

# **Becoming Who We Are: Building Bi Women's Community in Toronto**

I am fortunate to have come out as bisexual during a time when bi space not only exists, but is growing and flourishing. My space is the bisexual women's community of Toronto, Canada, which has nourished my identity for over a decade.

In this article I focus on four sites of bisexual culture that, while not specific to Toronto, have been essential to the growth of the bisexual women's community here, and relevant to me personally. These sites are 1) anthologies, 2) zines, 3) online computer forums, and 4) discussion groups. Each reveals a different tactic by which bisexual women construct our identities and make ourselves visible.

## ***1. Anthologies***

As a woman living in Halifax, my only proof that bisexuality constituted a legitimate orientation came through anthologies. *Bi Any Other Name*, the ur-anthology of bisexuality, was published the year I came out. Within a decade I had three more bi books, and by 2005 I had contributed to one myself, as had other women from Toronto.<sup>1</sup> I, and the bisexual women I knew, treated these books with the reverence of a canon: quoting them, engaging in exegesis, reading one section against, or in light of, another.

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<sup>1</sup> Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu, eds., *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991); Naomi Tucker, Liz Highleyman and Rebecca Kaplan, eds., *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries and Visions* (New York: Harrington Press, 1995); Kata Orndorff, ed., *Bi Lives: Bisexual Women Tell Their Stories* (Tucson: See Sharp Press, 1999); Debra R. Kolodny, ed., *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith* (New York: Continuum Press, 2000); Robyn Ochs and Sarah Rowley, eds., *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*. (Boston: Bisexual Resource Center, 2005).

Meeting Robin Ochs and Loraine Hutchins at 9ICB was like meeting Moses. Their anthologies functioned as a stand-in for the communities we did not yet have.

These anthologies acted as a model for coming out bisexual, offering us terms, phrases and examples. They also could act as a proxy, performing bi visibility in spaces that were not yet prepared to accept bisexual individuals. I carried my dog-eared copies around like a sign: Bisexual prepared to discuss theory, seeks same.

Mariam Fraser notes that many of the articles in bisexual anthologies are “partial or full confessions, constitutive of a subject who declares the truth of the self.”<sup>2</sup> Yet these confessions are cover-ups as well as revelations. Anthologies are a cacophony of voices, each with their own, possibly conflicting goals of self-representation. They offer a heavily edited self: first through the writing process of each author, then by the anthology editors, into a work that fits pre-set limitations of what is publishable. They are, above all, public discussions. They are engaged in a conversation with lesbian identity politics, with the regulating forces of heteronormativity, yet also with the minds of potential and future bisexuals. As such, they have a fundamentally apologetic and hortatory quality.

As public performances of bisexuality, these anthologies perform bisexual identity through a myriad of tactics and maneuvers. Four of these seem particularly key: 1) resisting heterosexist inclusions; 2) declining lesbian identity; 3) playing language games; and 4) claiming moral ground.

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<sup>2</sup> Mariam Fraser, *Identity Without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies series, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14-15. Citing Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton, eds. (London: Tavistock, 1988), 49.

## Resisting Heterosexist Inclusions

Bisexual women emerge from categories that have adapted to include and hide us. Heterosexuality can tolerate same-sex feelings by labeling them as “normal” stages of heterosexual development.<sup>3</sup> Fantasies and experiences can be redefined as play, practice, experimentation, confusion, or excess. Coming out as bisexual, I often found people reinterpreting my sexuality in these terms. “You’re not bisexual,” they would explain, “you’re just exploring/ kinky/attention-seeking/confused/going through a phase.” The term “bi-curious” remains firmly ensconced within heterosexuality, and is a category women may occupy throughout their lifetime. A 1994 study suggests that the majority of women who report same-sex attractions or behavior continue to self-identify as heterosexual.<sup>4</sup> Identities such as bi-curious or exploring enable women to “come out” without being outsiders.

Yet this inclusion comes at a price. To be acceptable, women's bisexuality must perform in the service of heteronormativity. This bisexuality is a kind of sexual labor reinforcing straight male privilege. As one woman claims, “Bisexual women have been less vulnerable to this new tide of intolerance only insofar as we are interesting and/or available to straight men.”<sup>5</sup> Bi women are treated as sexual aids to otherwise

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<sup>3</sup> The example that may stand out for most Canadians my age is the “Rumour Has It” episode of *Degrassi Junior High*, in which Caitlyn Ryan has an erotic dream about her teacher, Miss Avery. It was a disappointment to bisexuals my age that her crush was resolved as merely a natural (meaning not queer) part of growing up heterosexual.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Diamond and Rich Savin Williams, “Explaining Diversity in the Development of Same Sex Sexuality Among Young Women,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no.2 (2000): 297-313.

<sup>5</sup> Merl, quoted in Dawn Atkins, *Bisexual Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002), 189.

monogamous heterosexual relationships, accorded space for threesomes provided the relationship remains only sexual, and doesn't threaten male ownership of women. In addition, this inclusion requires that bi women maintain a gender presentation that heterosexual men find arousing and non-threatening.<sup>6</sup> To present a masculine or non-traditional gender itself is often sufficient to be labeled as lesbian (whatever one's personal identity) and expelled from heterosexual "service." Bi anthologies labeled the attempt by straight men to use female bisexuality as an avenue to adventurous sex or additional women as the "hot bi babe syndrome." In doing so, they identify their own bisexuality as something other than this heterosexualized behavior.

To reject heterosexual inclusion is to reject invisibility, and thus is a prerequisite for performing a public bisexual identity. How exactly one becomes visible as bisexual is another issue, but anthologies offered us many models. Their biographical entries provided bi coming out stories. These were often variations on the gay and lesbian coming out story in which the bisexual "came out twice," first as gay and lesbian and then as bisexual. Although inspiring, this model was not useful for me since I had not first come out as lesbian, but as bisexual. I was not an insider to queer culture fearing expulsion; I was an outsider requesting entrance.

How one stayed visible as bisexual was also a challenge, and anthologies again offered us strategies. Some bisexuals redefined their same-sex sexual feelings and experiences as personal and private, enabling them to hold a portion of their sexuality apart from male claims for access or control. Dannielle Raymond McClintock writes that

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<sup>6</sup> It is because male bisexuality is associated in the heterosexist mind with emasculation that male bisexuals have not been absorbed by heterosexuality in the same way that bisexual women have.

straight men interpret her identity as a sexual invitation. "I tell them to fuck off. It's inappropriate for them to think that my sexuality is for them."<sup>7</sup>

Other bisexual women wrote about redefining their opposite-sex relationships. Some defined all of their relationships as bisexual by virtue of their participation in them. Others dated men who did not identify as straight. In "The Queer in Me," Carole Queen asks, "A dyke and a faggot being lovers—is that a gay relationship?"<sup>8</sup> Diana, a bisexual woman living in San Francisco, describes her relationship with her bisexual male partner as "queer." She writes, "both of us being out of the closet made a big difference, because it never felt like a heterosexual relationship."<sup>9</sup> By redefining their opposite-sex relationships outside of heterosexual terms women claim agency in their interactions with men.

