian and gay television representations⁹⁸ and it was becoming obvious (to academia) that the television and cultural industries wanted to attract alternative niche audiences⁹⁹.

Putting this in context for the time, the creators of *X: WP* in the mid-nineties were bringing something new to the screen. *X: WP* was a novel series with two strong independent female characters with which women identified. *X: WP* ‘provides a strong female role model and a positive illustration of a close friendship between women’ (Bennett, 1999, p.1). *X: WP* as a text, ‘is unusual in that it focuses upon the adventures of a single central character; although there are a number of intermittently recurring characters, only Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle appear in every episode’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.9). Throughout the series, we are presented with very few male characters placed in either supporting or extra roles. Indeed, their roles must be considered as insignificant when placed against Xena and Gabrielle’s absorbing intimate adventures together as Melissa Meister¹⁰⁰ notes:

The text of the show does not revolve in any way around Xena’s interpersonal interactions with men. On the contrary, the show directly revolves around Xena’s interpersonal interactions with her travelling companion, Gabrielle. It is Xena and Gabrielle who have become each other’s signifiers (1997, p.4).

The fan text of *X: WP*, and the relationship of the two main protagonists, together with its dedicated fan club *XSTT*, all potentially exist in a new fan space of possibility. This suggests a non-normative, queer political, and cultural performance of subjectivity. I draw on Alexander Doty’s interpretation and model of queerness to

⁹⁸ Channel 4 (UK) first went on air in 1982 and quickly became known as a progressive channel. Three years after its first broadcast it produced and aired the acclaimed film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) with the first interracial gay sex scenes in it. Directed by Stephen Frears, the film was a mixture of political dissonance and social non-conformity and truly captured the Zeitgeist.

⁹⁹ A niche audience is an audience whose ‘responses are contrary to the normative, a kind of anti-straight viewing position, an audience that is made up of multiple identities and viewing positions’; (Alexander Doty, 1993, pp. 3-4).

¹⁰⁰ See Meister, M. (1997) in *Whoosh!* Issue No.10 [online] <http://Whoosh!.org/issue10/meister2.html>. [Accessed Dec 2001].

demonstrate how it is used in this context in relation to the *XSTT* fandom ‘as a mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity...a term representing unity as well as suggesting diversity’ (1993, p.2). I will now explore through the final two episodes of the show the emotional investment of the fans in the open secret, and how this helps us further understand the lesbian Internet fandom of *XSTT*. I will give brief synopses of the two final episodes to give some context to the drama before making space for the lesbian fans of *XSTT* responses to the show’s final demise and the death of Xena.

The Final Episodes of X: WP

These last two episodes depict every passionate aspect of Xena’s and Gabrielle’s earlier adventures as the show’s makers completely collapse the text into a manageable narrative that continues to support the concept of the open secret. The last two episodes of the series mark the “killing-off” of the fans’ heroine in a truly symbolic manner with the brutal act of decapitation of Xena. The fans watch an ending that obliterates Xena by symbolically disconnecting her head from her body. This storyline serves to generate a cyclonic fan online discussion adding to the layers of lesbian discourse. The locations and cinematography boasted very high production values, ensuring that this was a dynamic, dramatic and climatic two-part ending on every level. Yet, for all the spectacular techniques nothing can detract from what can be perceived in the response by the fans – a resistance to the control of the television studios by the fans. The fans’ response supports Michel Foucault’s claim that:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot or power (1980, p.142).

Applying Foucault's 'power and resistance model', the lesbian Internet fans, as social subjects, resisted and at the same time colluded with the open secret of the series. The following section will highlight areas of the episodes' storylines, camera edits and special effects which enable an interpretation of how the producers and creators of *X: WP* squeezed every last possible drop out of the open secret as the series came to a close.

Synopsis of “Friend in Need: Part 1”

In seasons, four and five the *XSTT* lesbian fans had come to enjoy such storylines as the scripted for “Destiny”¹⁰¹(1997) in which Xena is crucified and dies. In this story, Xena resurfaces and a woman called M'lila from her past raises her from the dead, reminding her, what her destiny is. The *X: WP* storylines are structured so that Xena and Gabrielle always survive and go on to fight another battle. However, in the first part of the finale, Xena sets off on a different journey that sets her apart from Gabrielle. Before she goes on her journey, she explains to Gabrielle why she has to go and the audience is privy, through flashbacks, to Xena's past relationship with a young woman called Akemi. She met Akemi before Gabrielle at a time when she was still a violent warrior. Xena explains, in a grief-stricken state, that after giving Akemi an honourable warrior's death, she had to take her ashes to the family plot. Xena, however, gets drunk on the way and fights with two attackers and breathes fire onto them, setting them alight. The blaze spreads to a nearby village, allegedly killing 40,000 people. We learn that Xena never knew that she had accidentally killed these people. She explains to Gabrielle that she must make reparations in whatever way

¹⁰¹ *X: WP* (1997) Season 2, Episode 12, “Destiny”. (dir. Robert G. Tapert) TV. US, 27 Jan.

possible to free these 40,000 souls from a wicked demon, Yoshida, who keeps them prisoner.

Xena decides that she has to leave Gabrielle to go and help Akemi kill the demon. The time it seems is also right for Xena to show Gabrielle how to perform the deadly act of the ‘pinch’ so that Gabrielle can protect herself. Xena does the ‘pinch’ on herself, as the blood starts to flow from Xena’s nose, Gabrielle anxiously enquires: “Why are you doing this?” Gabrielle then panics and shouts: “Stop this!” Xena releases her hold and, looking into Gabrielle’s eyes, says: “Always remember that I love you.” The editing is interspersed with rapid flashbacks of moments of intimacy, while romantic words are interwoven in the exchange between the two heroines. Gabrielle says: “You’re my whole life, Xena I won’t lose you.” Then Xena’s voiceover comes: “If I only had 30 seconds to live, this is how I’d want to live them. Looking into your eyes, even in death, Gabrielle, I will never leave you.” Xena then releases the ‘pinch’ completely and rises to her feet and states: “Let’s go – we’ve got a battle to win.” Gabrielle walks away.

Again, the fans are tantalised or teased with a notion of resolution, which also hints at a tale of morality for just as Xena is set to face her demons, some of the fans of *XSTT* experience their own demons in the shape of emotional anxieties around the projected death of their heroine on screen. Helford (2000) draws on Donna Minkowitz (1996) a lesbian writer¹⁰², who recognises that the television series has ‘sophisticated discussions of morality’ (p.75). Even though the fans see their heroine breaking many of the stereotypical social and culture norms of how women are identified within

¹⁰² Donna Minkowitz (1996) writes in MS. Magazine ‘Xena-Mania, ‘Why is TV’s Warrior Princess a Hit with Women?’ “Xena, She’s Big Tall and Strong and Popular”. Vol.V11. (1) Jul/Aug see Appendix ‘E’.

Western society, the absence of lesbian visibility through the use of the open secret awakens the fans to political action. As Hamming comments,

Rather than emptying lesbianism of its political velocity, the capitalisation of lesbian desire by pop-cultural television programming such as *X: WP* draws our attention to the fact that sexuality is mediated by and through the colonisation of sex as a social practice (2001, p.6).

The scene cuts to Gabrielle marching ahead with the non-diegetic music of the Amazon song of mourning¹⁰³, this music first appeared in an episode, “Endgame” (1999)¹⁰⁴. The music suggests Xena’s fate as she prepares for this battle. As a returning *leitmotif*, it also prepares the fans for their fate. The camera slowly zooms in on Xena’s eyes, portraying sadness as she swallows hard to hold back her tears. The storyline has until now been one of endless deferred narratives with Xena and Gabrielle always defying death. This has suddenly changed and the fans are privilege to the information that Xena has to remain dead to free these 40,000 souls. Commanding the fans’ attention, the story moves to Xena preparing for battle. Xena and Gabrielle are equal partners and soul mates. It is as if the fans, as audience, are grafted onto the text through the open secret, and it is this that keeps the fans immersed¹⁰⁵ in the ‘final’ text and its dramatic narrative. After this first episode of the finale, the words *To Be Continued* appear across the screen. This leaves the audience in suspense, even though they know Xena has to remain dead, the fans are still given a glimmer of hope that Gabrielle will be able to save Xena from the fate of permanent death. The open secret within the storyline still manages to keep the lesbian Internet fans and the fans of *XSTT* locked into the series with an ever-hopeful vision that they will see the objects of fandom live to tell another tale.

¹⁰³ See Gail Futoran (2002) *Whoosh!* Issue No. 71. [online]
<http://www.whoosh.org/issue71/futoran3.html> [Accessed August 2006].

¹⁰⁴ *X: WP* (1999) Season 4, Episode 20, “Endgame”. (dir. Steven L Sears). TV, US. 3 May (1999) TV, UK. 15 May [Accessed May 2006].

¹⁰⁵ See Gwenllian-Jones (2003) and Hills (2002) for further reading of fans immersed in fandom.

Synopsis of “Friend in Need: Part 2”

The first sequence of the final episode is the scene of a bloody battle where Xena, confused and dazed, is constantly showered with arrows to the sound of heavy, diegetic drumbeats. Bleeding very badly, she shouts Gabrielle’s name into the heavy rain, as it pours down amidst flashes of lightning, against the sound of metal clashing upon metal. As the battle continues, Xena cannot escape a sheet of arrows that bombard her body. The symbolic image

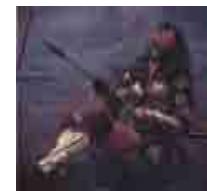


Fig. 1

of Xena is of her now seated on the floor trying to pull out the arrows as she is tortured by another barrage of flying steel. This is reminiscent of Guido Reni’s



painting, *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* where the legendary saint is pierced with arrows. The image of Xena in this scene is also a reminder of another popular saint, the Maid of Orléans, Joan of Arc.

Iconic portrayals of the martyr in the cinema popularly depict the

Fig. 2
saint in armour of steel looking towards the heavens for her redemption. The semiotic use of this image with its erotic iconoclastic appeal informs the fans that time may be running out for Xena.

It is interesting to ponder over what appears to be the final development in the use of the open secret; why did the producers and writers decide on this particular form of death? What is Xena sacrificed for? According to the storyline, she is sacrificed for the ‘greater good,’ paying with her life to save the 40,000 souls which she accidentally kills when taking Akemi’s ashes to her grandfather’s grave. However, the fans find other interpretations – they feel their experience as fans and their reading of Xena as a heroine has been sacrificed. In one way, this could be seen as the studio capitalising on the violent aspect of Xena’s warrior representation as well as on her lesbian sexuality that has marked her out as an outcast throughout the narrative.

The pouring rain forms a dark curtain of what symbolically could be described as tears, as eventually a young samurai warrior appears brandishing a sword and commences close combat with Xena. The dramatic visual close-ups and camera work with the intense drumming beats in the background, along with the physically violent act of decapitation, culminate in the symbolic and complete separation of Xena from Gabrielle and a severing of the lesbian fandom. This can be suggested as a metaphor for the termination of the disruption of the mainstream narrative by the lesbian Internet fans' desire and their circuit of lesbian discourse. This scene implies a harsh lesson to be learnt by both Xena and the lesbian fans. Xena's death is a challenge for the fans whose reactions to the open secret now help them read the dominant heteronormative discourse as winning in the end.

In the second episode, Gabrielle learns that she can bring Xena back to life by burning her body (hope again for the fans) and by putting her ashes into a magic spring before sunset on the second day after her death. Gabrielle goes in hope of finding Xena's body and discovers that she has to fight the samurai until he reveals where Xena's body has been placed. The horrific sight of Xena's torso lying there separated from her head, brings tears to Gabrielle's eyes. Gabrielle gathers up the body together with the head of Xena and proceeds to build a funeral pyre. She is determined to collect the ashes of 'all' of Xena. Now in suspense, the scene creates a tension for the fans in the continuing discourse of 'will she, won't she?' get the ashes in time. This message has been relayed to the lesbian Internet fans from the very beginning of the television series. The audience is now aware that this may be the last time Xena and Gabrielle will be seen together on screen as a couple. But as Gabrielle departs, Xena's spirit promises to be with Gabrielle for eternity. Gabrielle has now become the Warrior. The ending to this tumultuous relationship is not what the *XSTT* or many other online fans

expected. This is reflected in the fans' emails and postings. With the fans relating their own personal experiences to those of the two characters, they 'enhance' the meaning of the intimate relationship between Xena and Gabrielle as well as that of their own lived experiences. The postings on the message board from the *XSTT* fans after the final episode was aired in the US condemning the ending reached sixty-two and rising and this was within the first two hours of the final episode finishing on air¹⁰⁶. In these messages, many of the *XSTT* fans revealed both their anger and frustration at the producers' chosen ending for Xena and as such, the final two episodes depict the open secret as highlighting a new complexity in the *X: WP* narrative. I will explore the effects of this on the fans' lesbian identity and, although the open secret proved to be invaluable in terms of the fans' own progressive narratives online and thus 'positive' in general, with this ending, the messages showed naturally many negative responses and these are also representative of the *XSTT* fans I interviewed.

The On-Screen Death of Xena

The lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* take issue with the permanent death of their television heroine. After all, the investment the fans have in the character of Xena and with the association of Xena being 'real' forms an ironic interpretation as their comments and expressions suggest. Hills proposes that 'fandom may well be experienced as intensely personal (having a kind of intensified use-value),' (2002, p.79). There is also a negotiated path between the fans' inner personal self and the outer cultural or social self that does not succumb to the notion of one point of view of reality and its dominant interpretation. The reality for the fans is what Fiske describes

¹⁰⁶ The messages from (6418 to 6480) and many more can be viewed on the xenababylon@yahoogroups.com site [Accessed 31st Feb 2000].

as an ‘agent of culture in process’ in that it is difficult for fans to express their fandom in terms of ‘reality’ away from, or outside of its cultural context (1990, p.86). While acknowledging the fans’ investment in the characters as being symbolic and representing stages of life that they reflect upon and give meaning to, it is not to say that the fans cannot separate out what is ‘real’ and unreal for them. The *XSTT* fans are not entwined with the star Lawless and the character she plays (Xena) for they can and do separate them, and it is the fictional role of Xena that captivates the fans. The fascination for the fans is with the character of X: *WP* and not with the stars Lawless or O’Connor, (although no doubt some fans may not separate the actress from the character of Xena), it is the virtual Xena and Gabrielle that ‘make it possible to be a realm open to the imagination, culturally and erotically’ (Bennett, 1999, p.1)¹⁰⁷. The following accounts and comments about the death of Xena from the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans are representative of many of the fans from this fandom.

xeniteus a *XSTT* fan had this to say in response to the final episode:

Last ep: Pretty much as I laid it out for me. Was a wonderful extravaganza as Xena goes...just very disappointing. Not how it should have ended. You don't take a hero to the thronging masses, after giving them 6 yrs of adventure, hopeful things, and positive woman role models...and chop her head off AFTER riddling her with arrows...then after 6 years of bringing her and her partner back from the dead...not do it and have her and the love of her life ride off into the sunset with an open ending for them...Yes, it is fine.

The fan appreciated the spectacle that the Studio rolled out for the final two episodes, albeit with an ironic and disdainful tone emphasised in the word “AFTER” and the use of the phrase “... and Yes, it is fine”. The final two episodes did finally deem Xena to be dead. This fan, however, had used the show for its positive female role

¹⁰⁷ Bennett, K. (1999) ‘Xena :Warrior Princess, Desire Between Women and Interpretative Response’ [online]’Xena’<http://www.drizzle.com/kathleen/xena/html> [Accessed 23 Jan 2002].

models while negotiating her own life narrative and although “closure” is resisted, she accepts it.

Other fans through their fan practices are still able to fill in the gaps and capitalise upon the ending of the series. Another fan emeraldruid gives her account and reactions to Xena’s death:

hi resub. i haven't been very well of late, i'm doing much better tho. as for the last ep of xena.....it kinda floored me. i knew she was gonna die but i really wasn't prepared for it-esp the way it happened!!!! i'm still in mourning and i don't know how long that will last. anyway, i've done a lot of taping of as many eps as i could since christmas. i wanted so much for gabrielle 2 get those ashes in the fountain-FAST!!! but she didn't. xena's permanent death made sense, tho. it showed me that she finally forgave herself for all her transgressions.

This fan had mentioned previously in her interview with me that she saw Xena and herself as “survivors...fighters for life” however emeraldruid also mentioned that she was “always very suicidal”. Xena’s death is significant for this fan because she is potentially rethinking her own issues of selfhood. The character of Xena, as part of the moral story underlining the plotlines of the episodes, is emphasised as that of the ‘greater good’, therefore Xena’s death is a form of suicide, similar to that of Akemi’s. As Xena is a warrior and her death takes place in Japan then it would be traditional for her to die the death of a warrior by going into a battle to be killed in order to gain her redemption.

These comments address the fact that Xena had died along with Gabrielle on many occasions but she had always managed to be resurrected, however, this time it was her decision to remain dead so she could make amends for her violent past. In Xena’s last battle she uses her chakram (weapon) to set fire to the enemy’s explosives and this creates a huge firebomb. In her first sentence, emeraldruid states that she knew Xena was going to die but what shocked her was the way it happened. It was a very brutal

death and emotionally hard for all the fans to watch. This fan's underlining and emphasis on the word "permanent" in the last sentence of her conversation suggests that this means that Xena is not going to be able to escape death this time. Another fan texard explains:

Because Xena precipitated such major changes in my life, I feel like I've lost a friend. The only way I can really describe it is to call it a mourning of sorts. I honestly feel that it would have been better had Xena and Gabrielle both died. At least, they would have been together...and that's the way it is supposed to be. I will always be thankful for the characters that the creators of Xena brought to the show, to LL and ROC for bringing those characters to life, and for the relationships that I have established that were born from a mutual interest in a TV show.

This fan's mourning of the character of Xena suggests that, for her, the greater good or the sacrifice the character Xena had to make through her death was that she had to leave Gabrielle behind. This is what texard is objecting to. As a fan, texard would have preferred both the characters to die as they would have been able to continue their journey together even in death. This represents an emotional shift for texard as she engages in a reflexive mood where she is able to move to another domain of relatedness; here she is giving a voice to her new lesbian relationship. She expresses this by using the phrase "and that's the way it is supposed to be". This is an historical and cultural juncture for texard in which she can now talk about Xena "as a friend" who allowed her to be able to also talk about herself. She is able to celebrate the cultural power she has gained through the experience of viewing a television series and discussing the open secret as part of her fan practices and performances. She expresses her pleasure and pain while viewing the final episode. Xena and Gabrielle became part of her motivation to take her on a course of action, in which she goes online to have discussions with other lesbian fans and embarks on a whole new way of life. *XSTT* for texard has been life changing. Her interaction with lesbian Internet fandom offered her the means to pursue another lifestyle, through which she also

gained confidence to “move on” from her past. I asked another fan from *XSTT* a question relating to the final episode.

resubmit2001: “Who did you watch the final episode with?”

ladykat44:

Several friends, I was sad. Mainly because Gabrielle would always have Xena’s ghost, but that she would never be able to go on with her “life”.

resubmit2001: Did you feel angry?

ladykat44:

Yes, because the plot has so many holes. I had come to expect such high quality out of the writing staff and for a two hour finale it seemed very rushed and unfinished. I also never thought that Rob Tapert would kill Xena, though I understand why.

The fan ladykat44’s disapproval of the plot is uttered in the first two sentences but in a controlled way and then she retrieves her blame in the last sentence by suggesting an understanding of why it ended this way. In exploring the fans’ reaction to the death of Xena, patterns are imposed on the experience of the viewer that add to the pleasure and understanding of the text. The aesthetic appeal of the virtual Xena was an imitation of the ‘real world’ in terms of how, as a character, she was explicitly critical of herself and her actions were “normalised” in many ways reminding the fans of the real world even though the genre was a fantasy adventure.

resubmit2001:

What do your lesbian friends think of how Xena was killed?

ladykat44:

Most of them thought it was violent, but fitting for a warrior’s end

critter69_78

Each episode in Season 6 only got deeper and better until the final episode which there was a huge uproar about. I personally watched the last episode only once and haven’t been able to view it again.

The fan critter69_78 projects her emotional stance in that she cannot bring herself to watch it again, without stating why, which leaves things “open” in terms of how the fan views the brutality of the last episode and how she views how Xena met her demise, however, it was personally upsetting to this fan. Fandom as a topic of enquiry is subject to ‘isms’ and emotionalism is one that particular draws academic interpretation (see Hills, 2002; and Gwenllian-Jones, 2003). Emotion and passion is what enables a fan to communicate and express feelings and ideas of how their particular object of fandom offers them certain qualities with regard to understanding their everyday situations. Again, this is highlighted in fans’ reactions to the last two episodes.

novice_7 is critter69_78’s partner and comments:

I’m from the UK so I haven’t seen any of the last shows. I know what happens from your posts, but as I haven’t seen it with my own eyes Xena still lives on...which I’m glad as the show has given me a life changing roller coaster...not peaceful but certainly interesting.

In novice_7’s answer we can detect that although she has not watched the last episode at this point for her Xena will continue because the affects on this fan’s life were deep and life changing in her words. This fan was moved to pursue a completely different life after twenty years of marriage and fought to get her lesbian partner to be able to stay in the UK. She met her partner online during their discussions on *XSTT*.

cabinngirl, a founder member of the *XSTT* club, writes:

It was hated cause they offed xena...I did’nt like that either...I think we expected them to ride off into the ‘sunset’ and live happily every after. That Xena would not get killed... and that they would leave it open for a movie.

magmor’s *XSTT* fan response:

Bereft, as if a good friend had died but feeling that it was a fitting way to end this challenging show. Xena and Gabrielle become so real to me. I’d

have felt cheater if the ending had been a fairy tale, happy-ever-after one. The thought of a Xena sitting drooling vacantly in the corner of the old Warrior's Home would have broken my heart (as well as Gabrielle's no doubt).

If the personal is political and the political personal, then a medium such as the Internet fandom of *XSST* is by its very nature a forum that contributes to increased awareness and can be an intersection for the socio-political aspects of lesbian fandom. *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans recognise realistic interactive socialisation of their objects of fandom and their transference as an expression of their own identity. cabinngirl's use of language is intriguing in that she is angry about how the producers and writers of the show dealt with the ending of Xena, and she is speaking collectively for the lesbian online fans when she uses the pronoun 'we'. However, she does this with a tongue-in-cheek comment about a "ride off into the sunset" to "live happily every after".

Stone is another fan and one of the founder members of the *XSTT* club and was very vocal in her comments on the death of Xena. Her written words suggest puzzlement, anger and resentment, most of them directed at Tapert, the executive producer of the show. The complex dynamics of fandom and the studio's decision in the termination of Xena as a lesbian icon is what most of the fans cannot come to terms with. Stone echoes this sentiment:

Just gotta add that I do REFUSE to accept what I believe to
be the barely disguised anti-feminist, anti-love ending
Tapert devised. SURE SURE....he PRETENDS to care about
their love and them being soulmates...
Oh Yeahhhh...he gives
us that passionate kiss just to tear out our
guts...Yeahhhh....let 'em kiss....she's dead meat anyway-
serves those lesbos right for being so kooky over
her.....wait 6 fricking years for a kiss like that...god
that was cruel of him"

This apparent change of heart by the creators and producers of the television series in creating such a brutal ending is what this fan cannot come to terms with, even though fans had supported the open secret of the ‘relationship’ which, as we have seen through the *XSTT* postings and discussions, had become the driving force behind the show’s success. This fan’s emotional expressions of anger are aimed at Tapert, the show’s executive producer. This is because of her understanding of his ‘responsibility’ in how the long-awaited kiss between Xena and Gabrielle was eventually depicted. Stone has an economic, emotional, and political investment as a fan and as one of the founder members of the club. Somewhere in the planning and production of the last two episodes, the creators of the series constructed a narrative ending that hugely disappointed the lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* and these were fans who had obviously relished the six-year journey that the two characters took. Stone’s emphasis on the words “REFUSE”, “SURE” and “PRETENDS” becomes part of her trying to come to terms with Tapert’s position as part of the Studio and his understanding of the fans. Her suggestion is that he reveals his anti-feminist and anti-lesbian stance in how he represents Xena’s death. What looked like throughout the series to be emancipation and an enhancing approach by the executive Tapert, actually shows the great imbalance of power between the Studio’s strategy over the finale and the fans’ idea of what these two final episodes *should* portray.

xeniteus: has this to say when asked about the killing of Xena:

Tapert should never be allowed to write for show...or add to writing...he is great producer, but he is responsible for the uselessness and poor outcome from Season 4...his influence. I think he just wanted it to be done, maybe some personal thing – mild homophobia that his wife is so loved by Lesbians? Dunno? Think as big a deal as it was, was thoughtless and uncaring. Just business, and close it out.

This fan concludes that the ending as “business as usual” but raises the issue of another aspect of the subtext as that of mild homophobia within her answer. The fan makes a specific reference to the producer’s wife who is Lucy Lawless, the main protagonist of the series. xeniteus also challenges Tapert’s writing abilities but the fan talks positively about his skills as a producer.

The fan Stone continued to post on the *XSTT* fan bulletin board and also reflects on the producer’s decision. She writes:

The more time that passes since the ultimate travesty of Friend in Need the more it haunts me...the less I get over what TPTB [The Powers That Be] did to Xena, and consequently to all of us who had made such a great investment in time...and money...and of all in heart. For at the best Xena was a place...a vision of power and freedom...a woven tapestry of love that will never die and soul mates whose destiny is each other...whose time had come for so many women straight or gay

Stone explains that she made a vast “investment”. She explains how this involved much more than an emotionally abstract commitment. In practical terms, she draws on the temporal and spatial acknowledgement and effort that went into her fandom, and how she is presently coming to terms with the justification for her fandom in the first place. *X: WP* as an interactive television series allowed the imagination of this fan a space to discuss the many fantasies and realities of lesbian discourse through the Internet. Stone, although not consciously, was one of the many fans that offered a space online for deliberation and for a sharing of lesbian identities giving the fans the possibility of a deferred ending where the characters would continue to be outed through the narrative of the fans’ discourse on reflecting the open secret of the show. The *XSTT* fandom grew in discourse and diversity, even though the show presented an ending for Xena that fans, like Stone, could not have envisaged.

The television series' dramatic ending with Xena's decapitation drew many postings on the *XSTT* fan club, which suggests that the lesbian Internet fans would never be able to come to terms with such an ending for a heroine. This is a posting from DCB, a fan who was seventy-two years old who posted on *XSTT* and identifies with the idea of a hero:

Anyway, I just came on to say hello and how terrible I feel about the destruction of Xena. She was my super hero. One that I waited so long for. The ending, I felt, was a slap in the face to the many fans. I'm not a young woman, you know. I waited for someone like Xena to come into my life. Although fictional, she was the female super hero I longed for all my life.

This fan uses the word "destruction" as if the very act of Xena's death is personal and that she has no control over the narration of what she feels is also her story, and that this has been lost at the same time. DCB recognises the fantasy behind the representation of this character and yet Xena meant so much more to her as her



Fig. 3

heroine extended into her own life as the 'longed-for' hero. In the final episode, the fans are given one last glimpse of what could be interpreted as a tender, passionate kiss between the heroines, as Gabrielle tries to save Xena's life. Yet this kiss that the fan Stone discusses in her thread about the death of

Xena is upturned and given a new meaning. This is how the fans appropriated the original image and recreated it representing how they perceived the final subtextual lesbian kiss. This scene captured as a still photograph by the fans



Fig. 4

was shown on the dedicated websites. As we can see here, it is the fans who had the last say when they put their own 'spin' on the representation and gave the image an inspired 90-degree turn. This image now depicts Xena and Gabrielle in a standing position in which Gabrielle holds the face of Xena as she very intimately places the

water into her mouth which the fans decide to change and own as Xena and Gabrielle's last intimate screen kiss before Xena becomes a ghost herself.

Just as the open secret of *X: WP* informed another layer of lesbian discourse, the next chapter unravels and explores the cultural struggle for meaning within the text of the series *X: WP* for the lesbian Internet fans. The open secret operates both on and off screen and plays a role in how the fans explore and read the different episodes of the television show. Having explored the fans' social, political and emotional investments in *X: WP* and in the lesbian Internet fandom of *XSTT*, I will now progress my argument of empowerment and agency and the celebratory aspect of the three layers of lesbian discourse to support the understanding of the lesbian Internet fans and the advancement of lesbian fandom generally. I will explore how the fans struggle for meaning from the television text and their online fan practices to support their everyday life. The next chapter will explore how the fans make meaning from the appropriated postmodern text, its ambiguity and subtextual relationship of the characters of Xena and Gabrielle, and how masquerade and camp are introduced within certain episodes that add to the fans' playfulness and pleasure within their struggle for meaning.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE CULTURAL STRUGGLE FOR MEANING FOR THE LESBIAN FAN

Matt Hills in his study of fan culture suggests:

Fandom is not simply a ‘thing’ that can be picked over analytically. It is always performative; by which I mean that it is an identity which is (dis-) claimed, and which performs cultural work. The term fan and cult may not circulate simply as ‘labels’ for actual things or referents, but may instead form part of a cultural struggle over meaning...by which I mean the attachments, emotions and passions of those who self identify as “fans” (2002, p.xi)¹⁰⁸.

While Matt Hills emphasises the ‘cultural struggle over meaning’, I argue that *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans engage in a ‘struggle *for* meaning’ by this I mean the second layer of lesbian discourse, or their fan communications, shows how fans actively seek out their own meanings as transient social subjects. In this respect, the second layer of discourse shows the development of the fans’ fandom as one of ownership or the empowerment of realisation and enlightenment. It is celebratory. Again, in this chapter we shall see how fans draw continuously on the subtext of the protagonists of the show as a lesbian couple, I shall be looking further at how the fans seek out the transformative meaning of the relationship as it is applied to the everyday lives. The second layer of discourse shows an intensity of fandom as fans become intimate with particular episodes, and how those that particularly interest them form a substantial part of their online discussions. This investment of interest in episodes reflects senses of personal ownership of their responses to the text rather than just resistance or appropriation or the notion of wresting control of the subtext from the Studio. With regard to the heightened response of fans, I will explore particular episodes to which fans have given special focus by naming them in their discourse, “The Bitter Suite” (1998) and “The Quest” (1997). Bearing in mind that fans’ performances and

¹⁰⁸ See Hills, M. (2002) *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.

practices online, whether consciously or unconsciously, are about lived experiences as social subjects in which fans are seeking out in their fandom following Hills' suggestion of 'attachments, emotions and passions', around these episodes fans express tensions and anxieties of gender sexuality and femininity in their own lives. I will demonstrate how fans draw parallels in the online discussions of their personal transformations with the on-screen lives of the two characters reading them as a lesbian couple. Fans express aspects of intense viewing. They express avid watching of episodes. The use of these episodes illuminates our understanding of the fans by the ways in which they reference particular incidents or situations in which the characters find themselves, and this is discussed in their episode-viewing. Dramatic techniques as well as reference to character aspects of the two main protagonists also feature in their discussions. In the second part of this chapter, I will explore the use of two particular dramatic techniques that of camp and masquerade. The subversive uses of camp and masquerade sophisticate the text of *X: WP* adding layers of meaning. The text captivates the fans as they grapple with on-screen representations.

***XSTT* Internet Journeys with Xena**

The second layer of lesbian discourse is used by fans to tell their own stories. It is the fans' own journeys with the narrative of *X: WP* as a starting-point. Their journeys also inform us how the second layer of discourse is used as part of a fan community. It gives them visibility during their discussions but perhaps most importantly, it becomes a place for them to describe and reveal life-histories and tales of transformation. In chapter three, early explorations of the fans of *XSTT* disclose the fans as using the second layer of discourse to talk about their rites of passage and coming out narratives. In this chapter, I will uncover life-histories, confessional

discourse and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans' historical process of transformation. All these journeys denote empowerment as they use the second layer of discourse. But first it is important to remind ourselves that many of these journeys have come about because of the Internet and as such they are 'Internet-driven' voyages for fans often report that they use the Internet as a media tool to progress their lesbian fandom. At the beginning of my research, I interviewed an *XSTT* fan, reneeg_33. The fan explained how the Internet was intrinsic to her fandom. Through her various accounts online one can trace an historic record of her life and further she notes at the beginning of her fandom her use of the Internet as a tool:

I think without the Internet I would have still been in that mess and closed off from the rest of the world. I'm a very open minded person but having people right there at your fingertips was a big help.

Her comments interpret the Internet as being a reliable and essential device as she explains its medium, and how it established itself for her as an implement to generate her social network as well as a tool for her fandom. It forms the foundation or mechanism for the support of a network of people and moved the process of lesbian fandom to online performance and, for her, it is intrinsic to her lesbian identity. The network suggests a sustaining and unifying community that supports the fan in her own struggle for meaning. The fan reneeg_33 uses the Internet to map out her personal history. She explains how she suffered from domestic violence, and how she views this powerfully through the lens of her associations with the character of Xena and the series of *X: WP*:

in a roll about way xena's show probably saved my life, you see I was married, it was bad I was in an abusive marriage anyways I formed some really good friends with them, now I was in a bad relationship for 10years kept a lot of what was happening to me to myself then one day I starting telling one of the people I became friends with slowly I started talking more about it I had about 5 friends from the list that made sure they were there on line very night just to make sure I was ok finally they got thru to me that if I didn't get outta that mess that I would die and this I new was

true so I started to plan to leave gave up a lot but I'm glad I did and as I was healing I got more in touch with the true me realized I was gay...now days I'm so much happier so xena means a lot of things for me.