Another option was to promote bisexuality as a culture as well as a sexual identity. Toward this end, anthologies offered examples of bisexual enclaves, such as Boston, where people were building communities. Anthologies also provided examples of cultural artifacts, such as slogans, buttons, banners, and songs, that could be reproduced in other places. Some of this visibility took advantage of the capitalist absorption of gay and lesbian identity, in which visibility and legitimacy were effects of buying power. If it could be printed on a mug or a t-shirt, and sold, it was legitimate. As products available for sale in the marketplace, anthologies themselves participated in this.

Yet bi anthologies also offered a glimpse of bisexuality as a political identity, that

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<sup>7</sup> Danielle Raymond McClintock, "Danielle," in *Bi Lives*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Carole A. Queen, "The Queer in Me," in *Bi Any Other Name*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Orndorff, *Bi Lives*, 232.

defined itself against the heteropatriarchal norm and against gay and lesbian assimilationism. This option appealed to me. As a feminist, I was suspicious of definitions of sexuality that relied on the distinction between public and private. I agreed that the personal was political. I also didn't want my identity to be defined by the sex of my relationship partners, which felt arbitrary, external, and was subject to change. I needed a political content to my sexual identity, which made it feel as legitimate as lesbianism. I also needed a critical stance that would allow for solidarity with radical queers, including gays and lesbians. Anthologies showed how others were attempting to build communities of shared political commitments rather than just shared sexualities. Their reported failures taught me as much as their successes, such as when the North American Multicultural Bisexual Network's decision to rename themselves BiNET USA revealed the white supremacy that undergirds much of our queer identity.<sup>10</sup>

### **Declining Lesbian Identity**

Lesbians do not have a category that functions as "bicurious" does for heterosexuals. Lesbians are already experts on mainstream sexuality, and do not exoticize it as a subject for curiosity. Despite this, lesbian-identified women do sometimes sleep with men, and lesbian identity has adapted to accommodate this behavior. Lesbian practices of boundary maintenance can permit opposite-sex encounters provided they do not challenge lesbian identity, either by becoming a relationship, or by making male claims on lesbian space. As Michelle Tea explains in "Bis Bite back," the way that lesbian incorporates opposite-sex experience, and the kind of experience it can hold are

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<sup>10</sup> BiNET USA stands for Bisexual Network of the United States of America. For details about this name change see Laura M. Perez, "Go Ahead: Make My Movement" in *Bisexual Politics*, 109-114.

determined by gender:

I've had a lot of butch friends get crushes on dudes, make out with them in the bathroom or on the street, take them home and fuck them, and it's perceived a few different ways: sort of tough, almost dude-on-dude action—really playful and exploring.... But when a femme girl does the same thing, it seems very threatening: She's showing her true colors: she's straight!"<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the behavior must be viewed as an aberration or slip, and not permitted to challenge dominant definitions of lesbian identity.<sup>12</sup> Unlike heterosexuality, lesbianism doesn't make bisexuality perform on its behalf. Rather, it uses bisexuality to define the boundaries of lesbian identity, community, morality, and behavior.

For many women, lesbian identity functions as a protection against a heterosexist world. Declining lesbian identity is thus a frightening prospect, evoking images of homelessness. Carole Queen describes claiming her own bisexual identity in this way:

“the only thing a queer can do in the face of fear of exposure is come out. Yet I moved toward that self-empowerment slowly, and with more fear than I'd ever felt leaving the dysfunctional heterosexual fold fraught with danger, games, and outmoded roles. The worst of it was—I didn't know if I had a place to come out

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<sup>11</sup> Michelle Tea, “Bi's Bite Back: Five queer women talk frankly about being bi in a community that doesn't see both sides,” moderated by Shar Rednour, *On Our Backs* (Spring 2005), 35.

<sup>12</sup> This became clear to me in 1997 when the AIDS Committee of Toronto published a safer sex brochure for lesbians. One panel featured the text “Dykes Do Boyz,” with information on how to reduce the likelihood of HIV transmission when having sex with men. Although the contents emerged out of focus groups with lesbian-identified women, the brochure was not received positively by lesbians in Toronto. More women seemed offended that ACT had suggested that lesbians sleep with men than that the brochure also included information about safer use of IV drugs.

to.”<sup>13</sup>

Bi women described their separation from lesbian identity as a loss of community, clarity, or self. Lani Ka’ahumanu writes, “when you said you were bisexual after having identified as a lesbian, you weren’t coming out into a community. You were coming out to yourself and one or two other people. You were losing a community, and you were losing friends. You were losing respect. You knew women were talking behind your back.”<sup>14</sup>

In anthologies, bisexual women distinguish themselves from lesbians, sometimes against lesbians, but they do not reject lesbianism or lesbian community in the same way they reject heterosexuality. Anthologies portray many women whose bisexuality incorporates their former lesbian identity. Laura Johnson writes that her bisexuality means “I am a lesbian-among-other-things. I call myself bisexual because I am willing to respond to individual men who can relate to me in an honest way and are willing to deal with their sexism and homophobia.”<sup>15</sup> I regret that I was not more accepting of women whose journey had included lesbian identity. Initially, my rigid mindset could not incorporate these multi-layered sexual identities, and assumed they must be faulty,<sup>16</sup> Just as lesbian women had often viewed my bisexuality as an early stage of lesbian identity, I

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<sup>13</sup> Queen, “The Queer in Me,” 19.

<sup>14</sup> Orndorff, *Bi Lives*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Johnson, “Making my own way,” in *Bi Any Other Name* 41.

<sup>16</sup> Researchers at New York University have developed a bisexual identity model that seems to account for this coming out journey. Sara Bleiberg, Adam Fertmann, Christina Godino, and Ashley Todhunter, “The Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development,” *National Association for Campus Activities Programming Magazine* 37, no. 8 (April 2005). <http://www.nyu.edu/residential.education/pdfs/article.bisexual.identity.pdf>

viewed these lesbian-bisexuals as women who had not yet fully accepted their bisexuality. I have since realized what a closer reading of these bi anthologies would have shown: there is not one single correct model of bisexual identity development, rather, there are many.

Since I had not come to bisexuality via lesbianism, I did not have the experience of losing lesbian identity or community. I identified with those women whose stories usually included the line “I knew I wasn’t a lesbian.” Our challenge was to find a sexuality outside both heterosexuality and lesbianism. The rejection experiences I read in the bi anthologies, coupled with similar experiences when I joined “gay, lesbian and bisexual” organizations, left me with a sense that I could never find the community I sought within lesbian space. It left me, if anything, convinced that we needed bisexual community first, in order to become the bisexuals we wanted to be.

### **Playing Language Games**

Faced with a language that is unable to articulate our sexuality, bisexual women have resorted to a variety of neologisms, word play, and many dreadful puns. Anthology writers were frequently trying on new identities: autonosexual, bi-affectual, gender-blind, omnisexual, pansexual, pomosexual, trysexual. They also named new experiences: monosexism, biphobia, lesbocentrism, and binary complicity. Many of the entries in *Bi Any Other Name* have been criticized for establishing a monosexual/bisexual framework that overlooks power differences among gays, lesbians and heterosexuals.<sup>17</sup> The employ

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<sup>17</sup> Clare Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography Of Sexuality And Gender* (New York: Routledge 2002), 27-32; Claire Parry, "Review of Bisexuality: The Psychology And Politics Of An Invisible Minority," by Beth Firestein, ed. *Bi Community News* 12 (1999).

of "monosexual" was a useful tactic for centering bisexual subjectivity, but it has not continued to prove useful. In the 1995 anthology, *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries and Visions*, monosexual has nine pages referenced in the index, and monosexism has thirteen. In the 2002 anthology, *Bisexual Women in the Twenty-First Century*, monosexuality has three pages referenced, and monosexism is absent altogether. I see this as an effect of both bisexual maturity, and of a gay and lesbian community that is becoming tolerant of bisexuals, enabling a queer solidarity.

Lesbian discourse has sometimes framed bisexuals as failed lesbians, coining the term "hasbians." Through terms such as lesbian-identified-bisexual, bi-dyke, bisexual lesbian, queer-bi, or married lesbian, anthology writers attempted to honor connections with lesbian identity and community, or to better represent their own experience of bisexuality.<sup>18</sup> As a reader, my own identity debates felt like an extension of this conversation. As co-chair of Toronto's Dyke March Committee, I spent many hours discussing the term "dyke" with lesbian, bisexual and transsexual activists: what does it mean, who can reclaim the term, and who decides?

Anthologies showed bisexual women modifying gay and lesbian terms to reflect their own experience; "coming out of the closet" was redescribed as "coming out again," or "coming out of the lesbian closet." Bisexual women who allowed themselves to be read as lesbian described the experience as the "closet within a closet." Instead of babydykes we were baby bis, instead of gaydar we had bidar. Mastering these terms, developing our own "secret" language, bonded us together as bisexuals. Achieving

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<sup>18</sup> Since same-sex marriage rights have been gained in many Canadian provinces I notice fewer women identifying as "married lesbians" since the term no longer mixes heterosexual and lesbian categories.

mainstream visibility comes at the cost of possessing this language as uniquely ours, a problem we share with gays, lesbians and transfolk.

Again and again my conservative literary senses have been tortured by bisexual puns: *Bi Any Other Name*, *Getting Bi*, *Blessed Bi Spirit*. Bisexual anthologies also tended to display the postmodern fondness for slashes, square brackets, plays on words and juxtapositions. Mariam Fraser argued that irony allows bisexual women to both claim and deconstruct a unique identity. She terms this usage “ironic authenticity,” and writes that it “represents something of a signature tune for bisexuality as it struggles to find a place on the broader map of contemporary sexualities....”<sup>19</sup> This word play risks appearing ludicrous or nonsensical in its search for terms that better encapsulate bisexual women’s sense of self. Although this wordplay affected me like nails on a chalkboard, I had to admire their willingness to risk spectacular failure.

### **Claiming Moral Ground**

We do not claim our identities in a vacuum, devoid of moral meaning. Identities, with their borderlines, their definitions of insider and outsider, map out ethical commitments and moral identifications. As Revi, a young bisexual woman explained, “If you’re not heterosexual, labels become very useful, because you need to know who stands with you, and you need to have a community that you identify with.”<sup>20</sup> Creating communities takes more than shared identities; it takes shared meanings (stored in symbols and language), common values (judgments of worth and the commitment to pursue that worth), norms (agreed standards of behavior) and a shared vision for the

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<sup>19</sup> Fraser, *Identity Without Selfhood*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Orndorff, *Bi Lives*, 227.

future. Bisexual anthologies not only present the meanings, values, norms and visions of their contributors, they also critically reflect on these elements and point to changes for the future.

A recurring critique within bi anthologies concerns the way that sexual identities have been constructed by white supremacy. Bisexual anthologies are constructed by their editors with the specific intention of representing, revealing, and creating an international, multi-racial, multi-lingual, cross-class bisexual movement. As a production of Sister Vision Press, 50% of *Plural Desires* was written and edited by women of color. The editors, a collective of six women, took pains to represent all their differences:

“We are middle class and working class; we are university educated; we are not currently living with disabilities; we are in our twenties and thirties. We are writers, actors, directors, community AIDS workers and workers in feminist publishing, restaurants and film production.”<sup>21</sup>

The editor of *Bi Lives*, Kata Orndorff, writes, “I regret this book does not have as many women of color represented as I would have liked,” but she notes that it does cover a range of ages and relationship structures.<sup>22</sup> One third of the introduction to *Getting Bi* (2005) is devoted to describing the measures taken in “recruiting contributors from diverse class, race, ability, age, gender identity and language backgrounds.”<sup>23</sup> As a mixed race woman I see many problems inherent in the idea that outreach and participation

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<sup>21</sup> The Bisexual Anthology Collective, *Plural Desires: Writing Bisexual Women's Realities* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press 1995), x-xi.

<sup>22</sup> Orndorff, *Bi Lives*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Robyn Ochs and Sarah E. Rowley, eds. *Getting Bi: Voices Of Bisexuals Around The World* (Boston: Bisexual Resource Centre, 2005). An upcoming edition aims at including more entries from the non-Western world.

alone will overcome racism. Suffice it to say that as yet, bisexual events remain largely white dominated spaces, and the vision of a multiracial and multicultural bisexual movement remains unfulfilled.

Since we are often stereotyped as dishonest and traitorous, honesty is a recurring theme in bisexual anthologies. Choosing to embrace a bisexual identity is defined as being honest, open about our current attractions or relationships, as well as clear in acknowledging our history or potential future. “I feel like I am part of the lesbian community,” writes Rosa, “but I know that I’m not a lesbian. I do know women who identify as lesbians who sleep with men. I could probably do that if I wanted to, but it just seems to me that it’s more clear to say I’m a bisexual.”<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on truth-telling even seems to apply for those women who don’t embrace bisexuality as a positive facet of themselves, such as Judy Freespirit, who writes, “I don’t like to have to call myself bisexual. It’s not something I embrace, but it is something that I have to acknowledge.”<sup>25</sup>

Other features of the landscape are more problematic. Some bisexuals continue to use essentializing, universalizing, and naturalizing as strategies to support their identity choice. By positing bisexuality as immutable and timeless bisexuals lay claim to both time and space, but in ways that overwrite or undermine the identities of others. Similarly, when bisexuality is defined as an ability, bisexual women reject the definitions imposed upon them by others (hyper-sexual, uncommitted, indecisive) and simultaneously give bisexuality moral content that defines other identities by lack. While these tactics may be effective in enabling or stabilizing bisexuality, they raise questions

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<sup>24</sup> Orndorff, *Bi Lives*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

about the ethical foundations upon which we build. With whom do the bisexuals produced by these tactics stand? Where is their community, and to what have they committed?