This fan's confessional discourse enabled her to create friendships that were built upon a common interest that developed into one of mutual trust and understanding. Utilising her lesbian fan social network, she was able to take action in the real world, which she may not have carried out otherwise. As evidenced in this extract, other fans from *XSTT* supported this fan's request for help and she was able to escape from the cycle of domestic violence. Her full story, with her consent, was published online and appears in Appendix 'D' of this thesis. Just as *reneeg_33*'s journey is an historic account, so it is also her tale of powerful transformation. Journeys for other fans of the club are also decisive and proactive demonstrating how they seize the text to find their own meaning in their everyday lives and depart on journeys often 'in the name of Xena'. The *XSTT* fan critter69_78 responded to me by email to describe in detail aspects of her own metaphorical journey that appears to run parallel to that of Xena and Gabrielle's journeys together on screen.

From the outset of the series, the show has used the metaphor of the journey. In the opening episode of the show, "Sins of the Past" (1995), Xena's destiny leads her to meet Gabrielle who eventually leaves her own village to accompany Xena on a journey. This set a precedent for journeys of discovery to appear throughout the storylines. The emphasis is one of possibility, potential and promise. Each journey or episode is directed with a positive cry to battle. Victory is always firmly in mind. Often the *XSTT* fans use Xena's battle cry "battle on" and at the beginning of each episode of *X: WP* viewers are reminded with this or what they should be thinking. The voice of a male narrator is heard over the theme music declaring: "A land in turmoil

cried out for a hero, she was Xena! A Mighty Warrior Princess forged in the heat of battle.”

I chose to ask the fans how “their own battles were forged?” I wanted to explore how the fans related their own skirmishes and tensions within a cultural struggle for meaning, and how these could be compared to the struggle of the two main female protagonists Xena and Gabrielle. critter69_78 writes:

Since I joined the subtexttalkclub I have met a very wonderful person whom you know also thru the club by the posted messages. It is because of this person I basically uprooted myself from my own country, left my job in an apartment management firm as a collections manager and an accountant, finalized my divorce after 20+ years of marriage, and just decided to start a new life over here in the UK.

The fan critter69_78 gives her personal account of how she arrived at making dramatic changes in her own life that meant leaving her country of origin and settling with her partner in the UK.

XSTT fan novice_7, the partner of critter69_78 also responded to my “battle question”:

I left my very longstanding relationship for an American I met through this club XSTT... she came over to the UK...and then we had trouble with immigration and currently my partner is in the USA and I am thousands of miles away here in the UK...as you know we are second class citizens with less rights than heterosexuals unless you live in Vermont! Xena and Gabrielle had the courage to change their lives and although it sounds corny, their example in some of the episodes does help as we take on this fight...something that I never would have imagined in a million years I would be doing. So, for me the quality of their relationship lives as we fight in a different way for the rights of women to love women.

As the fan translates the significance to her of the television series and Xena and Gabrielle’s actions as the characters within the series, she is projecting her own relationship onto the two main characters within the show. She traces this aspect of ‘we and us’ as a shaping power in her own process of her online lesbian identity and

fan performance discovery. The fan novice_7 also moves on from merely appropriating the battle on cry as she develops her discussion to take on the challenges of the American and British immigration laws. She describes her own struggle vividly as having to take the decision to leave a longstanding partner and choosing a new relationship that meant that she had to travel many miles across continents as did Xena to be with Gabrielle in many of the television episodes. She attributes this transformation to having been inspired from the depiction and quality of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship within the show. Xena and Gabrielle's character arcs are geared to personal journeys of promise and possibility. Through the series Xena the character changes from being a non-caring violent warrior despising the greater good to someone who battles for this principle and loses her life to it, while Gabrielle starts out as a naïve young poet and writer who matures to become a warrior who acquires great skills in the pursuit of peace and for the greater good. These two fans' historical passage and experiences draw on the transformative vision of the series as they re-vision it for themselves. The XSTT fan critter69_78 and her online partner novice_7 translate their Internet journeys with Xena into defining acts in daily life. critter69_78 summarises her journey so far:

we are doing fine...sorry I did not get the info finished for you...real life seemed to get in the way...I did meet many women who were either on the verge of coming out or were already out...many have or had girlfriends....it made it easier to establish a friendship first thru the net then if possible face to face...such is the case for my partner and myself...No the show didn't allow me to choose my new lifestyle...I always knew there was something missing in my life and I also realized I needed to make myself happy for once instead of putting my own needs and wants on the back burner...So my identity for a while was one of confusion which has since been cleared up and I am happy to say my new partner is a gift sent from the Gods

In an appropriation of the mythic language often used in the narrative of show the fan critter69_78 celebrates her newfound partner as "a gift sent from the Gods" acknowledging that it was her own need to reflect on her identity that she had

struggled so long with that had prompted her to take ‘real life’ action. This action and realisation enabled her to embark on an adventure both online and offline that culminated in her own relevant happiness and empowerment. In reference to the show offering a life example and experience through the fantasy narrative of *X: WP* which has encouraged many fans to reflect on their identities, other fans too trace their path of fandom through an historical narrative. At first texard’s story is one of suppression:

I knew when I was in high school that I was gay, but I was raised in a very strict Southern Baptist home. Being gay was a sin and definitely NOT an option. I was supposed to grow up, go to college, get married and have children. So that’s what I did...2 husbands and 3 kids.

texard reflects on her internalised homophobic past that restricted her sexual autonomy and continued to police her own sexual desires, texard is a fan that was prompted to action by the online lesbian fandom of *XSTT* and its performances. The homophobic repression positioned texard within a society and culture where ‘resistance needs to be directed not only at oppressed people’s social and economic locations but also against their internalizations of forced constructions of self and identity’ that for many can manifest in self-sabotage (Yuval-Davies, 2006, p.202). For texard, having an “alternative” lifestyle or gay sexuality was expressed as “NOT” an option during her life at high school in the eighties. Whether the right-wing politics of President Reagan and the growing religious bigotry aimed at the LGBT community in certain Southern States of the US during texard’s time attending high school can be attributed in part to her emphasis on the word ‘NOT’ is speculative, but certainly this modality suggests an impossibility that this fan later made achievable. Furthermore, I argue that because of the fan’s act of going online and using the second layer of lesbian discourse freely she arrived at a new sense of potential, possibility and visibility and this propelled this fan to translate aspects of her understanding found online directly into her ‘real’ world. The fan used discussions on the bulletin boards

and chat rooms to support her lesbian fan identity. This enabled her through online conversation to perform her fan practices and simultaneously explore elements of her life that kept her in the closet. It is the lesbian Internet fan performances of *XSTT* that enabled this fan to acquire a deeper understanding of the diversity of the lesbian fans and their existence as transient social subjects and as being real, thus offering her another option of living and being in the world, texard writes:

It took several days before I had the courage to attempt to chat in the XMC chat room. When I did, I found I really enjoyed the people, mostly women there. Through conversation, I discovered that most of them were lesbians. Ever more fascinating, most of them had real jobs and functioned in the real world just like I did.

The fan texard discovered that lesbians are real people with real lives and what was once defined as “NOT an option” became a real possibility for this fan. As Elizabeth Bird points out, ‘Internet communities, like place-based communities, do not just happen. They develop in response to particular circumstances and to the needs of a particular set of individuals’ (2003, p.74). The online lesbian space for some of the fans of *XSTT* has influenced their fandom chat by enhancing their own erotic agenda and enabling them to be in control of their possible emerging sexualities. The *XSTT* online space has become a testament and celebration of the fans’ sexuality even if it may only be in the fans’ minds and their ‘virtual bodies’. After her initial introduction to the chat rooms and bulletin boards, this fan decided to cross the boundary between her “window shopping”¹⁰⁹ or “cruising” online to acting out her new online fan lesbian identity and performance. With reference to Butler, I suggest texard decided to ‘lay claim to the power to name oneself’ [herself] (1993, p.227). She was able to do this by the repetitive acts of speech within her new online lesbian discourse and her fan performance as a *XSTT* fan member that supported her everyday struggles as a

¹⁰⁹ See Clarke, D. (1991) ‘Commodity Lesbian: The Postmodern Lesbian’ in *Camera Obscura*. Doan, L. (ed.) 181-201

social subject. *XSTT* fandom displays an awareness of the many collective interconnected experiences and highlights individual agency and empowerment, thus providing a positive transforming experience for some fans.

texard describes how she became more involved and immersed in her activity of online fandom as fantasy. She continues:

I got deeper and deeper into the fantasy world of the computer and Xena as the object that drew many of us together. Over the course of the summer, I spent in the range of 16-20 hours a day on the computer, chatting with various women...fortunately, when all my cyber relationships were falling apart, I met someone new....we emailed and chatted in private chat rooms

The fan continued even though the virtual side of her life had begun to control her 'real' world until she propelled herself into new directions. When performing her fan activities the fan moved from online fantasy and absorption in the Internet into real life action, and although the television show is a fantasy, what was important for this fan is that it resonated with her real life experiences both on and offline.

texard's fandom eventually became part of her offline experience and she attributes this to her investment in her objects of fandom and the fantasy of the series:

After nearly a year, I sold my house, quit my teaching job, and moved me and my kids 1000miles away to be with her. We have been together now for nearly 3 years, and I couldn't be happier. I believe that if Xena hadn't drawn me to XMC and the women there, I would not have had the courage to make the changes in my life that I did. The support at a time when I really needed was incredible.

The question for this fan became 'What if?' in the context of her awakening to a new possibility for herself and her family. She challenged her political, social and cultural status through her online fan activities. She met other women who could become potential partners. She challenged her status of being in a heterosexual marriage, left her employment, moved her children and migrated one thousand miles to began a new

life with a woman partner. This fan evidenced her use of the fandom through the Internet community of *XSTT* and her online lesbian discourse that enabled her to understand her struggle for meaning in her everyday life. This fan also took action and agency to transform her life.

While texard's fandom seeks out the potential and possibility in her lesbian performance of fandom, xeniteus goes on a different path, a redemptive journey. The fan xeniteus became a *XSTT* lesbian Internet fan when she was going through a difficult period in her life. She had split up with her partner and lost her home, her two children and her sister-in-law who was her best friend, died of cancer. I asked her questions about how she dealt with loss through her fandom and her relationship with the characters within the text of *X: WP*.

resubmit2001: When you say you “almost lost myself” what do you mean?

xeniteus:

what I meant...I know that when I lost everything in my life...after 1/3 of life spent in this family totally emerged with them, XWP and the stories, history, legend, FRIENDSHIP and that love can be solid and lasting, helped me not to sink down and lose my sense of self...hard to lose so much in such a short time and be isolated. Ya Know?

As a fan she is able to discuss her previous and present circumstances and her performative assertion reveals attachments and emotion. It is her understanding that through the representations of the characters of Xena and Gabrielle in “XWP love can be solid and lasting” and she documents not only the stories but lists the history, legend, friendship and love of the show as part of her fandom. When faced with emotional suffering, her fandom, she declares, using the capital letters to highlight the value she places on friendship it offers her, help to ease her feeling of isolation. Her attachment to her fandom is redeeming for it “helped me not to sink down”. The fan

actively translates her fandom as a supportive attachment to one that becomes uplifting and a celebration of her lived experiences.

The second layer of lesbian discourse used by the *XSTT* virtual community invites fans to discuss the non-normative genre of *X: WP* and its multiple readings. This increases new diverse fan dialogues which advance the fans' subjective agency with a sense of sophistication that is attached to the use of the Internet. Fans also spend time discussing particular episodes of *X: WP* in the *XSTT* fandom. This practice can offer to the fan an intensity of discovery as it becomes interactive and touches many relevant social, political and cultural global discussions. The topics discussed through watching *X: WP* can be wide-ranging from relationships, friendships, sexuality, femininity, romance and gender issues to list but a few. I will explore why *XSTT* fans reference certain episodes in terms of their struggle for meaning.

Another fan, malki_35 used the *XSTT* to explore her fan identity and her struggle for meaning was expressed as her self-identity. malki_35 had friends on various other sites dedicated to *X: WP*. This fan engaged in many fan practices, frequently posting on the bulletin board, joining in the chat room discussions about the sexual relationship of Xena and Gabrielle, purchasing fan artefacts and videoing missed episodes. Her self-identification, "I'm straight", is a position that is more complex and contradictory than is first perceived. When asked during the interview "do you think lesbians explore their identity through the series of *X: WP*?" The reply was: "I don't know if explore is the right word maybe identify is better". When asked with regard to fan practices: "What are your favourite episodes?" malki_35 replies:

That is a tough one I have a few episodes I consider my favourites. One Against An Army: Bitter Suite and Many Happy Returns which just aired I haven't seen Season 5 yet and I haven't seen all of 4 yet either, but from what I've read the Ides of March seems like it would rank up there.

I continued the interview by asking this fan: “What is the most memorable thing that happened on the show?”

Well for one “The Bite” in “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun”, the first hot tub scene in “A Day in the Life”, Gabrielle dying and Xena trying to do CPR on her in “Is There a Doctor In The House” there really is quite a few.

All these episodes receive high ratings among lesbian subtext discussions by fans. The episodes feature numerous scenes with Xena and Gabrielle hugging and kissing, enacting the role of lovers. There are many innuendoes and references to a sexual relationship between the characters. malki_35’s answers blur the boundaries of self-identification. This fan demonstrates in her ambivalent answers a state of ambiguity mirroring the open secret of her objects of fandom. The next question I asked was related to family. I was aware from a previous question that this fan had a young daughter. I asked, “Are you a one parent family?” malki_35’s response was:

I had a very unhappy childhood and I can’t pinpoint exactly what got me hooked or why exactly I just had to keep watching, something about Xena’s dark past, her “friendship” with Gabrielle and no I’m not a one parent family and it’s complicated.

This fan offers a subject position that is complex and restricting in one aspect as the language is guarded and closed. I was constantly reflecting upon this fan’s gender/sexuality during our conversations. What is interesting is how the fan refers to the word “friendship” in inverted speech marks suggesting the different connotations of this word and at the end of the sentence, malki _35 departs from the theme using the word “complicated.” This conversation was based on selfhood and identity, and how this fan enjoyed the online performances of the lesbian Internet fandom. The interactiveness which is part of her discourse and part of her active search for self-definition during the interview was more complex than the binary language suggests

and, as such, is not quantifiable. Therefore, malki_35's investment in fandom of 'attachments, emotions and passions' must be defined as individual to a particular situation and circumstance, as with all the fans of *XSTT*.

Online fandom in *XSTT* provides the space for a diversity of fans to converse with each other regardless of the complexity of their political, social or cultural conditions. To support this claim, I cite the work of Shelley Correll (1995) 'Ethnography of an Electronic Bar' in which she analyses an interview given by a woman visiting an online virtual lesbian café-bar. The woman explains the reasons why she frequents this virtual space and community: 'Because of the pressures from family and friends, I lead a very straight life. The LC¹¹⁰ is the only place I can really feel "at home". For me the LC is an outlet. Somewhere I can go to get out of my reality' (1995, p.283). I argue that a visit to a virtual online café/bar reduces the risks of going to a real bar or outing oneself, as one can exist in the café/bar by the mere pressing of a button; and for people who do not identify as lesbian or queer, a virtual space enables them to still explore and experience a lesbian or queer community, without fear of recognition or judgement. malki_35 could explore the online lesbian fan community of *XSTT* without feeling threatened, and the answers to my probing questions suggests that malki_35 felt safe to respond in this way.

The *XSTT* fan silverravyn, a twenty-eight-year-old Hispanic fan, who identified as working class, and who was employed as a data clerk at a wireless communications company, was an avid fan who also wrote fan fiction. At the time of my interview with her, she was struggling with personal problems within her own relationship. silverravyn points to an episode where the storyline reflects some of her own delicate

¹¹⁰ LC is an abbreviation for Lesbian Café.

personal problems with her girlfriend. One of the episodes is “Is There a Doctor in the House?” (1996) and the other is “One Against An Army” (1998), both are episodes in which Gabrielle puts her own life in danger by not taking advice from Xena. Here silverravyn speaks with particular reference to “One Against An Army” (1998).

silverravyn: states:

In OAAA [“One Against An Army”] Xena knew she needed to stop the Army coming, but since Gabby went and tried to help that guy, got hurt and Xena didn’t care about anything else but that

resubmit2001: Do you think Gab was testing Xena, seeing how much she really cared for her?

silverravyn: yes I do.

silverravyn continues:

There are times when Xena was in a bind...or she was doing something she was past...at least as the evil Xena, and the thought of Gabrielle brought her back, but Gab also got her into many binds, making things harder than they should have been.

silverravyn answered my question about her favourite episode:

Hmmm...my fav ep? That would have to have been...One Against an Army. Because of the declaration of their love, and their undying friendship, and the statement “Not even in death” would they be separated.

In the episode, “One Against an Army”, Xena is prepared to die if it means she can rescue Gabrielle. She says to Gabrielle, “Even in death Gabrielle, I will never leave you”. Another of my questions to this fan was about her personal “battles” in relation to Xena’s battles within *X: WP*. silverravyn replies:

Well I don’t know if any of my battles have been anything like Xena’s, but some seem like they are as hard as they are, especially when her battles were emotionally hard for her.

resubmit2001: can you explain a bit more, can you give examples?

sil verravyn:

Well, when my GF cheated on me, it was very hard to actually stay living in the house with her...see her everyday while we were actually broken up...and when we did break to watch her walk out of the house and go out...when I wanted to tell her to stay home, not to go out... or watching her drink, knowing that I should tell her that she needs to stop, but not wanting to run her life.

sil verravyn's personal testimony is evidence of her using the television series and the interview forum to help in trying to make meaning in her everyday life. It also affords us an insight into an aspect of a lesbian experience of the series. The interpretation of the fan's comments when she depicts the characters' dilemma in "One Against An Army" describes the fan's emotions and attachments she experienced with her partner and these emotions and tensions can be related back to those of the character of Xena and what she shares with Gabrielle during this episode. For sil verravyn, it is Xena's love for Gabrielle and Xena's anxiety about the violence she has to use to rescue Gabrielle from her ill-conceived spontaneity that make things harder for Xena. In the on screen story this action by Gabrielle places Xena in a catch-22: she has to save her from serious injury or death and in order to carry out this action she has to resort to hostility that she finds increasingly difficult to reconcile herself with as she reflects on her past warring behaviour. Gabrielle did not listen to Xena on a number of occasions especially in the "One Against An Army" episode. In this confessional moment in my questioning of the fan a narrative of the subjective self is projected. This fan refers to her own emotions around her girlfriend and the personal problems she is encountering by transferring them onto the behaviour of the two characters. The snapshot of this fan's relationship and the tensions between her and her girlfriend expose a reflexive moment as well as a moral tale of wanting to nurture and support. For sil verravyn, it is about her realisation of her rescuing tendency, and how it became "harder" for her not to interfere with her girlfriend's choice of lifestyle, (the danger of her drinking)

even though, as she explains, it could be detrimental to their relationship. She uses the word “Well” at the beginning of the sentence with a pause after it to suggest just as Xena’s battles were hard for her, her girlfriend cheating on her and her having to still live with her were also proving to be an emotionally difficult time. Her answer is positive in terms of her reflectivity, and although she expresses anxiety during her personal confessional narrative, she is reluctant to cast blame on her girlfriend and does not want to make judgements that might escalate the situation. This reflective mode could be said to mirror similar actions taken by Xena with regard to her approach with Gabrielle. This represents further evidence of how the reaction of the characters became central to lesbian Internet fandom so much that it was even popularised in online merchandise with the lesbian Internet fans attracted to buying and selling T-shirts with the popular slogan: ‘What would Xena do?’ This articulates an empowering question that fans of the series no doubt would ask themselves upon occasion, but ‘such uses of television texts are mostly private and invisible’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p.164).

Another *XSTT* fan ladykat44 evidenced as one of her favourites “One Against An Army”:

I love One Against An Army, When Fates Collide & Ides of March. All three to me at least showcase the actresses emotional talent and bring the relationship between the characters to the foreground. They were all beautifully written episodes.

“One Against An Army” for ladykat44 is about the emotional acting skill that gives the chemistry and realness of the love and romantic connection of the characters in their gestures, postures, and lesbian coded emotional moments. This is highlighted when they share a lovers’ exchange as the previous fan, silverravyn, pointed out. The passion that the lesbian fans have in the mobilisation of the text of the series online,

and how they use it to constantly renegotiate their lesbian lives as a marginalised group, like the show itself, invites and requests debates of identity. In reference to Matt Hills' (2002) point that fans express 'emotional, attachments and passions', this fan demonstrates her insights and acknowledgement of the subtext and open secret written and performed with precision by her 'objects of fandom'. Further, the episode becomes a platform for ladykat44's own lesbian foregrounded identity within the *XSTT* fan discussions online, and, as such, it becomes part of the second layer of lesbian discourse in her struggle for meaning. The characters of Xena and Gabrielle within the narrative of *X: WP* challenge the visibility and invisibility of women's positions in history. In this respect, the visibility of the lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* is a modern challenge to the traditional status of lesbian fan history, which has been marginalised prior to the Internet and prior to the creation of lesbian online fan groups such as *XSTT*.

The *XSTT* Internet journeys are all individual, although some fans connect in terms of their favourite episodes or descriptions of characters. Some fans are oppositional in how they perceive the characters and actresses such as demonstrated in magmor's 'coming out' journey and her relation to the character of Xena. The fan magmor views the character of Xena as an aspect of emotional repression or part of her dark side that is so often discussed in the chat rooms. magmor's struggle for meaning in her Internet fan journey is one of confession and coming out. She has this to say:

I identify strongly with Xena's terrible emotional repression-I managed to repress my lesbianism for over 18 years-and how she can flip into those rages. However, I also identify with Gabrielle a baby starting off on a great adventure, as I'm only three years out to myself, two and a half out on the scene.

The fan magmor's admiration and identity with the actresses emotional performances in their characterisations in reference to the open secret helps convey the various, different attachments as well as diversity within the *XSTT* fandom. The traditional historical and status values allotted to women in our Western culture are disputed and disrupted by *X: WP* using a postmodernist non-linear narrative. The verisimilitude of the cause and effect concept that is central to the adventures and to the characters' relationship is at times, conventional, yet oppositional, this adds to the protagonists' non-normative identities. Gwenllian-Jones argues that minority groups like:

XWP fans (most of whom are women, many lesbian or bisexual) can and do identify themselves among history's lost tribes - the colonized, the terrorized, the outcast, the dispossessed- whose emergence from the shadows in postmodernity has been, in part at least, responsible for history's disarticulation (2000, p.405).

The storylines of the show featured many outsiders this, in turn, supports the lesbian fans' practices that challenge their own life histories through the rewriting of their own personal narratives, both on and offline. *X: WP* distorts the audience's learned perspective of history and questions the authenticity of the stories that place women on the margins.

The tensions of gender, sexuality and identity occur in many of the *X: WP* episodes highlighting women's marginalised positions and the female characters challenge this within the show's storyline. Often the text depicts the social construction of the masculine and feminine binary and the power struggles that the female characters go through in each episode. Love, humour and friendships are themes woven into every episode and the lesbian Internet fans relate to these themes as part of their struggle for meaning. The postmodernist narrative of *X: WP* moves away from suggesting one's individual sex and gender is determined biologically and it critiques gender and

sexuality with the valuable use of female masquerade, feminist camp and the use of excess within its innovative episodes. The struggle for cultural meaning continues within the text and is dealt with through parody, masquerade, and humorous camp. I will now define camp in terms of the show, although its meaning is difficult to define, and even more complicated given its many interpretations. The one hundred and thirty-four episodes in the six seasons of *X: WP* all employed some notion of camp and masquerade but the ones I have chosen to discuss are “The Quest” (1997) and “The Bitter Suite” (1998). These can be defined as *XSTT* fan-favoured episodes that received the most attention online within the fans’ second layer of lesbian discourse or struggle for meaning.

‘Feminist Camp’ and Masquerade in relation to *XSTT*

Camp and masquerade are used variously throughout *X: WP*. These techniques deliver many different effects and layers of meaning to the subtext as explored by the *XSTT* fans. In examining the uses of camp and masquerade, we can expand our understanding of lesbian Internet fandom. We can see them as points of reference engaging the fans in an insightful discourse in their struggle for meaning. With regard to the drama created for *X: WP*, I shall qualify ‘camp’ as ‘feminist camp’ because historically the term camp has largely been associated with the gay male. The term is derived from the French, *se camper*, meaning ‘to strike a pose’. With regard to its uses in the television series, I shall first refer to it in terms of the exaggerated poses of the female protagonists as well as the characters adoption of ironic attitudes. Further I shall refer to camp in terms of the lesbian subtext reading of the characters and of the show itself. When camp is placed after the word feminist according to Morreale (1998, p.78) it gives it a special “twist” ‘which subverts’ the branches of essentialist thinking. By this I mean that feminist camp is a term which aptly defines the

characterisation of Xena as she strikes a pose against the stereotypical heroines of the mainstream action-adventure genres. Feminist camp can be used to interpret *X: WP* as a feminist text that depicts gender as a caricature and a distortion. Feminist camp is also the term used to describe the addressing of the mainstream heteronormative audience within the subtext of the show. In this way, feminist camp is deployed to redress the balance of a mainstream genre and its representation of gender and sexual identities. The character of Xena in her depiction as a warrior (feminist angle) princess (distinctly feminine) ‘illustrates the contradictory nature of Xena’s representation’ but propels the fans to focus on the feminist messages disguised within the stories (Morreale, *ibid.*). Because of this ambiguity, the character of Xena adopts a strategy of protective provocative gender behaviour. The character of Xena reverses the stereotypical and archetypal notions of how society envisages common-sense prescribed normative gender and sexual behaviour. This is what the fans find integral in the use of camp and masquerade: the characters play roles that free them up and liberate the fans from socially and sexually inscribed constraints. The strategy of reading Xena and Gabrielle as feminist camp characters who are sometimes placed in contradictory masculine and feminine roles within the plotlines of the show, enlightens the cultural struggle for the fans when they are trying to make sense of their everyday lives with regard to love, friendship and humour between women.

In the series its humour is used to deal with the contradictions of gender roles and the characters play-acting performances become Xena’s and Gabrielle’s ‘weapons’ throughout the show. This dramatic weaponry enhances their power and control within their many adventures and battles. Camp is part of the exaggeration depicted in many of the episodes of *X: WP* as an over the top excess of emotions, gestures, dialogue and mise-en-scène that highlight certain aspects of human behaviour and

aesthetics. This, together with a mixture of modernism and postmodernism and a feminist version of history and myth collapses to form a ‘tongue-in-cheek logic’ that is stretched beyond the broadcast episodes into the online forums.

Finally feminist camp can be used as a part of a political subtextual lesbian discourse that enables *X: WP* and the lesbian Internet fandom of *XSTT* to be part of a fan cultural and social fan phenomenon. Pamela Robertson suggests that ‘[c]amp’s attention to the artifice of feminine images of excess helps undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and to displace essentialist versions of an authentic female identity’ (1996, p.6). The characters of Xena and Gabrielle use an excess of hyperbole and humour as part of their campness. This gives them the ability to be political, “below the surface” and yet non-threatening in its revealing of gender, sexuality and identity. This is all part of a playful social construction. One of the fans cabinngirl expresses this as a dramatic magnification in the show:

Xena was my favourite character...she is strong willed, protective, funny, seductive, sincere, playful, sensitive and helllofa fighter. I got hooked and it started to be like a soap opera. I wondered where the writers were going to take me next with the characters and if they were going to pursue the intimate side of Xena and Gabs relationship.

Many of the episodes employ masquerade alongside camp and the fighting scenes mentioned by cabinngirl both feature these techniques and add to the deployment of the open secret. This fan’s journey and struggle is with the unpredictability of the open secret and the subtext which resonates with the endless possibility of “Xena and Gabs” intimate relationship and adds to the complexity of sexual representations on contemporary television. Xena and Gabrielle are always getting dressed up in different disguises which functions to reinforce the playfulness of the characters which is carried over by the fans into their Internet chats after the episodes have aired. I will define masquerade within the text of the show as a notion to impersonate, to

disguise and this is offered as part of a tool or act to destabilise stereotypes of women and men, which, in turn, demonstrates social construction. Masquerade is used to displace essentialist readings and accounts of female and male identity in a similar way to camp. Additionally, masquerade is used within the episodes of *X: WP* as a form of mischievousness that is harmless and pleasurable in its regard to the ontology of gender.

“The Bitter Suite” (1998)

According to *Whoosh!*¹¹¹ the viewing audience for ‘Syndicated Action Dramas’ in the US for 2nd February 1998 saw the *X-Files* in first place with 6.9 million viewers and in second place *X: WP* with “The Bitter Suite” attracting 5.8 million viewers. This episode is high on the “lesbian radar” because it is packed with references to previous episodes and pays homage to various Hollywood genres of fantasy. The struggle for meaning, and how the lesbian fans of *XSTT* use this episode in a variety of ways will now be substantiated. reneeg_33 writes about her journey and its connection to the rift between the characters Xena and Gabrielle and that she has a metaphorical attachment to the title “The Bitter Suite” of this particular episode. This is how it resonates with reneeg_33’s struggle for meaning:

..... I finally took the step. I left him. I waited till he wasn’t going to be home that weekend and I loaded up my things and I left. It was a bittersweet feeling. I was glad to be out of there, but a part of me still loved him. A part of me felt sorry for him.

An example of loss and the discourse of ‘other’ features in the fan reneeg_33’s online journey and struggle for meaning about the breakdown of her relationship with her violent husband. With her sense of loss, she suffered a ‘bittersweet feeling’ through

¹¹¹ See fanzine and e-journal details of audience ratings during 1998. *Whoosh!* [online]. <http://whoosh.org/epguide/bitter.html>. [Accessed Dec 2006].

her transition (that later becomes celebratory) from being a heterosexual married woman facing a domestic violence issue to the self-realisation that she is a lesbian who could love other women. This is exposed in this confessional and rites of passage narrative¹¹². In the second section of the confessional life narrative that she wrote on the Internet called ‘Healing Heart’, there is second section, ‘Part Two: ‘Mending’. In this particular section of her writing, she looks back on the time she decided to leave her husband and make a new life.

reneeg_33 recounts her journey:

A year and 7 months has passed since the bittersweet morning I gathered my things and started out for a new life. And it has been one very long bumpy road. This being an under statement.

reneeg_33 expresses through the story her emotional pain of a “bittersweet morning” at having to physically and mentally leave behind a heteronormative dominant lifestyle to begin an alternative one. Virtual communities like XSTT allow for the testing of identities and this can provide help in the forming of alternative families – see Cooper’s (2010) study of developing friendships and networks to deal with isolation and loss during the testing of identities.

The unfolding plot of “The Bitter Suite” sees Xena and Gabrielle devastated after a violent and emotionally destructive breakdown in their relationship. The emotional turmoil was treated by the writers of episode by dramatising it in the form of a musical in which each character could revisit their past mistakes and make amends to each other in song. Each in turn had to answer to the other’s questions as to why they had hurt each other. The diegetic music played an important theatrical part in this

¹¹² See Appendix ‘D’ for a copy of ‘Healing Heart’ and the section ‘Part Two: Mending’ – [email received by the author on 7 Aug 2001]. The story was originally published on the website called the ‘Missy Good’ and it featured in the ‘Artist Pup section’. (At the time of writing, this site has now been closed down.)

tragic episode, as did the characters' singing to each other. This dramatisation allowed the characters to express their innermost secrets and their fundamental issues of darkness and fear. reneeg_33 designates this particular episode as one of her favourites, along with a number of other fans from the *XSTT* site. The theme music to this episode is pertinent to another fan darxe who replies to my question, "Did you like bitter suite?"

darxe:

yeah, I did I have the sound track of it – The sound track is called *The Bitter Suite*.

"The Bitter Suite" is a significant episode because of the meaning the fans have placed on the text; some refer to it as a 'musical odyssey'. Another fan, xeniteus declares it her favourite episode:

The Bitter Suite is my fav ep it encompasses that SO well. Very moving and powerful stuff. Do you like Gilbert and Sullivan stuff?? The Bitter Suite is an operetta, with G & S overtones. It is very deep but fun too. GREAT MUSIC. Great action... Just GOOD SOLID EVERYTHING.

This fan enjoys this episode because it incorporates hybrid film genres such as those of the musical, comedy, melodrama and opera to deal with the tension and anxieties around the issues and dynamics of the subtext of gender, sexuality and identity in the representations of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship.