## **Anthologies Revisited**

Coming out, I longed for a bisexual role model that hadn't committed suicide or died of a drug overdose. I desperately needed validation, particularly in the form of real bisexuals living happy lives. This was not available in the small village where I grew up. It was also not available in Halifax, where I knew less than five out bisexuals. Anthologies provided me with hundreds of examples of bi lives. When I did meet other bisexuals, anthologies served as a shared cultural inheritance we could discuss and debate.

## **2. Zines**

“Anything you hold in your hand can be used as a weapon or as a tool, and zines are no exception.”<sup>26</sup>

After anthologies, Zines stand out for me as a key part of bisexual cultural creation. Zines are an outgrowth of the fanzine, but also of poetry chapbooks and the pamphleteering and manifesto tradition. S. Bryn Austin and Pam Gregg write that zines are essentially a product of the “the photocopier-and-personal-computer revolution of the 1980s, that gave renegade publishers a quick, easy, and accessible medium to work

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<sup>26</sup> Hank Revolt, *Xerox Revolutionaries*. <http://www.digressonline.com/lgbtplus/xerox%20revolutionaries.html>

with.”<sup>27</sup> Bisexual women’s zines are community productions, giving space to a variety of marginalized voices and producing bisexuality as a multi-vocal identity. At the same time, they are embodiments of single identities, as symbolic manifestations of their editors.

One of the differences between the content of zines and that of anthologies is the identity of the assumed reader. Anthologies are written for other bisexuals, but with an awareness that the conversation is taking place in public. Compared with books, zines have a vastly lower print run, lack mainstream marketing, and have a greatly streamlined editorial process. As a result, zines can function as a dialogue that is internal to the bi women’s community. This internal dialogue counters bisexual misrepresentation and invisibility in the gay and lesbian press, and fills a void created by shifts in queer women’s space.

In Toronto, bisexual women produce zines within a larger culture of queer zine production. Cheryl Dobinson, creator of *The Fence*, writes

“I know a lot of the other local zine girls or queer zinesters and we go to many of the same events, are on the same email lists, submit work to each other’s zines and support each other in projects. I started to meet these folks as soon as my first issue was out [in 2002], and have felt increasingly part of the larger queer/grrrl zine community since then.”<sup>28</sup>

Toronto’s Zine Library lists over sixty queer zines and Fruit Market, a queer zine fair,

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<sup>27</sup> S. Bryn Austin and Pam Gregg, “A Freak Among Freaks: The ‘Zine Scene,’”(81-95) in *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond The Lesbian Nation* Arlene Stein, ed. (New York: Plume, 1993), 82.

<sup>28</sup> Cheryl Dobinson, “Questions about the Fence,” personal email (October 19, 2007).

celebrated its fifth year in 2007. The number of zines in circulation reveals that our bi community has grown far beyond a circle of friends who meet for supportive chat and go for coffee afterwards. The first issue of the *The Fence* had a print run of 300 copies. This is remarkable given that the largest bi group in the city, **Bisexual Women of Toronto** (BiWOT), has just over three hundred women on our email discussion list. It astounds me that there are bisexuals I don't personally know reading bi zines all over the city. In addition to regular subscribers, Dobinson writes, "I sell the zines at stores in Toronto like Toronto Women's Bookstore and This Ain't the Rosedale Library plus at Venus Envy in Ottawa, I sell them at zine fairs in Toronto, and I sell them at Pride and at bi community events and BiWOT meetings." Zines are exportable as well, representing bisexual Toronto to other places. Dobinson notes that of *The Fence*'s 80 subscribers, half are from Canada, while the rest are "mainly from the US with a smattering of other countries represented."<sup>29</sup>

As I see it, bisexual zine culture in Toronto has been influenced by two developments: the demise of Clit Lit, a monthly spoken word series curated by author Elizabeth Ruth, and the collapse of *Siren*, a primarily lesbian-oriented magazine. Clit Lit debuted in 1998 at the Red Spot, a long, thin, dimly lit bar on the second floor of 459 Church Street, in the heart of the gay village. By 2001 Elizabeth Ruth began to seek out guest curators to enable her to devote more time to editing *Bent On Writing*.<sup>30</sup> I offered to curate the June 2002 event and suggested that Bisexuality be the theme for the evening.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Ruth, ed. *Bent On Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002). This was a collection of writing that had been performed at Clit Lit during its run.

Although Clit Lit had been in existence for four years, and many bisexual women had read their work there, this was the first time the theme of the readings had been specifically bisexual.<sup>31</sup> There was a sense of excitement that evening, as we created a moment of bi space at what was usually a lesbian event. The realization that so many women in our community could write was energizing, and people discussed the idea of creating published work. Out of the enthusiasm of that night a spate of bisexual-edited zines emerged, both short-lived runs, such as my own zine, *Bi-Dyke*, and longer-running works such as *The Fence* and *Pussy Pen*.<sup>32</sup>

A second influence on bi zines in Toronto was the demise of *Siren Magazine*, that ended its nine year run in 2004. Originally a zine itself, *Siren* had grown to become the voice of lesbian women in Toronto, particularly as *Xtra*, “Toronto’s gay and lesbian biweekly” newspaper became increasingly male-focused to compete with the gay male magazine *fab*. *Siren*’s editors cited volunteer burn-out and a lack of funding as reasons for the magazine’s trouble.<sup>33</sup> At approximately the same time the U.S. based bisexual magazine, *Anything That Moves* (ATM) stopped production, also citing dwindling volunteer and financial resources. Although I hadn’t been one of its readers, *ATM* held a unique symbolism for me in that it was the only bisexual magazine in a sea of gay and lesbian publications on the newsstand. Its loss, along with that of *Siren* created a vacuum for bisexual visibility in Toronto that the production of bi zines shifted to fill.

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<sup>31</sup> As it turned out, this was the last ever Clit Lit, provoking the fear that people would blame bisexuality for “killing Clit Lit.”

<sup>32</sup> *Pussy Pen* began as a bisexual-led spoken word event to fill the void left by Clit Lit; the zine of the same name followed almost immediately.

<sup>33</sup> See <http://www.siren.ca>. [link currently down]. Another factor in its demise was the decision to eliminate regular columns (including my Bi Lines column), resulting in a lack of local content.

In many ways, the rise of bi zines in Toronto represents a failure by our queer press to fully or adequately represent bisexuals. S. Bryn Austin and Pam Gregg argue that queer zines are “rooted in (and against) the gay/lesbian and the feminist presses,” defining themselves in opposition to a mainstream that is perceived as corrupt, commodified, and lacking radical political commitments.<sup>34</sup> Zines simultaneously participate in the discourse of media and act as a parody, critique or counter-narrative, enacting bisexual identities that do the same. A local example of this is Abuzar Chaudhary’s zine, *Shame On Pride*, that critiqued the commercialism and depoliticization of Toronto’s Pride Week celebrations. In addition to being a critique, *Shame On Pride* also featured the first attempt to survey participants and observers of the Pride Week festivities for their political perspective on the event.

One of the reasons that zines are attractive to bisexuals is that access to the queer press is not guaranteed for us. Rather, it is contingent on being acceptable to the editorial staff, advertisers, and to their perception of what their readership (assumed to be gay or lesbian) wants. Although she sometimes writes for the gay and lesbian press, Cheryl Dobinson she notes that in doing so she speaks as one individual, and not to an exclusively bi audience. She sees zines as offering greater freedom. “I wanted to be able to create it in the way that I wanted,” she writes, “and to have it be all about bisexual women.... So the zine is also somewhat of a community building activity in a way that writing for the queer press isn’t.”<sup>35</sup> My own experience as a journalist has been similar. Whereas it would be unthinkable for *Xtra* to print a homophobic article, pieces reporting

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<sup>34</sup> Austin and Gregg, “A Freak Among Freaks,” 83.

<sup>35</sup> Cheryl Dobinson, “Questions about the Fence,” personal email (October 19, 2007).

biphobia have had to balance the voice of bisexuals with that of biphobic lesbians and gay men. Editors act as gatekeepers to public voice, assigning authenticity to writers and defining as well as reflecting public opinion.

A zine is a product of numerous voices and also the product of one voice, the editor. Fred Wright argues that individuals “create their publications because of the psychological need to produce and consolidate a sense of identity for themselves...” He sees zine names, and publisher pseudonyms as a way individuals “actively shift their positions in the [Lacanian] Symbolic order... creating entirely new identities for themselves in the pages of their zines.”<sup>36</sup> *The Fence* is a collection of articles by local bisexual women, but also reflects Dobinson’s editorship and individual bisexual identity. *Pussy Pen* is edited under the pseudonym Ms Snit, a persona the editor maintains in her online interactions as well, almost as her bisexual persona. My own zine, *Bi-Dyke*, was an attempt to explore my experience as a bisexual whose queerness is public and political, yet who feels inept and awkward in sexual situations.

Like anthologies, zines enable us to represent the kind of community we want, but don’t yet have. Zines offer space for marginalized voices, that might not be found in mainstream gay and lesbian publications. *The Fence* has included writing that explores intersecting identities such as black, native, or deaf bisexuals, and issues such as ableism, antisemitism and sexual abuse.<sup>37</sup> I produced one Dyke March Zine, the main purpose of which was to communicate our manifesto, that defined the march as trans-inclusive. This

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, “The Psychological Motivations of the Zine Publisher,” <http://www.zinebook.com/resource/wright.html>

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy P. Bushnell, “Zine Reviews; Fence Sitter #1” *Invisible City Productions* (June / July 2001). Formerly at <http://www.invisible-city.com/zines/reviews601.htm>.

was done at a time when we were facing pressure to reject both male-to-female transsexuals as not “real women,” and female-to-male transsexuals as traitors to womanhood. Our zine and its manifesto, that now reads to me as not inclusive enough, was a way of opposing narrow definitions of lesbian and woman, and refusing to help build the community those definitions would authorize. Likewise, bisexual zines aim to create inclusive bi communities through representation, showing the multifaceted bisexual identities that don’t yet feel fully embraced in bi Toronto itself.

Annie Knight, publisher of *Digress Magazine*, describes zines as a repository of radical visions for queer futures:

I've come to see zine making as one of the most influential forms of activism and consciousness raising. Also, since I'm such a zine fiend and a bisexual, I've found many queer zines to contain views and approaches to living in regards to sexuality, gender, and even just our daily routines that have inspired me to stretch my limits as an individual, writer, artist, and activist in ways that mainstream publications never did or will.<sup>38</sup>

For bisexuals, under-represented by local and national publications, zines have been an affordable way to create a lasting archive of bi culture. By claiming a space within a counter-culture media where bisexual women can speak by and for themselves, zine writers produce themselves and others as particular types of bisexual women: anti-capitalist, artistic, poetic, and political.

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<sup>38</sup> Annie Knight, *Digress Magazine*. <http://www.digressonline.com/lgbtplus/aboutthissite.html>.

### ***3. Online Computer Forums***

“Do you believe in the user?”<sup>39</sup>

The internet is frequently touted as a site where women may perform identities in anonymity, as experiment, play or practice for later identification. It has also been suggested that virtual reality discussions allow women to share views, feelings or experiences they feel unable to share in “real life.”<sup>40</sup> This view accurately describes my experience of the internet as a place where identity can be developed, interpersonal skills can be learned and honed, and communities can be forged. At the same time, the characterization of the internet as "virtual" reality seems to dismiss the authenticity of these experiences.

Undoubtedly, bisexual women in Toronto have used the internet in a multitude of ways to build and shape their community. The yahoogroups maintained by BiWOT, and the Toronto Bisexual network (TBN), for example, enable people to stay connected with support and discussion between monthly meetings and events or when attending these gatherings isn't possible. For me, and for other activists I know, one of the strongest influences on Toronto's bi women's community occurred online, between October of 1999 and September of 2005. This was the lifespan of the internet forums Sexilicious and Hercurve.

Sexilicious was a mixed-gender site focused on women's sexuality. It featured non-fiction articles, erotica, a monthly column by site owner Renee Racine, photo

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<sup>39</sup> Quote from *Tron*.

<sup>40</sup> Ann Kaloski, “Extracts from Bisexuals Making Out with Cyborgs: Politics, Pleasure, Con/fusion (1997)” in Merl Storr, ed., *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 204.

archives, a connection to Womenline (a personals site) and a discussion forum. The site functioned as a virtual Toronto, in part due to the promotion efforts of its creator. "I spent all my effort on the Toronto women's community," writes Racine. Although Sexilicious was for straight as well as queer women, Racine admits she put a "strong slant toward the queer -- littering women's washrooms all over the village with promo cards and stickers)." Despite this, she notes, "the site attracted women from all over the country and internationally."<sup>41</sup>

Racine created Hercurve as the queer sister site to Sexilicious. "The content on this site could really go 'all the way' in terms of being queer," writes Racine. "It's existence gave me access to new frontiers in terms of promotions and partnerships. And it gave me a place to explore my own personal evolution (feeling at the time that I was transitioning from a straight-seeming existence to an openly lesbian existence)."<sup>42</sup>

Hercurve began in July of 2000 and I joined in August after hearing about it from a friend, who was moderating the Bi Pride forum under the name Darl. I posted as Moogie, a name I frequently used online. Our Hercurve profiles could include an email address, homepage, occupation, interest list, and ICQ number. This allowed for a variety of degrees of outness among the members. At the time I was out at home, school and work, but not yet fully comfortable being accessible online. I listed a hotmail address, named my occupation as "student" and listed my location as "Toronto - the dirty downtown core within stomping distance of the village." I listed some interests, but I was not an ICQ user, and did not then have a homepage.