The 'bittersweet' in the title of episode refers to how Xena and Gabrielle are suffering because of the hurt they have done to each other and because of this, a rift has developed which needs to be healed. This is portrayed with the use of comedy and drama mixed with camp styling, and masquerade, and finally with the use of song through which the characters profess their deep love for each other. The fan refers to musical work of Gilbert & Sullivan for although the operetta is original it is

deliberately stylised to be reminiscent of the comic absurdism of what the fan calls “G & S”. This is highlighted when the couple break into song as they fall down a waterfall. The episode has further dramatic references woven into it, which also drew in the fans. These references range from how in “The Bitter Suite” Gabrielle falls down the well evoking *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* to when Xena goes after her, the duo find themselves in a fantasy land called ‘Illusia’ drawing on dreamscapes of the ‘Yellow Brick Road’ from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Moreover, the whole backdrop setting to the story is camp à la Hollywood. Masquerade is also present in the form of Castillo, (Hudson Leick) Xena’s former nemesis, as she appears in a tarot card costume disguise based on the tarot cards of The Fool and Justice to lead the duo through the land of Illusia.

The episode is rich and carefully crafted from the outset. The opening scene in “The Bitter Suite” sees Xena and Gabrielle having to set up camp in a cave. With a fire glowing brightly in the background, both Xena and Gabrielle have animal fur skins covering their bodies and noticeably wet hair. In this episode the characters’ clothes, bodies, lighting and camera angles, as well as the different states of undress of Gabrielle, suggest sexual activity has recently taken place. As the story subtext is overt but denied we never see the characters actually making love, although there are many passionate moments. The intimate moment in this sequence is interrupted with loud thunderclaps and flashes of lightning outside the cave in another camp layering. The change in ambience creates a new dramatic scene with camp overtones. As Xena’s loving gaze and facial expression of happiness changes to one of fear and a heightened awareness of her surroundings, her eyes widen and her brow furrows as she says: “My fighting for good is a cover for something darker”. The ‘darkness’ of the feminist camp is noticed by the fan ladykat44 she states:

I had seen some 3 the Hercules shows and was expecting it to be similar in the i was surprised by the dark nature of the show not having seen the xena trilogy

Camp in this context for this fan complements the lesbian feminist reading of *X: WP* in that Xena's dark side is emphasised without judgement other than her own reflection on her warlord past.

In keeping with the disruption of the female identity, Xena's wounded muscular body also becomes a central spectacle of this episode. The lesbian fan's gaze and Gabrielle's gaze within a frozen moment views Xena's wounded body through the audiences' shared intimacy. This display allows the lesbian fan/audience and Gabrielle to assert control over the image; the pleasure lies in the passivity of the wounded character of Xena. This acts as a disavowing Xena as the fans' object of desire but also gives the fans agency and empowerment over the gaze. The scene develops as Xena and Gabrielle are forced by this hurt/comfort¹¹³ or 'bittersweet' consequence to come together as warrior and bard for a romantic and emotional moment especially as a rift that has dogged them for some time seems to be placed in the background. The hurt/comfort zone makes the drama rich in emotion. However, as the story gathers momentum the two characters fall down a waterfall and end up in the land of Illusia where their journey for forgiveness begins. Now they must sing to be understood and have to reflect on the emotional, physical and psychological journeys they have so far taken.

"The Bitter Suite" uses camp as a technique to deal with some of the tensions of gender, sexuality and identity. Gabrielle, a bard by season two, is beginning to dress

¹¹³ The sequence in this episode uses a fan fiction notion of hurt/comfort which features one of protagonists being injured and then being comforted by the other protagonist. In fan fiction this is a theme that is repeated in the couplings of the characters in s/lash fan fiction narratives which is discussed in chapter five in more detail.

and act more like a warrior and acquires many more fighting skills as she becomes confident and more powerful in the battle scenes. In contrast, Xena becomes more reflective of her anger and her dark side and questions her violence constantly within the episodes. As a result Gabrielle learns how to defend herself and puts her physical fighting attributes to the greater good as her fighting skills are about gaining justice and freedom, she has altruistic motives. Some of the *XSTT* fans reconcile their own sexual ambiguities along with the characters, as their roles as fans and social subjects in their search for cultural meanings transgress their heteronormative lifestyles. In this context, *X: WP* ‘flirts with and sidesteps questions of sexual identity, but it never buys into them’ (Bennett, 1999, p.5). Although the fan club of *XSTT* is set up as a lesbian Internet fan club, the fans still belong to and engage with fans who are not necessarily identifying as lesbian but who also talk to each other in their struggle for meaning. The club itself could be said to ‘flirt with and sidestep[s] questions of sexual identity’ just as the show does, as I demonstrated when discussing malki_35 who self-identified as straight.

The sophisticated online fandom of *XSTT* is framed around online lesbian discourse, lesbian-viewing habits, cultural changes and subjective gazes. This all adds to the multitude of extra-textual pleasures for lesbian fans. The lesbian Internet fan can take pleasure in the knowledge that they are addressed by a mainstream text and have challenged its heteronormativity through their viewing habits and online fan discussions. Visibility is now part of a lesbian online politics that demands recognition through the Internet by lesbian Internet fans and by different minority groups and is central to the shift in traditional fandom to online fandom for lesbian Internet fans. The producers and the writers of the series include in this episode a sequence of a storyline that is depicted in some of the s/lash fiction fan writings which

form part of the third layer of lesbian discourse that the fans relate to in their struggle for meaning. The concept of the hurt/comfort zone genre that is portrayed in the episode of “The Bitter Suite” is another area of focus of the lesbian online discourse that the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans write about in their fan fiction. This fan practice is part of the move from traditional fandom to online lesbian fandom with its advantages for the fans as part of the third layer of lesbian discourse and this helps with the struggle for meaning. This last section will now deal with another of the most popular episodes of *X: WP* that the lesbian Internet fans discussed. This episode appeared in season two and is another episode rich in meaning for the *XSTT* fans.

“The Quest”(1997)

This episode was one of the most watched episodes of the second season. “The Quest”(1997)¹¹⁴ drew in the second highest audience behind another episode called “A Necessary Evil” (1997) which peaked at 7.8 million in the [US] Syndicated Ratings. “The Quest”, episode eight of the series, observed the characters indulge in their first romantic kiss. A kiss can awaken more than a desire it can produce a lesbian subject – were Xena and Gabrielle coming out of the closet? So was this a quest to out the characters? All this added to the fans going online and performing their second layer of lesbian discourse. This is significant in that the kiss was represented as desire but, as with any postmodern text and story, it was fraught with conflict and confusion. The ratings for this groundbreaking series were steadily rising and the producers were

¹¹⁴ *X: WP* (1997) Season 2, Episode 13, “The Quest” (dir. Michael Levine) was the second highest rated episode of *X: WP* which had started at the bottom of the top 20 syndicated [US] shows but began a fairly quick ascent to the number one position. ‘It managed to topple *Baywatch*, which was some feat. By the time “Destiny” was broadcast, the audience had reached 6.4 million, and “A Necessary Evil” drew in 7.8 million viewers’. *Whoosh!* Issue No. 53 [online] <http://www.whoosh.org/issue53/dooland1.html> [Accessed May 2001].

aware of the importance of the subtext and the lesbian virtual audience. It was pertinent to the lesbian Internet fans' online discussions, in fact it was essential.

In the plot of "The Quest", Xena enters the body of Autolycus¹¹⁵ so he can help her get a precious stone that Xena needs to come back from the dead. Xena also wants to talk to Gabrielle and explain that she does not want to have an Amazon funeral because she does not intend to remain dead. "The Quest" was aired when the Internet saw an explosion of websites exploring the use of the series' subtextual dialogue and innuendo, along with discussions about the increasing lingering looks exchanged between the lead characters. This episode which is punctuated with camp humour all the way through is central to this upsurge of online lesbian fandom. The fan magmor first watched *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995) and compared its camp humour with its spin-off *X: WP*.

magmor:

when xena came along it had the same camp humour but was actually unpredictable in what was going to screen each week

magmor continues:

the stars are both very attractive, easy on the eye (I wasn't able to admit that to myself at first as I was still in denial back then!), are good actresses

For this fan masquerade and camp as portrayed in this postmodern text plays a part in her understanding of her own life in terms of its unpredictable outcome as someone who was searching or was on her own quest to come out of the closet and find a new identity. Being in the closet was what was at stake for magmor. Camp for this fan is acknowledged within this series as unpredictable and not as a standardised dramatic technique.

¹¹⁵ Autolycus the name of Xena's friend is a pun on words and serves as one of the many innuendos that the fans search for in their scanning of the texts.

The lesbian subtext is strongly played out in the dialogue of the plotline also in the gestures of the characters of Gabrielle and Xena and the impersonation of Xena by Autolycus (masquerade) in order to help Xena come back to life. Gabrielle is very upset that Xena has died and says to Autolycus, “I would have told her how empty my life was before she came. And all the lessons I learned. And that I love her”. Lesbianism in “The Quest” is a milestone for fans, for ‘while not explicit... is so strongly suggested that it could reasonably be described as “maintext” ’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.416).

The body-swapping scene in this episode can be interpreted as denial and camp in its usage. It cuts across many genres in contemporary cinema, and television audiences are becoming increasingly familiar with sexuality and gender tensions within contemporary representations of sexuality and gender¹¹⁶. However, this episode does contain the long-awaited screen kiss between the characters and, although it was televised in such a way as to give it an alibi, it still became the most deliberated episode, apart from the final two episodes. The fans of *XSTT* list it as one of their favourites. resubmit2001: What was your favourite episode?

critter69_78 replied:

I have several fav eps...but the first one to come to mind is the Quest...this was the first defining ep that let the characters show there true feeling for one another even if it was thru a dreamscape setting.

¹¹⁶ This sequence is similar to the romantic comedy thriller-drama *Ghost* (dir. Jerry Zucker) (1990) starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore. Another similar body-swapping scene also features in an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2003) where Willow finally decides to try and get over the loss of her previous girlfriend but gives in to the persistence of Kennedy the woman who wants to be her new girlfriend. Just as Willow starts to kiss Kennedy, the audience watches as Kennedy transforms into Warren, the warlock who killed Willow’s previous girlfriend, Tara. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2003) Season 7, Episode 13, “The Killer in Me”. (dir. David Solomon) TV, UK. 4 Feb.

Another fan, magmor also talked about this episode as one of her favourites.

What??? Hmm ONE??? That's too hard! Okay putting aside. 'The Debt', 'The Ring Trilogy', the Bitter Suite, Doctor in the House, Who's Gurkhan, When Fates Collide, The Got You Know. One Against an Army, The Quest, Here She Comes Miss Amphipolis, Altared States, Been There Done That, er Ill stop now- The wacky fight scenes, the wonderful modern-pastiche of Greek mythology and the dark side of Xena, made it so different than any other fantasy show around at the time.

Both fans find it difficult to pick just one episode because there are so many that deal with the subtext, open secret, camp and masquerade that are all incorporated into this postmodern-pastiche 'adventure quest' text. However, critter69_78 did connect with this one episode. From her watching of "The Quest" the feelings the fan talks about in terms of the lead-up to the long-awaited kiss form part of her own coming out narrative and in turn validate the show for her. Indeed "The Quest" as the title of the episode is also pertinent to the *XSTT* fans' own quest and search with the show and within their reading and writing experiences online. Episodes of this calibre enable them to quench their thirst for narratives that resonate with their own experiences.

The Studio's justification for the kiss in this episode was to place it in a storyline that suggested Xena's body had been taken over by a man, so, instead of Gabrielle kissing Xena, she was kissing a man in Xena's body. The question posed was, is it Xena or Autolycus who kissed Gabrielle? The camera angles, editing and lighting techniques are used as part of the campness of the dialogue of double entendres and the intertextual references that continue to produce the excess that is associated with postmodern camp. Xena's spirit has taken over the body of Autolycus, and she wants to tell Gabrielle that she is still alive. Xena talks through Autolycus and asks Gabrielle to close her eyes tightly and think of her. Gabrielle faces Xena in Autolycus's body in this love scene and the camera cuts to Gabrielle closing her eyes as Xena requested.

The background changes to swirling colours of blue, green and white in rhythm with the accompanying non-diegetic music of soft violin strings. Xena says “Gabrielle it’s me, I’m not dead”. In this love scene, the camera cuts back to a close-up of Gabrielle opening her eyes. She begins to cry and raises her hands up as she moves to touch Xena. Xena puts her hands up, to stop Gabrielle, and Gabrielle moves her hand towards her own face placing them over her mouth lightly, saying: “Why, Why did you leave?” There is a sequence of reverse shots with Xena just smiling lovingly at Gabrielle. Gabrielle says: “there’s so many things I want to tell you”, and then there is a cut to Xena putting her hands up again saying: “You don’t need to say anything.” As she moves closer to Gabrielle, Xena bends her head down to kiss Gabrielle. Xena moves further in and just as her lips meet Gabrielle’s the screen dissolves to black for a few seconds. It then fades up to an image of Autolycus and Gabrielle looking puzzled at each other and pulling away, as Autolycus states: “I hope you two sort things out,” Gabrielle replies, “We already have”.

The campness of this love scene and the confusion of the male with the female gender in addition to the sparse dialogue becomes part of the challenges to not only the characters in the scene but to the audience and fans. To underline the direction of this particular show the production style of *X: WP* is consistent with the concepts of postmodern camp (Morreale, 1998). The juxtaposition of replacing Xena with Autolycus during this particular love scene and the pun on the character’s name add to the campness of the depictions of the characters and the use of masquerade that engages the lesbian Internet fans with the subtext, while appealing to the mainstream audience simultaneously. This particular episode proves that masquerade and camp are very complex and multidimensional to cater to the various sections of the audience simultaneously.

Xena is not a stereotypical female and neither is Gabrielle but, within the storylines, they have to encounter gender stereotypes within patriarchy that they continue to dismantle through their representations, thoughts and behaviours as in the episode of “The Quest”. With a combination of a female gaze, and a lesbian gaze the question of Mulvey’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ in *X: WP* is nuanced differently, suggesting the series also adheres to the notion of “soft core” lesbian erotica or pornography¹¹⁷ thus expanding the identification and scopophilia of the viewing habits of the lesbian audience. As Anat Pick writes:

[t]he concept of lesbian spectatorship becomes more complex, so does the question of made-for-male titillation. What matters most, I think, is the ways in which same sex female desire can be configured into mainstream texts to create new narrative, aesthetic, and political possibilities (2004, p.107).

The new narrative and space of possibility is what becomes available as postmodern camp in the narratives of *X: WP* and enables a positive ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of Xena and Gabrielle as female characters offering so many pleasurable and subversive political possibilities for its lesbian or queer audience. According to Bennett, ‘*X: WP* is not so much a capital L “Lesbian” as it is queer, an interpretive landscape where gender roles are uprooted and hetero, homo, and bisexuality coexist in the space of possibility’ (1999, p.5). According to Joanne Morreale, ‘Feminist camp subverts traditional female stereotypes despite its formal acquiescence to the discourse of patriarchy’ (1998, p.79). *X: WP* is a text that allows the characters a mainstream compliance of feminism as well as a subtextual resistance to femininity as part of the shows’ discourse with its many possible readings and contradictions.

¹¹⁷ See further discussion on lesbian erotica and pornography in chapter six.

A new language is needed in academia to explore lesbian online fandom and its trajectory with regard to traditional fandom, one that is inspirational; one that embraces empowerment and the supportive networks which manifest in online chats. A language that is able to discuss lesbian Internet fandom as a fandom that is awakened to potential and possibility: one that is celebratory, playful, and pleasurable, and not stigmatised. Lesbian fandom requires a new language that can suggest freedom, to be fluid in choices of behaviour, to desire or be desired, to be a sexual subject, or object with an inclusive flexibility over power and pleasure. The fans' performances and practices online, whether consciously or unconsciously, are about lived experiences as social subjects. So, a rethinking of lesbian Internet fandom is needed with an Internet fan language that can reconfigure lesbian fans' viewing habits, discourses, pleasures, and desires, and how they deal with an online lesbian identity and what this represents for lesbian global visibility in terms of it being mirrored in the virtual and social world. A language that can discuss the lesbian fan's political struggles with media and television representations, and how this is dealt with through their activities on the Internet is what is required for future research.

The next chapter explores and discusses the fans' next stage in their textual engagement with the subtextual notion of the sexual relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. This appears to a necessary process in the fans' cultural struggle for meaning within their fandom as the fans' own responses to the case study support this. As we have explored in this chapter and chapter three, the lesbian fans of *XSTT* have described coming out narratives, rites of passage, and confessional discourse. They have enlightening actions and journeys to prompt their seeking and struggle to find meaning through their lesbian online discussions.

The question of whether the challenge is still being faced by fans of being tied back to traditional notions or resistance remains. How much agency and empowerment have they gained through the second layer? This is an ongoing debate and I will now explore the third layer of lesbian discourse. As fans begin to “own” the second layer of discourse, they are prompted to produce their own fan fiction writing online. This is the third layer of discourse. This enables them to decide on Xena and Gabrielle’s sexual relationship and their own online self-identity as lesbians as they explore this creatively through Internet fan fiction after the television show has terminated.

CHAPTER FIVE: LESBIAN INTERNET FAN FICTION

This chapter will continue to explore the extra-textual narrative of *X: WP* through the creative writing of the lesbian Internet fans, and how the fans engage in the third layer of lesbian discourse within their fan activities. It will make use of primary interviews and conversations from the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom, which will focus on the area of lesbian fan fiction and its development. I will not be offering a literary analysis of the fan fiction presented in this chapter but rather I will be exploring its function within lesbian online fandom. This is not a thesis about fixed texts but offers an illustration of lesbian fan fiction online writing that promotes the understanding of *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom and its engagement in lesbian discourse. The creative online fan fiction writing will be examined as well as its process and procedure and the different genres that connect to questions regarding censorship, pornography and erotica. I will give two examples of stories written for a particular genre by lesbian fans and demonstrate the empowerment of the lesbian fans through their writing of fan fiction.

The stereotyping of lesbians in that an individual lesbian can be seen in the media as “standing-in” for the collective terms of lesbianism is problematic and lesbians in general accept many of the images they are offered. However, the fan practices of lesbian Internet fans in their fan fiction writing of the characters of Xena and Gabrielle as lesbians are vicariously meeting needs that might be formulated as political demands both in their form and function and these should not to be dismissed as entirely uncritical. Central to *X: WP* as a text is the way in which it is redeployed while keeping its fantasy narrative intact. As it is being reshaped to encompass a lesbian reading, it fuels the transition from traditional lesbian fandom and offline fan

fiction writings to online lesbian fan writing. One of the questions raised through this study is what are the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans doing with the *X: WP* television text in this process? Another prime field of enquiry is whether various media streams from film, literature to audio transmissions used for discourse can be claimed as ‘lesbian’ regardless of the intentions of their authors or creators?

The lesbian Internet fans create extra-textual pleasurable fan practices such as fan fiction writing as part of the permutations that constantly manifest in the *XSTT* lesbian online fandom and in the Xenaverse virtual community. The complex dynamics of the identities, desires and representations of the two main characters of *X: WP* encourages the lesbian Internet fans to write stories to enable their own complex identities to be read through lesbian desire. Lesbian images, however, are still limited and restricted in their diversity and representation within television and film texts. However, according to Clare Whatling:

No film text belongs to any one constituency. It seems as foolish to argue that any text is intrinsically lesbian as to argue that a text is exclusively heterosexual, for this would deny the multiple possibilities of interpretation and revision that we as lesbians rely upon in our reception of mainstream films (1994, p.195).

The queer sensibility manifested in this quotation is adapted as a reference point to include the television text of *X: WP* but with the focus mainly on the lesbian reading of the open secret. Lesbians still remain invisible in many ways. As a marginalised group, it is constantly scanning images and representations from media and popular culture to appropriate and revise according to its own recognisable identities and needs. The lesbian fans of *XSTT* utilise the *X: WP* text to engage in what I define as a third layer of online lesbian discourse which is their fan fiction writing. This discourse is formulated as another part of their celebratory and extra-textual fan practices. As

distinct but interrelated layer of discourse, we must bear in mind that this third layer uses the first layer which is that of the subtextual discourse and the second layer which is the fans' communications in relation to their discussions of the subject. These combine finally to form this third layer which is the creation of the fan fiction. This is produced by fans as part of them fulfilling new lesbian online fan identities that challenge traditional lesbian fandom. Many of these writings in the third layer can be described as lesbian s/lash narratives. These stories are a fairly new genre to fandom and it is important to note in a recent piece by Francesca Coppa in her chapter called 'A Brief History of Media Fandom' the only time lesbian s/lash or Xena and Gabrielle are mentioned is in a footnote. This footnote refers to Christine Scodari's (2003)¹¹⁸ article informing us that Xena and Gabrielle s/lash is lesbian because the show was coded as lesbian and that the fan fiction is written by lesbian fans. Again, only briefly in Ika Willis' chapter, 'Keeping Promises to Queer Children' in the same book is there just a sentence about lesbian s/slash¹¹⁹. However, there are no other references to lesbian fan fiction or s/lash of Xena throughout the rest of the book. Indeed there are only limited accounts of lesbian fan fiction or lesbian s/lash fiction writing within fantasy or science fiction being investigated by academia during the last decade.

It was not until the emergence of a lesbian Internet fandom dedicated to *X: WP*, that academics showed some interest in lesbian fan fiction. In contrast to the mostly heteronormative academic readings of fan fiction or s/lash writing before the *X: WP* phenomenon, there was some investigative study of s/lash partnerships. The partnership of Cagney and Lacy of the eponymous series (1982-1988) in the popular

¹¹⁸ See Scodari, C. (2003) 'Resistance, Re-Examined: Gender Fan Practices Science Fiction Television' in *Popular Communications* 1 (2): 115-137.

¹¹⁹ See Ika Willis' (2006) chapter 'Keeping Promises to Queer Children' in Hellekson, K. and Busse, K. (eds.) *Fan Fiction and fan communities in the Age of the Internet*. London: McFarland.

police television drama featuring two strong feisty females in the lead roles is cited by Scodari as being one of the first lesbian s/lash fandom although not much has been written on their pairing. Further, the series was not overtly coded as lesbian as *X: WP* was by the Studio but some lesbians might have read the show in this way. However many studies have appeared in the last decade relating to television fantasy or science fiction television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the *X-Files* (1993-2002) and the pairing of certain characters within the series. Several scholars have been pursuing these investigations (Jowett, 2005; Jung, 2004; Kaveney, 2001; Saxe, 2001)¹²⁰. Within these studies are some short sections on the queering of s/lash or fan fiction written by the show's fans that were current with the gender and queer theories of the late nineties and early twentieth-first century. However, lesbian s/lash writings were slow to receive academic attention even though the lesbian fans of the Xenaverse were writing about Xena and Gabrielle in s/lash fiction after the first season of the show in 1996. Gwenllian-Jones (2000) and Hamming (2001) were two academics who "took up the mantle" in terms of the lesbian fan writers of s/lash on Xena and Gabrielle and understood the zeal in the lesbian fan fiction and the importance of understanding its complex form of resistance and agency in terms of fandom. Gwenllian-Jones cites comments on s/lash fiction written about the genre of 'XenaRotica' by a fan writing of the genre in *Whoosh!* Leila Armstrong¹²¹ states:

The writers of XenaRotica use their own subjectivity, and their knowledge of other lesbians' subjectivities, as their locus. They tell and retell, interpret and reinterpret, comment on and critique. They write for each other, share their fantasies and enjoy other writers' fantasies. Most

¹²⁰ Susanne Jung (2004) 'Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fan Fiction' in *Gender Forums, Gender Queeries*. 8 [online]. 'Gender Forum' <http://www.genderforum.org/fileadmin/archiv/genderforum/queerqueerhtml>. [Accessed 2006].

¹²¹ See also Armstrong, L. (1998) [online] 'The Zeal for Xena: Appropriation, Discursive Elaboration, and Identity Production in Lesbian Fan Fiction' in e-journal *Whoosh!* Issue No. 25. <http://whoosh.org/issue25/arm1.html>. [Accessed 2001].

importantly, they fashion something out of this process: a sense of self (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.415).

The empowerment and agency of *XSTT* and its fan fiction writing is how the lesbian fans employ a strategy of resistance to enhance their imaginative online identities, leaving behind how, as a marginalised group, they have been defined historically. In order to explore the various forms of fan fiction from s/lash writing to other genres, I will define ‘s/lash fiction’ in terms of lesbian Internet fan writing. These new forms of writing are a source for understanding lesbian *XSST* fandom. The new forms often show aspects of resistant reading or evidence of how the fans connect to the subtext as well as discussing the open secret. They provide examples of how new experiences such as pleasure, friendship and independence in the production of work encourage fans. Through fans’ short extracts of conversations about fan fiction along with short fan fiction stories written by online lesbian fans, I will give some textual analysis of these contemporary forms of writing. The online editors of the magazine and their contributions have helped further the development of lesbian discourse connected to *X: WP*, the Xenaverse and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom. Fan fiction writing has been able to encourage lesbian online fans in general to assert their new lesbian fan identities while the Studio’s recognition of some of the fan fiction writers has played an important role in empowerment for online lesbian fans.

The Studio Poaching of Melissa Good

Once the *X: WP* Studio recognised the lesbian Internet fandom’s powerful response to the subtext, it began to poach fan fiction writers such as Melissa Good in a strategic pursuit of fans. There are many fan fiction stories in the Xenaverse and many diverse writers, however one fan fiction writer or ‘bard’ as they are known in the Xenaverse

attracted particular attention from the *X: WP* fans and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans along with the producers of the television series. She is novelist Melissa Good.

The production company Renaissance Pictures Universal Studios, owners of the television series of *X: WP*, approached Melissa Good to write an episode for the show in season six. Good became the first lesbian Xenaverse fan fiction writer to get her work shown on television in an episode entitled “Legacy”¹²² (2000). The writer went on to script another episode, “Coming Home”¹²³ (2000) for Renaissance which was also used in the same season. In order to continue oiling its production machinery, the Studio needed the fans’ creativity to ensure new ideas for the series would keep on attracting large audiences such as a lesbian fan audience. The appropriation of the fans’ writings and the publicising of the television series’ lesbian online fandom became a popular topic in many radio and television interviews¹²⁴, which further suggests that the Xenaverse and *XSTT* fandom was a lucrative avenue for not only the Studio but the media and cultural industries as a whole. ‘Over time, fandom has become a significant source of extra revenue for production Studios’ (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p.166). The industries targeted fandom initiating a poaching strategy that was cloaked in the veil of heteronormativity and the economics of a ‘world-building for profit’ venture (*ibid*, 2003, p.167). ‘Far from detracting from sales of official spin-off products, online fandom seems to increase them by deepening audience interest and promoting everything relating to the series to a wide body of fans’ (*ibid*, 2003, p.171). The targeting of global lesbian audiences in this way was definitely new in the nineties; observing their prospective profitability, the Studio moved to focus its

¹²² *X: WP* (2000) Season 6, Episode 5, “Legacy”. (dir. Chris Martin Jones) TV. US, 29 Oct 2000 and (2001) TV.UK, 29 Jul.

¹²³ *X: WP* (2000) Season 6, Episode 1, “Coming Home”. (dir. Mark Beesley) TV. US, 1 Oct and (2001) TV. UK, 1 Jul.

¹²⁴ See page 90 for further information on the executive producer, Tapert’s move to contact online lesbian fans.

strategy on the online fandom as an important niche market. The lesbian fans realising their potential and the viability created a new form of lesbian story telling and used the series as a template. From this they began to produce lesbian online discourses and fan fiction. Due to the fact that the series was shown in so many different countries, variations to the lesbian text could still be understood and processed as empowering for lesbians as texts would be written in many different languages and styles but in keeping with the template from the series itself. All these writings could be reconstructed to encompass many different lesbian subject positions and more than had previously been available through traditional contemporary fandom which was constrained in its options. Online lesbian fans could easily coach other lesbians online in their writing and this practice was on a global basis. Fans could direct other potential fan writers to different sites within the Xenaverse in order to answer their specific concerns about fan fiction writing and lesbian desires. One of the genres to emerge from this, which made a great impact on the visibility of lesbian fandom, was online lesbian s/lash fan fiction. This form benefited from the use of the Internet as a generative and easy-access tool as well as from an avid fandom. I shall now explore further this genre of fiction and its central impact on lesbian Internet fan fiction writing.

S/lash Fiction Lesbian Fandom

Early key theorists in the field of fandom have all contributed to the debate on fan fiction writing by exploring s/lash fiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992, 2000; Jenkins, 1988, 1992; Penley, 1993, 1997). More recently, academic work has appeared on the Internet from writers, bloggers and discussion forums talking about fan fiction. Sites similar to 'AfterEllen.com' that provides up-to-date information on media and cultural

exchanges within the LGBT community¹²⁵ have also featured in the debate regarding representation within this community and its fan fiction writing. I will now discuss some of the points of contestation over this form of writing, and how s/lash fiction has developed for and through the lesbian fans being online.

S/lash fiction, as referred to by fans and academics, are stories that pair same sex characters from television series or films in such a way as to suggest there is a homosexual or same sex relationship occurring through the structure and outcome of the written narratives. According to Hamming, ‘S/lash actually derives its name from the abbreviation of characters’ names linked together by a ‘/’ (s/lash)’ (2001, p.1). The characters of Xena and Gabrielle are linked together by their initials and a 'slash' in the middle of these initials to form ‘X/G’ and this is how they are often described in this fiction or as ‘Xena/Gabrielle’.

Jenkins, one of the earliest theorists of fandom, fan fiction and s/lash writing, implies that fan fiction writing, in the main, is produced by women and read mainly by women¹²⁶. His early writings suggest there is ‘a space within this fan fiction writing to explore the complex issues of culturally inscribed gender, together with the homoerotic pairing of males with males and what this signifies for women fan writers’ (1992, p.189). However, David Howlett (1996) draws our attention to the fact that fan fiction writing dates as far back as works written in 800AD, with early versions of tales about mythical figures such as King Arthur who appears throughout European story telling traditions¹²⁷. Yet, modern forms of fan fiction writing although existing

¹²⁵ See ‘AfterEllen’ [online] <http://www.afterellen.com/TV/thelword.html>. [Accessed. 2002]

¹²⁶ Bacon-Smith (1992) as referenced by Jenkins, (1992, p.191) suggests that 90% of all fan fiction during the 1980s was written by heterosexual women.

¹²⁷ King Arthur was believed by certain historians to be based on a saint who appears in a book called *The Historia Brittonum* (written around 829 AD) – see also Howlett, D. (1996) *The Celtic-Latin*

in science fiction and fantasy fan culture in the twenties did not progress to academic discussion until works such as the first and subsequent series of the fantasy television production *Star Trek* (1996-1969) were studied. Jenkins states:

As these debates suggest, s/lash has established channels of communication between lesbian, bisexual, and straight women, provided common terms within which a dialogue about the politics of sexuality may be conducted, and created opportunities where the social construction of gender may be explored with greater openness and self-consciousness (1992, p.221).

S/lash writing functions as the foundation on which to build the plotlines of a fictional narrative within the science fiction genre that can depict homosexuality. Jenkins (1988, 1992) and other influential researchers into fandom indicate that s/lash writing highlights many tensions of gender and identity occurring between the characters within a television text that the fans appropriate for their writing. S/lash fiction is predominantly a female-authored fan activity. The established sub-genres and themes within s/lash fiction writings such as the ‘hurt/comfort zone’ that implies nurturing and sexual descriptions are woven into the different narratives of s/lash fiction. These sub-genres and themes challenge many of the stereotypical versions of women and men and their attitudes to gender and homosexuality.

Early investigations of science fiction s/lash stories all relate to the pairing of men. The initials ‘k/s’ is used for ‘Kirk/Spock’, the characters from *Star Trek* in the stories and the fans’ representation of these characters is of the characters having same-sex sexual encounters. The majority of theorists who analyse s/lash fiction convey why women fans write about male/male fan fiction as s/lash stories.

Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) in their study about Internet fan fiction choose Joanna Russ's (1985) investigative study of 'Pornography by Women for Women with Love' and the 1986 work of Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith – 'Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines' to discuss contemporary s/lash fiction¹²⁸. These feminist writers were amongst the first to produce feminist scholarly criticisms that dealt with the s/lash fiction writing of *Star Trek* fandom in a positive celebratory way, noting that the characters written about in these fantasies were often depicted as outsiders or androgynous figures such as that of the *Star Trek* character Dr. Spock.

Russ's work, in particular, relates s/lash fan fiction stories in which the characters are depicted as being involved in more than an emotionless encounter. She writes that s/lash, for the women who read and write about it, accentuates 'the lovers' personal interest in each other's minds, not only each other's bodies' (Russ, 1985, p.85). Russ's position suggests that women write s/lash fiction as a form of feminist pornography, which illustrates explicit sexual scenes between the fictional male(s) pairing, enables the women writers to portray the characters in such a way that women themselves would like to imagine, in their own sexual lives with their partners, a place where inequalities do not exist.