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<sup>41</sup> Rene Racine, "Questions about Hercurve Inception," personal email (October 19, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Our online selves were represented in a multitude of ways. The site assigned us a status based on our length of time posting and number of posts. These included “slightly warped,” “completely bent,” and “curviest of all.” I checked the site several times a day for new posts or responses, and the speed of replies from others made the message boards resemble a conversation. The relative anonymity of the internet enabled me to oppose biphobia more directly than I felt able to in the queer community in which I lived. Lacking the pressure of face-to-face discussion, or its online parallels, such as chat or messenger programmes, I had time to draft, revise and edit my comments before posting them. Discussion, agreement and argument with others on Hercurve gave me the terminology and practice I needed to develop into a bisexual activist.

Most users chose not to list a location, but of those who did, most listed Toronto, including Racine, known as Editrix.<sup>43</sup> Hercurve functioned as a virtual Toronto, allowing us to create a bi-friendly queer community that did not yet exist in the “real” Toronto. The website represented the type of community we wished we had, and by doing so became a community itself, spawning friendships, rivalries and romances. One former Hercurve member, who posted as Ladyjane, met her wife, Mistresslynx, on Hercurve. She wrote that “Finding Hercurve was finding family for me. It was the first time I'd ever felt like I belonged somewhere, which isn't hard to imagine when you realize that I was a young, queer, polyamorous pagan in middle America.”

Racine's vision of women's sexuality was insightful and accurate. Hercurve defined our sexuality as a holistic experience, not simply something genital. The forums and articles addressed body image, health, and politics, as well as sexual topics. Racine

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<sup>43</sup> Others listed locations as varied as Japan, Australia, London UK, and Texas.

wrote that she has “some strong views about body image issues and taking back ownership of our sexuality which I wanted to address.”<sup>44</sup> This helped us to realize the extent to which our politics, our sense of ourselves as attractive, and our place in our community are part of our sexual experience.

The forum took a political stance by defining bisexuals, transsexuals and the polyamorous as legitimate members, not only for the board itself, but also for the Toronto it represented and the queer women’s community in general. The BiPride forum endorsed our claim that we belonged in queer space, not as poseurs but as equals. The transforum, for both MTFs and FTMs, made a claim about transinclusion that was years ahead of “real life” groups in Toronto. Instead of a Butch/Femme forum Hercurve had separate Fantastic Femmes and Bois and Butches sections, reflecting the way these identities were no longer seen as necessarily two halves of the same coin. As a femme primarily attracted to other femmes, this structure allowed space for my identity, even if I frequently encountered members whose ideas of butch and femme differed from my own.

The forums served as both a safe space and a window into the lives of others. Rather than dividing us, the various forums allowed us to see and accept the diversity of our community. Racine wrote:

the communities both operated with surprisingly little drama. The members they attracted seemed above the norm in terms of self-possessed-ness, restraint, emotional intelligence and understanding. Boards about sexuality, with very little

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<sup>44</sup> Racine, "Questions about Hercurve Inception."

need for moderation – astounding.<sup>45</sup>

Although the forums authenticated our identity labels, and provided a relatively safe space, they also raised the issue of who is authorized to speak as bisexual, trans, or lesbian. I sometimes encountered biphobia among lesbians who had once identified as bisexual. Their biphobia went unacknowledged, as they felt their former identity enabled them to speak authoritatively about bisexuality. I didn't yet have the tools I needed to deconstruct this experience; I just knew that the bisexuality they were describing and critiquing was not the bisexuality with which I identified myself.

Our anonymity, together with Hercurve's culture of support and respect, allowed us to be more personal in our discussions. We posted questions we could never ask one another in person. We discussed experiences that were traumatic, confusing, or shameful. In this way, the forums provided a short-cut to intimacy. Many of us sought this connection particularly because we had recently lost the founding mother of Toronto's bi women's community, Karol Steinhouse.<sup>46</sup> Her sudden death in March of 2000 left many grieving. I had known Karol as a facilitator through BiWOT. For women like me, Karol's death meant the loss of a mentor and role model. We watched those who had been close to Karol grieve, and grieved ourselves that we would never know her better. Her death gave an urgency to our interactions that allowed us to break through the barriers that determine what is appropriate to say between women, between acquaintances, and between friends.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Karol Steinhouse was killed on March 29th, 2000, when her airbag deployed after her car was bumped from behind at an intersection. She was 47. For more about Karol see [BiWOT's memorial page](#) and [the memorial article](#) written by Krista Taves.

By having such an impact on queer women living in Toronto, Hercurve inevitably had a concrete effect on the Toronto it represented virtually. We began to meet up apart from the website. Toronto hosted several Hercurve meetings offline, with visitors coming from as far away as Vancouver and Kansas to attend. Ladyjane wrote, "The fact that a large portion of its users, including my wife, were in Toronto was actually really helpful for me."<sup>47</sup> Ladyjane attended two Hercurve meetups in Toronto, first in August of 2001, at Pope Joan's, and later in October at Buddies In Bad Times.<sup>48</sup> "I was meeting people who lived here," Ladyjane wrote. "This made it easier on me when I actually moved to Toronto to be with my wife because I had already made connections and had a bit of a support network established, which is something that usually takes a fair bit of time when moving to a completely different city."<sup>49</sup>

Eventually, even at events that weren't designated as Hercurve gatherings, we began discussing the site and introducing ourselves by our Hercurve names. I made friends offline with women I had first met online. This was a departure for me, since I had previously used the internet primarily to communicate with people I already knew personally.

Online existence is transitory, particularly with a board such as Hercurve, which is essentially the project of one woman. To begin with the boards were expensive, and didn't generate their own revenue. Racine writes:

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<sup>47</sup> Kettunainen, "Response to 'Hercurve,'" in Livejournal the\_moogie (July 19, 2007). <http://the-moogie.livejournal.com/306007.html>

<sup>48</sup> Pope Joan was a bar primarily for lesbians on Parliament Street. Formerly the Rose, it later became Foxy's and Coyote's and has now been demolished for condo space. Buddies in Bad times is a theatre and bar on Alexander Street.

<sup>49</sup> Kettunainen, "Response to 'Hercurve.'"