Representations of female characters in television media during the eighties and early nineties were often portrayals of submissive or passive characters such as in soaps operas where kitchens were coded as mainly female gathering places and garages coded as male. Men were depicted as having a strong sexual drive, being active in their desire, while sometimes being portrayed as being repressed when it came to

¹²⁸ See Hellekson, K. and Busse, K. (eds.) (2006) *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. London: McFarland.

nurturing or showing their emotions. In s/lash fiction fan writing, heterosexual women writers are able to portray the characters as caring and “in touch with their emotions”. Many of the characters in the storyline have characteristics of constructed female and male traits and they share in more “equal” relationships, with regard to their friendships and in their sexual desires.

Hellekson and Busse (2006) offer two explanations of s/lash fiction and why women write and read this form of fan fiction. First, the sexual scenes of the male/male pairing can be interpreted as representing the intensity of emotional intimacy and fantasy for the women fans that write the fiction. Second, these narratives were written at a time of discussion and analyses that incorporated the contentious feminist debates on pornography and censorship in the late eighties. These debates raised a critique of pornography and censorship that was set out in America in 1984, when feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon became leading activists in creating an ‘ordinance’ for the Minneapolis City Council that was supported by anti-feminist conservatives (see Rodgerson & Wilson, 1991, p.10). This controversial ordinance meant that any pornographic material would violate women’s civil rights. It meant giving women the right to take ‘a civil action against anyone involved in the production, distribution or sale of pornography on the grounds that they had been harmed by the image of women it portrayed’ (*ibid.*).

Sections of the media, along with feminists, responded in opposition to this bill and an organisation called the ‘Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force’ (FACT) was set up to challenge this civil action. Eventually the ordinance was ruled as unconstitutional and taken off the statute book after a two-year legal battle. The reason for the opposition to this civil action both in America and Britain was a crucial challenge to the

commonsense notion of sexuality, was, because, according to Elizabeth Wilson, it evoked a ‘sexual ideology in our culture’ that suggests all women are victims of pornography (1991, p.12). The feminists involved in the anti-censorship campaign argued that there was a need for more investigation into sexual ideology and the part it played in Western culture deserved re-thinking. The argument implied that pornography featured only as a minor part of the macro problem of inequality and subjugation of women. In the eighties and early nineties, the feminist message appealing to women demanded that:

We must go on the offensive and stop being baited by those who call our defence of our sexual images oppressive, stop allowing them to set the agenda for what is and is not feminist (Rodgerson & Wilson, 1991, pp. 74-5).

The arguments over pornography and feminism continue today although not as aggressively as in the eighties. It is impossible to ignore the relationship between the Internet and pornography especially when exploring the use of Internet in the creating and publishing of lesbian Internet fan fiction. According to Richard Berger (2010, p.181) online s/lash fan fiction became ‘pornographied’ by the Internet itself. S/lash fan fiction was beginning to be observed as challenging different types of pornography even though it was more about being supportive to interactive minority online communities whose fans were exploring and investigating, their sexualities and desires in a light-hearted way.

In respect of the XSTT lesbian Internet fans, the growth of this genre was about their visibility online that was part of fulfilling their lesbian sexual fantasies. The reading and writing of this genre enabled them to explore explicit forms of lesbian desires as part of a playful and for some, a political process of being in the world. The Internet is now the largest public forum for pornographic images and narratives and in the next

chapter, I will discuss how pornography has impacted on fan fiction and lesbian fan fiction writings.

The research texts on fan fiction writing that Russ and Lamb & Veith examine, propose that, as a fan practice, they deem this writing to be a cathartic exercise for both the fans writing the s/lash and the women fans reading it. However, my argument is that this is much more than a cathartic exercise especially with regard to the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom.

Mirna Cicione recognises that Russ (1985) and Lamb & Veith (1986) position themselves within the s/lash fiction debate as supporting the notion that s/lash fiction writing is a fantasy that can ‘articulate women’s desires’ (1998, p.154). The key issue is that s/lash fiction is written outside of the oppressive heterosexual censorship issues, as argued by radical separatist feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon. MacKinnon in an interview with Stuart Jefferies for the *Guardian* online¹²⁹ she discussed her book *Are Women Human?* (2006). In this interview she continued her radical feminist stance of over two decades referring to the subjugation of women and the dominant roles of men in regard to pornography and its exploitation of women for sex. Jefferies posed a question: “How about lesbian pornography - made for, by and about lesbians?” MacKinnon replied:

Most of it is sold in liquor stores and mostly it is men who are its consumers. Some of it is about a real aspiration to recapture women’s sexuality for women, no doubt. The fact is that the materials themselves in general are about the use of women for sex and when women are being used for sex that is about a male-dominant model of sex, whether men are doing it or not. It’s not biological. It’s about sex roles. Anyone can play them.

¹²⁹See [online] Interview with Catharine MacKinnon (2006) on her book *Are Women Human?* by Jefferies, S. *Guardian*, April 12, 2006. ‘Gender’. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/apr/12/gender.politicsphilosophyandsociety>. [Accessed 2008].

The reaction to lesbian pornography by MacKinnon continues to relate to the male-dominant model of sex that historically seems dated and does not offer anything substantial to the debates about pornography or censorship on the Internet, although she does concede in a small way that lesbian pornography may be about a real aspiration regarding women's sexuality. The new lesbian online fandom that produces fan fiction writing about the lesbian relationship between Xena and Gabrielle is dealt with using a hybrid of literary and fan genres about explicit lesbian desire and sexual acts in all its "shapes and forms".

These many forms have been discussed by Lamb & Veith who argue women's s/lash fiction representations concern themselves with the deeper emotions of love even within their explicit sexual content and desire. Sex in heterosexual women's s/lash writing in an earlier investigation by Penley (1991) reflects relationships of love, within an equal partnership. Lamb & Veith's (1986) earlier investigations into s/lash fiction narratives, cited in Hellekson and Busse, emphasise 'that women may want different things from their sexual fantasies than either romance or porn can provide' (2006, p.17).

It is crucial to point out that although Hellekson and Busse's (2006) edited version of the study of fandom was innovative in its field, most of the work featured in their book looked at studies of pornography as evidenced mostly in heteronormative investigations in which heterosexual women are writing s/lash narratives with male-to-male pairings. Whether academics were interested or not, it was clear to *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans that they were continuing their struggle for meaning in how the characters of their fandom are depicted in the television series and in their new writing. It is clear through the *XSTT* discourse that fan fiction writing deals with the

complexity and contradictory states of contemporary feminist lesbian thought. Some of the complexities are resolved during the lesbian fans' reading and writing of lesbian fan, and s/lash fiction because they can create their own narratives about Xena and Gabrielle's sexual life and this automatically, as Armstrong (2001) described reinforces their own 'sense of self'. This is a very clear representation of lesbian desire and sexuality. It is also evidence of how lesbian fans are changing the landscape of lesbian visibility and that their fan fiction narratives are rejoiced in and celebrated by the circuit which is the virtual global lesbian fan community.

The fact that the Internet enabled discussions to continue without end in the virtual arena has also aided the development of new online writing. *X: WP* was the first fantasy television series to have what Berger¹³⁰ refers to as 'an emerging dialogical relay between fanfic and television' (2010, p.178). I challenge Berger's research that places "*Buffy* fanfic" as being the contender for the first position as the first form of fan online fiction writing to emerge from traditional fandom on the Internet. It was the Xenaverse with its dedicated lesbian fans that spawned the first pioneers in this online venture: this is evidenced in the first forms of online fan fiction in 1996 that appeared before *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was broadcast.

One of the reasons that *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans writing online s/lash fiction so soon into the series was that they were questioning what Xena and Gabrielle's relationship could be about for them. The fans require different things from their sexual fantasies than the *X: WP* coded lesbian television series could offer. In this context, Russ, Lamb & Veith all agree that s/lash fiction written by heterosexual women should not be compared to male pornography, but the scholars are still aware that heterosexual

¹³⁰ Richard Berger (2010) 'Out and About Slash Fic, Re-imagined Texts' in Pullen, C. and Cooper, M. (eds.) *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*. New York: Routledge, pp. 173-184.

woman are also looking for different things from their sexual fantasies that cannot be provided by pornography. They point out that the depiction of the characters within s/lash fiction is more than one-dimensional. Moreover, they assert that the characters within women's s/lash fiction possess traits of nurturing and dedication, and these characteristics are prominent in all their representations of pairings. Cicione's view of s/lash writing also reflects some of 'the ambiguities that characterise the position of women with respect to heterosexuality' (1998, p.154). Additionally, Cicione argues that other s/lash study investigations have all proposed that s/lash stories and their sexual nuances reflect the fantasies and pleasures explored by heterosexual women because these experiences are hardly available with men outside of the fantasy element of s/lash fan fiction (Russ, 1985b; Lamb & Veith, 1986; Penley, 1992).

From a feminist perspective, Cicione claims that the stories themselves imply an egalitarianism that most heterosexual women seek. She argue that this is demonstrated within s/lash fiction as a fantasy of authentic love, which can exist only between equals; especially, 'people who are strong and share adventures as well as emotions' as the female characters of *X: WP* illustrate so well (1998, p.169). The aim is to find equality with men and s/lash's depiction of male/male pairings as homoerotic images is a form of pleasure for some women who can fantasise and get sexual pleasure through the ambiguous images they create. The images also suggest desire and sexual pleasure can be unpredictable, as previously discussed in chapter four, in the context of the subtext discussed by the *XSTT* fans magmor and cabinngirl. In discussing the genre, I was directed to the Altfic. site by an *XSTT* fan darxe. Another important genre of fan fiction writing for lesbian Internet fans is Altfic., as darxe highlights:

...I found some that said fanfiction so I went to those, and started reading the ones that had alt. by it . . . I don't remember the first site I went to, but I still go

to all the first ones I did then. Obsessions¹³¹ home page was one of the first ones I went to.

darxe chosen alt. fan fiction from the beginning of her *X:WP* fandom. Her comments are representational of many lesbian fans who find explicit sexual fan fiction that helped them find a narrative and a reading space in which to indulge their lesbian fantasies. This next section will explore the development of this genre in lesbian Internet fan writing and why it has become so popular.

Altfic. and Lesbian Fan Fiction

The *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans produce a concrete material possibility for social and cultural exchanges through their lesbian fan fiction writing. ‘Altfic.’ is an abbreviation for alternative fiction. In Altfic.¹³² the fans still use the main characters from the plot of a television series or film, however, they write about the characters in situations and relationships in a way that is different from the way they are presented in the mainstream narrative. With regard to *X: WP* and *XSTT*, Altfic., also refers to the pairings of the characters of Xena and Gabrielle in a same-sex romantic erotic storyline that has many sub-genres. The Xenaverse and the *XSTT* fans apply the term Altfic. to the categorisation of fan fiction writing because many lesbian fans reject the term s/lash and ‘femslash fiction’. Femslash fiction is another sub-genre of s/lash that presents relationships of characters as heterosexual within the original canon of fan fiction and these characters are paired sexually in the fan fiction writings. (Due to the fact that the term s/lash within traditional fandom has related to the pairing of heterosexual male characters in fan fiction, many lesbian fans objected to it being

¹³¹ The fan is referring to ‘Dax’s Obsessions’ a popular alt. fan fiction archive begun in 1995, see also ‘Fan History’ [online] <http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Obsessions>, [Accessed July 2010].

¹³² ‘Altfic.’ or www.altfic.com is a site which contains mature themes on relationships between women and is a significant source for fan fiction.[Accessed May 2005].

used to represent lesbian online fan fiction.) Lesbian Internet fans in this study often sought out writings that incorporated a romantic yet overt sexual storyline about the desires of Xena and Gabrielle as a lesbian couple.

darxe was an avid fan of Altfic. Many of the *XSTT* fans such as darxe address and recognise the writers from the Xenaverse who write about ‘Xena and Gabrielle Altfic’ in their interviews. As the fans’ appetite for alternative fan fiction grew many global websites joined the Xenaverse, one being a lesbian site created in Australia called ‘AUSXIP’. This set up a link to Altfic., declaring, ‘Bards are Australian’¹³³ appealing to the Australian fans and the playfulness of the lesbian fans globally – after all, the show is shot in New Zealand and the star of Xena Lucy Lawless is a “Kiwi”! All these sites were housed within the Xenaverse from December 1996, the first year of broadcast for *X: WP* and the start of the Xenaverse¹³⁴. The eponymously named site Altfic. features The Bard’s Corner in its main index. This contains a list of writers who have had their work published and the site names circa twenty writers of the genre. It was on the Altfic. site that I first came across the writing of Theran Novan¹³⁵ the writer whose work darxe the *XSTT* fan had suggested to me¹³⁶. This fan fiction writer is one of the original writers of Altfic. and is rated very highly amongst the international community of Xenaverse fans. On this fan site, Novan has thirty-three stories under the title of classic fiction genres, which are broken down into sub genres such as Über¹³⁷, Conqueror, Janice and Mel fiction, Post Final Fiction and Xena

¹³³ See ‘T. Novan, Genre Classic’ [online] http://ausxip.com/genre_classic_k-o.php [Accessed Feb, 2005].

¹³⁴ The Xenaverse is a generic term for all the online fandom community dedicated to *X: WP*. Its websites and fans were part of the AOL chatroom. The Xenaverse was started by a 14-year-old-girl called Laura.

¹³⁵ Novan began writing fan fiction when her career as an American Police Officer ended due to illness.

¹³⁶ See ‘AUSXIP’ and ‘T.Novan, Index’ [online] <http://ausxip.com/tnovan/index.html>, [Accessed Feb, 2005].

¹³⁷ Über, as stated earlier, is the German word for ‘cross-over’ and in connection with the *XSTT* fandom it can also refer to some of the fans’ journeys as they move or cross-over from traditional lesbian

Clone Fiction. The site is comprehensive and attractive to the fans in its layout, links, and useful information for would-be bards who want to take up this fan practice. Novan also posts on what is called e-Book Corner on the Altfic. site. Here fans can download up to twenty stories at a time from their favourite writer. The capacity of the Internet and new media enables vast quantities of fictional writings to be in circulation simultaneously. Through this site, new fans are introduced to a range of various lesbian fan fiction writers, while its easily accessible links and information take the lesbian fans through a stage-by-stage process and explanation of the different forms of fan fiction. At the end of each section is a frequently-asked-question subdivision that supports the fans' different reading habits. I have introduced a short extract from the discussion with darxe that contains the introduction to the fan fiction writer Novan and her fictional narratives. The *XSTT* fan darxe is someone who gets pleasure from the fan practices and as a member of the online fan club and I asked her: "Do you have the site address for the two stories you told me about yesterday?"

darxe:

yeah hold on let me find it. www.ausxip.com/fanfic.html

darxe:

the bard is T. Novan I don't remember the title but all her stories are good

resubmit2001:

Thanks, Is this person a lesbian?

darxe:

Yeah. She is awesome.

fandom to online lesbian fandom. It also relates to the *XSTT* fans' coming out narratives as they transform in terms of self-identity and online performance.

Altfic. grew quickly in popularity because it gave the fans what they were looking for in terms of a variety of lesbian sexual stories relating to their object of fandom. This form of fan fiction is easy to access and fans encourage each other to go online and seek out stories. Like many fan fiction readers, darxe sought out stories that she could identify with and that made her reflect on her own self-identity and life experiences.

darxe:

Gab is my favourite. She is just so cool, and beautiful to boot. My friend know how much I love Gab, so she got me this really awesome pic of her with Xena at the bottom of the page. I scanned it & it's on my pc at work. LOL, ive really enjoyed watching Gab get better and better, I think I cheer her on more than anything else.

In her discussions, she refers to the character of Gabrielle as her favourite and the enjoyment she gets from the character hence the “LOL” (Laugh Out Loud) abbreviation. Gabrielle is a bard, a creative teller of stories within the television series. Gabrielle displays her refined and unique art in conversations. “Gab” for darxe is a role model who talks the same language as in “cool”, darxe was in her early twenties during our online conversations and Renée O’Connor who plays Gabrielle was just twenty-four, when she was chosen for the part of Gabrielle within the series. darxe gets a lot of pleasure from the characters of the series and from the fan fiction as is evidenced in her comments.

darxe: I think about it all the time. I print out fan-fict to read. If I’m out of school [she’s a school secretary] and work, Im reading a story. I even read Über stories, Über stories are stories that have X& G descendants. People who look like them but are not. Tell you what...the best Xena fan-fict, and Über are by Missy Good have you heard of her work?

darxe was enthusiastic about her fan fiction and wanted to inform me of her different choices and of the writers she most enjoyed and admired. A great many of the fans read Über stories which have significance for lesbian fans in terms of its crossing over analogy. The lesbian Internet fans have migrated from traditional fan fiction reading

and writing habits perform their own online discourse and fan fiction narratives. Fan fiction written about Gabrielle and Xena is something that connects with the fans from *XSTT*. The loyalty of Gabrielle and her consistency in “being there” for Xena in times of her emotional and physical crisis is something discussed by many of the fans, silverravyn: writes:

I have few faves...but Gabrielle is my favourite, because of her loyalty.
No matter what she was always there...good and the bad'.

In one of my interviews with silverravyn I asked her: “Do you write Xena fan fiction?”

silverravyn: yes I do

resubmit2001: Can you tell me more about your fan fiction

silverravyn: the first one I wrote is called ‘Why Joxer’¹³⁸ it’s funny. It’s more or less about Jox trying to show G how much he loves her

silverravyn: that one story is posted over on Minerva’s site and some of my other stuff is at Xena Eyes Collective

resubmit2001: Are these lesbian sites?

silverravyn: Hummm. I wouldn’t say yes or no. I know they are owned by lesbians

The *XSTT* fans’ acknowledgement of the loyal friendship between the female characters is also part of the romance and nurturing process that takes place in the ‘new’ Xena and Gabrielle’s adventures of the fans’ own fiction narratives. *XSTT* fans darxe and silverravyn take delight in reading and writing all the different forms of fan fiction as it reinforces their sense of self. It is a fan practice that is used to celebrate and accept the reality of otherness and the diversity of the lesbian identity and subject which, like the fan group itself, is constantly in a state of ‘forever becoming’ or what

¹³⁸ See silverravyn’s fan fiction story [online] ‘Why Joxer?’ on ‘Members Tripod’ http://members.tripod.com/Terpischor_e/whyjox.html [Accessed March 2001].

could be referred to as a “work-in-progress”. The writers of fan fiction place the characters into situations and locations that serve as a foundation for many sexual and romantic themes. These stories can have plotlines highlighting humour, danger, violence, isolation, transformation, and migration all interwoven around the accentuated love that Xena and Gabrielle’s have for one another. Friendship features in various ways within the fans’ fan fiction narratives online, it is significant because the *XSTT* fans began their social networking practices during their visits and discussions about their fandom and friendships developed through this discovery. Camaraderie is imperative not just to the two characters of Xena and Gabrielle within the television series, but to the lesbian fans who encourage and “cheer each other on” in their fan practices just as darxe cheers Gab on to get better and better. It is an evolution of their fandom and fan activities online and helps build their virtual community and new lesbian fan identities.

In order to understand the evolution of the fans’ own online fiction, I have illustrated a fan fiction story called ‘Why Joxer’ written by *XSTT* fan, silverravyn. I will introduce the character of the series by giving a brief synopsis of Joxer’s relationship to Xena and Gabrielle. I will then give a short extract from the fan’s story, and how the fan uses the character of Joxer as an obstacle in the plotline to Xena and Gabrielle’s sexual relationship. The interpretation of the fan fiction story is a direct manifestation taken from the open secret of the television series. The fan fiction story is a example of how online lesbian fan fiction has become embedded in the first and second textual engagements or layers of lesbian discourse, and how it has shaped new lesbian online fan identities through challenging traditional reading and writing fan practices.

The character of the show Joxer appears in the show halfway through the first season and remains in the programme until the fifth season when he is killed defending Gabrielle. He is part of a travelling trio with companions Xena and Gabrielle. Joxer is portrayed as a character with an innocent and bumbling nature. He is an inept and blundering warrior with a big heart. He cares for Gabrielle and Xena. Within the drama of the series, he sustains an unrequited love for Gabrielle and his often “goofy” persona adds to the camp nature of the over the top battle scenes in which Joxer is more of a hindrance than a help. Joxer is used as a counter character to measure Gabrielle’s transformation from that of a naïve young woman who relies on her words to get her out of situations to a strategic warrior of Xena’s calibre. The confusion arising from Joxer is in his ‘relationship’ to Gabrielle in the series and this becomes the focus of the fan fiction that silverravyn writes. She illuminates in her writing how this adds to the tensions between female and male roles within *X: WP* and how these tensions are then dealt with through humour. The struggle for meaning for the lesbian fans can be drawn from the depiction of the difficulty Gabrielle faces in trying to negotiate her way as a young woman who is becoming a powerful and wise warrior and this is portrayed in the counter-reflection of Joxer as a fool and innocent.

silverravyn’s fan fiction story ‘Why Joxer?’ is erotic and humorous and draws on the comedy aspect of the *X: WP* character Joxer and his blindness of Xena and Gabrielle’s love for each other. It also features distinct sexual lesbian acts and language between the two female characters that enhances the appeal of this genre. (I have not changed the layout of the story nor its grammatical style as I wish the story to remain exactly as it was presented on the writer’s fan site). The fan silverravyn uses ‘Silver’ as her fan fiction name. The story does not state what particular genre ‘Why Joxer?’ is rooted in, however, it has all the usual themes such as love, friendship and

sexual activity with a lot of camp innuendo that Xenaverse fans would be able to recognise. These stories have explicit erotic lesbian sex scenes. They refer to a lesbian sexual language that is presented and written to engage with a lesbian audience, and this is what attracts the *XSTT* fans. Lesbian erotic creative writing is present in the form of fan fiction writing on the Internet which has influenced and become a productive activity. It is a valuable resource for lesbians and their sexual knowledge thorough story telling within the online and offline communities.

I will now give a short extract from silverravyn's fan fiction story 'Why Joxer?' However, before introducing the story to the page, I felt it important to draw attention to the disclaimer written by the fan, as this is not only in keeping with the television show that uses a disclaimer at the end of every episode, but it was also part of the style template of this form of fan fiction writing. This format started to be developed online in an environment where the Studio had tried to impose copyright infringement on some of the fans and their sites. Further, I am showing it because fans used it as part of the recognition that they were operating in an independent and empowered space such as the Internet and they wanted to promote and protect their work in a similar way to the Studio but not in an economic way as silverravyn states:

A fan story: 'Why Joxer?'¹³⁹

Standard disclaimers: I don't own the characters, I do own the story. It wasn't written for profit but for fun and to give an outlet to my over active imagination. If the thought of love and sex between two women is offensive to you, then you don't want to read this. If your mind and heart have been liberated from restraints the general public places on things read on and enjoy. This may contain season 5 spoilers. It was inspired from those recent episodes, and from reading a short fan fic story by Mary D 'No Strings Attached'.

¹³⁹ This is a short extract from the fan fiction narrative just to give the reader an understanding of the form and content of silverravyn's writing. The overall story length is short so I have not italicised it.

‘Why Joxer?’

By

Silver

"I don't understand why you had to tell him that Xena? Why give him advice about telling me he loves me?!" Gabrielle spat out. The blonde woman was frustrated. Joxer had constantly been looking at her like a sad puppy, and Xena was no help at all, letting him think she was available.

"I'm sorry Brie, it just sorta happened ya know? It's not like I want him swooning after you!" Xena replied exasperated, knowing that her lover was upset.

(With good reason we all know.)

The would be warrior had finally told Gabrielle that he loved her, and since then he had been giving her silly looks; trying to do things for her with disastrous results; and just simply getting on her every nerve.

"Xena, I know you weren't feeling yourself then, but did you really think that telling Joxer to just tell me he loved me with no strings was the right thing to do? Honestly?"

Xena looked liked a child being reprimanded for doing something knowingly wrong.

"I'm really sorry baby," she pouted full lips, "if you want me to, I will go tell him that you are very taken," the dark-haired beauty stated, looking at her soulmate with hopeful eyes.

Gabrielle sighed, "Xena, everyone in the known world seems to know about us, why doesn't Joxer see it? It's been a little over three seasons now that we have been lovers, how can anyone be that blind?"

Gabrielle spoke softly then turned to face her lover again, placing her small hand on high sculpted cheek. The warrior leaned into the bard's warm hand and smiled a smile reserved only for her Gabrielle.

"Xena, I know you weren't feeling perfect, and we were dealing with so much, I don't mean to be upset with you, I just want Joxer to understand."

"Understand what?" Joxer so rudely interrupted as he came up from behind, smiling boyishly at both of them. "You ok Xena? Is Gabby checking to see if you have a fever?" Joxer questioned as he noticed his love was touching Xena's face.

"No Joxer," Xena sighed. "She wasn't looking to see if I have a fever, we were just talking."

Gabrielle removed her hand much to Xena's disappointment. Rolling her eyes

heavenward, the tall warrior walked over to Argo to get some tea herbs to settle her stomach. Travelling while being pregnant just was not pleasant, and this situation did not help matters any.

sil verravyn incorporates into her story Gabrielle being pregnant which she has drawn from season three, episode five called “Gabrielle’s Hope” (1997)¹⁴⁰. sil verravyn in her discussions with me online informed me that her girlfriend had a baby and that they all lived with her girlfriend’s mother in the same house. The link to the pregnancy of Gabrielle that she took from the television episode and possibly to her own life experiences found a place within her fan fiction story.

sil verravyn’s fan fiction narrative is complicit with the storyline of the television series in one respect as Joxer is besotted with the character Gabrielle. Joxer as a character in the series is symbolic for the open secret or subtext a denial of the main characters lesbian love. However, in the fan fiction story the plot focus is about the fan not only being complicit with the television text but also showing resistance to it by producing a story in which Xena and Gabrielle are clearly in a lesbian relationship a form of dualism. The use of the show and the online support she received to write her fan fiction story is part of her struggle and sil verravyn use the show’s content to make meaning for herself as a lesbian subject in a heteronormative dominant society as this extract from the story emphasises.

That night they found a decent inn to stay in. Of course Gabrielle had haggled for two rooms, a hot bath, and dinner. The trio ate dinner together, but ‘thankfully’, Gabrielle thought. ‘they all did not have to share quarters or space similar when they camped out’.

This part of sil verravyn’s narrative has drawn on the sexual coding within the television series of the hot bath scene which became synonymous as sexual activity between Xena and Gabrielle within the television series. This was first featured in the

¹⁴⁰ X: WP (1997) Season 3, Episode 5, “Gabrielle’s Hope”. (dir. R.J. Stewart) US. TV, 27 Oct.

episode “A Day in the Life”¹⁴¹ (1997). In this episode in a scene in which Gabrielle washes Xena’s back in the hot tub Xena’s turns around and asks: “Are you sitting on the soap” Gabrielle answers, “I was wondering what that was …” a fun splashing fight begins. Many scenes like this with the hot bath after dinner are featured throughout the series and are recognised by the fans as a euphemism for sexual foreplay between the characters in the television series.

It is because of the lesbian Internet fandom that the series of *X: WP* continued to be so popular through its six-year broadcast and it was now the role lesbian fans to revive and revise the series with their new fan fiction narrative created online. The fan fiction writing is what supports the fans and assists them in bridging the disparity between the heterosexual world and their own lesbian existence. During my interview with silverravyn, as with many of the *XSST* fans, she revealed part of her identity within the flow of information that was released over a period. Online fandom for lesbians enables this process at a pace convenient to the fans. In my interview with the fan I asked silverravyn: “Do you think the show and the chat lines have enabled lesbian fans to make connections and talk more freely about sexuality and identity. Has it helped you?”

silverravyn replied: “I think it has...it helped me be more carefree about who I am”.

Fan fiction reading and writing as a resource or fan activity has been categorised in previous fan studies as a form of cultural resistance to the mainstream that appears within the gaps of the ‘canon’ and against what can be referred to as the ‘cultures of the dominant’ (Derecho, 2006, p.73)¹⁴². Moreover, the modern day complexity

¹⁴¹ *X: WP* (1997) Season 2, Episode 15, “A Day in the Life,” (dir. Michael Hurst) TV, US. 17 Feb.

¹⁴² See Abigail Derecho’s (2006) chapter ‘Archontic Literature’: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction’ in Hellekson, K. and Busse, K. (eds.) *Fan Fiction and fan communities in the Age of the Internet*. London: McFarland.

observed as a dualism of the fans' resistance and collaboration with the producers and creators of mainstream popular culture is changing the theoretical landscape of fandom. Various fan scholars illustrate this transition in their investigations of fan culture (Bennett, 1999; Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, 2003; Hamming, 2001). The *XSTT* fan fiction writing on the Internet can also supersede previous paradigms of resistance within fandom and fan fiction. Hamming suggests that:

In their exploration of Xena's and Gabrielle's desire for each other, and by association, their own desires, lesbian followers of Xena produce for themselves a character who is as interesting as, and certainly more libidinous than, the Xena of television fame (2001, p.7).

The erotic portrayal of Xena's and Gabrielle's sexual relationship that the lesbian fans produce in their fan fiction writing on the Internet offers a form of 'self disclosure' of desire and sexuality that is a mirror for lesbians that generates its own consumable lesbian fan market. It has its own guidelines in much the same way as the television series itself, with its universal canon that is housed in many sub-genres. However, the fan fiction universal canon for *XSTT* and the lesbian writers of the Xenaverse is that the relationship of Xena and Gabrielle is about lesbianism: it is not the subtext or the open secret as is the case of the show. It may have different sub-genres but they are all about explicit lesbian sex in its diverse forms even though the plotlines of the stories are very different.

One of the reasons women get pleasure from reading and writing fan fiction is because it can 'shape the metaphor with which a real-life message will be constructed for social interaction' (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p.203). This is evidenced in discussion with another *XSTT* fan, Adara. This fan acknowledged the shaping of real-life messages through her discussions of the theme of Xena and Gabrielle as soulmates.

Adara states:

The controversial denouement, thought true to the risk-taking nature of the series, infuriated many of the ‘Xena’ faithful to a degree which Lawless seems only now to be fully grasping. Lawless says “For her, it was that so many people in this world have never been in love or they were in love and lost the other person. They want to believe in the soulmate concept. Our show kept talking about the soulmate, the soulmate, for all those seasons, what we did was take Gabrielle’s soul mate away from her. Gabrielle and Xena were split up. And I think that had a dreadful resonance for very many of our fans- For that I’m really sorry”. Part of me is happy that Lucy got to see what a horrible thing they did and how messed up the final for the whole series really was.

The online social interactions of fandom provide many fans with cultural and social capital that helps them exchange views about their own lives and that of the objects of fandom, giving them more confidence. However, I am not arguing that this is axiomatic of fandom. The shifting terrain of fandom and the fans’ reading and writing activities and practices emphasise Gayle Rubin's claim that ‘there are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicised. In such periods the domain of erotic life is in effect, renegotiated’ (Rubin, 1993, p.4) During the nineties, the Internet became a prominent tool in terms of changing fandom fan practices and performances with regard to sexuality and identity. Lesbian desires are flirted with but simultaneously made absent by the television series in the story telling of the relationship of Xena and Gabrielle. However, the fans’ use of new technology and what it affords is what evokes the fans’ depiction of their objects of fandom as sexualised characters in the foreground of their fictional reading and writing fan practices. As Gwenllian-Jones informs us:

Producers, writers, cast members and fans alike have been quick to exploit the possibilities of cyberspace as a means of communicating with each other; fans use the Internet to extend X: WP’s cultural terrain far beyond the limits of the diegesis, interconnecting rhizomatically, via hypertext links, with a wide variety of extraneous topics, discourse and Net culture (2000, p.9).

The Internet houses a variety of online lesbian fan discourse which connects and informs the lesbian virtual community in terms of social and sexual lesbian history and imparts knowledge in many areas which was previously not available. Recent academic investigations such as that of Cooper (2010) and Edwards (2010) explore the medium of television and the Internet through the expansion of lesbian or transgender communities online ‘that offer the opportunities for identity testing, preparation for coming out if one chooses to do so and a support system throughout the entire process’ (Cooper, 2010, p.76). Lesbian fan fiction can function on the Internet to engage other online overlapping lesbian groups and communities to read and write fan fiction as part of a virtual community pleasurable practice. Margaret Cooper (2010) in her study of virtual communities looking at ‘Lesbians who are married to Men’ adds to the debate of lesbian online discourse and collective story telling of social, cultural and sexual identities. Cooper’s informative study details the emotions that women face when deciding to go through the process of self-discovery. Her work has a direct bearing on this case study in that she discusses the support and friendships formed through the lesbian’s journey online.

Monica Edwards’ (2010) investigation into the online fans discussion of the lesbian centred television series, *The ‘L’ Word* (2004-09) is important to the debate of lesbian online discourse. It is relevant in terms of its discussion of ‘unstable sexualities’ which question the essentialist and constructed notions of identity and how the changing approach towards sexuality and identity during the last two decades has produced a queering of television texts such as *The ‘L’ Word*, signifying disruption and expansion of a variety of lesbian identities and gender. Edwards’ study of the online discussions of the character, Max, and his transgender identity, adds to the online debates that contain the fans’ personal subjective sexual views when

conversing about the show's plotlines and stories. The varied online virtual communities including that of the Xenaverse and its fandom of *XSTT* Internet lesbian fans use the Internet space to discuss the changing definition of the lesbian community and the endless possibilities that this holds. One of the significant themes common to *The 'L' Word* and *X: WP* is the ongoing debate of the closet. The concept of the closet was continuously recognised by the creators and the production team from *X: WP*, even though some of the fans never gave up on their dream of the outing of their objects of fandom. This is illustrated by some of the lesbian Internet fans of *XSTT* relationship to the closet and their online fandom in relation to the television series of *X: WP*.

Fans such as texard, reneeg_33 and billienomates_18 expressed their past experiences of homophobia and violence, while billienomates_18 also articulated her sense of isolation as a young bisexual woman. When billienomates_18 became part of the *XSTT* fandom, she was able to renegotiate her own life narrative through her fandom and through viewing the *X: WP* series. During my conversations with the fans and in the context of discussions with billienomates_18 about her employment difficulties, the unequal status of the fans with reference to their cultural capital and fan knowledge became very apparent. billienomates_18 was not aware of fan fiction writing although she did read the official Xena fanzine¹⁴³. This fan turned to the character of Xena to sometimes support her self-esteem, while other fans like darxe turned to the fan fiction. darxe's comments about "feeling good inside" were a way of her expressing sexual pleasure as a lesbian reading lesbian erotic literature, and empowering herself as a lesbian subject. Some of the *XSTT* lesbian fans read Altfic. writing to escape from an environment that regulates and constricts their experiences

¹⁴³ The Official Xena Fan Magazine is published by Electronic Arts.

as lesbians. It is important to recognise that darxe and other fans of *XSTT* use *X: WP* the television series, its fan activities and the fan fiction writings as a form of a *Bildungsroman*¹⁴⁴ to help them in their rites of passage as bisexuals, lesbians, transgender or queer people. These rites of passage are different for each fan I interviewed. Their rites of passage depended on their geographical location, class, age, race, religion, and how other aspects of their cultural and social experiences had affected them as individuals and their social functioning in society. Yet the idea of ‘formation’ writing in general highlights again the sense of this writing as one of potential and possibility which urges fans to create their own pieces of work.

In this respect, the forum and networking of *XSTT* and other clubs is important to the act of writing for fans. Lesbian fans can inform and support lesbians and potential lesbians who are in the coming out phrase of their life experiences, such as the experiences given by magmor, through their online Xena fan discussions, chat rooms, message boards, video games¹⁴⁵ and fan fiction writing. I have included a short extract from an email received from magmor regarding Über fan fiction writing on the Internet. My question was: “Do you write fan fiction Über¹⁴⁶ stories for *X: WP*?”

magmor replied:

I had quite a creative burst just after came out of denial, and while still on XenaNet. I’m not what you’d call prolific, but yes have written some fanfiction, about six in all out there on the net-posted on a friend’s website. One of them could be described as an über story, as it was inspired by the mangled versions of Cinderella told by Gabby, Joxer, Aphrodite and the season four episode, “If the Shoe Fits.” Nene Adams-used to be called

¹⁴⁴ *Bildungsroman* – a contemporary use of the term is used to describe a novel or any other form of communication such as film, video, or audio that deals with a person’s early life and development, an exploration or a journey of progression from one phase to another. It can be a form of material that is able to bridge and support the passing of childhood into adulthood or in terms of a sexual transgression from one identity to another.

¹⁴⁵ Electronic Arts published the first *X: WP* video game in 1999 to be used on the PS1 and Game boy Platforms.

¹⁴⁶ Über, as previously stated is a German word meaning ‘to cross over’. In *X: WP* it means the characters of Xena/Gabrielle are in different locations using different names and having different character traits but are still recognisable as the two main characters from the *X: WP* television series.

Bardwynna- now has her own site...she wrote one of my favourite ubers, the Gaslight series. Set in 19th Century London, the Xena-like is an aristocratic lady la Sherlock Homes, who often features in the series. The Gab-alike is a former prostitute milady rescues from Jack the Ripper Great stuff-well written and she has a great feel for the language and era. And Nene also does some great fairy tale reworking.

magmor's reading knowledge spans many of the classics and she delves into the operatic narrative of some of the *X: WP* stories. magmor enjoys the thriller genres that encompass the Über narrative along with the sub-genres of the hurt/comfort theme. *XSTT* fan magmor's use of fan fiction may differ from darxe's, but at the heart of her reading choices is the sexually explicit content of these narratives. Even though there is still a stigma that goes with having a lesbian identity or being part of the LGBT community, the introduction of the Internet and the variety of different groups or individuals making use of it in myriad ways helps break down the shame and isolation that can be attached to a particular sexual identity.

Über fan fiction writer Nene Adams has five books published, two in the Gaslight Series as previously mentioned in magmor's quotation. Adams is recognised as an excellent writer by the fans who visit her website¹⁴⁷. The information and knowledge for many online lesbians or queer fans would not have been available in such copious amounts during the period of traditional fandom and hardcopy fan fiction¹⁴⁸. Furthermore, as mentioned in science fiction and fantasy fan culture, there was still a concern associated with homosexuality, and lesbian and gay fan fiction fans and writers were envisaged as a dangerous element within traditional fan culture. However, homophobia within fan culture began to subside during the late eighties (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992).

¹⁴⁷ See 'Nene Adams'. [online] <http://www.nextchapter.net/Fiction/Adams/index.html> [Accessed May 2003].

¹⁴⁸ See the *Whoosh!* [online] site index for all the fan fiction writers and the latest stories of the different types of fan fiction available, as well as all the information on fans' favourite Xena writers. <http://www.Whoosh!.org/uber/index/s.html> [Accessed May 2003].

The X: WP fan fiction stories written by the *XSTT* fans and other Xenaverse lesbian fans about the characters of Xena and Gabrielle are structured and coded in a lesbian discourse for the LGBT community. These online fan fiction stories have empowered young fans like darxe to have a deeper understanding of the diversity of the lesbian community and how sexual identity can be viewed within a new set of social and cultural circumstances. It is important that lesbian sexuality is viewed as fluid and transient and progressive as is all sexual identities. This is what the evidence shows the fans of *XSTT* are seeking. The attentiveness of this is portrayed within the fans own diversity, and how they have interacted online with each other to produce the different lesbian fan fiction writings. Here is an extract from darxe's favourite fan fiction writer Novan, from her story entitled: 'Amazon Pleasure'¹⁴⁹. (As stated earlier, I am using the layout to show how it appears on Novan's website.)

A fan story: 'Amazon Pleasure'

The warrior laughed as she nodded. Offering her hand to the bard she pulled the blonde up behind her in the saddle, Gabrielle wasted no time wrapping herself around the warrior.

"*Ohh I like it here*". She murmured as she laid her head on Xena's shoulder.

"*I'm glad*". Xena stroked the arms that were around her waist. "*I like having you there*"

Gabrielle: "*So my dear warrior. I won. What do I get?*"

Xena: "What do you want?"

Gabrielle: "*Hmm now that's an interesting question. Can I have anything I want?*"

Xena: "*Anything that it is in my power to give you my love*"

¹⁴⁹ As previously stated I am not italicising the title as it is an extract from a fan fiction online short story not a novella or novel.

Gabrielle: “*Hmmm that could be dangerous*”. The bard laughed as she gave Xena a squeeze. “*Okay well then, didn’t you say that Argo needed new shoes?*”

Xena: “*Un-huh*”

Gabrielle: “*Then we’ll be getting a room?*”

Xena: “*Unless you want to stay in the stables with Argo?*”

Gabrielle: “*Umm no. Okay I’ve got it.*”

“*What is?*” Xena grinned.

Gabrielle: “*First I want a nice meal and a hot bath.*”

Xena: “*Okay*”

Gabrielle: “*And during the bath you’re going to make yourself available for back washing duty*”.

Xena: “*Oh ‘hurt’ me.*” The warrior chuckled as she nudged Argo to pick up her pace.

“*Careful or I just might,*” Gabrielle’s hand slipped down to a muscular bronze thigh, stroking lightly with her nails.

“*Promises, promises, So all you want for winning is to get your back washed? Small reward for such a great victory over a mighty warlord little bard.*” The warrior grinned, setting the trap.

Gabrielle: “*Well now that you mention it*”.

Gotcha Xena’s smile widened. “Yeessss....”

Gabrielle: “*We really will end up spending a couple of days won’t we?*”

The warrior considered the question and nodded. “*Probably. We’ll get there late today. Then it will take a full day to have Argo shod. We can leave the day after, assuming the shoes are okay.*” * *What are you cooking up in the little mind of yours my bard? **

“*Okay then here’s what I want for my victory....*”

“Yes”.

“I want to see how many ways I can bring you pleasure.”

The warrior sat up just a little straighter in the saddle, cocking her head just slightly.

She smiled as she twisted around to look at Gabrielle. *“I thought this was supposed to be your reward, not mine”.*

Within the first page, the reader is introduced to a sexual banter between the two representations of the television characters. This exchange is familiar to the Xenaverse fans and *XSTT* fans. The writer uses subtextual codes from the television series that are well known to the fans, such as the suggestion of a hot bath by Gabrielle (as previously mentioned in the silveravyn fan fiction narrative). Novan uses various phrases that suggest double meanings, such as one from Gabrielle who won the game the characters were playing. Gabrielle says to Xena: “Okay then here’s what I want for my victory... Yes ...I want to see how many ways I can bring you pleasure.” These connotations lure the reader into a form of sexually coded, recognisable lesbian fan discourse that the Xena and Gabrielle of the series use when something sexual is about to happen. Novan’s choice of words and her descriptions of humour, romance and sexual desire, depict the characters’ close bond as they perform some sort of theatrical sexual dance that incorporates a game of power play.

This game of power is concerned with sexual constraint and there is a light-hearted hint towards sadomasochistic leanings, in which Xena is not allowed to do anything unless Gabrielle says so; this is a power struggle for the warrior who has a strong ego, and their roles as teacher/pupil are reversed in this game. The character of Xena enjoys this sexual switch in roles and the narrative structure takes us on a journey of experimental lovemaking. The story leads the reader to an inn where the characters

stay for three days making love. Novan's writing at this stage becomes more about the actual mechanical sexual acts in which the characters partake, albeit the structure of the sexual discourse is also sprinkled with tender, nurturing moments. True to the conventions of *X: WP* television scripts, this fan fiction story keeps to a similar standard in plot, pacing, and characterisation, however, Novan's use of erotic language dominates about half of the action of the story. Although the story expresses some realistic situations, the fictional elaboration of the sex between the two main characters indicates and describes submissive dynamics of power exchanges in their relationship. In her disclaimer, Novan, tongue-in-cheek, declares her intentions to saturate the fiction with lesbian sexual practices so she expresses this under the heading: Other, in which she states, "Plot", "What Plot?" However, there is a story of female romance within the explicit sex illustrations. It includes lesbian desire, pleasure and commitment, and this style of narrative is one that has become a superstructure for the Xena/Gabrielle erotic narratives.

I have chosen another short extract of conversations on fan faction from the *XSTT* lesbian Internet case study to illustrate darxe's interest in sexual erotic fan fiction reading. My question to this fan was: "Do you believe the Über stories to be contemporary lesbian pornography or modern morality tales?"

darxe:

not porno, I read alot of the uber stories. For me it's great because I don't have to get to read les novels without going to the store. All I have to do look on the net. I have several "Bards" that I read, & I always go back to their site to see if they more stories up...both X&G and Uber

resubmit2001:

Do you go to the lesbian fan-fic for example Ripleys *X: WP* Page?

darxe:

Well when I first got on the net I went to yahoo and put XENA in the search space. It pulled a whole long list sites. I found some that said fan-fiction so I went to those, and started reading the ones that has alt by it.

darxe is one of many self-identified lesbian fans who use the fan fiction sites to support their experience and knowledge of the online lesbian fan community. darxe is aware of the different choices such as the alt. fiction within the canon and field of the many fan fiction stories relating to Xena and Gabrielle's sexual relationship. She is concerned about the term 'porn' because of its connotations especially online, she did not enter into dialogue about it only to say that she does not read 'porn'. The judgements and values that are placed on women getting pleasure from pornographic fan fiction stories are viewed as morally wrong and darxe is guarded in her discussion in this area understandably, particularly because of the many negative depictions of lesbians within the media. On stating this, *X: WP* was received by fans as having a positive affirming influence on fans dealing with sexual identity and in different stages of the coming out process (see Collier, 2009).

Other lesbians that have come out online during their fan activities have used their fandom or fan fiction writing as a rite-of-passage; developing their communication with other like-minded fans. I suggest that the Xena Über stories written or read by fans are part of the journeys that some of the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans mentioned in this study have taken. This has sometimes been expressed as a sense of loss by lesbian fans within their confessional narratives during the interviews. Many of the fans have left a cultural and social environment such as heterosexuality that has previously supported and shaped a concept of their subjective self. The links they have formed with the characters of Xena and Gabrielle on their journey of discovery and the

experiences of meeting new lesbian friends or partners in the fan clubs online have helped their transition.

The Über journeys of the two characters in their roles in the series run parallel with some of the fans crossing over from traditional fandom to Internet online fandom and exploring their new lesbian identities and this is encompassed in their confessional ‘coming out’ narratives. The characters’ relationship is portrayed in many of the fans’ fiction writings as one of loving, pleasurable and sexually active.

The purpose of establishing the importance of online lesbian s/lash fiction writing within this thesis is to suggest that another genre of creative writing has been added to the science fiction and fantasy fan culture genres. Lesbian fans and their fan fiction writing migrated from traditional fandom and its fan writing to an online erotic lesbian s/lash fan fiction genre with many sub-genres. Story telling has now become the norm throughout the Internet, and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fan’s s/lash writing engages with current gender, lesbian and queer theories as the sites within the Xenaverse and the fanzine *Whoosh!* demonstrate. Continuing the theme of celebration in terms of lesbian fan fiction writing to understand *XSTT* and lesbian fandom in general, I will briefly discuss the advantages of breaking with the model of traditional fandom for lesbian fans.

Fan fiction and s/lash writing in its infancy was an endeavour participated in as a form of pleasure for heterosexual women who saw the original texts taken from television or cinema as lacking in emotional maturity or in “realness” in terms of the diversity of the characters. In the early nineties the portrayals on television mainly in British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (1960-) and *EastEnders* (1985-) of passive women characters and their desires and the machismo of the males as a reaction to the

women's submissiveness became outdated and not the complex matrix reflection of relationships between men and women. Underlining these outmoded social and sexual constructed television representations is the reinforcing notion of essentialism that feminism has tried to argue in terms of the categories of men and women while still recognising the importance of these television representations "by not throwing the baby out with the bath water". In contrast to these depictions of men and women in the storylines of television soap operas in the nineties, the lesbian online fan fiction writing of the fans within the Xenaverse as seen in *XSTT* broke with a 'traditional model' of fan fiction writing previously used by heterosexual women who wrote for heterosexual women. The *XSTT* fans as lesbian fans branched out to write their own online lesbian fan fiction for lesbians with Xena and Gabrielle as characters at the centre of the plot as lesbians.

Fan practices have changed within the last decade and innovative television texts such as *X: WP* with its overtly subtextual theme supported the notion of an interactive audience. Because fans can use the Internet, thus enabling many more fans to become involved in fandom and discuss different television or radio texts. Fans could now write and discuss potentially confrontational narratives involving diverse lesbian sexual acts and desires. The lesbian fans of *XSTT* engaged in a new form of online fan fiction, both in its production and distribution. *XSTT* lesbian Internet s/lash is inherently queer because the original television canon that the lesbian fans appropriated was subtextual and the lesbian fans have re-appropriated, rewritten and redistributed it as a lesbian main text and online discourse. This challenges previous traditional reading and writing habits of lesbian fans, offering a new online platform of reading and writing lesbian sexuality, gender, and desire and ultimately enhancing performances of online lesbian identity. The s/lash fiction written by lesbian fans

online is new in its format, style, production and distribution. It caters for a global diversity of lesbian identities within *X: WP* fandom, and the sub-genres of the fan fiction stories express this difference. I argue that the online s/lash fiction narratives continue the virtual extra-textual online lesbian fan narrative that has dominated *X: WP* lesbian Internet fandom. In stating this, it should be noted that the writing and production of s/lash fiction generally within various forms of fan culture is a progressive element of fan practices that is shifting and constantly being redefined through the use of the Internet. Earlier depictions of traditional s/lash fiction such as those seen in the *Star Trek* fan fiction have sometimes offered stories of romance with a hurt/comfort sub-genre which do not relate to any of the pairings as aggressively sexually exciting. Yet, some of the *X: WP* online s/lash stories deal with aggressive sexuality as well as the pleasures associated with this form of sex, while there are many s/lash fan fiction Xena sites that focus on bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism (BDSM)¹⁵⁰. While these genres might not appeal to everyone's taste, all these forms are evidence of the diversity of the creative writing within lesbian fan fiction and, before the explosion of the Internet, such varied forms of narrative could not have operated on a global scale.

Nancy Baym in her research about soap opera fans using unofficial sites notes that 'the Internet gives fans a platform on which to perform for one another, and their informal pleasures might please fans more than the official ones do' (2000, p.216). The official ones in this context refer to the Studio-owned website and this notion of performance can be equated with the fan site of *XSTT* during the show's broadcast and after the series' completion. Just as soap opera fans love talking to each other and

¹⁵⁰ See 'Sapphic Warrior'. [online] http://www.geocities.com/sapphic_warrior/homepage.html. This site has not been updated since 2004 but received 1,394 hits in April 2004, suggesting that many fans got pleasure from this fan fiction site [Accessed Oct, 2005].

networking is part of their enjoyment and pleasure, so the *X: WP* fans' fiction writing reveals a complex form of communication with the television text that informs the writings foundation. Sometimes the television series gives the fans enjoyment in terms of their identification with the characters, but it can also refute the fans' sexual desires as previously discussed in terms of the subtext as an open secret. However, the production of fan fiction writing becomes another dais on which fans can perform for one another by reclaiming or creating their new lesbian online identities. Many fans have interests in both science fiction and fantasy genres and have been influenced in their own writing experiences by using these two genres. The fan practice of reading or writing an explicit sexual form or "X-rated" version of *Xena* fan fiction such as s/lash or Über obviously adds to lesbian fandom's discovery and knowledge about their own needs with regards to the reading or writing of fan literature. magmor, a fan of these genres, explains how she was drawn to s/lash fiction:

I had been reading fanfiction of a sort- Star Trek novels- and Jane told me about "s/lash" fiction, the term comes from K/S-stories where Spock and Kirk are lovers, but now there was something much better to explore – *Xena* fanfiction. At first I read some stories where Xena and Gab were friends, others where they actually had sex with men, and I found these boring and upsettingly untrue to the show, respectively. Then I read some alt.fanfic. There was no going back. This was it – these stories were explicit about their relationship being a sexual one. This was what I had missed in the straight stories-Lucy and Renee played the looks and the touches, the writers coded it in the show.

This fan has sought out the different types of fan fiction writings about *Xena* and Gabrielle on the Internet until she came to what she believes are true and explicit elements pertinent to her objects of fandom's sexual relationship. Her statement of "There was no going back" is an echo that the stars that play the character of *Xena* and Gabrielle transfer their skill of acting through their on-screen chemistry and this is captured in the alt. fan fiction in terms of lesbian sexuality being at the core of the plotlines. magmor expresses her concern that the lesbianism was left out when reading

other fan fiction stories of Xena and Gabrielle and it is this aspect this she identified with. This fan found an appealing and commanding presence of fan fiction writings online. It is precisely the togetherness and sexually-charged fan fiction narratives that entice magmor and give her pleasure. Her views form part of the snapshots of the fans' interviews which help form an overall picture of the collective *XSTT* fan reading habits and the fans' preferences and opinions. Like the characters in the series, often the fans' relationships do not "offer closure" as such and do not necessarily present static relationships. Fans such as critter 69_78, magmor, reneeg_33 and texard discuss the contrasting radical shifts in their personal social and cultural relationships, as experienced onscreen by the characters of Xena and Gabrielle.

During the six-year storylines of the series Xena and Gabrielle undergo many changes in their relationship. They get married. Xena gets married to a god and Gabrielle to a young man who is killed on their wedding night. Both have children: Xena has a son and Gabrielle a daughter. Both are killed. While explicitly appealing to the lesbian fans through its subtext, especially in the last two seasons, *X: WP* did introduce some heteronormative behaviours and ceremonies in to its plotlines to further exploit the themes of comedy and tragedy. This added to the binary language in the story telling embedded in the discourse. And so, as I have just illustrated, these texts became skewed versions of what is depicted as dominant mainstream media texts. The postmodern form of television text that sets up the first layer of lesbian or queer discourse left many ways for the audience to seek closure if required. It enabled mainstream fans to do this, while giving a "nod" also to the lesbian fans and marginalised groups in the direction that there are many different ways of being in the world and diverse ways of negotiating and constructing alternative families and friends such as Xena and Gabrielle did. Fans, such as magmor, discussed their rites of

passage that came about through their fan fiction writings. This is part of magmor's account:

In 98, another SF friend, Maria suggested I write a crazy story idea we had dreamed up together-Xena meets Babylon 5. Of my Sf friends, no-one watched the show as devotedly as I did, though the women all enjoyed the way Xena treated men if they caught it. Maria wrote fanfic for B5 – which included a male s/lash story-and at their suggestion I used myself and Maria as models for characters in the story. As this character was my age, she had a past, and as the story progressed, I invented her backstory, and I had to make her a lesbian. She wouldn't play straight no matter how I tried, she always turned into a lesbian. In spite of this "life" she'd had, I wasn't able to give this woman a lover, or let her admit to anyone, or have anyone in the fanfiction story know that she was gay. I shared some of what I had written with Maria, including a love scene for Xena and Gabrielle, and she told me it was very romantic. Maria was in her mid-20's at the time, and was getting some hassle from her mother about her single status. She often came to my house to let off steam, and I told her one evening while we were discussing relationships, that I wouldn't rule out a relationship with the right woman at the points in my life. She was completely okay with me saying that, and I think now that I was testing her reaction for future reference! I eventually stopped writing the fanfiction story, as my character was flatly refusing to act straight and the real me wasn't coping too well with what this said about me.

This fan is using this third layer of discourse for the "playing out" of her own changing sexuality and identity through her fan fiction writing and was able to come out to her friend through expressing the fictional character's life within the story she was writing. magmor's fictional character reflects magmor's actual traits and behaviours of denial in that she too was also unable to come out to her family or friends (as stated by her). This fan struggled with her sexuality and what that "meant" socially and culturally for her and, as she commented, she discarded this particular story when it became too painful for her to write. However, magmor was not only empowered through her online discussion within fandom about the characters of Xena and Gabrielle, more importantly, she was enabled in her own journey through her own fan fiction writing. This fan demonstrates through her commentary that in contemporary fandom the notion of the closet and even masquerade is at stake for

fans in terms of the subjective self which she writes into her fan fiction. Through these particular activities she is able to reflect on her own historical coming out confessional narrative that occurs during her conversations and interviews and in her fan fiction writing. Many fans use the series and the Internet to support their rites of passage and their coming out narrative. Fans use their resistance reading against the Studio trying to ‘normalise’ lesbian desire within the mainstream. In this action the lesbian Internet fans became determined to ‘literally write on the virtual body’ in terms of re-writing the characters of Xena and Gabrielle into sexually explicit narratives. These narratives have evolved through the fans and are continuing to increase with the growing diversity of genres within lesbian fan fiction.

Because there are no restrictions for the writers of online fan fiction, no constraints of time or censorship as opposed to those found within television or film writing, the characters of these fan writers’ stories are multi-faceted. In this way, the characters in these stories can be identified as having lives that are more closely connected to those of the fans. This enables the characters to become more “real” in terms of their emotions, passions and attachments and this is obviously more satisfying for the writer and the reader of fan fiction. In fan fiction reading and writing, agency is expressed by some lesbian fans as bringing the pleasures of same-sex desire to the forefront of the *X: WP* phenomenon. Not all the fans from *XSTT* participated in fan fiction writing. Additionally, there might be fans who have tried to join the fan site and have not been able to continue with their fan practices for numerous reasons, as Nina Wakeford (2000)¹⁵¹ explains in her research on queer virtual communities within the Internet. Wakeford made the observation that there will always be lesbians,

¹⁵¹ See Wakeford, N. (2000) ‘Cyberqueer’ in D. Bell, & B. Kennedy, (eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader*, New York: Routledge, pp.403-415.

bisexual, transgender and gays from marginalised communities who will experience isolation and exclusion or non-recognition in terms of self-identification within virtual community groups on the Internet. It is important to recognise this with reference to contemporary fandom within *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom and the self-identifying of its fans. Furthermore, Wakeford states: ‘the question might not be ‘Are you lesbian?’ but ‘Are you lesbian enough?’ to participate in these Internet spaces (2000, p.413). In reflecting on these questions, I am reminded that the focus of this study is an online, self-identified, coded lesbian fan site. However, its significance for this investigation is that the diverse performances of identity of the *XSTT* lesbian fans on this named lesbian site suggest inclusiveness, but this does not necessarily remove exclusiveness from its specific fandom for some fans. The concerns of Wakeford are illustrated in the *XSTT* case study in the interview of malki_35, whose self-identification was “I’m straight”. An Australian artist and fan of *X: WP*, Nancy Lorenz, also had this to say: “In real life, my encounters with the Xenaverse have been joyous, accepting, diverse and wonderful. It is one of the places I feel liberated, even though I am straight” (*Whoosh!*, 2000)¹⁵². As lesbian readers going beyond the construction of individual identity to explore the construct of the user within the fan community, we can extend the way lesbian identity is projected, and how the fans’ actions within their online community define their identity. The identity of the fan as a user and the personal profiles of the fans I interviewed imply that there are many sexual, social, cultural and geographical performances taking place on a daily basis. These continue to evoke a lesbian or queer online discourse that requires a new way of thinking about lesbian fans, the Internet and, self-identity.

¹⁵² See Lorenz, N. (2000) ‘The Discrimination in the Xenaverse’, in *Whoosh!* Issue No. 43. <http://www.whoosh.org/issue43/lorenz1.html> [Accessed May 2006].

The *XSTT* fans indulge in both lesbian and queer performances, producing fan discourses adhering to their fan practices online. The *XSTT* fans' confessional coming out narratives suggest that the execution of lesbian discourse and promotion of visibility are two of the main achievements in the virtual community and space where the politics of recognition can be just as difficult as in the cultural and social real world. 'Lesbian and gay communities are seen as a range of spaces in which involvement must be negotiated' within offline and online communities (Munt et al., 2002, p.134). The *XSTT* fan club members participate and socialise within a lesbian subculture as part of a wider performance that is connected to the Xenaverse narrative.

Some of the *XSTT* Internet lesbian fans such as texard and magmor had learned to police their own lesbian desires before the open forum of the Internet was an option for their discussions of sexuality and identity. Meeting and being able to interact with likeminded people, texard began to value her sexual desires as something positive. This means that the word 'lesbian' in the context of this study is not used in a socially or culturally inscribed way, but in a discursive manner, which suggests that a subject holds multiple contradictory identities that constantly shift within the realm of language and cultural practices. I acknowledge Gayle Rubin's proposition and apply her suggestion that:

The realm of sexuality has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvring, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political (1993, p.4)

Therefore, I am stating that sexuality and identity for some of the *XSTT* fans is caught up in the complexities of a constant power struggle. The lesbian Internet fans are

aware of the convergence between grassroots fan fiction and TPTB and the dynamics of film and television ownership. Some fans do not want to enter into ideologies of power but continue to use the fan fiction dual perspective of readers and writers to be informative and help them in the fan fiction equation. Some fans write their own fan fiction, but in this small case study, the majority of those interviewed read fan fiction as opposed to writing it. It is important to recognise the notions of pleasure and agency in terms of a work in progress as well as resistance that lesbians engage in through their rituals of fandom. We need to understand the ‘emotional investments by which [lesbian] subjects are attached to the discourses of [popular culture]’ as a way of expressing their desires (Barker, 2000, p.179).

While suggesting that the fans who practice their lesbianism within their fan fiction get pleasure from their activities, it would be foolish to concur that this fan activity of writing is all celebratory and uncomplicated. The empowerment gained through the shift of fandom to a global and virtual platform embraces many social and cultural differences that enable some fans to gain and to recognise their own agency. I have given two brief samples of short fan fiction stories and explored some of the interviews of the *XSTT* fans to see how the lesbian Internet fans have continued a circuit of erotic desire in terms of the third layer of lesbian discourse. I will also document in the next chapter the struggles of some of the science and fantasy fan fiction writers and their continued battles with issues of homophobia by reflecting on the historical path of lesbian fan fiction writing. This will produce an up-to-date understanding of the introduction of the professional beta editors within the Xenaverse who support and give free advice to the contemporary lesbian online fan fiction writers.

CHAPTER SIX: THE DEVELOPMENT OF LESBIAN ONLINE FAN FICTION AND ITS BETA READERS

Lesbian online fiction has its historical roots in the genres of science fiction and fantasy which encouraged fan fiction writing. However, despite this encouragement, from the early thirties to the eighties lesbian and gay fan writers were not very visible within these genres. Therefore, it is important to give a brief overview of the resistance to homophobia that spurred the early traditional lesbian and gay fan writers to continue to be recognised as contributing to literature in the form of fan fiction writing. Homophobia was present '[e]ven as late as the 80s, gay and lesbian fans and professionals had not won their right to present themselves as an interest group with a voice in the science fiction community' (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p.139). Lesbian and gay fans have had to overcome what could be perceived as a double subjugation when seeking out the pleasures of fandom. The first hurdle constituted having to relate to the punitive rules laid down by a heteronormative society generally, and the second hurdle was seeing their fan subjective identities as lesbians or gays being denied or repressed within media representation. *X: WP* as a progressive television text led the way in actively encouraging the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans to challenge the dominant text and become visible online and to become a recognised force as part of an active audience.

Bacon-Smith (2000) refers to a narrative history of homophobia existing within the science fiction fan community. In 1986, after many years of trying to form a fandom in America, the LGBT fans and writers from the science fiction and fantasy community finally came together. This happened at a media convention called the 'Boston Bash'. Fans took responsibility and made the first steps to organise a functioning lesbian and gay fandom. Eventually, they received recognition from

within the science fiction fan community. Science fiction fandom began to demonstrate that LGBT fans could have a ‘visible presence’ in the structure of the ‘Worldcon’ – a large convention of science fiction and fantasy fans (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p.140). The ‘Gaylaxians’ as the fans were known were members of the first lesbian and gay science fiction fan organisation formed in Boston, US. (The organisation went on to have branches in the US cities of Albany, Philadelphia and Washington.) This organisation was a major breakthrough for the LGBT fan community. It demonstrated that shared vocabularies of the lesbian and gay communities could support the creation and evolution of an anti-homophobic language in which the nuances of meaning have developed and matured over time.

Most theoretical writings about fandom of that era condemned the intolerance and oppression of lesbian and gay fans and noted how underground fan activities and its subsequent homophobia were documented. This had been regarded as an “ongoing issue” since fandom’s early gestation in the twenties and thirties¹⁵³. Bacon-Smith spoke to a number of lesbian and gay writers who were also fans in the science fiction community. She reveals:

Gay and lesbian writers such as Delany and Russ were among the forefront of those changing the face of the genre. But, even as late as the ‘80s gay and lesbian fans and professionals had not won their right to present themselves as an interest group with a voice in the science fiction community. Few writers were out, and fans seemed welcome as long as they fit in to the essentially straight establishment. By 1980, however, gay professionals and fans were trying to change that (2000, p.39).