“I was running the sites as cheaply as I could. I tried a variety of cash generating schemes -- selling toys through a Babeland affiliation, serving ads, asking for donations, even converting Sexilicious to an adult links site by the end in order to support the business, attempting to make Hercurve the 'all for one' site that sexi[licious] used to be -- but they all failed to cover the costs of keeping these forums alive.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition, the site had server problems. The Hercurve board was first lost in November of 2003. The forums reopened in December of 2004, but were inconsistently available after that, and closed permanently in September of 2005. From the perspective of the user, all the posts, status, user information, passwords and other features simply disappeared one day. Although these portions of us exist online, distinct from our physical bodies, they are no less real. Many women experienced the loss of their online self as highly traumatic, and chose never to return to the renewed board.

In its demise, Hercurve revealed a clash between the site creator, who had started the site as a business, and some site members, who felt Racine has betrayed them to consumer interests. Although we are right to be concerned about capitalism's role in controlling queer women's space, the feminist in me was disturbed by the role Racine was expected to fill. Demands that she be all-giving, self-sacrificing, self-negating and obedient struck me as particularly problematic for a feminist community. The construction of Hercurve's demise as a betrayal took on a biphobic slant as some members noted that the site closure coincided with Racine's choice to date a man. Some women formed their own discussion forums on mainstream message board providers

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<sup>50</sup> Racine, "Questions about Hercurve Inception."

rather than depend on one individual to protect their self-expression.<sup>51</sup>

In remembering Hercurve, Ladyjane wrote, “I’m sad that it’s now defunct because it served as an excellent resource and sounding board for me and for many other women. With it being gone, the resources and community that was there is gone, too, or at least it has become heavily fragmented in different pockets around the web. The family feeling I got from Hercurve in the near 2 years I was actively participating on the boards was irreplaceable.”<sup>52</sup>

#### ***4. Discussion groups***

Groups for discussion and support have been a feature of bisexual women’s activism from the beginning. Although they owe their origins to consciousness-raising feminist circles, they are currently determined by the discourse of support typical of 12-step programs. In this section I examine the **Bisexual Women of Toronto** [BiWOT] discussion group, and argue that bisexual space emerges as multi-layered, delineates itself by ritual evocation and dismissal of similar space claims, and establishes safe space in part by claiming bisexual normativity.

BiWOT meetings take place on the first Thursday of every month at the **519 Community Centre** at 519 Church St. This is both a heterosexual space, in that it is a municipal community centre, partially funded and supervised by the city of Toronto, and also a gay and lesbian space, in that it is located in the middle of Toronto’s “gay village,” and dominated by gay and lesbian groups, programmes and events. Bisexual space thus

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<sup>51</sup> One example of this is Sapphismo at <http://www.ezboards.com>.

<sup>52</sup> Kettunainen, "Response to 'Hercurve.'"

occurs within gay and lesbian space, which is within heterosexual space, resulting in layers of sedimentary meaning reminiscent of a Jawbreaker. Since there are no bisexual bars, community centers, cafes, bookstores, or centers in Toronto, our identity has no specific footholds on city space. As Clare Hemmings notes, because bisexuals lack bi space, “bisexual self-identification is not directly related to an external bisexual “home” in the same way as lesbian or gay self-identification often is,” and she identifies the temporality of bisexual space, and its emergence from within gay and lesbian space, as one of the reasons bisexual subjectivity is accused of being inauthentic.<sup>53</sup>

The 519 is experienced both as a welcoming place, where creating bisexual space is possible, and also as a dominating force, against which bisexual space must be claimed. BiWOT has no control over its room assignment, which is related to group size. Room placement within the 519 is not a neutral act, and some rooms are ascribed meaning by BiWOT participants. An example of this was when BiWOT’s numbers temporarily swelled, necessitating a larger room. The group was assigned the use of the East Room, which during the day is a pre-school space. Unlike the other rooms the space changes frequently as children’s artwork is displayed, and the room has a couch and matching chairs. The group experienced this room assignment as a reward by the 519, and participants began to compete for the comfortable seating. When attendance shrank, and the group was reassigned to the third floor, this was interpreted as judgment and punishment, and some suggested that it was an instance of discrimination. Additional stigma is attached to rooms in the basement, and to assignment to the café space, which is less private and often disorganized and messy. If space is a form of representation, then

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<sup>53</sup> Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces*, 46; Hemmings, “A Feminist Methodology of the Personal,” <http://orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/hemmings.htm>.

the circumstances of bisexual space claims represents bisexual subjects as temporary occupants of gay and lesbian space, reinforcing images of bisexuality as ephemeral and transient.<sup>54</sup>

BiWOT meetings are disciplined spaces, and in many ways, ritual spaces. The meeting begins with the symbolism of closing the door, which creates a separate and private space. Although newcomers may arrive at any point during the meeting, the meeting has begun once the door is closed. BiWOT's identity as a support group evokes the model of 12-step support, and the specter of participants as addicts. This shadow of AA and similar groups is evoked and dismissed in order to establish bi space. This is done first in the welcoming speech, in which the facilitator reads or paraphrases the guidelines of the group, and notes that BiWOT "does not have the expertise to provide therapy but we can refer you to people who provide that service," thus distancing themselves from the mental health discourse.<sup>55</sup> But the majority of ritual evocation and dismissal is spontaneous, and accomplished by humor, such as when group members purposely imitate the AA check-in by phrases such as "hello, my name is Margaret, and I am a bisexual," and the group responds with "Hi, Margaret," parodying 12-step solidarity.

Part of what makes the space at BiWOT "safe" is its separation from heteronormative social surveillance, enabling participants to discuss their experiences with employers, churches, psychiatric institutions, and other social authorities, without

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<sup>54</sup> Hemmings, "A Feminist Methodology of the Personal," [http:// orlando.women.it /cyberarchive/files/hemmings.htm](http://orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/hemmings.htm). Also, please note that this applies to the 519 prior to its 2006-2008 addition and reconstruction.

<sup>55</sup> Bi Pride Planning Group, "Monthly Meeting Facilitation."

repercussions. Yet another element of bisexual women's space is its differentiation from lesbian space. Although lesbian-identified women have attended BiWOT, the focus on bisexuality, and the assumption that unless otherwise indicated, women identify as bisexual, creates a presumption that lesbians are outsiders who may be discussed. The separation between bisexual women and lesbians is a fiction, since some of the women who attend are coming out as bi after having identified as lesbians, and may still be identifying and living as lesbians when not at BiWOT. As well, some of the bi-identified women live in a queer women's community which is not exclusively lesbian, but that certainly includes lesbians. The fiction that lesbians are outsiders enables women to discuss the incongruities they experience and the issues they have with community boundaries and identity policing without fearing outing and reprisal.