Bacon-Smith’s account deals mainly with the genre of science fiction and its fandom which is an important marker in terms of the history of lesbian and gay fandom. She also makes reference to an infamous homophobic incident within the science fiction

¹⁵³ Fandom and the histories of known fans from the era of the twenties and thirties have been discussed by fan theorists see Bacon-Smith (1992); Jenkins, (1992); and Penley, (1992).

fan community that took place in the late thirties and early forties. According to Don Sakers, a gay writer and editor of the anthology, *Carmen Miranda's Ghost is Haunting Space Station Three*¹⁵⁴, the scandal referred to a fanzine editor who was a member of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Association (LASFA). This community member stirred up the West Coast fan circles with his claims that 'LASFA was full of gay members' (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p.136). The actual incident is not documented but it was said to have produced a similar reaction to the McCarthy-era style "Red under the bed" occurrences that were marked by the anti-communist hysterical witch-hunts of the fifties. These witch-hunts took place when American society in general was suffering from widespread anxiety about the alleged infiltration of communism within Hollywood, which culminated in many prejudices that shaped the social and cultural landscape. Another participant in Bacon-Smith's (2000) investigation into the homophobia of early science fiction fans was Forrest J. "Forry" Ackerman. He was a well-established science fiction fan and fanzine writer, who although identifying as heterosexual drew attention to the bigotry experienced by lesbian and gay fans within early science fiction fandom. He was an especially strong advocate of the lesbian community and befriended many lesbian fans and writers. Ackerman produced work under the pen name Laurajean Ermayne. Ackerman alongside Edith Eyde were two writers who contributed to early fan fiction writing in the science fiction and fantasy genres. It is important to acknowledge these lesbian and gay fan writers in the early period of science fan fiction as being central figures in the science fiction and fan communities. Moreover, Edith Eyde deserves a mention in the same way as the online slash fan fiction writers such as Novan and Missy Good who belong to the historical period of the twentieth-century. Edith Eyde used the name 'Lisa Ben', an anagram of

¹⁵⁴ This work consists of nineteen short science fiction stories written by a number of well known lesbian/gay writers such as Melissa Scott that are based on a song by Leslie Fish which is also the title of the anthology.

lesbian, when she later became a ‘pioneering editor/publisher of one of the first American lesbian free underground newsletters called *Vice Versa*, subtitled “American’s Gayest Magazine, in 1947”’ (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p.136)¹⁵⁵. Ben published a story that Ackerman wrote called ‘Kiki’ in 1947 in *Vice Versa*, under his pseudonym. After many years writing and promoting the genres, Ackerman was eventually invited as a guest of honour to the ‘Gaylaxicon’ conference in 1994. It was there that Ackerman expounded his long-term commitment to the lesbian cause, tracing his support back to the fifties of what in 1955 was known as “The Daughters of Bilitis”¹⁵⁶. It was through his long term acquaintance with Lisa Ben who worked as a secretary in the fifties in the Los Angeles Film Studio, RKO, that Ackerman was first acknowledged as a supporter of the LGBT community. When Lisa Ben joined the organisation, ‘The Daughters of Bilitis’, she published their lesbian newsletter called *The Ladder* (1956-1972)¹⁵⁷. This newsletter as a traditional form of communication and information before the Internet was pioneering in that it made lesbian and gay fan fiction accessible. Having looked at named fans of significance and their work in the early part of contemporary fandom, I will now explore the trajectory of fan fiction writing in terms of tolerance towards the lesbian and gay community in the contemporary



Fig. 5

¹⁵⁵ *Vice Versa* was a free newsletter that ran for nine editions from 1947-1948. Another lesbian newsletter was published by Lisa Ben called *The Ladder* to support ‘The Daughters of Bilitis’- see ‘A Labor from the Heart’ (2001) J. Whit, *Lesbian Magazines from 1947-1994 Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Vol 5 (12) 229-251.

¹⁵⁶ ‘Bilitis’ is the name given to a fictional lesbian contemporary of Sappho by Pierre Louÿs, a French poet, in his 1894 work, ‘The Songs of Bilitis.’

¹⁵⁷ ‘The Daughters of Bilitis’ was not founded under this name until 1955, see Bacon-Smith (2000) *Science Fiction Culture, Feminist Cultural Studies, the Media and Political Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press in footnotes. She cites D’Emillo’s (1993, 1998) *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and also *Hidden from History*, (1996) (eds.). Düberman, G.P., Putnam and Sons. Ackerman also refers to its later name.

period. This will further inform an historical understanding of *XSTT* fandom and its developing online lesbian fan fiction writing.

The steady inclusion of lesbian and gay fans and their contributions towards fan fiction writing after the eighties has been discussed by Bacon-Smith (2000), Jenkins (1998) and Penley (1997). The shift in openness towards lesbian and gay fans was endorsed by such prolific science fiction lesbian writers as Joanna Russ, Melissa Scott and Ellen Kushner who were recognised as being part of the ‘New Wave’ genre in the sixties and seventies. In their book, *Science Fiction Audiences*, Tulloch and Jenkins suggest that:

These writers’ efforts opened up possibilities for a new generation of queer authors, working in all sub-genres, to introduce gay, bisexual and lesbian characters within otherwise mainstream science fiction stories (1995, p.243).

The late nineties witnessed the development and growth of the Internet and its online fan communities, which continued to recognise the importance of the LGBT fans and their fandom in both science fiction fandom and fantasy fandom writings. As Hanmer points out:

Shortly after the intelligent business strategy by the X: WP Studio to get involved in the Internet fandom, the Alt TV news group came online. This prompted a deluge of X: WP fan fictions and uber stories, and, by the spring of 1996, a number of bards (name given to writers of *Xena* fan fiction) had set up numerous sites with the Xenaverse. In 1996, a bard named Dax produced her ‘Obsession’ page that prompted the discernible physical love between the two female protagonists (Hanmer, 2003, p.85)

Fan attention as I note here was now being diverted away from the fantasy of the show on to the sexual relationship suggested in the subtext. Heated arguments and “battles” took place on the Internet between different areas of fandom. These debates occurred between diverse sets of groups who fought over the ‘meaning’ of the subtext. Many sets of fans had become antagonist towards the lesbian Internet fans

over the subject of Xena and Gabrielle's lesbian love and this generated much controversy and homophobia.

The transition from traditional to Internet fandom and fan fiction material being downloaded everyday¹⁵⁸ has resulted in the lesbian fans' mobilisation especially amongst the members of *XSTT*. Internet fandom began to reinforce a lesbian presence thanks to collective contributions by fans to the story telling and to new shapes and forms in terms of genre. Yet, despite this positive form of growth, as recently as the nineties, fandom continued to experience forms of homophobia on the Internet¹⁵⁹. Pullen, in her essay, 'I-love-Xena.com - Creating Online fan Communities', exposes a heated exchange on a Xenaverse Internet fan site:

For all of you who think that Xena and Gabby are lesbians because of 'Is there a Doctor? You need a more open mind and get a life, Gabby [sic] is giving Xena mouth-to-mouth resuscitation!!! They are not kissing!!! Grow up and get a life! That's not what the show is about!!! (2000, p.59).

Pullen is citing directly a fan who has mixed up the characters in this particular episode: it is Xena who is giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to Gabrielle and *not* the other way round as the fan indicates. This 'misunderstanding' by the fan articulates the early different interpretations of fans of *X: WP* as well as the aggressive fan activity and the visibility of communication online between the heterosexual-identifying groups and LGBT community.

However, some of these debates were overcome in a positive manner in the Xenaverse where lesbian fans who were continuing to post and discuss the subtext of the series and create their own fan fiction also welcomed input from heterosexual-

¹⁵⁸ See Appendix 'K' for data on the growth of Xena fan fiction from June 1996-98. The data concludes that by January 1998 increasing numbers of stories were starting to be indexed by fans.

¹⁵⁹ See again Hanmer, R. (2005) 'Queer Television Discourse – Reality TV', in *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 2 (1) 'Hanmer' [online] <http://dpc.uba.uva.nl/cgi/t/text/get-pdf?c=gjss;idno=0201a05>.

identifying fans. The problem of ‘absence’ in terms of representation of the LGBT community in different media such as television still presents itself as an anxiety for many fans. The LGBT community as discussed in the more recent work of Cooper (2010) and Edwards (2010) suggests that the discourse of sexual identities is one of the driving forces behind online communities. They note how it continues to cause concern for lesbians. In *XSTT* fandom, lesbian fans reverted to either reading more or writing their own Xena fan fiction stories with their own endings that acknowledged a sexual relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. This mirrored more closely the fans’ own lived experiences, as Kenneth Plummer points out:

People increasingly have come to live their sexualities through, and with the aid of, television, press, film and most recently, cyberspace. ...As such it is part of a growing concern amongst scholars of sexualities to ‘read’ the ways in which the sexual is encoded in our daily lives (2003, p.275).

In the essay entitled, ‘Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity, and Coming Out Online’ Munt and others examine a self-defined lesbian online community and its migration paradigm, including the problematic notion of risk in the confessional narration on the Internet. These researchers propose that the ‘story describes an individual’s journeying towards an imagined community’, and that this can be envisaged as a rite of passage and migration for potential LGBT people both on and offline (2002, p.127). In her book, *Heroic desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, Munt writes:

The classic lesbian journey, in the coming out story, is from isolation to inclusion, an idealised trajectory of self-realization. It follows the footpath of all those hundreds of thousands of Westerners since World War 1 who made the geographic shift – the heroic-journey - to the gay and lesbian homeland, the city. The imagination and experience dialectically constitute the lesbian subject (1998, p.174).

Rather than the metaphorical city that Munt relates to within the coming out journey, the city can be re-cast and re-applied to the virtual community of online fandom as in

XSTT. An example of isolation and the discourse of ‘other’ features in the *XSTT* fan reneeg_33’s conversations about the breakdown of her relationship with her violent husband. Her journey then is her transition from being a heterosexual married woman to the self-realisation that she was a lesbian who could love other women. In part two of the fan’s confessional life narrative ‘Healing Heart’ in the section which she has entitled ‘Mending’ reneeg_33 writes about how she was supported by online fans.

One night I was in a bad fight...and that my friend that I was emailing wouldn’t be able to get email back to me fast enough. So I told another good friend of mine who was on the ICQ [messaging program] at the time what was going on. Between the two friends they helped keep me calm. And they let me know that I wasn’t alone. From that night on those two were always online when I was.

One of my key points in this case study is how Internet fandom networking and support was available on many levels as reneeg_33 acknowledged. An aspect of her fandom was how trust was built up over a period of time, and how other fans supported her and made sure they were online at the same time as a form of protection. The fan reneeg_33 demonstrates how the *XSTT* and Xenaverse fandom and her own fan fiction writing online became a safety net for her as well as enabling her to make a fan contributions about her ‘real lived experience’. She was not as isolated as she first thought. The theme of migration or the ‘crossing over’ (*Über*) or coming out narrative is explored by the fans and is portrayed by the fans’ characters when they write their Xena fan fiction. In a further exploration of the theme of departure, I will now look at other sub-genres within *Über* fan fiction.

Über: Cross Over Fan Fiction Stories

The term ‘Über’ is also important in the context of the case study and the fans I interviewed because it refers to the some of the fans’ crossing over or coming out narratives, and how they viewed their online fan practices such as their fan fiction

writing. The reading or writing of Über enabled some of the fans to read the ambiguous text of *X: WP* and identify within their own personal transition and migration with regard their progressive and ongoing lesbian or queer identities. The *XSTT* fans engaged with three layers of lesbian online textual discourse during their journey of fandom, and fan fiction reading and writing was the third layer of their lived experience. Through the practice of reading and writing fans were able to not only realise their fan identities on the Internet, but also to develop their social and cultural identities through their fan practices at the same time. For some fans, this led them to immerse themselves in their own Über fan fiction, a world in which the lesbian Internet fans write about being fans of the characters of Xena and Gabrielle within their storylines. As Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson suggest:

The dense texts of *Xena: Warrior Princess* together with their commercial and noncommercial spin-offs, constitute deterritorialized fictional worlds that approximate virtual realities, supporting immersive and interactive viewer engagement (2004, p.xviii).

The *XSTT* fans enter the fictional world of *X: WP* in order to enhance their lesbian identities and give their lives more meaning. Weeks after “The Xena Scrolls” (1997)¹⁶⁰ was aired, a fan fiction story was written and appeared on the Internet called ‘Is there a Doctor on the Dig?’ This piece of fan fiction was written in response to the television episode “The Xena Scrolls” as an Über story. Bat Morda is the writer of this story and a dedicated fan of *X: WP*. Her style of writing belongs to the Altfic. genre and the Über genre because she writes about the adventures of two characters called Janice and Mel based on the reincarnations of the characters of the television episode. Morda’s story was given a review on the Altfic. site that suggested her story be proposed as the first Über story to be placed on the Internet. It was recognised by many Xenaverse and *XSTT* fans as a classic for many fans appreciate and respect

¹⁶⁰ *X: WP* (1997) Season 2, Episode 10, “The Xena Scrolls”. (dir. Charlie Haskell) TV. US, 13 Jan.

Morda's work as being a form of celebration that encompasses a set of writing values for themselves as fans to be inspired by.

"The Xena Scrolls" (1997) is one of the episodes of *X: WP* which inspired lesbian Über stories online. In this episode, the characters move between temporal and spatial worlds. Later episodes developed this theme and feature the characters of Xena and Gabrielle in India and the United States. While the two main characters of Xena and Gabrielle's are reincarnations or soulmates, destined to be together for eternity, and, as such, remain partners, the change of locations expanded the interest in the 'Xena drama'. *Whoosh!* fan e-magazine states that:

ÜberXena fan fiction was first theorized by Kym Taborn (who also coined the term ÜberXena to describe the genre) and followed by others (notably Deb McGhee, who criticized Taborn's use of the term ...as too limiting and expanded on it significantly) the same month after the first completed ÜberXena was released on a private mailing list (June 14, 1997). Under Taborn's theory, ÜberXena was the logical outcome of the path taken by three episodes of the internationally syndicated TV show, *XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS* (*Whoosh!* 12/6/01)¹⁶¹.

Über stories have many sexually explicit scenes in the majority of the plotlines, and while the hurt/comfort stories that appear in s/lash fiction appear in many of the *X: WP* Altfic. fan fiction: most of the Über stories are more stories of redemption, because they focus on how Xena's past as a warlord always haunts her and is something she constantly regrets. In these fan fiction stories, the character of Xena is portrayed as still trying to make amends for her dark past, just like the character Xena in the television series. Many of the stories written in *X: WP* fan fiction suggest a modern day morality tale, one of self-reflection and altruism, with a hint of 'the American dream' scenario.

¹⁶¹ The website of 'ÜberXena' was originally set up by 'ÜberRoos Family' (1999) an Australian website before being transferred to *Whoosh!* [online]. See 'Whatuber', in *Whoosh!* Issue. No. 25 <http://www.whoosh.org/issue> [Accessed April 2003].

For the fan fiction writers of *XSTT* and the Xenaverse, the ‘injustices’ in terms of the control of the media and cultural industries and the Studio are eased by the sheer number of online writers and publishers who offer their professional editing services for free to fan fiction writers who contribute to online fandom. This expansion has also been helped by a democratisation of the writing. This can be attributed in some part to the arrival of ‘professionals’ (by which I mean highly-skilled) within online fan fiction writing who have helped in the growth of the writing. These professionals are called beta readers and their function as editors will be discussed in the following section.

The Function of Online Reviewers and Beta Readers

Beta reading is when a fan fiction writer releases a story to a trusted member of the fan community to read and comment upon, before it is placed in the public domain of the Internet. Beta reading has now become part of new fan practices within the community of *XSTT* and other fan sites (Karpovich, 2006)¹⁶². This new process has, in fan fiction writing, proved to be as invaluable as online fandom itself for the virtual fan. This practice has materialised since fandom moved from hard copy paper versions of fanzines to online hypertext fanzines. Beta reading and the ‘convergence of the technology and social practices of fans’ are also integral to the understanding of the development of *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom and its new lesbian online identities (Karpovich, 2006, p.171).

The word ‘beta’ has become part of computer terminology and derives from the activity or process of testing computer software. Most computer software at the stage

¹⁶² See Karpovich, A. I. (2006) ‘Audience as Editor’ – ‘The Role of Beta Readers’ in Hellekson, K and Busse, K. (eds.) *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, p. 171.

of beta testing is not fully developed. Moreover, the nature of computer software is that it is always at this stage; it is constantly being upgraded and reinvented or improved. Angelina Karpovich (2006) adds '[c]omputer connoisseurs check the software for 'bugs' and faults before allowing its circulation and distribution, and finally it is officially released'(p.172). The beta readers, in their fan fiction performance, have a similar function as editors in their process of reading the stories. They ensure the writing is of a particular standard and they try to 'iron out any bugs' or small problems that may prevent the style or content of the narrative being transmitted to the reader. This ironing out is part of the intersection of two very different types of skills: one is a facility with computer software technology, and the other is a literacy skill in terms of editing online. These two highly developed proficiencies come together in unity to perform as another 'fan practice'. Not every fan will be competent in computer software or have knowledgeable skills in computer editing, but often exchanges of skills to upgrade beta readers' expertise take place on the Internet fan fiction sites. This fan practice suggests a more democratic approach in terms of a technological terminology to support the writers rather than the editorial practices demonstrated by the authoritarian, "hard-nosed" publishing houses. This beta reading is part of the performance of new media. As such, it has also enhanced and developed a crossover of skills that complement each other symbiotically. It also represents an alternative system outside the traditional institution of publishing and editing. The lesbian fan fiction writings complement the original work of the Studio's writers and this can be classified as a work-in-progress, just as the fans' online discourses and identities are part of a further understanding of the complexity of fan fiction. The beta reader's architecture continues to benefit the public reception of virtual story telling in everyday lives. Its does this with a diversity of fans at the helm,

such as fan fiction writers magmor and silverravyn from *XSTT* fandom and Morda and Novan from the Xenaverse and it is this very exchange skills and views which encourages a positive promotion of lesbian fan fiction writing on the Internet. Moreover, it could be said that all the writers, especially the well-known authors with their wider influence, who offer their professional knowledge and skills gratis, are advancing lesbian fiction along its historical online journey.

Practical computer knowledge such as, for example, ‘archive maintenance, digital editing and web design’ is indispensable now to contemporary fan practices (Karpovich, 2006, p.174). New media proficiency is crucial for fans to enable the continuation and expansion of fandom and fan fiction. The two main obstacles that traditional fandom faced were those of time and distance. These have now largely been removed by online fandom with its enhancement and use of new media. Fan practices of distributing fan stories to the beta readers is now an accepted part of fandom and fan culture, and this procedure highlights and maintains links with fans and has led to the sharing of computer expertise on a global level.

Many of the authors write continuously online and as such have created a solid presence for themselves and their beta readers in the virtual arena. The bard Novan is regarded as a highly rated lesbian fan fiction writer for the Xenaverse and makes use of a beta reader called Kamouraskan who is referred to in the Xenaverse fan fiction as a leading authority in terms of her highly developed editing skills. This beta reader has also written over thirty-five stories for *X: WP*¹⁶³. In earlier forms of contemporary fandom editing skills in fans were a rarity and fans who had these talents tended to be viewed as part of the élite as Bacon-Smith’s (1992) earlier work revealed. There was a

¹⁶³ See beta reader ‘Kamouraskan’ [online] <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/1863195/kamouraskan>. [Accessed Mar 2010].

hierarchy within fan culture. This is highlighted by the scholar's point that while it was one of most prevalent processes in writing fan fiction for traditional fanzines, editing was reserved for the few. Naturally, this 'pecking order' can affect how the fans' work is circulated and distributed within a particular fandom. However, the process has now been revolutionised with the intervention of the Internet and new media and new attitudes. Thanks to user-friendly software, fans themselves now take part in the editing processes and distribution operations of their own fan fiction even if they had no practical editing skills previously.

The beta procedure and the new fan media resources that accompany it in the virtual domain can be regarded as an intricate part of contemporary Internet fandom. It has enabled the flourishing of a new form of fan fiction writing and circulation amongst lesbian fans and fans in general. In addition to this innovative supportive network of the beta readers, lesbian fandom is changing: its agency and empowerment in terms of online visibility and encouragement is in abundance as the fan fiction illustrates. The lesbian writers of lesbian fan fiction now have an opportunity through their fan writings to "speak for themselves" and this communication is now being "heard" online from the very many virtual voices that are appearing all around the world.

Another phenomenon to emerge from beta reading and new online fan fiction is the creation of social and cultural links. These new associations work through the new online publishing and distribution services and also challenge traditional forms of fan activity and the notion of fandom itself. This practice of linking also helps to enhance the transition and migration of changing online identities and social and cultural positions within fandom's foundation. As a fan practice, this process of sharing fans' creativity and professional expertise in such a structured and democratic way is the

way forward for lesbian online writing. This lends to the notion of fandom as a social construct: '[f]ans reception cannot and does not exist in isolation but it is always shaped through input from other fans motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community' (Jenkins, 1992, p.76). It is through these new developments within the production and distribution of lesbian fan fiction that a greater understanding of lesbian Internet fandom is revealed.

The fan Lunacy started reading and reviewing Xena fan fiction in 1996 and has a fan site called 'Lunacy's Fan Fiction Reviews'¹⁶⁴. This fan's site demonstrates a comprehensive use of beta reading, linking and reviewing. The site was launched in July 1999 for Xena fans and non-Xena fan fiction writers and serves as a well-established example of reviewing which serves to further the production and distribution arms of online fan fiction. This site also has a commercial section as well as a link to commercial fiction reviews. Lunacy is a member of the Amazon.com Associates Program that can link writers to commercially available items of fan fiction if requested. This site does not allow the fiction writers to post their stories – it is set up purely to review them. There is a frequently-asked-questions' link on this site that gives all the information about reviewing fiction and points the writers to the Beta Readers Directory¹⁶⁵ if they require technical help with their stories. In addition, there is a section for would-be fiction writers – Posting Your Fan Fiction Story on the Web. This is useful to "newbie" writers because it gives information about the dos and don'ts and legalities of publishing extra-textual narratives.

¹⁶⁴ See 'Lunacy's Fan Fiction Reviews'. [online] <http://lunacyreviews.com/index.html>. [Accessed May 2002].

¹⁶⁵ See 'Beta' in 'Lunacy Reviews' [online] <http://lunacyreviews.com/beta.php>. [Accessed June 2002].

The X: WP Beta Readers Directory on the website is an important fan writing resource. It is complete with all the names of the fans who would like to review stories and their personal experiences and other first-time fan writers can get in touch with them and obtain feedback on their stories. Lunacy's site also gives explanatory notes about how to get your work reviewed, and a list of fan fiction titles and their reviewers, as well as how these reviews are organised¹⁶⁶. This information guides the fans through their online fan writing and reading as well as the many sites that also incorporate this knowledge. There are some interesting instructions from an updated version of Lunacy's website that gives more detailed information about the free service beta readers' offer. Also embedded in its words is the emphasis on the subtext and how this has remained very important in terms of online fan fiction writing.

When you read a story that you really like, that touches you in some way,
 PLEASE CONSIDER SENDING THE AUTHOR A MESSAGE
 LETTING HIM/HER KNOW ABOUT THIS. These bards spend
 COUNTLESS hours working on their stories and then they share them
 with us for FREE! It takes tremendous courage to post a creative effort
 like this for the world to see. The LEAST as beneficiaries of their talent
 that we can do is let them know how much we appreciate their effort and
 if possible provide some positive feedback - what did you like about the
 story, what touched you, what made you cry, what made you laugh?

I selected to choose this statement from the Lunacy website because it announces the free professional service offered by the bards and appeals to the fan fiction community to express their appreciation for these stories, thus inviting another form of interaction that challenges the reading and writing habits of lesbian Internet fan practices.

¹⁶⁶ In *Whoosh!* Lunacy states: "In real life I'm a librarian and Internet trainer. I've been hooked on X: WP since the Warrior Princess appeared on HERCULES: THE LEGENDARY JOURNEYS. I first ventured into the Xenaverse in late 1995, joining the NetForum where I was soon exposed to X: WP fanfic. It was love at first read! I've been a faithful reader and bard groupie ever since. In 1996 I started doing fanfic reviews in order to keep Xenites on the NetForum current on new fiction". Today the Lunacy site features hundreds of reviews, while its news reports regularly go out to a number of mailing lists. [online] *Whoosh!* Issue No. 25 <http://www.Whoosh!.org/issue25/lunacy1.html#Future> | Accessed June 2002.

This site DOES **NOT** FEATURE OBJECTIVE REVIEWS OF STORIES. The reviews very much reflect my OWN taste in fan fiction and original fiction. I DO NOT review every story out there. I write ONLY about stories which I like or which I consider otherwise significant for some reason. You will therefore NEVER see a negative review from me. If I don't like a story for whatever reason I prefer not to write about it and let readers make up their own minds - rather than risk discouraging people from reading something they may very well like - we all have different tastes after all.

This writer informs the writers and readers how essential it is to encourage writers, and how they should use this virtual space without the hierachal rules laid down by commercial publishing houses. Reviewers such as Lunacy make suggestions when taking on the responsibility of reading a fan's story but she states here that she will not respond in writing if she does not like the story. Lunacy's constructive criticism is made in a way that does not suggest negativity or discouragement, as an editor and writer Lunacy states:

So what type of stories DO I review at this site? Honestly, there are no set rules. Obviously I include stories which I've enjoyed reading. Currently I'm reading mostly Xena fan fiction although I also read Star Trek Voyager stories and original fiction. Sometimes I'll include stories which I don't personally like all that much but which are unusual or indicative of some new type of genre within the specific fan fiction. I take into account things like spelling and grammar but a few errors in this area wont necessarily keep a story from appearing in the report. I consider also how believable the characterizations in a tale are given what is depicted in the TV series.

What is significant and interesting is the mention by Lunacy of "some new type of genre". Fan writers constantly update their knowledge of story telling and enjoy the democratic process of posting their opinions and views of innovative stories in the open for public access without the negative aspects of challenging new writers to follow a form of hierachal apprenticeship that is often ego-driven. These writers pool ideas and without exhibiting any inclination towards financial reward. The positive encouragement helps pave the way forward for writing progressive fan fiction as part of a virtual fan practice.

In contrast to Lunacy's fan fiction site, there are other sites such as the Xena: Warrior Princess Virtual Series (XWPVS)¹⁶⁷. The XWPVS website is far more hierachal in its approach to fans. It has adopted various controls. The site has sections on the responsibilities of staff appointed to work in the roles of production manager, point person, illustrator or art director. The reviewers and beta readers of this site are also known as coordinators or production managers. Further, because the artwork for this site is copyrighted it belongs to the artist but the script from the writers becomes the property of the XWPVS if it is accepted.

Some sites are owned and kept updated by individual fans – some are writers themselves, and the fans are encouraged to post their stories without charge by the owners of the site. The beta readers who have replaced the traditional editors run a free service to encourage and develop the different writing styles of fans, especially the newbie writers. They offer advice and hints on how to categorise their narratives, and how to create and expand the plotlines. The support to help other fans is very different from the competitiveness of traditional fandom where the resources and skills on offer are limited. Beta readers do not make edits but also advise and suggest on such matters as the plotline, checking of spelling and grammar, but more importantly, they are willing to admit to their weaknesses as well as their strengths. This enhances trust in the virtual community and adds to the pivotal notion of the fans and their imagined community being able to gain cultural capital which evolves through the function of one-to-one dialogues between the beta reader and the writers.

As Karpovich points out:

The very nature of hypertext makes it impossible to assume that a novice will always have a first encounter with the community at the most

¹⁶⁷ See 'XWPVS' website [online] <http://xwpvs.tripod.com/faq-main2.htm> [Accessed 17 Jun 2010].

“general” level, or that having entered the community, its new member will progress in a set, predefined direction (2006, p.186).

What is significant in describing the changes within the last decade with the advent of the beta reader is that the older *X: WP* sites on the Xenaverse are updating their sites. Many of them, it appears, are retaining the same democratic procedures such as beta reading while continuing to offer invaluable professional advice for free to fans. In the Xenaverse, there does not seem to be a hierachal notion of fandom with regard to fan fiction writing, although this may require further academic investigation in the future.

Services such as beta reading have encouraged the proliferation of online fan fiction writing. However, it is not only beta reading and the creative and technological developments in production and distribution which are shaping lesbian online fan reading and writing practices. New genres and sub-genres of writing are also emerging. The development of the Internet in terms of its connection to and its distribution of pornography has encroached on fan fiction in general and this has become a significant issue within online lesbian fan fiction. I will now approach this by exploring what is at stake for lesbian fan fiction readers and writers with regard to the intersection of romance, erotica, and pornography that has resulted with these genres entering the virtual arena. I suggest this intersection occurring online represents a new form of sub-genre in online lesbian fan fiction writing in the canon of s/lash writing.

Pornography, Erotica and Romance within Lesbian Fan Fiction

This next section will introduce very briefly how online lesbian fan fiction writing has developed from its historical roots in the genre of the romantic novel. I will explore

how it has combined the genres of pornography and erotica, and how this has fashioned online fiction in terms of innovative contemporary reading and writing

The subjects of pornography and erotica are considered to be “socially unacceptable” and have become areas of increasing debate since the introduction of the Internet. The Internet as a media tool has long been associated with the dissemination and viewing of pornography (and erotica) especially in its early days. This was because of its relative affordability, its ‘privacy’ in terms of access from the home and, for a long time, its anonymity. With increasingly high definition quality images and ‘new’ technology such as video streaming, in addition to the general online prevalence of the pornographic image created privately and by business, the virtual world of pornography has now become the concern of legal institutions and governments. In January 2009, it became illegal¹⁶⁸ for anyone in England or Wales to possess an ‘extreme’ image of pornography even if the activity itself is legal. To coincide with the forthcoming amendment of this law, BBC Radio 4 broadcast an investigation by journalist Penny Marshall on the 13th January 2009 – *Online Damage: Porn in the 21st Century*¹⁶⁹. The programme discussed mainly child pornography and the protection of children on the Internet. However, it presented a one-sided argument and a short-sightedness, drawing on all the negative aspects of the Internet and featuring, primarily, professionals who were concerned with the policing of the Internet and the criminalisation of pornography. In her programme, Marshall interviewed an Internet Safety Officer, a Home Office Minister, a Counsellor, an ‘academic’, a spokesperson for an American group called Family Online Safety, the owner of MySpace social

¹⁶⁸ Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 made it an offence to possess a limited range of extreme pornographic material. Section 71 of the Act amended the Obscene Publication Act 1959 by increasing the maximum penalty for offences under that Act from three years imprisonment to five years imprisonment. The provisions came into effect on 26 January 2009 in England and Wales.

¹⁶⁹ *Online Damage: Porn in the 21st Century* (2009) Radio, BBC R4. 13 Jan and 20 Jan.

networking website and a member of the public, an adult who regularly viewed porn on the Internet and also five young people. Most of the adults voiced their concerns over the protection of children and the education of parents about pornography on the Internet, as well as the moral issues surrounding this subject. The people interviewed for this programme, which was partly conducted in the US and partly in the south west of England, were anxious about the expansion of online pornography and its ethical effects on society.

The new law is part of the policing of the Internet, and it is of concern to the LGBT online community who write s/lash fiction or produce s/lash images that support and enrich their and other fans' sexual identities in a social context of intimacy and sharing. As a result a number of academics signed a statement addressed to the 'Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill Committee' on a website called 'backlash,' that adheres to upholding the Human Rights Act, stating that this law has been based on 'moral, political and taste grounds' and that it uses unreliable evidence as well as sensitive language to promote its intent¹⁷⁰. With this policing it is they who may feel threatened and displaced. It would appear that images and what is deemed pornographic in its various formations on the Internet has become one of the new moral panics for the twenty-first century¹⁷¹. It is important to understand the relevance of debates about pornography and the Internet and how, when discussing lesbian s/lash fiction and explicit lesbian sexual narratives written by lesbians online, that this fan activity may attract confrontation legally and politically. (This argument is beyond

¹⁷⁰ See 'backlash Statement' [online] 'at www.backlash-uk.org.uk/acad_statement.html'. One of the signatories was Professor Martin Barker who has researched audience response into screen violence for a project run by the British Broadcasting Film Council (2007). Professor Barker informed backlash "that the planned legislation will promote sexual ignorance" while many women academics whose research is in the area of screen violence have also spoken out against this legislation as have the editors of the lesbian magazine 'Diva'. [Accessed May 2008].

¹⁷¹ For further reading on moral panics in the twentieth century see Stanley Cohen (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.

the scope of this thesis but future research on fandom and fan fiction writing would be advised to explore the new laws being processed around the Internet and pornography and its position as part of a moral panic.)

In addition to this contemporary concern of Internet censorship by the LGBT community and slash fiction writers, the notion of what is and is not acceptable in terms of pornography and erotica and the romance has also been long debated by academia in their explorations of the readers of the romantic novel. The romantic novel holds a negative position within romantic fan fiction because of its connection to popular and mass culture in how in the mass audience it becomes feminised in contemporary society. A further negative is how the romantic novel has also sometimes come to be regarded as a cultural representation of women's immaturity. Historically too, the reading of popular romance by women as a pleasurable pastime and something that was undertaken in isolation or in secret or independently was not socially acceptable. Women who participated in this leisure activity and read romantic novels as a pleasurable pastime were portrayed as 'lacking' in 'real romantic and sexual relationships' in much the same negative vein as fandom and its fan fiction writing are positioned when placed against what is classed as quality literature such as the classics (Driscoll, 2006, p.85).

Catherine Driscoll's understanding is that both the genres of pornography and romance can be linked in terms of their configuration embedded in fan fiction writings. She explores the genres of romance and pornography, and how in the eighteenth century they were linked in popular culture. She notes that although these genres were diverse in content and technique, social concern began to grow as their popularity increased. The narratives of 'literacy, popular culture and the private self'

that include pornography and erotica offer a valuable understanding of a structure within new lesbian online fan fiction writing (Driscoll, 2006, p.79). The connection of pornography and the romantic novel in fan fiction writing as a discourse of 'imagined communities' warrants further in-depth study that is not possible in this thesis. Driscoll's chapter: 'One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance'¹⁷² calls attention to the two important trajectories that occurred within the genre of romantic fiction, and how its perception and inclusion of the genre of pornography entered into the romantic novel. The first transition was in the romantic novel being recognised as a progression away from the pursuit of the self as a scholarly mission moving towards the performance of sensationalism and scandal that was more associated with the cheap, more popular examples of the romantic novel. The second transition occurred with the industrialisation and mass production of the publication houses in the nineteenth century and with this began the wider circulation of numerous and varied romantic popular fiction (Driscoll, 2006).

I have noted that Driscoll does not explore the intersection of the lesbian romantic narrative and erotic or pornographic genres in fan fiction in terms of the lesbian online fans. Her definitions of pornography and the romantic novel relate to the fantasies and sexual practices of heteronormative women, such as intercourse between men and women. Pornography and the romantic novel are understood by academia as having a subversive quality when presented as part of the content of fan fiction written by heterosexual women for heterosexual women. My suggestion is that academia needs to qualify online lesbian fan fiction written by lesbians for lesbians and its symbolic

¹⁷² See Hellekson, K and Busse, K. (2006) (eds.) *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Jefferson N.C .and London: McFarland.

appropriateness of certain television texts as part of a challenge to traditional fan fiction reading and writing habits.

The interactive field of s/lash writing for lesbian fans holds many possibilities and subtleties in terms of defining what the reader/writing is approaching in terms of genre. Driscoll (2006, p.85) proposes a useful definition of erotica in romantic fan fiction writing which is reflected in some forms of online writing and describes it as 'sexually arousing representations which are neither visibly exploitative nor offensively explicit'. Erotica, as a sexually arousing representation, features in many online lesbian fan fiction writings. However, within its own reading circles, erotica has been distinguished from pornography as sexual pleasure for women, while pornography can be considered as sexual pleasure for men because men and women in the socially constructed sense are envisaged as having a different relationship to sex and sexual pleasure. Driscoll also proposes another view of pornography as a genre that is 'consumed for the explicit purpose of arousal rather than arousing' (*ibid.*, p.85). Erotica is not pornography although it might have elements of sexually-explicit description. In terms of lesbian online fan fiction, fans have created s/lash fiction because it suits their needs and desires. It blurs, ignores or dismisses these genre definitions. Further, this blurs, intersects and interweaves pornography, erotica and romance. Again, this is an aspect of reading against the grain. Online forms of pornographic, erotic and romantic writing are central to this form of lesbian fan fiction writing which elaborates on the joy and sexual pleasure of the open secret or notion of forbidden or taboo sexual acts. According to psychologists, Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons, fan fiction that illustrates this form of pornographic,

erotic, romantic genre can be best explained as “‘women’s pornography’” (2004, p.96)¹⁷³.

The romantic genre that incorporates erotica and pornography as described by Driscoll can now be transferred to the lesbian literature model as part of a new online lesbian fan fiction sub-genre as evidenced in my case study where many *XSTT* fans’ conversations progressed to discussing erotica or ‘Xenarotica’. This genre is expressed explicitly through the Xenaverse and its lesbian fan fiction writing. As a new online genre it explores the enjoyment and pleasure of lesbian sexuality, practices and lesbian identities through such fan fiction writings as ‘Conqueror Stories’ written by lesbian fans belonging to the Xenaverse. One such fan fiction writer is ‘Milady’ who has written a story called ‘The Conqueror’s Touch’,¹⁷⁴.

This form of writing on the Internet is being developed as a collaborative form of story telling and draws on cyber online stories that use many traditional genres of fiction. The drama within these genres is usually based on reader and writer experiences as they draw on their own lives for their story telling. The narratives of these stories can be in the form of love stories, adventures and quests to name but a few formats. Milady’s ‘Conqueror Story’ is prefaced with two disclaimers:

Disclaimer 1 reads: “I don’t own the characters, I just love writing about them. Disclaimer 2 reads: This is erotica, that is to say, there is a definite focus on the details of the more sensual elements of the “plot”. If for some reason there are laws preventing you from reading erotic stories about women, you might want to avoid this one. Description: Xena is the Conqueror, ruler of the known world. In this story, she gets a new body slave. Go ahead; guess what the slave’s name is!

¹⁷³ See further discussions of pornography in Salmon, C. and Symons, D. (2004) ‘Slash fiction and human mating psychology’ in *Journal of Sex Research* Vol. (4): 94-100.

¹⁷⁴ See the fan fiction stories ‘Milady’ [online] http://www.ausxip.com/fanfic12/conquerors_touch.html [Accessed August 2009].

The disclaimer for this story points out the erotic nature of the plotlines with a tongue-in-cheek question to the fans at the end. While agreeing that erotica is very different from pornography, Driscoll's argument is that pornography can be structured in relation to the conventions of romance. It can be embedded in the romantic novel as a form of subtextual reading. This has been expressed as a secret within a novel or the open secret in the case of the *XSTT* fans' reading of a subtext within the original narrative of the television series, however in many of these stories no attempt is made to disguise the erotic as a subtext.

Driscoll's study is shaped around the pairing of heterosexual characters within fan fiction. These are mainly written by heterosexual women, whereas the genre of the 'Conqueror Stories' and many other genres (or sub-genres) on the Xenaverse are written by lesbians and have explicit lesbian sex contained in the storylines: in such stories, popular scenarios might describe Xena getting drunk and making Gabrielle her sex slave. (In Milady's story, Xena is the conqueror and Gabrielle her slave). The lesbian fans of *XSTT* have evidenced their enjoyment of reading and writing a diverse range of fan fiction online. This reading and writing fan practice moves them away from traditional fandom that placed more emphasis on the coupling of male heterosexual characters. It takes the lesbian fan on a journey of transformation and discovery as demonstrated in darxe's comments.

I don't remember the first site I went to, but I still go to all the first ones I did then. Obsession's home page was one of the first ones I went to. I read the subtext fan-fiction Xena stories only. I believe they are a couple so reading the general ones just are not any good to me

Erotica, rather than pornography, features mainly in the online lesbian fan fiction and is pleasurable reading for lesbians fans who wish to consume or produce X/G s/lash or sexually explicit lesbian fiction. Erotica is written and illustrated by lesbians for

lesbians, and does, on occasion, contain pornographic images, however, these images differ from pornographic images that appear in the mainstream. One such example of this form of the blurring of pornography and erotica is a story written by ‘T. Novan’ called ‘Amazon Pleasure.¹⁷⁵’ This story does use a version of Driscoll’s model that describes ‘sex lingered over as a sex scene, a difference evident in the timing of the narration, where time is both condensed and extended to mimic the representative structures of pornography’ (2006, p.86). This is also illustrated by the question ‘plot what plot?’ in the disclaimer which signals that plot must be described as minimal. The plot of ‘Amazon Pleasure’ is minimal and most of the drama takes place during the three days that Xena and Gabrielle stay in their room having different forms of sex. The sexual acts described by the author in this fan fiction story are explicitly lesbian. The pornography in this story is situated in the real terms of lesbian desire even though it is exaggerated and excessive. It is a preferred sexual fantasy for the lesbian fan, and is part of the sexual pleasure and commentary on lesbian sexual intimacy. Even though the fan darxe states during the interview about Über fan fiction that it is “not porn” she gets pleasure from identifying with the lesbian sexual acts depicted in the Über stories and Novan becomes one of darxe’s favourite fan fiction writers. Erotica and “soft” pornography are entwined within the romance of Novan’s s/lash fan fiction.

Another popular writer of this new form of writing is by Melissa Good or “Missy” Good who, as noted earlier, also gained further renown when she was invited to write for the television series, *X: WP*. By 2001, Missy Good had written seventeen online novels, thirteen of these being part of her *Journey of Soulmates* book series and four

¹⁷⁵ See ‘AUSXIP’ and T.Novan, Index’ [online] <http://ausxip.com/tnovan/index.html>, [Accessed Feb, 2005].

that supported her Über crossover series. Missy Good also uses a beta reader. The location for this series of novels is Miami which is also the location for the television series *Tropical Storm* (1999) that she wrote, making her a favourite amongst its fans. Missy Good also had a site called Merwolf's Cave which is part of the Xenaverse. This fan site is split into seven sections, linking the fans to different trivia relating to the X: WP and its plethora of information. One section is the Royal Academy of Bards and this lists all the sub-genres of Missy Good's fan fiction narratives as well as featuring the work of other fan fiction writers. In Missy Good's stories Xena and Gabrielle are openly lesbian characters who have and enjoy lesbian sex in its many forms. Another fan named Shari, who posted on the bulletin board of XSTT, had this to say about Missy Good's work:

Her portrayal of Xena really gets to me. Missy has said that she has a soft spot for Xena. I guess I do too. In many stories and in the show, Xena is much more 2-dimensional, while Gab gets to display a wide range of emotions. I love that in the Missyverse we get to see so many different facets of Xena's personality. She is playful, fun, spontaneous, loyal, intense, moody, smart, powerful, etc., etc. Missy takes us inside her head to really get a feel for how she thinks, what she feels, what hurts her and what gives her joy. And then, Missy lets her experience all of those feelings. It's perfect¹⁷⁶.

Shari is immersed in this writer's portrayal of the character of Xena and she praises how Missy Good explores and makes Xena a three-dimensional character. Xena is her object of fandom and the fan enjoys how Missy Good's creative talents have been given her as the fan the freedom to explore Xena. In these contemporary narratives, Xena is given many facets in the "Missyverse". Shari is just one of the fans who now can gather around the "large Internet campfire" of the Xenaverse while sharing their versions of different stories of their likes and dislikes in online writing. Giving Xena a

¹⁷⁶ See 'Merwolf's Cave and Merpups' [online] <http://www.merwolf.com/> [Accessed May 2003].

multi-dimensional personality enables the writer to bring emotional vulnerabilities to come to the fore and this is what makes these stories essential reading for Shari.

While I have tried to be multivocal in terms of my interpretation of the *XSTT* fans' experiences of fan fiction writing and what their comments on online lesbian discourse have revealed, naturally this may still be read at times as self-validation of myself as a fan/academic. However, bearing this in mind, I have also highlighted the complexities of interpretation within and outside the cultural systems of identity, fan scholarship and fandom itself. With fans' discourses as central to this study, I have tried to focus on the cultural and media discourses of Internet fandom and its 'imagined community' while still allowing the intensely personal notion of online lesbian fans of *XSTT* and their virtual fandom.

The depictions with online fan fiction are what the lesbian fans of *XSTT* respond to and find significance for their struggle for everyday meanings. The lesbian fan fiction developed as evidence that lesbians can be secure in the knowledge that lesbian sex can be pleasurable and does not have to be repressed, stigmatised or kept in the closet.

There have been many changes in the reading and viewing habits of audience/fans during the last decade. Melissa Meister, another fan fiction writer whose work appears in the Xenaverse and in *Whoosh!*¹⁷⁷ commented:

There are currently over 600 stories that have been published on the Internet that take their basis from the show Xena: Warrior Princess. They are stories that continue the travels and exploits of Xena and Gabrielle. Some of them are as short as one page, some of them are novel-length, some of them are heterosexual-centred, and some of them are homosexual-centred; but what is significant about all of them is how they deal with the show. There is a noticeable absence of fan-fiction that deals with Xena and her desire for or search of a man.

¹⁷⁷ See 'Meister' full article in *Whoosh!* Issue No. 10 [online] <http://Whoosh.org/issue10/meister2.html>. [Accessed Dec 2001].

Since Meister's article was written in 1997, the number of *X: WP* fan fiction stories appearing on the Internet has increased eightfold. The fan sites dedicated to *X: WP* 'number in the thousands...and thousands of fan fiction stories are archived' (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.9). The intervention of new technology into fan fiction writing is unprecedented and liberating as Meister affirms:

Such fiction is not only liberating for lesbians and bisexuals, but for heterosexual women as well who have been told all their lives that their "soul-mate" must be of the opposite sex. The evidence of fan fiction suggests that *XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS* has been inherently successful and liberating in its recreation of fiction.

The advantages and agency for lesbians of Internet fan fiction writing is that through their migration from traditional forms of fan fiction writing to the lesbian fan fiction online they have discovered their own capacity to embrace different forms of lesbianism or different ways of being in the world.

As a community, the Xenaverse is the foundation for all the Xena sites, and how they are linked. It is 'the virtual territory that has evolved around, and includes, the programme' (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000, p.10). Within this virtual territory are cyber-sites that fan fiction writers can access to assist them in their writing journeys. There is a sense of belonging and empowerment for *XSTT* lesbian Internet fans as they discuss with many other fans the configurations of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality as part of the anxieties of lesbian discourse. This important fan practice is shared through the writing or reading of Xena fan fiction which connects fans on a global level. Within lesbian online fan fiction, however, the disclaimer has developed as a political and literary device. The disclaimer serves as an important lesbian marker and I will now explore why writers have introduced the use of these disclaimers into their writing.

The Use of Disclaimers in Online Fan Fiction

As I have already demonstrated in exploring the work of online fan fiction writers such as Novan, Morda and Milady, the use of disclaimers in online fan fiction has become prevalent in the Xenaverse. Disclaimers declare lesbian visibility: a sense of community; and are often protective mechanisms to warn fans against copyright infringement of the original characters of *X: WP*.

Morda like many well-known fan lesbian fan fiction writers constantly encourages other online fan writers. She has been writing since *X: WP* was first broadcast and has another nine stories to her credit. She is one of the many contemporary writers in these fan fiction genres to encourage the use of a disclaimer and state its importance within the writing of online fan fiction. Disclaimers give the reader information about the genre and indicate if the material is sexually explicit. As such, disclaimers became integral to this writing form and the disclaimer appeared at the beginning of all of these fan fiction stories on the Internet. Morda's Über story 'Is there a Doctor on the Dig?' uses a disclaimers as follows: 'This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story'¹⁷⁸.

As statements these disclaimers serve as benchmarks to show how far online writing is moving away from the policing of the moral panickers and earlier notions of the socially acceptable judgements which stigmatised the world of romantic fiction. Julie

¹⁷⁸ See 'Bat Morda' [online] http://lunacyreviews.com/authors/Bat_Morda.php [Accessed Oct 2003].

Parrish¹⁷⁹ (2007) gives credence to fan fiction disclaimers as having a basic classification to their narratives that follows similar structures and layouts as those of articles that appear in art and culture sections of newspapers.

The author Lunacy issues statements to be more inclusive, drawing on an understanding or unwritten rule that this is part of her duty of care as a ‘professional’ reviewer who supports, furthers and promotes this online writing community. Her disclaimers are detailed as well as informative. They are indicative of a well-established site favoured by fans. Dedicated fan websites such as this one encourage fan fiction writing while warning against copyright infringement. Sites such as this one firmly acknowledge that X: WP creators’ Renaissance Pictures could take legal action if fans were to publish and break copyright laws¹⁸⁰. This site also acknowledges the further possibility of copyright infringements if fans want to commercially publish Xena fan fiction and these are pointed out as well as part of its dedication to the development of the writing of fan fiction. Lunacy’s site also states that fans must not write stories that use specific character traits such as Xena’s famous war cry or use the chakram, Xena’s most famous weapon, after all, this is a legal property of Renaissance Pictures.

Lunacy also offer warnings to the reader on practice for once they have become part of the fan fiction online community, they are offering material to a wider audience on the Internet. When she reviews the alternative fan fiction sent to her by the fans if they

¹⁷⁹ See again Parrish, Julie, J. (2007) ‘Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction.’ In this study of fan fiction Parrish pursues the notion that disclaimers define the fan writer’s intentions in broad terms because there are so many texts on the Internet and fans alone have the knowledge and expertise about their subject. It would be ludicrous to try to define these more closely for as she suggests ‘such a huge body of text invites trouble’ (2007, p.11).

¹⁸⁰ Gwenllian-Jones, S. (2003) ‘Web Wars: Resistance, Online Fandom and Studio Censorship’, Jancovich, M. Lyons, J. (eds.) in *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*. London: BFI, Modern Classics Publishing, pp.163-176.

do not have a disclaimer she will add one when she has completed the review. Lunacy states:

I'm not particularly sensitive to violence, gore or rough language so you will see reviews of stories featuring these. In some cases, and particularly if authors themselves don't include disclaimers at the beginning of these stories warning about the content, I will include a short warning note in the review. Some of the stories I include in the general fiction section include very mild subtext – in line with what we tend to see in the TV series. In those cases I usually include a note letting people know that the story does include subtext. You can assume subtext *IS* the maintext in all alternative fiction stories :)

While Lunacy's disclaimers denote a self-reflexivity and a self-regulating aspect of the community of writing, the most significant aspect of all these disclaimers is that they all serve as confident statements on lesbian visibility.

The Never-ending Fan Fiction

It appears from this exploration of online fan fiction reading and writing that this practice is a supportive act for a community of lesbian online writers and also a continuous activity. *XSTT* fans have utilised their online fan activities to produce a form of fan fiction writing that upholds, reflects and highlights their agency and empowerment to determine their lesbian desire, which is absent from the television text that they appropriate. The fans' performances gain visibility while virtual lesbianism on the Internet has become a new discursive political language. Its queerness is in the freedom for anyone to contribute or participate in it as a fan and to continue to enhance its organic living narrative as in the case of the Xenaverse and its extra-textual narrative of lesbian fandom. This discourse becomes part of a 'circuit of productive desire' and performances on the Internet (Hamming, 2001, p.1). Performance and recreation is how subversion on the Internet for the lesbian fans of *XSTT* takes place in the discourse and this becomes a political act. The lesbian fans

use the liberating action of online discussions to explore many identities in creative and pleasurable fan practices. In looking at the first and second layers of discourse a question I asked *XSTT* fans was, “Do you think lesbians explored their identity through watching Xena and being involved in the chat lines and the Internet?”

xeniteus:

Absolutely...and others coming out, and considering that...Teens too Know 2 women who realized they were gay during years of seeing XWP.

ladykat44:

I was going through some things at the time...Searching, I suppose you could say, and I was captivated by the “friendship” between Xena and Gabrielle. Their chemistry jumped off the screen and I immediately felt a connection.

The act of fan fiction writing produced by the *XSTT* fans becomes part of the repetition of lesbian desire that is made visible through the three layers of lesbian discourse with which the fans interact. In these snapshots of conversation, the fans xeniteus and ladykat44 both acknowledge their own identities and in the case of xeniteus she also acknowledges that she also discussed identity in connection to the show with other fans. These fans have validated and invoked the first two layers of textual engagement and lesbian discourse.

I argue that fan fiction writing for the *XSTT* fan is more than a “stand in” for the lack of lesbian sexuality, and desire shown between Xena and Gabrielle in the television series. Lesbian Internet fan fiction writing has become a way of distributing lesbian sexual and cultural information and narratives, and more significantly contributes to a visibility of an individual and collective identity in a public arena. Individual fans can compare their own sexual relationships with the many variations of Xena and Gabrielle. This research has touched upon the consequences of fan fiction in terms of online lesbian identities and subjectivity. The lesbian fans of *XSTT* are part of the

success of the series on and offline, and ‘new’ lesbian dialogues offer a subversive form of appropriation in terms of social, political and sexual agendas.

Nancy Baym informs us that: ‘Online fans as an audience discuss the episodes, programmes and characters to build relationships with one another and this, in turn, develops their own identities’ (2006, p.216). Internet fandom as practiced by the fans of *XSTT* has its own pleasures and advantages because it included an opportunity to build up relationships. The immediacy of the Internet communication and its responses to questions and the interest of getting to know other fans from around the world is part of its celebratory aspect. It enables fans such as billienomates_18, magmor; novice_7; reneeg_33, and texard, along with others to gain credence and security about their own online identities while empowering their everyday lives as social subjects. There are many Internet sites that have become a medium for the masses where fans of television can discuss popular culture and where the niche audiences and the mass audience cross over, entering into interesting conversations and debates¹⁸¹. Fan fiction writing for the lesbian fans of *XSTT* is about the visibility as fans and as lesbians and is about ‘real desire’ that is constituted in their ‘real’ lived experiences as social subjects. Hamming had this to say:

Xena fanwriters operate as desiring-machines, and the uses to which Xena is put are not an effect of delusion or lack, but the production of new texts, and hence new augmented "realities", from the "raw material" of the show (2001, p.2).

Fandom and fan fiction writing provide an alternative community for women enabling them to discuss their experiences within a structure that allows emotions and feelings to be understood as a value creating process and where free training and professional advice and support is available to all. Supporting this argument is Bacon-Smith’s

¹⁸¹ See Hanmer, R. (2005) ‘Queer Television Discourse – Reality TV’, in *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 2 (1) ‘Hanmer’ [online] <http://dpc.uba.uva.nl/cgi/t/text/get-pdf?c=gjss;idno=0201a05>.

(1992) earlier analyses that women fans within science fiction fandom are able to express and indulge in their fantasies and, at the same time, develop their writing skills and discuss their anxieties in a supportive setting within fan culture. Online fandom allows more fans to be involved in the support process and to increase the amount of information passing between fans and fandom.

I propose that the fans of *XSTT* reveal and produce a third textual layer of lesbian online discourse through their fan fiction writing practices that is embedded within the Xena experience. This adds to the longevity of the Xena phenomenon and the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom chat room discussions on the Internet.

Conclusion

The aim of the thesis is to show how through the migration from traditional fandom to online fandom that the lesbians from the *XSTT* Internet fandom have been able to perform new online lesbian fan identities that gave them agency and empowerment. This was achieved through the three layers of online lesbian discourse and textual engagement with the television series *X: WP*. The first layer deals with the subtextual television series itself and the fans' discussions around its narrative. The second layer is revealed and developed through the fans' primary data consisting of interviews, emails and bulletin board postings that relate to the coded open secret of the series and the fans online lesbian performance of their fan identities. This online performance is reflected in the lived experiences of the fans of *XSTT* as they document the television series and its effect on their lives throughout the thesis. Finally, the third layer of online lesbian discourse is created through the lesbian fans' reading and writing of lesbian s/lash fan fiction about the two characters of the series and their intimate sexual relationship.

The biographical senses of the self that have been achieved by allowing the fans to speak for themselves have demonstrated how the different forms of lesbian online discourse enabled the fans to gain agency and empowerment which eventually culminated in the writing and reading of online lesbian fan fiction. This fiction was written by lesbian fans for lesbian fans. Consequently, online fandom itself engenders the potential for queer discourse, in its focus on transience and work-in-progress online identities that give rise to the possibility of various readings. In this way, the *XSTT* lesbian Internet fandom is multivalent in identity potential, offering celebratory move to action as well as consolation and reassurances to the biographical senses of self. Gwenllian-Jones states: 'Such tactics of seizure and salvage, appropriation and

revision, are intrinsic both to *X: WP* itself and to its fan culture' (2000, p.406). The lesbian *XSTT* fans activities are testimony of the phenomenon of the extra-textual narrative of *X: WP*, the Xenaverse and its ongoing lesbian Internet fandom, and I hope that this case study of *XSTT* helps address, in part, the under-representations of *X: WP* in fandom studies.

As the *XSTT* fans became aware of their empowerment, so too did the star of the show Lucy Lawless. It was decided it was important for her also to speak out herself about the open secret and death of Xena. She also needed to find some resolution to the way the show reached its brutal ending. Lawless gave an interview on television in June 2001 on the US talk show *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. It was to promote the two-hour finale of *X: WP*'s prize-winning television broadcast. During the interview Lawless informed Conan O'Brien that after viewing the episode she had finally cleared up the sexual orientation of her alter ego's character Xena. Lucy Lawless informs us:

Actually, you know, there was always an element of doubt in my mind, it was...it didn't matter to the way I played the role. So if the audience chose to see it or not...but I saw it [the finale] for the first time last night and I went home and said to my husband [Xena Executive Producer Rob Tapert], "you've outed my character. I just...I can't believe I'm saying this. I didn't run this by anybody, but I don't think there's any doubt in my mind anymore¹⁸²".

While the Internet may also be said to be a media and cultural tool of "levelling out" in the virtual sense of online performances of identity, in that anyone can participate in appropriating or discovering new identities, it should not be viewed as a totally 'utopian space'. It is more complicated and complex and in its infancy in terms of the geographical isolation still experienced by many people around the world. However,

¹⁸² See 'AfterEllen.com' [online] <http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/TV/xena.html>.

through this case study of lesbian Internet fans I have explored the notion that individuals as social subjects can obtain agency and empowerment and are able to contribute to their lived experiences through online fandom and by reading and writing fan fiction individually and collectively. The case study reveals that the Internet as a tool of communication for the twenty-first century has helped the lesbian Internet fans by expanding their lesbian visibility and giving them a platform that removes some of the existing social pressures that seek to curtail the lesbian voice and its advancement. I suggest that further research for lesbian Internet s/lash fan fiction that highlights the agency and empowerment, the potential and the possibilities of online performances of lesbian fan identities is essential to future studies. An undertaking in censorship, hierarchy and new genres within the lesbian online fan fiction is also worth further investigation in our understanding of lesbian online fandom. After all, while the Internet articulates a sense of freedom and contemporary globalisation, tensions and anxieties exist about its future and the future of free content. However, with regard to fandom, the changing reading and writing habits that have been developed through the revolution of the Internet has informed fan scholarship in terms of the debates of resistance and complicity. Hanmer adds:

To this end *XSTT* as an online lesbian fandom offers both the opportunity for agency, and the stimulation of identification. In some instances this may result in action, as evident in the case studies above where fans were encouraged to announce their concealed sexual identity. However, what must also be apparent is the potential to read a queer [or lesbian identity] in isolation, publicly unannounced, and its therapeutic benefits (2010, p.156).

The one redeeming consequence of the character's death is that the lesbian Internet fans did not let Xena *just die*, she was resurrected in the written word of many of the fans of *XSTT* and the Xenaverse. Xena and her partner Gabrielle are written into many amazing, fantastical adventures that continue to be read online globally and give many

lesbian fans pleasure and enjoyment and represent a validation of their own online lesbian fan identities. Online lesbian fandom and its new online performances is crucial towards our understanding of lesbian fandom in general, for it is a call for a new fan language of possibility and potential. This language should promote the diverse and complex biographical senses of the self: it should celebrate and encourage a social, cultural and political platform from which to continue dialogue about sexuality and identity on a global basis while respecting the reality of differences and otherness as well as the ability and potential of ongoing transformation. Finally through this study I have revealed that the new online lesbian genres containing elements of erotica and pornography within the lesbian fan fiction writing are important ways of virtual communities telling the stories of lesbian sexuality without the shame and isolation that previously was experienced through traditional fandom by many people. I refer to ‘people’ for this encapsulates the function of *XSTT*, whether they self-identify as lesbian fans or not. *XSTT* allows a transformational process through its lesbian fandom whereby people can and do enter into a deeper understanding about the function of identities and all the changing elements possible within their journey of life.

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Original Airdates of *Xena: Warrior Princess* Television Episodes

Hercules: The Legendary Journeys was broadcast in American from January (1995). *Xena: Warrior Princess* was a spin-off from *Hercules*. It is a syndicated production that was aired by Renaissance Pictures and distributed by MCA/ Universal.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1995) Season 1, Episode 1, “Sins of the Past”. Director: Doug Lefler. Writers: Robert Tapert and R.J. Stewart. TV, US. 4 Sep.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1996) Season 1, Episode 12, “Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts”. Director: T.J. Scott. Writers: Roy Thomas, Janie Hendler, Adam Armus, Nora Kay Foster. TV, US. 15 Jan.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1996) Season 1, Episode 23, “Is there a Doctor in the House?” Director: T.J. Scott, Writer: Patricia Manney. TV, US. 29 Jul.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1997) Season 2, Episode 10, “Xena Scrolls”. Director: Charles Haskell, Writer: Adam Armus, Nora Kay Foster, Robert Sidney Mellette. TV, US. 13 Jan.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1997) Season 2, Episode 15, “A Day in the Life”. Director: Michael Hurst, Writer: R.J. Stewart. TV, US. 2 Feb.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1998) Season 3, Episode 12, “The Bitter Suite”. Director: Oley Sassone, Writers: Steven L. Sears, Chris Manheim. TV, US. 2 Feb.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1998) Season 3, Episode 13, “One Against An Army”. Director: Paul Lynch, Writers: Gene O’Neill, Noreen Tobin. TV, US. 9 Feb.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1997) Season 2, Episode 13, “The Quest”. Director: Michael Levine, Writers: Steven L. Sears, Chris Manheim, R.J. Stewart, Michael Levine. TV, US. 3 Feb.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1999) Season 4, Episode 16, “The Way”. Director: John Fawcett, Writer: R.J. Stewart. TV, US. 15 Feb.

Xena: Warrior Princess (2000) Season 5, Episode 6, “Legacy”. Director: Chris Martin-Jones, Writer: Melissa Good. TV, US. 30 Oct.

Xena: Warrior Princess (2000) Season 6 Episode 1, “Coming Home”. Director: Mark Beesley. Writer: Melissa Good. TV, US. 2 Oct.

Xena: Warrior Princess (2001) Season 6, Episode 16, “Send in the Clones”: Director: Charlie Haskell. Writer: Paul Robert Coyle. TV, US. 23 Apr.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1999) Season 5, Episode 1, “Fallen Angel” Director: John Fawcett, Writers: R.J. Stewart, Robert Tapert. TV, US. 27 Sept.

Xena: Warrior Princess (2001) Season 6, Episode 21, “Friends in Need: Part 1”. Director: Robert Tapert. Writers: Robert Tapert, R.J. Stewart. TV, US. 11 Jun.

Xena: Warrior Princess (2001) Season 6, Episode 22, “Friends in Need: Part 2”. Director: Robert Tapert. Writers: Robert Tapert, R.J. Stewart. TV, US. 18 Jun.

Appendix 'A'

Fan Email

After approaching the XSST fan cabinngirl the first time to request permission to post a message on the bulletin boards of the site, this is the email she returned to me dated Thursday 17th May 2001 09: 40.53 – 0700 (ODT).

Email from cabinngirl one of the gatekeepers

Be my guest, I don't see any problem with it. I think You'll find that a good many women on the site would be willing to help. I haven't been there is a while myself because real life decides that ITS more important. If you should need some advice on whom to chose to ask questions to, I can give you some suggestion. I think everything should be find as long as you get the individuals permission about how they want to be identified. Good luck with the project, I hope you find tons of information that you can use.

cabinngirl

Copies of first postings placed on Bulletin Boards of *xenasubtexttalk* fan site requesting participants for my research.

First Posted Message dated 8/3/2001

Message 6349 of 6349 Hey kids Hi everyone.. its been such a long time since I came and posted anything, but I got a request in my email from a Xenaite in London wanting to do some research on us crazies. lol. Anyway what her plan is "to find out if self identified lesbians have achieved some form of empowerment through the Xenaverse and subtext." So, I figured I would give everyone a heads up and let you all know that she was gracious enough to ask for permission. So, I told her sure..go for it lol, let her try to figure out these crazy girls. Anyway, I am enjoying this season tremendously!!! I have to say that When Fates Collide has got to be the best ep I have seen in ages! It was weird seeing LL and ROC playing Xena and Gab but in a different light.. it was very refreshing. Not to mention romantic.. passionate... and all that other mushy stuff and curls our toes. Anyway.., might be popping in every now and again seeing as how my schedule during the summer becomes sparse. Talk to you all later.CG

Second Posted Message referring to break in research

Message 6360 of 6360

Research	 CabinnGirl “30/F/California)	5/24/01 2:25 pm
-----------------	--	-----------------

I got another email from the woman doing the research in the UK.. sorry, I cannot find her name, anyway.. looks like the research will be postponed for a bit.. here is what she emailed me.....Just to let all the women know that I cannot communicate for a while due to unforseen circumstances but I would like to express my thanks to some of the women who have began to participate in helpling me with my research. I will be back on line to chat and continue my study when some things have been sorted out. Can you please post this for me so the following women will realise that I have not forgotten them and that hopefully it will not be too long before I can resume my research with them. Once again Thanks to all of you Xenites, darxe, ultixeana, jerricat4, malki-35, stonexena, cabingirl, chakram78, emeraldruide, reneeg.33. billienomates_18, ladykat44, (not yet contacted drums4ever2002)

Appendix ‘B’

Participant Fans from *Xenasubtexttalk (XSTT)* Online Fandom

chakram78 (US) member of *XSTT* – active poster contact made March 2001 (dropped out).

stonexena (US) member of *XSTT* – active poster contact made March 2001 (dropped out) but reappeared on IRC.

reneeg_33 (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster, contact made March 2001 but active one-to-one on IRC.

ladykat44 (US) member of *XSTT* – active poster contact met March/April 2001 and on IRC.

jerricat44 (US) member of *XSTT* – active poster – contact made March 2001 (dropped out).

ultixena (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster contact made March 2001 (dropped out).

billienomates_18 (British) member of *XSTT* – not active poster – contact made April 2001, active one-to-one. IRC.

malki _35 (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster – contact made April 2001.

darxe (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster – contact made May 2001, active one- to-one IRC.

emeraldruid (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster. IRC contact made May 2001 active one-to-one IRC.

cabinngirl (US) founder member of *XSTT* – active poster made contact May 2001 active contact.

critter68_78 (US) member of *XSTT*– active poster made contact July 2001 active contact one-to-one active. [This woman has now moved to England to be with her partner novice.]

novice_7 (UK) member of *XSTT* – not active poster. IRC contact made July 2001.

silverravyn (US) member of *XSTT* club not active poster. IRC contact made July 2001.

texard (US) member of *XSTT* – active poster– contact email Aug 2001.

xeniteus (US) member of *XSTT* – not active poster contact IRC Aug/Sept 2001.

magmor (Ireland) member of *XSTT* – not active poster on this site made contact through email Sept 2001.