The need to prioritize bisexuality in order to create bi space became most clear for me when a bisexual woman brought her lesbian-identified partner, ostensibly to help the partner overcome her biphobia. The focus of the discussion shifted toward addressing her needs, rather than those of the bi women present. Our critique of lesbian positions or actions were met by this woman with explanation, as if the problem was not (as we defined it) lesbian biphobia, but was our failure to understand the lesbian point of view. Moreover, I was astounded by the authority we granted to her in our space (such that many of us felt silenced, despite outnumbering her by almost 20 to 1). This authority stemmed in part from her lesbian identity, which both claimed and was accorded greater authenticity than our (in many cases still-developing) bisexual identities. An additional authority stemmed from her gender presentation as butch, which reinforced her lesbian authority (as a real, visible lesbian) and also partook of the traditional valuing of

masculine over feminine. As a result, it became clear that part of the safety of bisexual space is in the recognition of bi space as bi-normative space, in which participants are either expected to be bisexual, or to submit themselves to bisexual interests. This can be seen reflected in the facilitation guidelines, which define the space as for discussion “only about relationship issues or topics relating to bisexuality.”<sup>56</sup>

BiWOT space is disciplined, both through outside constraints and through practices that establish behavioral guidelines. The temporary nature of BiWOT’s claim on the space is reinforced by time constraints and space management. The group must limit its meeting time to the constraints of its room booking (8-10 p.m.), and must dismantle the room after use, returning chairs and other items to pre-set locations. These spaces are thus never experienced as “ours.” We are consumers of an already produced static space, which is defined as gay and lesbian, with the perceived approval of the city.

Although the premise of “safe space” is that the individual is free from judgment and controlling authorities to “be themselves,” BiWOT has structures of surveillance which establish the space as a place where bisexuality is enacted, elicited, or demanded, not merely where it is allowed to exist. One of the traditions is that chairs are placed in a circle, indicating a lack of hierarchy among the participants. Yet as a practice this means everyone is constantly subjected to potential observation. BiWOT meetings feature an incitement to confession in the form of a “check in,” in which participants are invited to say their name and something about themselves. This confession is mannered in two ways. First, the facilitator is admonished not to allow anyone to monopolize the discussion time, and empowered to intervene in a narrative if necessary. A second way

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

confession is shaped is perhaps not surprising if one believes Foucault's argument that sexual discourse is not, in fact, repressed, but is demanded nearly constantly. Many report that they experience bi space as a freedom from the need for speech. Statements such as "It's nice to not have to explain everything," are common, indicating that part of the freedom of bisexual space is represented by the lack of interrogation of bisexuality, which typifies non-bi space.

Groups such as BiWOT are like school or hospital space as Foucault describes them, in that they are "areas of extreme sexual saturation."<sup>57</sup> This is a problem, as can be seen by the facilitation guidelines, that read, "[w]e are also not a dating service. People sometimes do meet other people through our groups, and end up dating or forming relationships. Still it must be noted that match making is not the purpose of our groups. Our purpose is mutual support."<sup>58</sup> The establishment of guidelines such as this reflects anxiety about the space becoming hyper-sexualized (as bisexual women are accused of being), and also reveals the assumption that the motivations of sexual interest run counter to those of mutual support. This is an ongoing issue for BiWOT members, some of whom see bi-specific sexualized space as a political or social necessity.

The desire that BiWOT be a safe space for all bisexuals results in prioritizing support over politics. Thus confidentiality is established as a group guideline over other values, such as visibility. Diversity is likewise put forth as a group value, defined as respecting all points of view, rather than making distinctions based on political

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<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978, 1990), 46.

<sup>58</sup> Bi Pride Planning Group, "Monthly Meeting Facilitation."

commitments.<sup>59</sup>

A final element of BiWOT's use of space is the tradition of going for coffee or food in the Church and Wellesley village after the meeting. This activity creates an overlap between the meeting space of BiWOT and the existence of BiWOT as an entity outside the 519. Although one might assume this social time is not technically a BiWOT event, the practice of the event suggests otherwise; the agreement that attendance is confidential, for example, extends to these social gatherings. These excursions both help to establish BiWOT as more than a support group, and provide a critical mass among which women may experiment with being visible as bisexual in the queer community. That such visibility requires a financial investment is part of the problem we inherit for having linked commercial venues with queer identity. Opportunities for this type of group visibility also occur during Pride Week, at the BiWOT brunch, in the Dyke March and Pride Parade, near the BiWOT/TBN table in the community fair, at Celebrate Bisexuality Day, and at various social events throughout the year.

## ***Conclusions***

Professor of International Studies, Benedict Anderson, argued that nations are imagined communities. "[E]ven the smallest nation," he wrote, "will never know most of their fellow-members...yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>60</sup> Anderson's definition is particularly helpful when examining our sense of belonging to a

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

bisexual community, since membership cannot rely on traditional boundary markers such as physical territory. Instead, our sense of belonging is based on what we imagine the bi community to be, and where we see ourselves in relation to it.

My image of bisexual communities in other cities was shaped by the anthologies I read. Activists in Toronto modeled our community in part on what we believed others were doing. Through cultural productions such as zines and online forums we present the kinds of community we need, yet do not yet fully possess. In some cases, such as it was with Hercurve, this imagined community can have a real affect on the way we define insider and outsider.

One of the facets of bisexual subjectivity I find most interesting is that in many cases, bisexual practices (whether sexual, social or political) pre-date the claiming of bisexual identity. This runs counter to the typical myth of coming out, in which self-awareness leads to community involvement and relationships. Rather than viewing bisexual identity as the prerequisite for access to bisexual space, it seems that participation and identity formation are related in more complex ways. Participation can precede identity, it can elicit identity, and it can influence what identity looks like, even as identity can evoke particular forms of participation as possible, desirable or demanded. Rather than discovering the “truth” of our identity and then subjecting our self to it, it seems that we discover and claim identity through the process of being with others.

What does this kind of subjectivity mean for values such as honesty and authenticity? As Jeffrey Weeks argues, “If sexuality does not speak its own truth, if not only what we define as good or bad moral or immoral sexual behavior, but the structure and meanings of sexuality are historically contingent phenomena then a clarification of

what we want and value, as individuals and as cultures, matters.”<sup>61</sup> Bisexual identity is not simply descriptive, or ontological, but functional. It does something for subjects, enabling us to make claims (to truth, to belonging, to solidarity) in specific times and places.

To acknowledge that my bisexuality is historically conditioned is not the same as endorsing a deterministic view. Weeks suggests that if our conditional nature is accepted, then we have “the opportunity for thinking about not only who you are, but also who you want to become.”<sup>62</sup> If we abdicate the responsibility to shape our identities then we give up their formation to other forces and interests, particularly heteronormativity. Since the value systems in which we negotiate our identities are themselves products of ideological struggles, our activism shapes the very moral landscape we traverse. In becoming bisexual, we not only claim our own space upon which to stand, but we also mark the landscape in which others find their own becomings.

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<sup>61</sup> Weeks, Jeffrey. *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values In An Age Of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 49, 100.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*