Appendix ‘C’

Questions used for each of the Fans interviewed

Where do you work?

How would you describe your ethnic background?

How would you describe your class status?

What age are you?

What attracted you to the show?

How long have you been watching it?

How did you get started watching it?

How long have you been a member of the club?

When you talk about it with others what kinds of things do you talk about?

Do you have a favourite character? Who? Why?

If that character were a real person, would you be friends with her/him? Why or Why not?

Do you see any similarities between any of the characters and yourself?

Are there ways you wish you were more like the characters?

Do you ever think about the show when you're not watching it?

What kinds of things make you think about the show?

Do you have any *Xena: Warrior Princess* materials, for example, magazines, books, videos or cards etc?

What do you think about when you look at them?

What was your favourite episode?

What were the most memorable things that happened on the show?

What was the most stupid thing that happened on the show?

How has the show changed since you've been watching it?

Do you think you have changed since you've been watching it?

What do you think is the general reaction to the final episode?

What did you think would happen?

Do you write fan fiction?

Do you go to the conventions have you made many friends through these activities?

Thanks so much for this, there is not rush you can take your time and it's very much appreciated.

Appendix ‘D’

A Fan Story: ‘Healing Heart’ by reneeg_33

The next six pages is a two-part story written by reneeg_33 a fan whose life narrative involved issues of domestic violence that was disclosed when I started to interview her. Her story was placed on the Merpups website on Missy Good’s webpage. This fan sent me a copy of this story by email.

Tue Aug 07 09:54:34 2001

stor

Date: Mon, 06 Aug 2001 23:48:54 -0700 (PDT)
From: [REDACTED]
Subject: [REDACTED]
To: r.h.
Message-ID: [REDACTED]

here you go. hope it helps you out with your research.

renee

HEALING HEART

It started out me being in love, I had found my true love,
My soulmate so I thought.

It wasn't long till that happiness turned to sorrow.
I soon seen his true self the real him—The jealousy, mind games,
abusiveness, and the rapes. It became mentally and physically
exhausting

My weakened heart weigh heavy with unhappiness

I hoped that he would change. I hoped of things getting better. After
all, I took the Marriage vows for better or worse.

But it never happened, they never do change. It only gets worse. My
world was falling apart. My life in hell had begun.

10 years 10 years this poor body endured things that NO human should
ever go through—NO ONE.

I've been beaten with a hockey stick so badly that my body shock from
pain. I've been beaten in the face with his own fist over and over
till I could hardly see with my eyes. My face would be so swollen, so
black and blue. With a death grip he has taken a hold of me by the
neck and smashed my head into the wall over and over again. He has
beaten me in front of his brother while his brother stood there
And watches, and his brother doesn't do a thing about it.

He would go through the place and smash anything in his sights.
Usually they were my things, never his and afterwards he would make me
clean it up and if I didn't more beatings would occur.

I was his punching bag I just wish that he would just get it over with,
and just kill me so it would all end. There were times I had even
thought of ending it myself, but somehow I always made it through.

But that was nothing compared to the rapes. That was worse then the
beatings. He would force himself onto me, and if I wouldn't do what he

Tue Aug 07 09:54:34 2001

story

wanted he would hold me down with his weight and beat me until I had no strength left to fight anymore. I would be so exhausted, I was like a rag doll being thrown around and he could do with me whatever he wanted to do while I lay there helpless.

This would happen almost every night.

I kept all of this my little secret. I had it all bottled up inside of me, never to let it out never show the hurt, the pain, and the loneliness. I was withering away.

I was crumbling to pieces. I was ashamed and afraid, holding everybody at arm's length, not letting anyone in. I was slowly dying.

Then one day a wonderful thing happened, A mailing list was created for a fan fiction writer that I liked on the Internet, I joined up.

The list went from one to being two lists. The second became the merchat list. Of course I followed right along with them. This was after all the chatty pups as we were called. We were the fun pups!

Friendships were quickly made. Then one day out of the blue I email a friend from the list telling her a little about my life, but still not telling about the beatings.

We would talk for hours at times, and she started telling me things that I knew she wouldn't be telling just anyone. A trusted was formed between us. Then I did it. I told her how sometimes he hit me.

Then one night I was in a bad fight with him and I knew that I needed to let someone else know what was going on with me. I knew that I needed to have contact right away, and that my friend that I was emailing wouldn't be able to get email back to me fast enough. So I told another good friend of mine who was on the ICQ at the time what was going on.

Between the two friends they helped keep me calm. And they let me know that I wasn't alone. From that night on those two were always on line when I was, just to be there for me--to watch over me.

I knew what they were doing for me, it meant so much to have somebody there. It gave me the strength I needed to go on another day. We soon had a nice support system between us in case I ever needed their help. They were my guardian angels. Soon two friends ended up becoming five friends. These friends were my lifesavers.

They would keep working on me telling me that this wasn't any way to live, and if I kept on living this way I would no long have my life—I would die. I knew deep in my broken down heart that they were right. I had to get out. I was starting to think more and more of being free again—being happy. As I started to gain control of my life back again

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story

it got more dangerous with him. He was losing his grip on me and he knew it. And I knew it. I knew that if I did this I had to resign from my job and move out of state. I would be starting all over.

My friends from the list were the reason I was able to get out. It was because of them believing in me and being there for me that I was able to do this in the first place.

it was because of that one show xena and then the fanfic and the friendship.....

I finally took the step. I left him. I waited till he wasn't going to be home that weekend and I loaded up my things and I left. It was a bittersweet feeling. I was glad to be out of there, but a part of me still loved him. A part of me felt sorry for him.

Little did I know what a long path of healing was a head of me. Some good days and many many bad days would follow from this day on. The leaving part was easy. It's the healing part that is hard.

The plans that I did have at the beginning of my journey fell through just a couple of days after I had left him. My heart was once again heart broken at this news. I was a mess. My pieces became even smaller then what they were. I didn't want to stay in this state any longer then what I had to. I couldn't let him find me.

For the next two weeks I was being hidden. I moved from one place to another, not taking any chances of him finding me. I soon learned about things that he had done that I had no idea of. It was me who was stuck straightening things out while he got away with it. This made me angry.

The healing began. What love I had for him was now gone. Now it was anger, hate. My blood boils with anger at him. No one should ever have to live in fear and pain. No one should ever feel alone and cut off from the outside world.

He is a cruel and heartless man. He couldn't feel guilt or regret or sorrow. There was no mercy no love. I now have nightmares every night. I relive the madness, the craziness, and the ugliness. Sleep becomes less and less.

I started to go once a week to Women In Need. It's a support group for women who had been abused. Bless these dear women. We bonded. We had a connection with one another. We cried and laughed together. We got angry together. We were healing together.

It's hard to get through something like this and it's harder to help someone else through it. People are there for me as often as they can be. Some had to pull away. I was in so much pain that it was hard to take me for long at a time. It was overwhelming them. It hurts when a friend walked away. But at the time you're so blinded

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story

by hurting and not seeing clearly, you don't think of what they are going through or what you're doing to them 'cause your still being mad at the world.

Same goes for family. My family has been there all the step of the way for me, but I only took my anger and frustration out on them and kept them at arms length. I felt so alone and like I would never ever heal. I didn't think that the old me the happy me—would ever return. I couldn't do anything about it.

There's nothing really I could do but walk through this. Yes, I'm a mess. It's okay to be a mess. I'm support to be a mess right now. It took a long time till I was able to just leave the emotions out mad, bad, sad, angry, crazy, guilty, happy, free, confused, alone, hope, faith, up, down

Finally my weakened heart is healing, though very slowly, The roller coast ride isn't over, but at least it has begun. The shock has passed. The feeling inside of me is returning. There's no turnin' back now. I have opened my heart and my mind. I know that I'll get through this cause I know that I am strong. I know that I'm loved, and I'm not alone.

I'm letting go of my past so I can take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it. I can now grow and live for the future. I can now imagine peace. And I can see a future better then what I can imagine it being.

I still have along ways to go and it's going to be a bumpy ride, but I'm holding on so I won't fall off.

Renee
Artist pup

Part 2 MENDING

A year and 7 months has passed since that bittersweet morning I gathered my things up and started out for a new life. And it has been one very long bumpy road. This being an under statement.

As I sit here and reflect on my thoughts many emotions come pouring back, returning at nonstop speed, it's almost too much. I remember that feeling of being left standing alone, with that great big feeling of emptiness taking over my soul and looking at a road, with no end. Deep within my heart cold and hollow as dark as a cold winters night my heart was withering, like ashes in the wind . slowly I was dying as time goes on, not knowing if I could continue. So many roads have come and gone and I was beginning to wonder if things would ever be normal

Tue Aug 07 09:54:34 2001

story

again. Did I even remember what normal was anymore?, it had been so long. The weight of the world was on my shoulders and I started searching to find the right path the path that would make me whole again. I wasn't even sure there was such a path for me. Frustrated, sad and confused, only to find myself feeling its wrath, it was a endless battle. Why even bother to go on? But for some reason i carried on. I don't know why, but I did. With my Soul tormented and bruised I came to stand at a fork in this forsaken place, tired, scared and all alone still. Tears of sorrow claimed my face. I've cried a river a thousand times grace. I fall, hitting hard. I was so close to the edge only having a few steps more to cross over, I've been here so many times before not knowing, not willing to understand blinded by fear I keep hidden away.

My world seemed to be upside down. But why? . I was no longer in the awful abuse world that I was in just a few not to far distance past. It was easy walking out but it was so hard to pick myself up and start over. It was all the emotions and the new discovery of the new me that had me on the see saw merry-go-round.

There were many times through out the year, I wanted nothing more then to end my life.

But I'm very glad I stuck it out. Smiles for many reasons. November 3th was when I finally received my divorce. I was so happy. I was almost free. Now I had to get my maiden name back. Then I would be totally free of him. Funny how just getting rid of the name can make you feel like a new person. I received my maiden name back on the week of Christmas. I think I was more excited about getting my maiden name back then I was about the divorce. Not that I was happy to have no parts of him, it was just a feeling of getting some of me back that was before he was in my life. After that things seemed to start falling into place for me. I ended up with a new job the second week of January. Something I think I needed to really get back to doing. It did me good to be back in the work force again. But I have no regresses to taking those months off. I needed them, I realize this more so now then I did then. Yes, 2000 was starting to look like a good year for me. I also returned back to posting on the chat list again. That was probably one of the best things I did.

It wasn't long til I was falling in love something that surprised the heck outta me. I never wanted to have a relationship ever again. I didn't want to get hurt. I questioned myself what am I doing? , but I would answer myself by saying I can't help it, I want it . But sometimes the heart does what it wants, without asking the mind. It is folly to pretend that one ever wholly recovers from a disappointed passion. Such wounds always leave a scar. There are faces I can never look upon without emotion; there are names I can never hear spoken without getting a sick feeling in my stomach. And the one thing I have learned from being with my ex was that I've learned that you cannot

Tue Aug 07 09:54:34 2001

story

make someone love you. All you can do is be someone who can be loved. The rest is up to them.

I wanted true love and knew as the weeks were going on as we enjoyed that companionship with one another, I had finally found what few people find. I had found true love .

At the first kiss I felt something melt inside me that hurt in an exquisite way. All my longings, all my dreams and sweet anguish, all the secrets that slept deep within me came awake, everything was transformed and enchanted, everything made sense. Be the choice of my heart still were I to choose for were I now am free I should again love just as I did and again feel that I could give up all to and for my true love the love of my life. I have become attached to my love as she is to her shadow. Love is waking up to find the subject of your dream you were having asleep holding you tight and knowing that they love you for you, nothing more nothing less.

There's nothing in all the world I want but my love and her precious love All the material things are nothing. I just know I'd just hate to live as or did colorless existence. With her in my life it's colorful with creativeness that she has the ability to do. Love works in miraculous ways. I can't say anymore then I love her, anything else would be a waste of breath.

but as life likes to throw you one of its curve balls....just as fastly as the love came as fast as it left. she told me that she didn't love me and she ended it. funny how that hurt more then all the abuse i went thru.....

So, I realize that I'm still very much mending, healing, growing as a new me but, the broken heart is still there

And "Yes", I'm still mending and I'm still over coming things. But things are getting better . YES, i'm much happier these days...and i'm still looking for that one speical love that i know is out there for me to share the rest of my life with.

Renee
Artist Pup

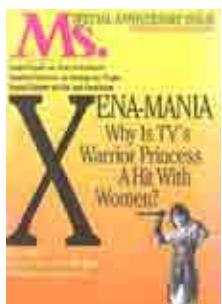
Do You Yahoo!?

Make international calls for as low as \$.04/minute with Yahoo! Messenger
<http://phonecard.yahoo.com/>

Appendix ‘E’

Special Anniversary Issue of Ms.

Front cover copy of Ms. Special Anniversary Issue July/August (1996) as discussed in chapter three.



[online] <http://www.mirrorblue.com/annex/ms796/index.shtml> [Accessed May 2002]

Appendix 'F'

Wengraf's paper system supporting inferences to Models – A Sample

Lady Katt 44. 29 (White) Woman in class
lyricist artist - comicbook industry

Discourse (3)

Discourse	Objective referent(evolving context)	Subjectivity (recounting subject)
Generalization about programme - Hercules comprises	SUP. TV series	I stated <u>honestly</u> wif religiously but wif they're their son was surprised by a dark nature of the show
Discourse of religion	DARK NATURE	→
Discourse of religion	- Spell Bound	Stably capturing the (family) relationship/family
Discourse of confession	- Friendship	Their closeness jumped off the screen and I immediately feel a connection!
Discourse of friendship	- Hide friends through their chil	Violent / Warm
" " romance	Final episode -	'You have to understand'
Anger	- Trampolin	- Yes I know I did -
Discourse of Tension	xWP - Sophie	Came out as gay
Discourse of self identity		

emergence - USA, Brooklyn, New York

Three Types of Knowledge gained from the analysis

④

Discourse	Objective referent (evolving context)	Subjectivity (recounting subject)
Discourse of 'self' / confession -	wanting to show changing channels → come across gorgeous women in center ↓ ↓	i had been in a fair very kindly treated - ended up in a wheelchair but i like the relationships between women in hospital
Discourse of friendship / relationship	Xena - show development	2 women can work together
Discourse of self - (confession)	Xena / myself - Xena skills TV - opera What did it mean to you as a actress	were both survivors fighters for life, i never had that b/c i was always very sickened Diet 1/2 - No last question will take a little thought lol
Discourse of Sexuality / Self Hamer Episode → Soap Discourse of acts of television practice	→ development House band - Bulletin Boards + lists Xena clothes She looks forward to watching Xena	not quite = soap opera but it became a cult series + got trouble - Most of the discussions had been with the average audience in lots
Discourse of communication		
Discourse of enjoyment		Not sure about to show that started to ride for club my, no,
Discourse of medical		→ soap opera like format with my
Discourse of confession	She was able to work without need of chair	1. see that i can do what i want 2. realized that after i came off the cancer after the first

Date: 28 - Saturday in school - 11:15

Discourse	Objective referent (evolving context)	Subjectivity (recounting subject)
Discourse of friendship relationship of self / sexuality	Watching TV Xanadu Friend Talks with friends about Xanadu's sex Episode or little Episodes from fighting them	Watched Xanadu, I heard he Xanadu is real. Watched It also depends on what talk to each other of to show we talk about Xanadu rocks + can be annoying like B.P. One really enjoyed watching and you better be better I think I have her own rule you enjoy the show I'll only talk about the comments! eg. this about him to me eg. when about the User Stories
Humor / sex fondness - excitement	Do you want to do Favourite Episode Fan-Fiction	A Day in The Life False LOVE Womanizer Jim eg. how is it - skirt, bed, car, com... to be honest, I don't no idea what just answer this
Discourse of Conformity	Favourite Episode	
Discourse of Fiction	Plotter - Reflect Narrator	
Discourse of self / other sexual	Empowered	

30 years old (white) Middle class -
Federal Bureau of Prisons ^{Dec 2001}

CABIN GIRL - Torn der member

Discourse	Objective referent (existing context)	Subjectivity (recounting subject)
Fluent, very descriptive narrative of opening scene -	Watched programmes often for past two years. By friend watched it <u>relaxingly</u> .	remembers first time watching it. Remembers huge haulers - one of the most sturdy women I have ever seen and it was HOOKED.
EMPHASIS ON 'HOOKED' spelling mistakes generalizes about New Zealand, ocean etc.	but we would talk like we were gossiping teenage girls - We would talk about symbolism, and what did we think this meant ...	enjoying talking about the subtext, relationship between Xena / Gabrielle.
Fluent in romantic descripta of various shows about S0B+xt -	Xena's character -	she is strong willed, protective, funny, selective, sincere, playful, sensitive and a hell of a fighter.
Discourse about favorite character -	Xena - 'crush'	here is important
Friendship discourse / romantic discourse -	part of her attraction 'opposite' -	'but that's part of the attraction too.'
Discourse about self	Xena as a fighter strong woman.	'I wish I could kick ass like Xena did.' lol.
Discourse of human- 'uneasy' wish- fulfillment fantasy -	She thinks she can't central her viewing habits now - Soap operas - some of excitement / not exactly the intention.	'I wondered where the writers were going to take me next in the characters and if they were going to pursue the untameable side of Xena and Gaho relationships.'
Discourse about self - 'hooked' (it started to be like a soap opera)	Xena maternal memories -	'photos well done & how much I enjoyed the ones to show - and he tries to show - and he tries to write back no no, that's a hard one ...'
Fluency of discourse not many hesitations, humours - 'journey of the unexpected'	Representations / Show recall -	'in sickness and in health', 'the valkyrie', 'ps and 'beast of darkness' -
Discourse of self -	Xena favorite episodes	

(2)

Discourse	Objective referent(evolving context)	Subjectivity (recounting subject)
Discourse of (non)feminist hesitation (last episode) what does this suggest?	the kiss of water that gabrielle gave tessa in the last ep... try to bring her back.	→ Most memorable thing that happened in the show (last episode) remembers - gabrielle & mermaid? 'kept adding to the story what I liked.' 'and I made some good friends.'
Discourse of humor?/ dislike?	Episode in soaps!	
Discourse of television codes/rep.	Show / intensity	
Discourse about 'self'	Yenice terminating death	'it was hated cause they offend tessa... i didn't like that either... i think we expected them to ride off into the 'sunrise' and live happily ever after
Discourse of flux in recentering other opinion of last episode / univalence of group discourse. XSTT.		
Discourse of romance		
Discourse of self'	Ten fiction	'no... but i enjoy reading it ... since I enjoyed it'
Discourse of celebration		

Appendix 'G'

Node Coding Report for NVivo Software sample

DARXE

NVivo revision 1.2.142

Licensee: ISS

Project: Xenasubtexttalk2

User: Administrator

Date: 25/05/2002 - 12:01:57

NODE CODING REPORT

Node: behaviour

Created: 01/05/2002 - 16:21:01

Modified: 25/05/2002 - 11:41:36

Documents in Set: All Documents

Document 1 of 36 24th june (1st July)

Passage 1 of 8 Section 1.1.1.1, Para 3, 2 chars.

3: \$1 **no**

Passage 2 of 8 Section 1.1.1.3, Para 5, 21 chars.

5: \$3 **moving prevented that**

Passage 3 of 8 Section 1.1.1.24, Para 53, 17 chars.

53: \$24 **Yeah.. if I could**

Passage 4 of 8 Section 1.1.1.26, Para 57, 18 chars.

57: \$26 **we can talk now..**

Passage 5 of 8 Section 1.1.1.27, Para 58, 20 chars.

58: \$27 **that is if you want**

59:

Passage 6 of 8 Section 1.1.1.31, Para 68, 10 chars.

68: \$31 **sometimes**

Passage 7 of 8 Section 1.1.1.33, Para 72, 32 chars.

72: \$33 **but I am mostly working to go to**

Passage 8 of 8 Section 1.1.1.45, Para 98, 114 chars.

98: \$45 **No one really says anything to us. We are very close, but we don't really push our relationship out in everyone's**

Document 2 of 36 darxe

Passage 1 of 28 Section 0, Para 3, 61 chars.

3: Well I wasn't busy til just now, but I still talk a little.

4:

Passage 2 of 28 Section 0, Para 11, 20 chars.

11: the bard is T.Novan

Passage 3 of 28 Section 0, Para 18, 54 chars.

18: She is awesome. Her stuff makes you feel good inside.

Passage 4 of 28 Section 0, Para 28, 134 chars.

28: Humm, I don't know. where was it? What story? You could always write to the Bard and ask her. They will almost always write back.

Passage 5 of 28 Section 0, Para 34, 43 chars.

34: I can ask around. See if anyone else knows

Passage 6 of 28 Section 0, Para 35, 20 chars.

35: I watched by myself

Passage 7 of 28 Section 0, Para 41, 40 chars.

41: It pissed me off, & I cried my eyes out

Passage 8 of 28 Section 0, Paras 97 to 99, 331 chars.

97: yeah just a sec [5]

98: darxe (3:12:18pm) : Okay sorry, There is a club I go to around here, but I only really go when a friend wants me to. It is usually to smokey. I rather just spend time with my friends.

99: darxe (3:12:50pm) : That's the only reason, not cause it has changed any. I never went to any clubs until about 5 years ago.

[5] Internal DB: This is to remind myself that I had to follow up on this part of the research, there were two breaks in the flow of conversation and the questions of Xena being a product which may have discussed lesbian identity on the Internet was never really answered at this juncture. I need to examine if this applies to the other documents. Darxe was always a chatty person who wanted to tell me about her life and what she was doing we formed a friendship very quickly. She sent me a photo of X/Gabrielle. The latter being her favorite she also sent me a picture of herself and her new girlfriend which she went to Houston with. This is the stage of the interview where she tells me that she likes her friend more than a friend and that her friend acknowledged this also.

Passage 9 of 28 Section 0, Para 103, 22 chars.

103: for some, but not all

Passage 10 of 28 Section 0, Para 107, 38 chars.

107: LOL Just a min. I need to think of

Passage 11 of 28 Section 0, Para 118, 225 chars.

118: can we talk later? I emailed a friend and told her that I liked her more than a friend, and she just told me she wants the same thing. I need to go think for awhile. I'll be here tomorrow and we can talk then. that okay?

Passage 12 of 28 Section 0, Para 146, 15 chars.

146: look on the net

Passage 13 of 28 Section 0, Para 146, 121 chars.

146: I have serveral "Bards" that I read, & I always go back to their site to see if they more stories up...both X&G and Uber

Passage 14 of 28 Section 0, Para 150, 48 chars.

150: Well when I first got on the net I went to yahoo

Passage 15 of 28 Section 0, Para 150, 9 chars.

150: alt by it

Passage 16 of 28 Section 0, Para 162, 32 chars.

162: I read the subtext fanfiction Xe

Passage 17 of 28 Section 0, Para 162, 47 chars.

162: I believe they are a couple so reading the gene

Passage 18 of 28 Section 0, Para 163, 37 chars.

163: I do talk about Xena with my friends.

Passage 19 of 28 Section 0, Para 164, 40 chars.

164: I also love the relationship they have.

Passage 20 of 28 Section 0, Para 165, 48 chars.

165: t is perfect, so it gives lots room dream about.

Passage 21 of 28 Section 0, Para 176, 134 chars.

Appendix 'H'

Sample of Membership page from *Xenasubtextalk (XSTT) Fan Club*

Yahoo! Clubs

http://main.clubs.yahoo.com/config/member_subtextalk&total_page=1&page=1

Members				
Listing members 241 - 260 of 359 Edit My Comments Page 13 of 18. View page # <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/> Prev Page Next Page				
Members - Yahoo! ID	Age	Gender	Location	Comment
NoLoElmo	Female	Houston		
invic7_uk	43	Female	England	hello!
oceanne302	48	Female	Ohio	
p_m_davies		Male		
Paris831			Female	Tarzana, California
pc3316		Female		age 36 norwch ct
peacefulwarrior		Female		
petrasoft		Female	xenaverse	...no legacy is so rich as honesty...
Phoenia_7	33	Female	Ohio	
player32x		Female		
pogis		Female		
potedisa444		Female		
quirkster	32	Female	California	The whip is mine. The frying pan is yours. Hower is MINE!... She's yours
r2ms	37	Female	The Forest	Cowgrif up!!!
raimilady		Female	Alabama	Subtext Newbie
Ramblin_F		Female	South Florida	The F's The Limit!
Red_Xen88	23	Female	All Over You	"I have many skills."
reagent_to_the_queen	33	Female	Amazon Territory	Xena&Gab- If all of us could be so lucky
ReneeG33	36	Female	Pa, USA	
resubmit2001	50	Female	London	I am a researcher who would like to ask
Listing members 241 - 260 of 359 Edit My Comments Page 13 of 18. View page # <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/> Prev Page Next Page				
= Send user instant message. = Send user offline message. = Founders. = Receiving club messages by email.		 Get Messenger to list your online status, and to send instant messages to members.		
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Appendix 'I'

Messages from Yahoo Board Posting from XSTT – A Sample of a Fan's Posting

EEG

The screenshot shows a Yahoo! Groups interface for the group 'xenassubtexttalk'. The left sidebar includes links for Home, Messages, Attachments, Members Only (Post, Files, Photos, Links, Database, Members, Calendar, Promote, Groups Lists (Beta)), and a section for 'Yahoo! Groups Tips'. The main content area displays a message from 'emeraldruid' dated May 25, 2001, at 5:55 PM, responding to a post about research. Below this, there are two more messages from other users: one from 'emeraldruid' at 7:55 PM and another from a user at 10:55 PM.

Author	Date	Message Content
emeraldruid	May 25, 2001, 5:55 PM	Re: Research hi cabinngirl, her name is resubmit2001. emeraldruid
emeraldruid	May 25, 2001, 7:55 PM	Hey kids Hi everyone.. its been such a long time since I came and posted anything, but I got a request in my email from a Xena fan in London wanting to do some research...
	May 25, 2001, 7:55 PM	Howdy do! Hello gang. For those of you who haven't seen this, there is an article at http://www.cinescape.com/ .
	May 25, 2001, 10:55 PM	Hello all is it true xena is ending?that sucks...

- Re: hello all
YES...very true.. only 3 or 4 more eps to do..
then done...
- MIA's
well well....another one of the missing in
action foundersHEY CG.....how's it going?

I have some special creatures in
my basement just waiting to...
- Re: MIA's
RIGHT, you can keep them nasty buggers.. I
dont want to see a bloody one! I got enough
to deal with with all these alien looking
spiders and snakes in my...
- Re: Brunhilda is a babe!
The Brunhilda in the Xena "Ring Trilogy" is
based very loosely on the play, "The Ring of
The Nibelungs", by Wagner. In the play,
Brunhilda or Brunnhilda is a ...
- Last Episode Favorite Line
Xena: "If God didn't want us to eat fish, why
did he make it taste so good?"...
- Nice Poem!!!
You have to love the poem that xena gave.
gabby!!! Even though sappho wrote it, it still
came from xena. You can see it in her eyes
when she first says, "When I..."
- Re: Nice Poem!!!
I have to agree, the poem was beautiful&it
got me all teary eyed> ..I think it captures
the love the 2 characters share, as well as the
love Lucy and ...
- Re: Nice Poem!!!
Then they went and ruined it by that cheesy
flying over the ocean thing. I thought that
was just a bit too much. But of course the
ending they should have had...
- Research
I got another email from the woman doing
the research in the UK.. sorry, I cannot find
her name, anyway.. looks like the research
will be postponed for a bit....
- Re: Research
hi cabinngirl,

her name is
mariannamur.

emeraldru...
- Re: Research
Thanks em... got it...
- Re: Research
- and so, the end is near.....

May
6:2

CabinngGirl

May
6:4

StoneXena

May
9:5

CabinngGirl

May
11:

angela_rules

May
11:

leospassen

May
8:4

latinskys

May
12:

FatesEyes

May
11:

Chakram78

May
7:2

CabinngGirl

May
8:0

emeraldru...

May
7:5

CabinngGirl

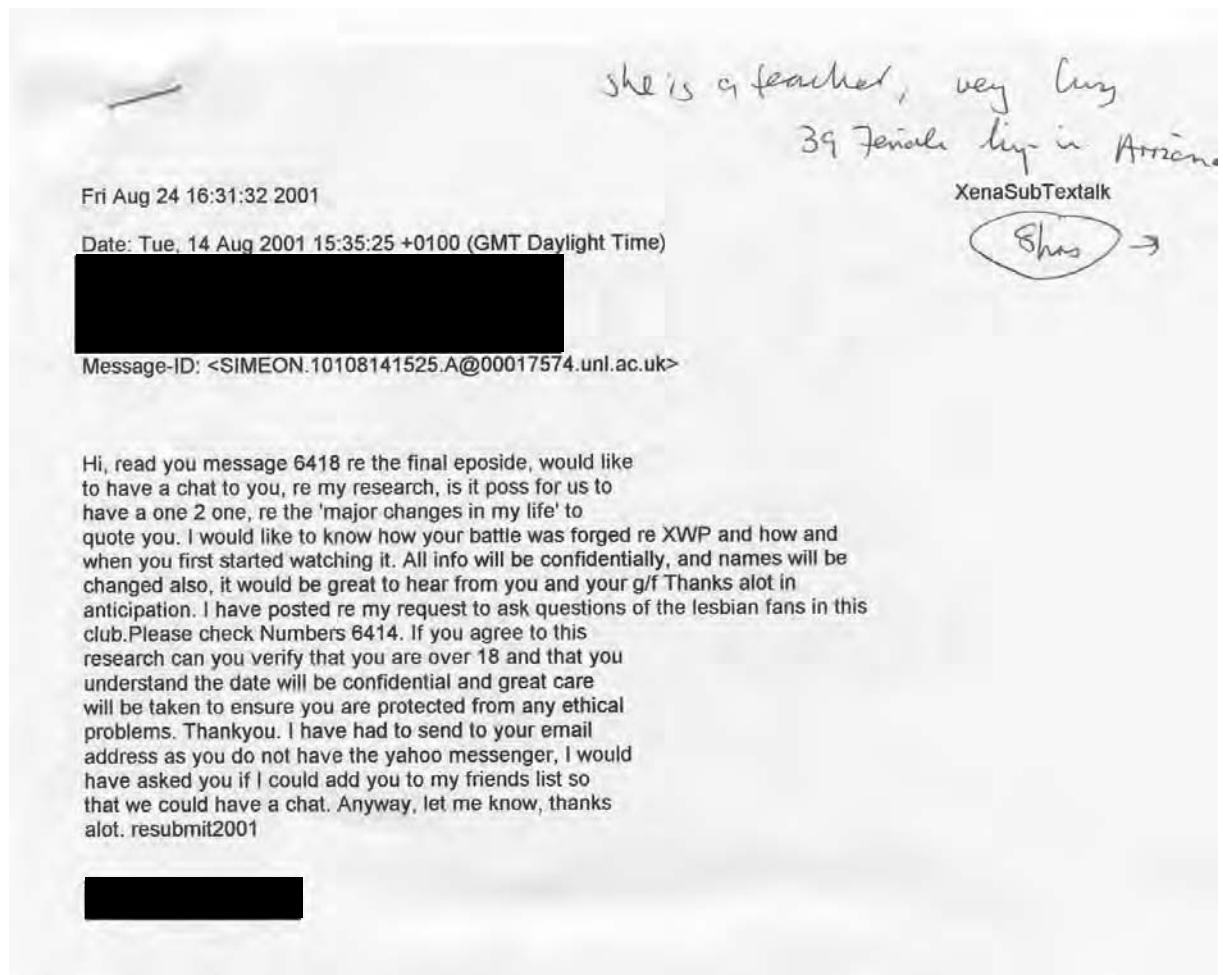
May
12:

emeraldru...

May

Appendix 'J'

Message by email from XSTT – A Sample of Correspondence with a Fan



Appendix ‘K’

An Early Table (1996) Indicating the Growth of X: WP Fan Fiction

This is an early table depicting the growth of X: WP fan fiction collated by a website called ‘Xenos’ indexing the rise in the stories appearing each month from the beginning of the series until 1998. Source: e-journal *Whoosh!* [online] Issue No. 25 org/issue25/lunacy1.html. [Accessed Dec 2010].

	GENERAL	ALTERNATIVE	TOTAL
Up to Jun-96(1)	52	15	67
Jun-96	1	0	1
Jul-96	3	3	6
Aug-96	14	3	17
Sep-96	19	3	22
Oct-96	19	5	24
Nov-96	29	8	37
Dec-96	47	7	54
Jan-97	60	31	91
Feb-97	54	39	93
Mar-97	66	57	123
Apr-97	55	59	114
May-97	38	43	81
Jun-97	54	54	108
Jul-97	53	69	122
Aug-97	56	49	105
Sep-97	41	58	99
Oct-97	65	57	122
Nov-97	53	40	93
Dec-97	63	58	121
Jan-98	54	44	98
TOTAL	896	702	1598